

13. Franklin's attempt to cancel Bourke falls squarely within this circumscribed definition.

### **The strikethrough option**

14. Is this attempt to "cancel" Bourke simply another example of the anti-intellectualism evident across the political spectrum? Is vitriolic misinterpretation really replacing thoughtful debate?
15. Attempts at "cancelling" often aim to inflict maximum reputational or economic damage to otherwise out-of-reach public figures and celebrities. But as the case of author J.K. Rowling suggests, the more famous you are, the more difficult you are to topple. Rowling appears to have suffered no significant career setbacks following calls for her cancellation after she tweeted controversial views on gender identity and biological sex.
16. Cancelling, in this sense, is a bit like executing the strikethrough option in the keyboard: a function that enables you to draw a line through a word while allowing it to remain legible and in place.
17. Cancel culture is not always discerning in its targets. The transnational #MeToo movement, to cite one example, has contributed to the exposure of high-profile sexual predators such as Bill Cosby and Harvey Weinstein, leading to criminal convictions. But other cancellations enact a more casual cruelty on ordinary, innocent people. I am reminded of the US writer Shirley Jackson's story "The Lottery" (1948), in which a member of a small American community is selected by chance and stoned.

### **Origins in social justice**

18. The idea of cancelling or calling out transgressions has its origins in the creative spaces occupied by marginalised groups. Exemplified by hashtag-oriented social justice movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, the strategy has been successfully deployed by activists to call out real harms and demand accountability.
19. Journalist Aja Romano notes the idea of cancelling a person, place or thing has long circulated within Black culture, and traces it to Nile Rodgers's 1981 single "Your Love Is Cancelled".
20. Writer and researcher Meredith D. Clark argues that "calling out", which begat cancelling, is "an indigenous expressive form" of "useful anger" perfected by Black women. The practice was colourfully deployed to name individual transgressions. In its networked forms, it became a critique of systemic inequality.
21. It developed into a socially mediated phenomenon with origins in queer communities of colour. In the early 2010s, Black Twitter – a meta-network of culturally connected communities – made the language of being "cancelled" into an internet meme.

22. The term “cancel culture”, however, has become unmoored from its history and its original significations. In its clamorous current form, it has no coherent ideology: cancellations come just as steadily from the right as the left. Reframed by the dominant culture, and amplified by the media, it has come to be used as a term of approbation wielded against minorities to maintain the status quo.
23. In the attention economy of the 24-hour news cycle, journalists routinely extract and decontextualise rich traditions of collective resistance (or in Bourke’s case, scholarly research) to meet the demand for attention-grabbing content. In doing so, they often fail to explain why these debates should or shouldn’t be part of mainstream public discourse.
24. Franklin is on record as championing freedom of expression and diversity of opinion. Earlier this year, he stated an artist’s boycott of the Sydney Festival was “censorship” and that it risked silencing diverse voices and important perspectives to the “great detriment” of society. Given free speech is a sovereign human right [that] many liberals and conservatives claim to hold dear, attempting to cancel a reputable academic seems an awkward spot to be occupying. Bourke is a prizewinning author of 14 books and a Fellow of the British Academy. She is an expert on the history of violence in British, Irish, US and Australian societies. Her work includes histories of rape, fear and killing. Her most recent book, Loving Animals: On Bestiality, Zoophilia and Post-Human Love (2020), has been widely reviewed in scholarly journals.

### Mediated speech

25. How is it that the most ardent defenders of free speech and diversity are often the same people who seek to silence those with whom they do not happen to agree, without a sound knowledge of the ideas on which they are passing judgement?
26. Let’s be clear. Platitudes about freedom of expression, in the contexts we are discussing, are not about the abstract principle of free speech as such. They are about the greyer areas of where we draw the boundaries. What kind of discourse and actions are considered acceptable? Which are morally out of bounds? And, crucially, who gets to decide?
27. All societies place some limits on the exercise of speech because it always takes place in a context of competing values. And in the case of cancel culture, this exercise of free speech is mediated by commercially owned social media platforms such as Twitter – the main arena of cancel culture – which, while free, thrives on the scandal that generates profit. In this respect, it is useful to remember that the kinds of speech and actions that society **deems** acceptable are historically contingent and an effect of power relations.
28. Societies evolve; norms change; attitudes progress; the boundaries of moral acceptability are redrawn over time. It is also in the nature of linguistic meaning to be fluid and provisional, not fixed or rigid.

29. As Judith Butler explains in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1996), speech acts are constrained by a larger set of discursive rules. Those rules are negotiable. In this sense there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as free speech, in the sense of unlimited and decontextualised speech.
30. A deeply integrated idea of liberal democracies is that people are equally empowered to engage in debate and freely express their ideas. But is this really so? The public sphere is a fractured space of competing elites. Idealistic visions of equal access fail to acknowledge disparities of knowledge and resources between social elites and disempowered groups.
31. Right-wing politicians and commentators have claimed in recent years that a progressive cancel culture has silenced alternative perspectives and **stifled** robust intellectual debate. The pejorative label “cancel culture” has been misappropriated [by the right] to discredit social justice movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo.
32. The question that remains to be answered is why, even as editorialists condemn cancel culture as the angry out-of-control crowd, the injustices and systemic inequalities that cancelling strategies evolved to name remain largely in place. The example of Franklin and Bourke suggests [that] hypocritical fault-finding remains part of the dominant political culture.
33. Understanding the genealogy of “cancel culture”, and how its language has been reframed and mobilised, may help us see such moral condemnations for what they really are: a reactive rearguard reflex by those in power, who are no longer in agreement with the progressive liberal culture that dominates a fractured public sphere.