



Reframing the ways we understand Cancel Culture: Clickbait Campaigns in The Attention Economy



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Introduction

Cancel culture as a phenomenon is constantly evolving. In 2019, Vice first wrote about cancel culture in an article titled “Why we can’t stop fighting about cancel culture: a mob mentality, or a long overdue way of speaking truth to power?” Today, free speech advocates remain opposed to cancel culture as censorship. But on the left, right, and center, the cancellings continue- like a game of cat and mouse. This research corroborates theories that, ultimately, cancellations are just blips on the TL, and not a productive force that “speaks truth to power.” The truth is that not even the largest online mob will ever be as powerful as those who control these tech platforms themselves.

Methodology

In order to conduct this analysis, the researcher chose to look at hashtag engagement during three mainstream cancellations that might represent different spheres of the culture wars. The researcher selected GOYA Foods, the cancellation of popular author J.K. Rowling, and finally the most recent attempt at cancelling singer-songwriter Lana Del Rey. Using the Indiana University Observatory on Social Media to generate graphs of hashtag usage the researcher was able to observe frequencies in hashtag usage over the selected period of time. Starting the day before the cancelled event, and ending the graph 10 days later, this led to extremely interesting findings.

Conclusion

According to these graphs, hashtag usage during “cancellings” is never long lasting. In fact, all selected instances indicate that the majority of hashtag usage, and therefore engagement, takes place in the first 24 hours after the scrutinizing event. This trend reflects an impermanence to issues which are broadcasted as major events by online users. While some academics ascribe to cancel culture powers of “bottom up” social justice capabilities, this research indicates that reality seems to be more aligned with positions like that of Gwen Bouvier and David Machin who believe that **“Social media does not lend to a more nuanced and complex discussion of issues, but rather to simplifications, extreme points of view and moral rages.”** The impermanence of these online moments reinforces the researchers theory which is that not only is cancel culture focused on trends rather than activism, but also that its only real winners are platform owners, who benefit from online traction.

Abstract

Issues of power and censorship have been prominent concerns in the culture war of the past ten or so years, and cancel culture plays a crucial role in our changing online dynamics. The purpose of this research is to turn the issue of “canceling” back on itself, and question **why these online platforms are so conducive to this kind of, apparently, trend adherent behavior.** According to the tweet data extracted about hashtag use during selected “cancellations,” there is an important story to be analyzed in the impermanence of the trending conversations, and the disconnect between those online conversations and the real world. In reality, cancellings appear like blips on the never-ending timeline, dominating twitter feeds and news headlines one day, and then completely forgotten the next—suggesting that perhaps, rather than being instances of valiant social justice and an upholding accountability, or even fascistic policing—**cancellations are simply instances of high engagement around a popular or inflammatory topic.** Employing theories of social capital, as it pertains to online spaces, engagement with a trending topic generates solidarity between Twitter users over their position in the conversations, and their agreement on the issue. Studies indicate that people are more polarizing and aggressive online, and cancel culture appears to be an example of that phenomenon. Sometimes these disagreements are picked up by mainstream news outlets, who write articles about the cancelling, describing the two opposing sides, providing an outline of their arguments, and ultimately generating another contribution to a fruitless conversation. Online debates keep users “engaged” and glued to their sites, as their dopamine receptors are triggered over and over again, rarely leading to an offline-reality tangible action or change. There are exceptions to this of course, such as the #MeToo movement, which had massive effects offline. Overall, the mainstream conversation about cancel culture as an issue of free speech appears to distract from the reality, which is that people are fighting over issues on tech platforms that do not necessarily penetrate or reflect offline reality. Therefore, these battles are largely symbolic, insular, and distracting, rather than productive or effective, and the findings of this research corroborate this hypothesis. In fact, the purpose of this project is not to debate the existence of cancel culture, but rather to question whether these cancellations are achieving anything besides a distraction from our material reality of chaos.

