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REVIEW

Toward a definition of cancellation: A historical review of the evolution of the concepts that define this dynamic on the internet

Hacía la definición de la cancelación: Una revisión histórica de la evolución de los conceptos que definen esta dinámica en la red

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ABSTRACT

Cancellation has been among the phenomena that have had the most marked effect on social media in recent years. However, no theoretical approaches have been made to the concept or what constitutes it, with the few considerations of the phenomenon being opinion articles or studies analyzing it as purely political without any attempt to define its characteristics and dynamics. This paper conducts a historical exploration of different phenomena in digital communication, namely, trolling and doxxing, to establish a background with dynamics that have evolved into what is now known as cancellation, establishing a relationship between the technology available to different generations of users and the global sociopolitical situation with the use of technology. Evidence is presented that these phenomena are part of a constant cycle that will generate similar phenomena in the future. Finally, an exploration is made of what constitutes the so-called culture of cancellation, its history, and its characteristics.

Keywords: internet; trolling; doxxing; cancellation; social media.

RESUMEN

El «cancelamiento» ha sido uno de los fenómenos que más ha marcado las redes sociales en los últimos años. Sin embargo, no se han desarrollado enfoques teóricos sobre el concepto ni sobre lo que lo constituye, y las escasas reflexiones sobre el fenómeno se limitan a artículos de opinión o estudios que lo analizan desde una perspectiva puramente política, sin ningún intento de definir sus características y dinámicas. Este artículo ofrece una exploración histórica de diferentes fenómenos de la comunicación digital, concretamente el trolling y el doxxing, para establecer un contexto con dinámicas que han evolucionado hasta lo que hoy se conoce como «cancelación», estableciendo una relación entre la tecnología disponible para las diferentes generaciones de usuarios y la situación sociopolítica global en relación con el uso de la tecnología. Se presentan pruebas de que estos fenómenos forman parte de un ciclo constante que generará fenómenos similares en el futuro. Por último, se analiza qué constituye la denominada cultura de la cancelación, su historia y sus características.

Palabras clave: Internet; trolling; doxxing; boicot; redes sociales.

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INTRODUCTION

It is the start of spring break. With nothing else to do, you sit down at your computer to see what's new. You open your browser, check your favorite sites, and receive a message from one of your friends with a link and the words, "Have you seen this? It is ridiculous!" The link takes you to a video of a young man, approximately 15 years old, in his school gym. He has a broomstick in his hands, using it as a saber. Energetic, he performs a kind of choreography with his weapon around the gym, recreating a scene from Star Wars. He puts a lot of effort into it, but his movements are clumsy, and he looks overexerted, with his hair over his face and covered in sweat. "Who would do this and why would they upload it to the internet?" you think as you take the link and send it to one of your other friends, who will repeat exactly the same process as you and share it with someone else and that person with someone else and that person with someone else...

It sounds like something that would happen today, but it happened in April 2003, and comments on this video jumped from the internet to Ghyslain Raza's real life, even including death threats and incitements to suicide. The crime? A video of a scene from one of his favorite movies that he never intended for anyone to see but was posted without his consent by classmates.

While Ghyslain's case is not one of cancellation, it does share certain characteristics with this dynamic that has become so prominent today. However, what and who is canceled? We could say that someone who does something wrong is canceled, but what is wrong? To whom is something considered wrong? If we answered those questions, does the internet have the right to be the executioner of that individual who did something wrong? After all, this would imply that those who cancel have not done anything "cancelable". Even if we solved this, are all cases of cancellation for this reason? What even is cancellation?

Before even attempting to answer all these questions, we need to know where cancel culture comes from. We have already seen that, as early as 2003, there were cases like what we see today, and you may be surprised to learn that this behavior is almost as old as the internet itself. I will return to the idea of Feixa (2021), who says that, thus far, there are three defined generations of internet users, the @, the #, and the ₿, each with a specific phenomenon attached to it: trolling, doxxing, and, finally, cancellation. We discuss how these behaviors have evolved with each generation and the technology available to them.

