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“The best way to keep a prisoner from escaping is to make sure he never knows he’s in prison.” Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Nobody and nothing seems safe. “Cremated” eye shadow? [Canceled](#). The Dalai Lama? [Canceled](#). Israel? [Canceled](#). Novelty Internet Rappers? [Canceled](#), [recanceled](#), and then [uncanceled](#). Kanye West? [Cancelled for not cancelling](#). The pandemic has proven itself the ideal temperature for the online breeding ground of US ‘cancel culture’. The spinning buzzword is a product of the merger between social media platforms and the celebrity news industry (previously known as ‘old media’). Mainstream outlets have so far survived off the continuous production of scandals, where VIPs, stars, royalties, and media personalities are provoked to show off their bad behavior, in order to be condemned, only to reappear in the next cycle. In this system, scandals were neither exceptions nor sign of crisis, but the very core of the business model. If, in the past, bad characters would have been ‘canceled’ (and thus disappeared), soon there would be nothing to report about.

Outrageous, dreamlike celebrities are, by definition, modeled not to act in a politically correct manner. In the old media model, the audience delegated, or should we say outsourced, their own desires for excesses to them. It is through the extraordinary lifestyle that norms in the ordinary everyday life are defined—and renegotiated. Until recently, celebrity role models (including intellectuals, writers, and actors), have performed in a fantasy world that both fascinates and disgusts ordinary folk, segmenting the very notion of class, of masters, and slaves. Is ‘de-platforming’ going to fundamentally change the ways entertainment and distraction are organized? Unless we change the parameters of our daily conversations and exit the platforms, together, yes.

In this social media age ‘cancellation’ means unfollowing or unfriending certain individuals or organizations from your feed. *“If you can’t beat ‘em, ban ‘em.”* It means terminating the communication once you’ve deemed their opinion, behavior, or a particular comment, objectionable. A breakup in the name of social justice. Staying true to the transactional nature of the word, it can be considered a total divestment. Once reservations and credit cards were the objects of cancellation. Now, it is ordinary people. The social media

deletion logic has spilled over into the real, with devastating consequences for activists and artists, causing a hysterical hype of witch hunt proportions in some circles.

Fear that a 'cancel culture' may be here to stay has been demonstrated to us through its explanation of worthy goals, such as the need for open debate and disagreement, which tolerance is supposed to endanger.^[1] In this accelerationist day and age, the paradox is that cancel culture can successfully ignore and shortcut the public sphere, and usher out discussion.^[2] Users respond in split seconds and before you know it, they've moved on. Dopamine-driven, impulsive users are known for their ignorance of the rules set by Habermas and cannot be bothered with the long hours it takes for a general assembly to reach consensus. But the main fear towards 'cancel culture' often remains unspoken.

The US professional class is de facto locked-in, and simply cannot think outside of the existing platform premises. They live haunted by '*Will you still like me tomorrow?*' Losing followers on Twitter means immediate loss of one's reputation, attention, and ultimately income. We're all influencers now. Less likes and retweets literally mean loss of salary. This is the high price intellectuals and artists pay once they have been sucked into the vortex and cannot see a way out. The Twitterati have zero imagination that a debate outside of social media channels is possible. In times of economic crisis, social media panic effectively leads to the closing of the American mind: There Is No Alternative. We're stuck on the platform.

Temporary expulsion of individuals from the tribe or nation has always happened, this is not unique. What happens today, in the age of platform capitalism, is that millions of users are simultaneously presented with the same 'outrageous' moralistic content, selected by algorithms whose purpose it is to provoke as much interaction (clicks, retweets, comments, likes) as possible, in order to keep us on the same service for as long as possible. In the age of social media, users are 'paying' (with) attention. A cancellation can reach a critical mass within hours. This is the unpredictable part. It is a sign of protest from users when they wish to 'delete' evil characters but in the logic of the entertainment industry this is simply not possible. America loves a comeback. And in the digital age, your past can come back to haunt you anytime. At the moment it is uncertain whose logic will win: social media or traditional publishing?

