

## A writer's experience with cancel culture

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When I was a senior in high school, I had a weekly column in the local newspaper, the San Bruno Recorder-Progress. By not writing for the school's own paper, I hoped to cover more controversial topics.

Growing up in the tolerant, pluralistic San Francisco Bay Area, I wanted to write a piece that would be pro-LGBTQ+.

But the column backfired big-time.

I don't remember the exact words I wrote, but it was something along the lines of "the head cheerleader or the high school football team's quarterback could be gay," so curb your righteous indignation.

But the column was read differently: "Watch out! They're everywhere!"

Looking back, my choice of words was indelicate, to say the least. But it was too late. The newspaper received a scathing letter from San Francisco's main LGBTQ+ newspaper, urging me to get therapy. The Recorder-Progress subsequently fired me.

To use contemporary language, I had been canceled.

You would think I would have learned from my high school indiscretion, but a year later, I was editing the newsletter for a program I attended at UCLA. We had a suggestion box where fellow students could submit jokes. One such attempt was a crude, misogynist one-liner. My 18-year-old self either thought, Controversy is good! or was hopelessly clueless. I published it.

The backlash came swift. Canceled again.

I'M NOT here to defend my youthful tactlessness – and I hope I would never write such things today. But it did give me a sensitivity to the power of words, a power that, in 2021, is being turned against public figures by those who feel offended or triggered.

Writing on a computer keyboard [Illustrative] (credit: ING IMAGE)

And while there is a lot of horrible language that deserves to be challenged and even canceled, it has created a climate of fear for writers like me. If I posit something particularly provocative, could I get canceled again? So, I hold back (even if it seems I'm habitually over-the-top).

Others have not been so fortunate.

Former *New York Times* journalist Bari Weiss regularly rails against cancel culture, featuring on her website and podcast professors like Portland State University's Peter Boghossian, and Dorian Abbot of the University of Chicago, both of whom were canceled for purported "wrong-speak" on campus.

Abbot, for example, who has advocated race-neutral university admissions policies, was prevented from speaking on his actual field of expertise, "as if his opinions on racial preferences irrevocably taint his climate science work," notes John McWhorter in *The New York Times*.

That has led to "an epidemic of self-silencing," Weiss writes in the *Deseret News*. She quotes a law school student who wrote that "self-censorship is the norm, not the exception. I self-censor even when talking to some of my best friends for fear of word getting around."

A study by the Cato Institute found that 62% of Americans say they self-censor.

For the most part, we should view that as a good thing. Social media is ugly enough as it is. Imagine if people didn't self-censor at all!

But I fear that we are losing important voices that can no longer be heard, because they said or wrote or did inappropriate things in their pasts.

What do you do with someone who has singular gifts but whose language or actions are egregious? Earlier this year, Dr. Seuss Enterprises announced it was canceling the publication of six of the celebrated author's books "due to racist and insensitive imagery."

Or how about notorious antisemite Roald Dahl? Do we cancel Dahl's oeuvre entirely? Put trigger warnings on the covers of his books, like HBO did when it repackaged *Gone with the Wind* for the woke generation?

When it comes to sexual abuse, the discussion becomes even more confounding.

The HBO documentary *Allen vs. Farrow* goes into great detail about Woody Allen's alleged sexual abuse of his adopted daughter, Dylan. The program pulls no punches: From the very start, it makes an unflinching case that Allen is indeed guilty.

Allen subsequently lost a book publisher, and Amazon terminated a four-movie deal it had with the director.

Woody Allen may be a serial abuser and, as the documentary reveals, a serial jerk, but we have lost a creative voice, someone whom I loved growing up. It's not only his future work – many will no longer even watch Allen's past movies. Can I?

Former *Haaretz* columnist Ari Shavit aggressively hit on journalist Danielle Berrin and other women, leading to his resignation from the paper. Yet he also wrote *My Promised Land*, one of the most astute tomes on modern Israel. Earlier this year, Shavit came out with a new book, which was dismissed by many out of hand, not on the merits of his arguments but due to his behaviors off the printed page.

Then there's "intersectionality" which has created an environment where unashamed Zionists – and all Jews by extension – are excluded from participating in progressive causes. The recent brouhaha over Sunrise DC's disinvitation of three Jewish advocacy groups to a rally focused not on the politics of the Middle East but climate change drives home the fact that, as Weiss laments, if you want to not be canceled, "You need to disavow Jewish power and you need to disavow Israel."

THE ANSWER to the cancellation conundrum is balance. Some behaviors and speech are clearly beyond the pale. We should never countenance racism, antisemitism, homophobia or sexual abuse.

Other actions and writings, however, demand more nuance – something that's sorely lacking in today's extreme political climate – and even the possibility of the offender doing teshuva (repentance), provided it is sincerely proffered.

Can we get there in today's increasingly polarized world? I'm not sure. But what other choice do we have but to try?