Results

J.K. Rowling has been cancelled more than once, beginning in December 2019 when she tweeted support for a transphobic researcher. She has been subsequently canceled since, but December 2019 was the first time that Rowling voiced these kinds of opinions, and the first time she experienced a real backlash.

Acknowledgements

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Norris P. Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality? *Political Studies*. August 2021. doi:10.1177/00323217211037023
English, Morgan. "Cancel Culture: An Examination of Cancel Culture Acts as a Form of Counterspeech to Regulate Hate Speech Online." Order No. 28419355 The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2021. Ann Arbor: *ProQuest*. Web. 16 Dec. 2021.



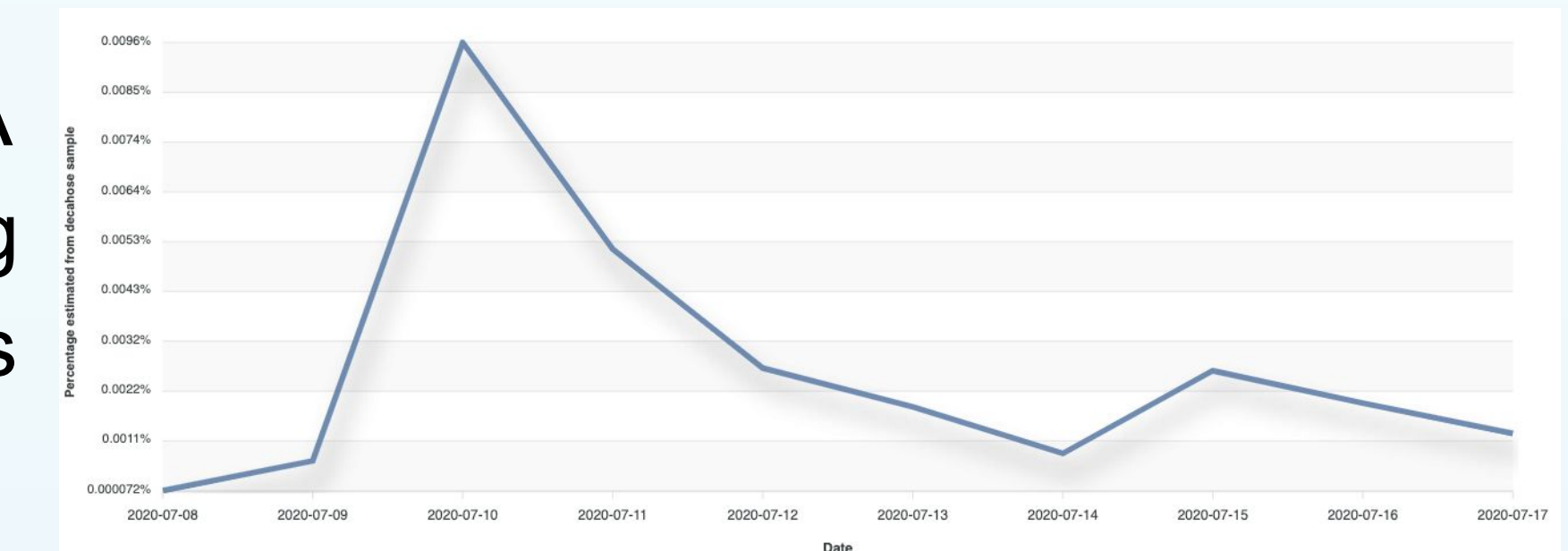
Samia Ali Salama @SamiaAliSalama · Dec 14

Replying to @FozzieBear88

I stopped buying Goya beans, olive oil, etc., as soon as that conwoman, Ivanka, held that can. I #BoycottGoya