The 'cancel culture' meme can also be read as an amputated, passive-

aggressive version of what is known in geek culture as up or down voting. This is a part of internet culture that originated in forums that existed before the World Wide Web. The branding logic forbids the implementation of the downvoting principle and shows that platforms are not neutral. Users are not allowed to vote, they can only delete or bail out, so to say. To speak in the terminology of Heather Marsh, the user-as-reflector is able to do is to 'reflect' current power relations.^[3] The technical premises of 'cancel culture' are unlikely to change soon—unless world history will demand a fundamentally different network architecture.

On the dominant social media platforms, we never hear of the downvoting side, as social media in their current forms are dominated by large marketing firms that organize brands' PR campaigns, including politicians, pop stars and 'influencers'. This global management class despises all things negative. They are not hired to organize, critique, and debate. As we all know, we still do not have 'dislike' buttons. As a result of this, today's 'cancel culture' is a pretty wild beast that seems to come from nowhere, provoking a lot of moral panic inside the ruling media elites, whose interest it is to keep the 'bad characters' on-stage. This is not supposed to happen. The atmosphere has to remain positive—at all costs. Celebrities may be sentenced, pay a fine and even go to jail, but they will reappear soon enough. After the remorse has been extensively covered, the cycle can start again. The spectacle goes on with the aim not to allow any space to address underlying problems such as sexism, racism, social inequality or climate change. The 'issues' stay under the surface until—surprise surprise—they burst out onto the streets, provoked by seemingly random events (such as the murder of George Floyd).

In theory we could say that when we 'cancel', we unfollow and remove, or delete, data (in this case followers or 'friends'). The collective deletion act is perceived as surprisingly negative and destructive. It's seen as a symbolic way to say 'No, thanks, I don't like you anymore, get out of my life.' To unfollow someone quickly becomes a statement. Cancellation may be an implicit sign that users desire change, a gesture that they want to abandon ship and call-off a symbolic connection to the figures that have been given power. But this viewpoint may be too voluntary. Using notions from the vanished mass psychology discipline, it would be better to emphasize the hysteria group-think aspect in which individuals 'dissolve' into one giant mass act of denunciation and get pleasure from the sudden movements of an online mob that is usually non-existent and invisible.

From a European materialist media theory perspective, cancellation is not an armchair replacement of 'real' protest but a software effect. Let's leave the cultural analysis of the 'mass morality' (Achille Mbembe), identity politics, and religious aspects of 'woke' culture to our American friends. What's important to emphasize here are the global implications of this culture as it is embedded in code (both on the level of the visible interface design, and the invisible algorithms and AI). If anything, 'cancel culture' is an expression of the limited ways we have to express ourselves on the dominant social media.

My recent ['sad by design'](#) research emphasizes the ways in which behavioral scientists are working for Silicon Valley platforms to produce human emotions such as sadness, anger, and depression.^[4] The techno-induced distractions, depressions and resentment has so far produced an extraordinary profit for companies such as Facebook and Google. The good news is that more and more of us are finding out how all this works, in contrast to 2016, the year of Brexit and Trump. However, not much has changed fundamentally since then. 'Cancel culture' as a sudden mediated response of the social media masses has itself become a meme. It is hardly something we associate as something that emerges out of street protests or social movements, as such.

There's no doubt that certain norms are prevalent in this context, associated with US-American 'political correctness'. However, we need to be careful here. Decisive is the toxic clash at play here between two rival male cultures that fight over the dominance of a shrinking, regressive empire: the op-ed culture of liberal-conservative media versus algorithms, written by geeks with their often white-supremist right-wing libertarian mindsets. Sudden waves of 'public shaming', initiated by influential mediators, with the aim to humiliate individuals, are never spontaneous and only 'go viral' when they trigger values which are embedded and already existing. As Lisa Nakamura suggested in a March 2018 NYT article, it may be better to transform the individual focus of cancellation into collective 'cultural boycott' campaigns as it makes more explicit who's acting and in what political context it is happening in. Emotional terms such as 'humiliation' do not mean much. Record or film companies can decide to no longer work with an artist, consumers can stop buying their products or related merchandise, politicians can be voted out, and most important, investigative journalism should, more often, lead to actual prosecution and change of legislation. The problem is, this rarely happens, resulting in widespread resentment and

rage. The endless production of scandals without consequences are the main reason behind the recent rise of organized public online shaming.

