Who is cancelling? Examining interest as a determining factor for participation in online public shaming[1]

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Abstract: *In this paper, we intend to advance the debate about cancellations by examining who participates in a cancellation. By "participate," we mean collaborate in any way, either with or without the direct intention to attack and shame the wrongdoer. The current literature points out the participation of subaltern counterpublics (Clark, 2020), the state and the press (Trottier, 2018), content creators (Lewis and Christin, 2022), employers (Saint-Louis, 2021) and regular social media users (Trottier, 2018; Bouvier, 2020). However, there is no general explanation for theorizing and encompassing all potential participants in a cancellation. Considering cancellations as a form of rule enforcement based on shame, we use the concept of entrepreneurship (Becker 1963) as central to understanding cancellers as actors interested in the cancellation due to virtuous or opportunistic causes.*

Keywords: *cancel culture, cancellation, online public shaming, deviance.*

¿Quién cancela? El interés como factor determinante de la participación en procesos de humillación pública en línea

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Resumen: En este artículo, pretendemos avanzar en el debate sobre las cancelaciones examinando quién participa en ellas. Por "participar", nos referimos a colaborar de cualquier manera, ya sea con o sin la intención directa de atacar y avergonzar al infractor. La literatura actual señala la participación de contrapúblicos subalternos (Clark, 2020), el Estado y la prensa (Trottier, 2018), creadores de contenido (Lewis y Christin, 2022), empleadores (Saint-Louis, 2021) y usuarios habituales de redes sociales (Trottier, 2018; Bouvier, 2020). Sin embargo, no existe una explicación general para teorizar y abarcar a todos los posibles participantes en una cancelación. Considerando las cancelaciones como una forma de aplicación de normas basada en la vergüenza, utilizamos el concepto de emprendimiento (Becker, 1963) como central para comprender a los canceladores como actores interesados en la cancelación debido a causas virtuosas o oportunistas.

Palabras clave: *Cultura de la cancelación; cancelación; humillación pública online; desviación.*

Quem cancela? Examinando interesse como fator determinante para a participação em processos de humilhação pública on-line

Resumo: Neste artigo, avançamos no debate sobre os cancelamentos examinando quem participa deles. Por "participar" compreendemos colaborar de qualquer maneira, com ou sem a intenção direta de atacar e envergonhar o infrator. A literatura atual assinalou a participação de contrapúblicos subalternos (Clark, 2020), do Estado e da imprensa (Trottier, 2018), criadores de conteúdo (Lewis y Christin, 2022), empregadores (Saint-Louis, 2021) e usuários habituais de redes sociais (Trottier, 2018; Bouvier, 2020). No entanto, não existe uma explicação geral para teorizar e excluir todos os possíveis participantes de um cancelamento. Considerando os cancelamentos como uma forma de aplicação de normas baseadas na vergonha, utilizamos o conceito de empreendimento (Becker, 1963) como central para compreender os canceladores como atores interessados no cancelamento devido a causas virtuosas ou oportunistas.

Palavras-chave: Cultura do cancelamento; cancelamento; vergonha pública online, desvio**.**

Introduction

After more than a decade of consolidation of social media platforms, the expression "cancel culture" has become part of the general public's vocabulary.

More than that, the numerous cases of "cancelling" have led an increasing number of authors to think about the phenomena through a diversity of lenses, from the ethics of the process (Ott, 2017; Bouvier, 2020; Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia, 2021; Day and Halborow, 2021; Han, 2023; Dyrberg, 2024), to specific instances where it happens such as in academia (Norris, 2020; Pfaus, 2023), to the emotions involved in cancellations (Bouvier, 2020; Tyson, 2022). However, there is still a lack of work examining *how* cancellations work, *what* its elements are, and *who* participates in the phenomenon. In sum, the structural qualities of a cancellation process are still under-explored.