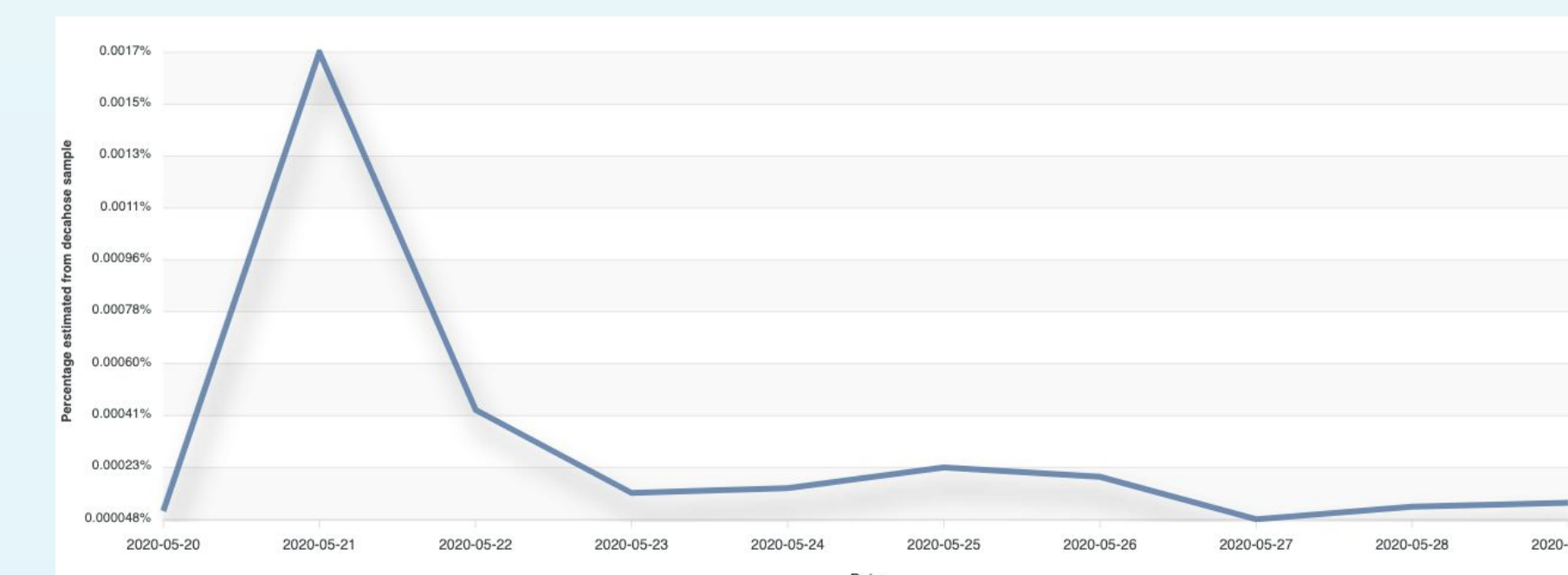
GOYA Foods has technically been canceled twice, both times due to the company’s support for and from President Trump. In February 2020, this led to a “boycott” which quickly fizzled. In July 2020, the issue came up again, and again online users spread #boycottGOYA along with other hashtags.

This graph looks at #GOYA usage in the 10 days following the CEO of the company’s endorsement of Trump:



In May 2020, Lana Del Rey took to Instagram to pose “a question for the culture.” She asked her followers about what she perceived as hypocrisy in the music industry, which she said that she felt targeted by. Immediately, this post was not well received. Mainstream news outlets and twitter users called her rant racist and anti-feminist and her fans begged her to take it down. Del Rey has since deleted the post, but this wave of backlash to what appears to be a (perhaps misguided) cultural observation, triggered a massive online argument about female songwriters, which subsequently died down a few days later.

This graph looks at #LanaDelRey usage in the 10 days following her “question for the culture” :



melissa lozada-oliva @ellomelissa · May 24, 2020

maybe lana Del Rey is a time traveler from 1960 stuck in this generation or maybe she is white and privileged and can just pretend that’s the case

This graph looks at #JKRowling usage in the 10 subsequent days after her transphobic tweet:

