A Pragmatic Look into the Cancel Culture Debate

In March 2003, country girl group, "Dixie Chicks" faced scrutiny for their public criticism of President George W. Bush at their concert in London during the "Top of the World Tour." Lead singer, Natalie Maines stated that the Dixie Chicks were ashamed of sharing their home state of Texas with President Bush and pilloried the impending invasion of Iraq. As one of the most popular country music acts at the time, the group faced widespread backlash by American country listeners, who were mostly right-winged and in support of the invasion of Iraq. As a result, the group was blacklisted from many country music radio stations, their music sales and concert tickets declined, and they lost corporate sponsorship.

The Dixie Chicks fiasco is just one thread in the bigger carpet that is "cancel culture." Cancel culture is the social phenomenon in which you publicly boycott or withdraw support from celebrities, organizations, or even people you know that you believe have acted or spoken in an offensive or unacceptable manner. In many cases, this leads the recipient to be ostracized, publicly shamed, fired, etc. This phrase has become one of the most divisive terms in modern conversation. Some see it as a form of accountability, others see it as censorship, however both sides fight for justice, but they mean different things. Through a pragmatic lens, the debate isn't about who is right–it's about what we think communication should achieve, and what may happen when our intentions don't line up. This paper aims to uncover how the cancel culture debate reveals a deeper pragmatic misunderstanding about whether communication and justice are for punishment or progress and asks what difference do the opposing purposes make.

It is first important to understand both sides. The pro-cancel culture side is framed by accountability and emphasizes the consequences of harmful actions or speech. This side uses moral and social arguments that aim to extract ethos and pathos. The anti-cancel culture takes a

more free-speech approach. This side pedestals individual freedom and open dialogue through a systematic perspective that uses procedural rhetoric, focusing on fairness and "due process."

What is at stake here? It's not just reputations or careers, but the function of public discourse itself. This debate shows a breakdown in shared assumptions of communication. Is the role of speech to express moral judgment or to be able to exchange ideas freely? What counts as justice–silencing harm or allowing for free speech?

A pragmatic approach, following William James or John Dewey, shifts this debate from "Who is right?" to "What does this argument do?" Instead of treating cancel culture as inherently good or bad, a pragmatist would ask: "What difference does it make in practice?" or "Does it reduce harm, promote reflection, or just create polarization?" Pragmatism helps uncover that people tend to talk right past each other because they assume different goals for discourse. A pragmatic perspective could help reframe the debate to move the conversation towards understanding and beyond endless moral posturing.

Looking at cancel culture this way shows that it's hardly about right or wrong, instead it's about what people think communication is supposed to do. Some see it as a way to hold others accountable, others believe it to protect public discourse and open discussion. Because each side expects something different from conversation, they will inevitably misunderstand one another. The issue isn't only about what people believe about cancel culture, but how those beliefs help us shape the way we understand and use communication.

In the end, the difference between punishment and progress in communication determines whether discourse becomes destructive or constructive. Pragmatism reminds us that true justice in conversation lies in not silencing or shaming, but in growth and mutual understanding. It

works best not when it tries to win moral points, but when it helps people learn, repair, and move forward.

The cancel culture debate shows just how easily communication can become a conflict when people take on different purposes for discourse. One side treats it as moral repair and the other side sees it as moral overreach. A pragmatic approach helps us understand that it's not about who is right, but what happens when each is put into practice. Does it lead to learning or silence? Does it encourage growth or deepen division? Pragmatism urges us to measure our words by their consequences and in doing so, it helps us see that the goal is not to win arguments but to create understanding that actually works in the world.

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