In this article, we intend to advance the debate about cancellations by examining *who their participants are.* By "participants," we mean those who collaborate in any way, either with or without the intention to attack and shame the wrongdoer. The current literature points to the participation of subaltern counterpublics (Clark, 2020), the state and the press (Trottier, 2018), content creators (Lewis and Christin, 2022), employers (Saint-Louis, 2021) and regular social media users (Trottier, 2018; Bouvier, 2020).

In this text, we want to explore these categories, expand them, and experiment with a general explanation of who participates in cancellations. More specifically, using the Justine Sacco case (2013), we will show that individual users, networked counterpublics, the traditional press, social media platforms, celebrities and employers participate in cancellations, as do non-governmental organizations, activists and for-profit companies. By exposing this complex array of actors involved in a single case, we aim to show that cancellations are not the tactic of a specific side of the political spectrum or the making of a definitive set of actors; they are the result of the engagement of those who have some kind of interest in the cancellation, meaning that the actors involved are as varied as the interests a cancellation might attract.

The article is structured as follows: firstly, we will briefly describe the case of Justine Sacco, cancelled in 2013. Secondly, we will define what we mean by "cancellations" and how it is a form of deviance creation – an entrepreneurial process that attracts diverse interests. In the second section, we will present who the literature considers responsible for a cancellation. Next, we will examine the individuals or groups involved in her public shaming.

The case of Justine Sacco

On December 20, 2013, Justine Sacco was about to board an eleven-hour flight to South Africa to visit her family; Sacco was 30 years old at the time and worked

as a high-ranking public relations manager at InterActivCorp (IAC) (Ronson, 2015). She had a Twitter account with 170 followers, and before boarding, she decided to write a post: "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!" (Vingiano, 2013). Sacco then took her flight and went offline.

According to Buzzfeed (Vingiano, 2013), while Sacco's device was in airplane mode, one of her Twitter followers sent the offending tweet to journalist Sam Biddle, who retweeted it. Biddle had about 15,000 followers and commented: "Very funny/cool AIDS/Africa joke from IAC's head of corporate communications, great work."Among the reactions, while Sacco was still flying, the hashtag #HasJustineLandedYet was created (Vingiano, 2013), which became a world trending topic.

Major media outlets, such as CNN (Stelter, 2013a) and ABC (Dimitrova, 2013), picked up the story. Social media users searched Sacco's Twitter account for other misdeeds, such as the tweets "I had a sex dream about an autistic kid last night" (Ronson, 2015) and "I can't be fired for things I say while intoxicated, right?" (Stelter, 2013a).

At this point, the hashtag #hasjustinelandedyet had been used almost 100,000 times around the globe (Vingiano, 2013), and Sacco's employer, IAC, stated that her tweet was unacceptable (Ronson, 2015). After landing, Sacco first deleted her tweet and Twitter account, and later, she issued an apology, calling her tweet needless and careless (Stelter, 2013a). IAC fired Sacco hours after her landing (Ronson, 2016).

The cancellation process and actors

Cancellations as a form of shaming rule-enforcement

Cancellations have been characterized as a process in which an individual or group perceives a situation as problematic; a certain individual or organization is pointed out as responsible for the problematic situation and exposed on traditional or social media; this exposition is replicated by other social media users, snowballing and reaching the attention of a mass public, generating demeaning comments, criticism and practices such as doxing; finally, employers and business partners are pressured to cut ties with the cancelled person, which might happen or not (Xavier, Tavares and Chaves, 2023). Authors like Aitchson and Meckled-Garcia (2021) and Saint-Louis (2021) have characterized this process as a form of rule enforcement, that is, "Social media users…respond to norm-breaking behaviour by calling them out to enforce what they believe

are established, or should be established conventions" (Saint-Louis, 2021, p. 4). As explained by Becker (1963), rule enforcement is part of the process of deviance formation, which transforms someone into an *outsider* – someone who is a "special kind of person, one who cannot be trusted to live by the rules agreed on by the group" (p. 1). From societal reaction perspective, the sole universal characteristic of deviance is the process by which it is constructed: "...what is universal is not a matter of content or substance, but of the process – the process by which definitions of acts and persons as deviant are socially generated and applied" (Pfohl, 1994, p. 284). In the words of Becker, deviance, that is, "(…) publicly labelled wrongdoing – is always the result of enterprise" (Becker, 1963, p. 162). In this way, deviance can be defined as "a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender'" (Becker, 1963, p. 9). As a form of rule enforcement, cancellations are, therefore, a process of characterizing someone as deviant and imposing consequences upon them.

In cancellations, this process of transforming someone into an outsider is reinforced by the fact that cancellers mainly use shaming (Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia, 2021; Tyson, 2022; Han, 2023). Shaming punishments are not new – shame was vastly used in pre-modern types of community punishments, for example (Thompson, 1993; Nash and Kilday, 2010), and its use as social control has never faded (Nash and Kilday, 2010). Shame can be characterized as the failure to achieve certain ideals (Piers, 1971; Morrison, 1983; Nussbaum, 2004) and it is related to others' evaluation of the shamed person (Lewis, 1971). Shame threatens social bonds with others, bringing fear of ostracization, expulsion, and contempt (Piers, 1971; Scheff, 1997, 2000). In this way, shaming, then, is "…a process that enrols a set of social actors to stigmatise and exclude (categories of) individuals under scrutiny." (Trottier, 2018, p. 171).

As said by Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia (2021), in cancellations, "The moral impugning of character … typically involves descriptions of a person as sullied and tainted, rather than stating facts or arguments concerning her views or behaviour. They are framed as someone beyond the pale, not to be trusted or engaged with" (p. 5-6). As an outsider, the cancelled is inserted in a narrative of good versus evil, in which she or he represents the opposite of the canceller's morality: "Such fictionalization is endemic to shaming. It is comforting to believe that we can easily sort the people we encounter online into good and bad, allies and enemies, human and subhuman. Online shaming expresses the fantasy of a simple moral world" (Tyson, 2022, p. 129).

Since the process of enforcement is an enterprising act, someone *with an interest* in the enforcement "must take the initiative in punishing the culprit"

says Becker (1963, p. 121). The author does not define what interest is concerning deviance-building, but he gives plenty of examples showing that the concept should be interpreted broadly. The prohibitionist movement in the US, for one, counted on moral crusaders who believed that drinking was an evil and were interested in bettering the lives of other, less fortunate citizens. Their interest was, then, a sincere belief in the goodness of the rule. At the same time, however, "some industrialists supported Prohibition because they felt it would provide them with a more manageable labor force" (p. 150); that is, their interest in the rule was opportunistic – what mattered was not the morality of the rule, but the profits the actors could gain from it. We see then that interest encompasses all sorts of objectives related to the process of creating deviance: not only the moral belief in the content of the rule but also whatever makes it beneficial to a given actor.

In the process of deviance formation, as stated by Becker (1963), "How we decide which rule of which groups prevail is a matter of political and economical power" (p. 17) since "Differences in the ability to make rules and apply them to other people are essentially power differentials (either legal or extralegal)" (pp. 17-18). These power differentials include changes in media; indeed, changes in media also mean changes in the resources in the construction of social problems. As Gusfield puts it (1963), mediatic spaces are "arenas of conflict between opposing status groups" (p. 175), and the multiplication of media tools allows for the multiplication of points of view and gives voice to those previously considered as folk devils (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995).

As we have shown somewhere else (Xavier, Tavares and Chaves, 2023), cancellations were made possible due to societal structural changes, which are implementing a network logic. The network logic differs from a broadcast model, in which a few actors emit messages that a mass public receives but never responds to (Castells, 2008, 2015). This means that, now, different actors, such as "commercial, amateur, governmental, nonprofit, educational, activist and other players (…) produce and distribute content and each of these groups is being transformed by their new power and responsibilities in this emerging media ecology" (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008, p. 5).

If the possibility of communicating with the masses is spread out in society, who will use these tools to shame others? As we will see below, the scholarship has pointed out different actors as responsible for cancellations but, so far, without constructing a larger concept that can encompass all types of participants.

Networked subaltern counterpublics and right-wing movements

A first perspective on the participants of cancellations looks at grassroots groups. For sure, we might understand cancellations as a process through which more groups are allowed to dispute in the process of deviance formation, allowing subaltern *counterpublics* (Fraser, 1994) to find a new online space to share experiences and culture and to voice their grievances (Graham and Smith, 2016; Clark, 2020). Fraser (1994) introduces the concept of counterpublics by criticizing Habermas' (2014; 2017) public sphere, as a liberal, bourgeois, male space that excludes other marginalized publics, such as women from various classes and ethnicities. Fraser emphasizes the importance of counterpublics, that is, "… parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p. 67). Jackson, Bailey and Welles (2020) show how, even though marginalized counterpublics have always found forms of communication to create their politics, they "…yet have repurposed Twitter in particular to make identity-based cultural and political demands" (p. xxv).

To Clark (2020), cancel culture is about giving voice to marginalized groups to frame and point out social problems that would not be addressed in the larger public sphere. Social media would "allow marginalized groups to engage in networked framing (…), through the collective reasoning of culturally aligned online crowds (Clark, 2020, p. 89). Certainly, the relationship between cancellations and counterpublics is also part of the origins of these online movements. As Ng (2022, p. 49–52) explains, based on journalists Clyde McGrady and Aja Romano, the expression "to cancel someone" has origins in Black popular culture, and it started being used by Black Twitter (see definition below) in other situations, mainly inside its own realms, and in cases in which both the cancelled and the canceller were black.

With time, the expression "cancelling" spread throughout Twitter, becoming a powerful way of demanding accountability; at the same time, it started losing its connection with communities of colour, being used by a larger public (Ng, 2022). Clark (2020) says that the expression "cancelling" has since been misappropriated by elites, and that "have narrativized being cancelled into a moral panic akin to actual harm, adding a neologic twist on the origin of the practice by associating it with an unfounded fear of censorship and silencing" (p. 89). Likewise, Day and Halborow (2021) state that "… the weaponisation of so-called cancel culture by those in positions of power is disturbing" (p. 29).

It is necessary to clarify that, despite its origins, cancel culture is not a practice exclusive to subaltern counterpublics. Some authors, unfortunately, mix the origins of cancel culture with it being exclusive to progressive groups. Dyrberg (2024), for example, states that cancel culture "is a culture in the sense of forming part of *leftist* identitarianism" (p. 193 –emphasis added), that it is a practice usually used against racism and sexism, and in which any dissent is considered right-wing extremism. Notwithstanding, besides empirical research that shows that liberals are less prone to cancel than their conservative counterparts (Cook *et al.,* 2021), multiple examples demonstrate that conservatives also cancel. The emblematic case is Gamergate: a series of cancellations of women and other people considered social justice warriors and pointed out as responsible for ruining the video game industry (Massanari, 2017). Furthermore, Tyson (2022) states that cancel culture has conservative features when considering

> …its insistence on conformity, shaming, even when harnessed for ostensibly progressive ends... the American right… has an undeniable taste for public shaming. The right-wing Twitter account Libs of TikTok, for instance, has gained more than a million followers by holding up queer and trans people as objects of disgust (Tyson, 2022, p. 126).

In this way, despite its counterpublic origins, cancelling is today a practice of both sides of the political spectrum. It is important, however, to remember that, despite that fact, "…due to fundamental power differentials that privilege Whiteness and maleness, those who challenge these structures are more likely to face harassment, systematically removing minority voices from the public sphere" (Marwick, 2021, p. 2). For sure, research shows that women, LGBTQ+ people, black people, indigenous people and people with disabilities are the main targets of online hate (Joseph, 2022; UN Women, 2024). We should be attentive, then, to the possibility that even progressive cancellations might target mainly the minorities they supposedly champion.

Moreover, through the work of Trottier (2018), Bouvier (2019, 2020), Lewis and Christin (2022), Saint-Louis (2021), and Day and Halborow (2021), we will see that the idealistic portrayal of cancellations as moved by grassroots movements' interests paints only a partial picture of the phenomenon. It leaves aside the participation of other actors whose interests are not the moral belief in the content of progressive rules but goals of visibility and profit.

Cancellation as assemblage? The state, the traditional press and content creators

Besides recognizing that not only liberals cancel, Trottier (2018) poses a second problem to the assertion that cancellations are the work of counter-publics: for him, this type of phenomenon would be the work of an *assemblage*, "that include[s] private security cameras, police, public broadcasters, social media platforms, users and their devices" (p. 170). An assemblage, for Haggerty and Ericson (2000), based on Deleuze and Guattari, constitutes a phenomenon that is "part of the state form" and that, despite being usually approached as "bounded, structured, and stable," is constituted by "an essentially limitless range of other phenomena such as people, signs, chemicals, knowledge and institutions. To dig beneath the surface stability of any entity is to encounter a host of different phenomena and processes working in concert" (p. 608).

Trottier (2018) focuses on criminalized incidents that are also exposed online, in which the culprit is not only formally processed by the state but also shamed by social media users and the press. To the author,

> Shaming is a social mechanism through which state and press-affiliated actors mobilize the public, either as a passive audience member or as an active participant providing personal details about—or condemnation of—a target. Yet through digital media, citizens are able to render shamed targets visible to a degree that may exceed the former's understanding of 'proportionality', or the latter's understanding of 'public interest' (Trottier, 2018, p. 179–180).

It is important to highlight, however, that differently from Trottier, we do not assume that the state and press are the leading actors in a cancellation, or not even that the state's presence is necessary. In Sacco's case, for example, the state presence is negligible and secondary, and the cancellation does not aim at enhancing an official punishment. So, even though the idea of a "limitless range of other phenomena" (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000, p. 608) is attractive, it would be inadequate to classify a cancellation as an assemblage, considering the connection of this latter concept with the state form.

Bouvier (2019) also highlights how the media plays a role in social media trends. With the advent of the new media landscape, traditional media has been challenged by the constant demand for updates and clicks. In this way, what is deemed newsworthy is influenced by what is trending online – trending itself indicates meaningfulness and cultural relevance. Moreover,

as the distinction between social and traditional media blurs, legacy media companies and social media platforms find mutual benefits in collaborating, say Lewis and Christin (2022) citing Cunningham and Craig, 2017. They argue that cancellations are a complex process involving traditional media, social media platforms, content creators and celebrities. The visibility of the topic highly drives the platform drama created around cancellations – that is, the number of interactions, views, clicks and likes received by a certain story. This means that what content creators defend as moral or immoral might depend on the pushback they might receive from their audiences: "many creators felt that they were unable to produce videos that went against the prevailing opinions of their audiences, fearing backlash or low viewership numbers" (p. 1643).

In this way, Trottier (2018), Bouvier (2019) and Lewis and Christin (2022) show that, besides grassroots movements, the state, traditional media, social media platforms, content creators, and celebrities engage in cancelling practices.

Employers and business partners

A final group of actors who must be considered in the cancellation process are the cancelled person's employer and business partners. Saint-Louis (2021) differentiates the acts of ostracising and shaming people online, which he calls cancel culture, from its "active element", "an event where organisations censor, fire, or encourage celebrities or commoners to resign following a breach of social norms, mores, and taboos" (p. 4-5). Organizations and employers cut ties with the wrongdoer. This cut, however, is not due to ideological reasons but merely because of risk management: "Risk mitigation is an important motivation. Organisations do not cancel their members because of convictions. They do so to protect their reputations (Fehr and Fischbacher, 2004) as a part of crisis management plans (Coombs, 2007)" (p. 8). In this way, it must be considered how mass online protests put power in the hands of employers to silence individuals (Day and Halborow, 2021). We can consider cancellations partly as a managerial practice through which companies administer risks.