DEVELOPMENT

Generation @ and trolling

Sometimes it seems impossible to conceive of a world before digitization and globalization on the scale we have today, but it was up to Generation @ to lay the foundations for the dynamics of online communication. It begins with the transition, explained by Negroponte (1994), from tangible atoms, which depend on a physical medium to transport them to bits, the smallest unit of digital communication.

However, the fact that they had to build communication on the network does not mean that they knew nothing about digital technology. As Tapscott (1998) points out, these early users had grown up with video games, which subconsciously gave them an understanding of the transition from atoms to bits. Similarly, having access to what they wanted when they wanted was not a revelation in itself. Gates (1995) noted that analog media were already focused on on-demand content. The breakthrough came in the ability to modify content and disseminate these new versions of information on a massive scale, no longer limited to those in your immediate circle.

It was not until the mid-1990s that the first forums appeared, pages dedicated to specific topics where enthusiasts conversed in posts, where a user would start with a kind of headline about a topic and others could comment on it. Digital discussion was scattered across these spaces, but users tended to be in different forums on different topics, thus replicating the dynamics of one another. Email was extremely important because before messaging services were established, it was one of the few ways to have a more personal conversation with someone else.

This does not mean that everything occurred in these divided spaces. The internet worked in a "word-of-mouth" format, where users who saw something that attracted their attention would share it in another forum or send it to their friends by email, which is where the first viral phenomena came from, such as the aforementioned Star Wars Kid or Numa Numa Guy. These cases have something in common: people with distinctive physical appearances doing something that was considered ridiculous, which was shared with mockery in various forums until a large number of people recognized them.

This phenomenon, which became prominent in the mid-2000s and reached its peak in approximately 2006, is known as trolling. Finchman and Sanfilippo explain it as follows:

Repetitive and disruptive online behavior by an individual toward other individuals or groups [...] There are competing definitions ranging from the assertion that trolls do it for lulz (for laughter or entertainment) to definitions that include strategy or motivation, depending on the troll. (Finchman and Sanfilippo, 2016).

The goal of trolling is to target a figure or group, either for reprehensible behavior or because they are considered strange or outside social norms and humiliate them through mockery or jokes on digital media, forcing the subject in question to leave these platforms, in many cases resulting in real-life harassment.

However, spilling over into real life is not necessarily part of trolling. In some cases, such as Ghyslain's, it is an essential part, but in others, such as Brolsma's, it had no place outside of it because the @ generation was not particularly concerned about what happened on the web. They laughed at things they found ridiculous and shared them, which could lead to cyberbullying that spilled over into reality, but this was not the intention. These were issues that entertained internet users and that the mockery could be transferred, but there was no intention to truly affect the other person. This would come into effect until the next phenomenon we analyze.

Generation # and doxxing

The @ generation laid the foundations for interaction on the web, but the # was the first to have a profound impact on the nondigital world. In the mid-2000s, forums began to lose ground to the first types of social networks, in the form of sites such as MySpace and Hi5. These represented an enormous change in dynamics: you no longer had to be in a forum for each of your interests but could connect with several people from different groups in a single network. This meant that you could see these discussions in one place, which led to a crossover between different subcultures, generating greater exchanges both in terms of topics of conversation and ways of interacting on the network. It was the end of "word of mouth" and the beginning of trending topics.

Tapscott (2008) considers it to be the first generation with profound importance in the digital world, since it is the first generation that did not build foundations but was born "bathed in bits," with unprecedented freedom in terms of the content they could access and the way they could jump from completely different media (text to videos, images to games) from one second to the next. If Generation @ found freedom on the internet, Generation # took it for granted.

Socially, generation # was hit very hard, as it was impacted by the 2008 economic crisis; thus, they use the internet as a kind of escape from the problems of the world, aided by the rise of technologies such as Flash and Java, which allowed them to create games that worked in the browser and the prominence of trolling as a form of entertainment.

However, they also became the first generation to realize that what they do on the internet can have an impact outside of it. There are several cases, but the most famous example was "Kony 2012." In 2012, the Invisible Children channel published "Kony 2012," a documentary narrating the atrocities committed by guerrilla leader Joseph Kony in southern Africa. It encouraged the public to promote the campaign of the same name as the documentary, putting up posters in public spaces and organizing demonstrations with the aim of capturing Kony by the end of the year. The campaign was a complete disaster, but it provided one of the first mass examples of the use of the internet for social purposes.

On the other hand is the case of Gamergate in 2014, where the American gaming community, mainly teenage and adult men, harassed the journalist Zoe Quinn to publish a series of articles criticizing game developers for giving female characters revealing outfits in cases where it made no sense, such as in combat armor. This led gamers to attack Quinn on social media and send her death threats.

This follows the same pattern as what happened with Star Wars Kid, but there are several key differences: Ghyslain Raza did something that the internet found funny, while Zoe Quinn did something that enraged it. Raza was harassed on the street by his schoolmates, while Quinn was harassed by a mob of strangers because her address was leaked online.

This phenomenon is called doxxing, which Eckert and Metzger-Riftkin define as follows:

A complex communicative process in which one or more people (doxers) seek out private or personal information about another individual (target) and distribute it through online channels without the person's consent, leaving them vulnerable to exposure in the mass media. Doxxing often occurs alongside other forms of online harassment and develops in complex ways both online and offline. (Eckert & Metzer-Rifktin, 2020).

Owing to its continued prevalence, one of the most popular and prominent cases is swatting, which we would consider a branch of doxing. This consists of obtaining a person's address, calling the police, and directing them to that address, claiming that something terrible is happening there, such as drug trafficking or human trafficking. This has been around since the mid-2000s (the earliest I found the term coined is from 2004, when 14-year-old Matthew Weigman called the police to the home of a girl who refused to have sex with him, claiming that he had her and her father kidnapped at the residence [FBI, 2013]), but it rose to prominence in the media in the mid-2010s.

The most well-known reason for swatting came with the popularity of live streaming services such as Twitch. Users of the platform who want to harm a streamer, either because they do not like them or to see their reaction live, decode their IP addresses to obtain their home addresses and call the police. This happens mainly in the United States, where the reaction is immediate and swift, with police arriving in combat mode to evict streamers from their homes, and one false move can obtain them shot.

There have been no fatalities in the streaming world yet, but there have been incidents on a smaller scale. Such was the case with Tyler Barris in 2017, who sent the police to the home of Andrew Finch, with whom he had a fight over a game of Call of Duty. Barris said he had killed his father and was holding his family hostage but sent them to Finch's home. Finch, confused, did not know how to react and was shot dead by the police (BBC, 2019). Generation @ embraced digital technology, and # was responsible for bringing it to the world.

Generation and cancellation

This generation is currently dominant in online discussion. It is characterized by being part of our lives outside of computers because of smartphones and the "internet of things," which allows everyday objects such as light bulbs or coffee makers to be equipped with the internet to expand how we interact with them. The internet has become an extension of ourselves.

The dynamics of social media seek slow time: short content that grabs your attention and keeps you fixed on a single platform, which uses complex algorithms to search for content specifically tailored to your tastes and interests. The more time you spend on these platforms, the more information they receive to sell and the more advertising you see.

This attachment to the digital world and the fact that we consider it so close to us has led to various phenomena, such as fake news, where on the one hand, users are so interconnected with the network that they consider any information they see on it to be true, without truly investigating it. On the other hand, it has been a way for certain groups to impose a specific agenda on public thinking, taking advantage of either an older audience that is not familiar with surfing the internet or a younger audience that has lost the fear and mistrust of previous generations toward it. Owing to this and the strengthening of mainly conservative movements, driven by the fact that their parents and elders have had decades to adapt to new technologies, young people feel attacked and confined.

The internet, which once gave them the freedom of a world that did not accept them, became filled with those who confined them from the public sphere, so they tried to jump to new modalities and formats that older people do not understand; when older people adopt them, young people jump to another, creating a loop. For example, when parents took over Facebook, young people jumped to Instagram, a medium that, at least in its first iteration, prioritized images over other forms of communication.

This search for a safe place leads young people to gather in "nonplaces". It is necessary to address the term coined by Auge (1996), which referred to spaces in urban sprawl where an increasing number of people were forced to live together or in compact conditions but were more separated on a human level, although liberties were taken to adapt it to the current context. Feixa adapts it as follows:

I freely use here the concept coined by Marc Augé (1996) to designate the ubiquity of youth space, between their expulsion from public space, the supervision and commercialization of leisure spaces, the disorientation of hyperspace, the anonymity of new shopping malls, and the return to the bedroom. (Feixa, 2021).

This displacement of youth has led Generation □ to become increasingly resistant to people and ideals outside their ethical norms and to take responsibility for creating justice within their places of trust, while previous generations acted mostly in the face of entertainment or against the unusual, Generation □ seeks to displace what it considers immoral. In this context, cancellation emerges.

I define cancellation as a practice carried out mainly through social media in which the aim is to displace an individual whose actions fall outside the morally acceptable, labeling them as a bad person who, therefore, does not deserve to be seen in good light within the public agenda. This displacement takes place in different ways, such as post-s exposing the reprehensible acts of the "canceled" person, insults against them, mockery (trolling), and even more extreme measures such as exposing personal data, such as their address, where they work, etc. (doxing). Although this displacement does not always seek a moral victory, it can sometimes be done for the sole purpose of trying to ruin someone's life.

One of the first cases to gain worldwide prominence was that of film director James Gunn. In 2018, owing to his openness in expressing his leftist views on Twitter, the American right dug up tweets from almost a decade ago in which the director made jokes in poor taste, some with pedophilia undertones. This caused him to be reviled by a certain section of the internet, and Disney fired him as director of the film Guardians of the Galaxy 3, a role for which he would be rehired years later. In this case, the reason for the cancellation was revenge by an opposition sector rather than a bad action by the subject himself. Although the tweets that were dug up are reprehensible, the consensus on the internet, which led Disney to rehire him, was that, at the time, it was a type of humor that was accepted on the internet and that the passage of time meant that it did not represent him today.

Another case was that of writer J.K. Rowling, who angered users and even actors from films based on her Harry Potter literary saga, for comments she made in 2021 against various sectors of the LGBT community. This is an interesting case because, in reality, it did not affect Rowling. Although sales of her books declined, the percentage was not enough to affect her financial stability; the books continued to be reprinted, and more film adaptations of her works were made. In addition, it opened the door for her to ally herself with conservative media and figures around the world, which is why she never apologized or felt she had done anything wrong with her comments, which continue to this day.

Some of the cases presented have similarities, with their particularities referring to their corresponding phenomenon and generation. Gary Brolsma ended up appearing on South Park and having a long career on the internet, as did other victims of trolling, and streamers who were victims of swatting and doxxing continue to have prosperous careers in their media. This shows that cancellation is not a new phenomenon but has been around practically since the internet became popular. Generation @ discovered a new form of communication that allowed them to find groups with similar tastes and see different realities in a medium beyond the photo or the written word. Their content went viral through email and mass publication in various forums. Generation # adapted these dynamics to new social networks, where discussion was centralized on social media, moving from word of mouth to trending topics. It was a generation hit hard by economic crises that took refuge in the internet as a means of entertainment to distract themselves from reality, taking for granted a freedom in this medium separate from their physical lives and those who inhabited it, which led them to continue trolling and turn it into doxxing, where the consequences spilled over into real life, breaking the line between the physical and the digital. This leads to Generation□, which arrives in a world where the digital and the physical have no separation and whose parents already dominate the networks, resulting in a discourse that differs greatly from that of youth, who seek to retreat into new formats that their elders do not understand. At the same time, young people have been displaced from their physical environments, forcing them to take refuge in their digital nonplaces, where they seek to maintain their ethics and beliefs through cancellation, a way of shutting out those they consider to have harmful discourses.

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