US ‘cancel culture’ in its current form is indeed a form of ‘protest without consequences’, as social media users have no say about their next contract or new job. We’re talking about clouds of sentiments that can blow over very quickly and even have reverse consequences. In these times in which we build a ‘stack’ of multiple crises, we should not be surprised that a strong anti-racism movement erupts alongside increasingly stricter immigration laws and structural violence, particularly within education and the labor market. What discriminatory artificial intelligence and violence against women have in common, is that they are both invisible. It is our duty as activists and researchers to make power visible. However, we need to take into account that, despite all the graphic and physical violence (that, in theory, can be documented with cameras etc.), we’re increasingly fighting against abstract violence (code, borders, and other forms of structural separation).

The Social Media Question is not an irresolvable problem.[\[5\]](#) Jaron Lanier’s 2017 call to delete your social media accounts still holds.[\[6\]](#) What’s to be done is to steer Europe’s big data and artificial intelligence billions into the ‘Unlike Us’ direction of building social media alternatives, build by multi-disciplinary teams, not just geeks (as is still the case of the EU *Next Generation Internet* program). To say it with the art world’s No.1 follower Hans Ulrich Obrist: “It’s urgent!”[\[7\]](#)

Much like in the Covid-19 case, European alternatives to the dominant social media platforms that are no longer based on advertisement and hidden data extraction are entirely possible—and can be built within months. The urgency is there. From the perspective of change, a lot of our institutions will have to be closed down as they are beyond repair—and Silicon Valley tops the list. New business models are in dire need. If you hope that a revolution will happen while we remain polite and do not question anything or anyone in case somebody gets hurt, nothing will ever happen. In these times of acceleration, Corporate America has lost its monopoly of moving fast and breaking things. The imminent breakup and closure of Facebook will be a moment of liberation for mankind. By no means does it mean the end of the internet. Quite the opposite.

“All mankind is divided into three classes: those that are immovable, those that are movable, and those that move,” Benjamin Franklin once said. It is

sad to see that large corporations are now in the avantgarde position with their (largely symbolic) Facebook 'Stop Hate for Profit' advertisement campaign. It is us, users, that are immovable category. For decades Silicon Valley monopolized and stifled the innovation of communication and business. Users are trapped in 'virtual cages', clueless how to escape. Virtually all activists, artists and geeks have no longer any imagination how to an exodus could be organization (let's not even talk here about academics, NGOs and the cultural sector).

Freeing Europe from the venture-capital start-up model, driven by hypergrowth and related 'free' services, could lead to a renaissance of social networking tools. The decentralized app landscape may seem chaotic at first, but will inspire young people to become actors again, instead of tragic zombie consumers. Delete your profile, together, not some 'friend'. Needless to say that the development of alternatives extends well beyond the strategic social media realm. We don't need Airbnb or Uber to find a rental or call a taxi. New services can be based on data prevention, not protection. Give peer-to-peer a chance. Let's find other ways that we can search for information, and each other. Yes, this also implies that we cancel Google (not just Facebook) and reclaim their algorithms and databases, as it was us, the people, who provided them with that data in the first place.

[1] See David Fuller, <https://medium.com/rebel-wisdom/sleeping-woke-cancel-culture-and-simulate-d-religion-5f96af2cc107>.

[2] "The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away. We refuse any false choice between justice and freedom, which cannot exist without each other. As writers we need a culture that leaves us room for experimentation, risk taking, and even mistakes. We need to preserve the possibility of good-faith disagreement without dire professional consequences."
<https://harpers.org/a-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/>.

[3] Heather Marsh, *The Creation of Me, Them and Us, Must Read Books*, 2020, p. 108.

[4] Link to original 2019 Eurozine article.

[5] Reference to the irresolvability chapter of Matthew Fuller and Olga's *Bleak Joys* (University of Minesota Press, 2019), in which they discuss the

works of Christa Wolf.

[6] Jaron Lanier, Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now, Vintage, London, 2018.

[7] Title of Obrist's Arles exhibition, summer 2020,
<https://www.enrevenantdelexpo.com/2020/06/15/its-urgent-au-parc-des-ateliers-luma-arles/>.