We see, then, the literature points out different actors as responsible for cancellations: marginalized counterpublics, right-wing social media users, the traditional media, the state, content creators, celebrities, employers and businesses partners. We look forward, however, to an all-encompassing definition of who cancels, *beyond the enumeration of specific actors*. The authors reviewed here are mostly preoccupied with describing empirical findings and

cases that, unfortunately, limit a larger concept of who cancels. Trottier (2018) is the exception with the conception of assemblage. However, he ends up limiting it by defining cancellations as a movement *led* by and with the necessary participation of the state and the press, followed by social media users. As we will see in Sacco's case, a more extensive and flexible concept is necessary since unpredicted actors can participate in and even lead a cancellation – as long as they are interested in it.

Methods

We decided to use Justine Sacco's case to analyze cancel culture as a shaming mechanism and the actors involved in it. It is a well-known instance of cancel culture, thoroughly narrated by Jon Ronson (2015, 2016) and often cited in the academic literature (see, for example, Ott, 2017; Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia, 2021; Tyson, 2022). Using the service TrackMyHashtag, we acquired a dataset with tweets, retweets and replies that used the hashtag #HasJustineLandedYet from 2013-12-20 to 2014-01-20. The resulting dataset contains 51,601 tweets.

Using Gephi, we then built a "name network", also known as a "who-mentions-whom": "When applied to Twitter data, the name network approach connects Twitter users if one mentions, retweets or replies to another" (Gruzd, 2017, p. 521) . We built a network with 30,442 users connected by 44,835 mentions. In a second step, we identified the users mentioned by at least ten other unique users – this reduced the network to the most influential 591 users. Finally, we identified which messages mentioned these 591 users and were repeated at least ten times via retweets, quotes or replies. We intended to select the most popular messages in the network, which incited users to replicate them. We identified the 676 messages that were then submitted to an inductive coding process (Glaser and Strauss, 2017).

Whose rules?

Black Twitter

To identify the cancellers, we observed who the cancellers themselves pointed out as participating in the cancellation and, secondly, who actively tweeted about the case. In this first group, the Twitter users referred to *Black Twitter*. Considering this, we argue that Sacco's cancellation partly happened because of (1) an *already existing* network (2) continuously engaged in activism and shared cultural practices and interactions, (3) organized through hashtags and (4)

whose interest in the values offended by Sacco had peaked in the summer of 2013 (which Clark (2020) called "*Black Twitter's summer of accountability*" – p. 90).

Users refer to Black Twitter in their messages and give the impression that the subnetwork is the entity making the decisions on Sacco's cancellation: "She needs to pull a Snowden and stay in the Terminal till she negotiates asylum with Black Twitter" (user 103). The users do not identify who the members of Black Twitter are or how Black Twitter makes decisions. Despite that, Black Twitter was characterized as a real online power that can confront Sacco's racism: "Lesson from #HasJustineLandedYet - black twitter is *real & coming to get* your casual oblivious racist cruelty (user 104 – emphasis added). This confrontation would not be pleasant, of course: user 20 compared this eventual meet-up to the shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

American Twitter has an over-representation of black adults (Jackson, Bailey and Welles, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2024). Florini (2019) explains that Black Americans constitute "Black digital networks."[3] (p. 2-3), which became more visible after protests in Ferguson in 2014, following the death of Mike Brown, but that long before were "…how Black Americans have been able to create and use multimedia, transplatform digital networks to articulate their experiences, cultivate community and solidarity, mobilize political resistance, and both bypass and intervene in legacy news media coverage" (p. 2-3). Jackson, Bailey and Welles also report how, since the killing of Oscar Grant in 2009 and Trayvon Martin in 2012, "…counterpublics, activists, and concerned citizens engaged digital technology in the long tradition of elevating untold stories and unfair conditions faced by African Americans" (Jackson, Bailey and Welles, 2020, p. 118). Furthermore, black Americans also use Twitter to talk about humour and entertainment (Ng, 2022), such as TV shows like *Scandal,* a TV series that was very popular with Black audiences and about which Black Americans used to live tweet weekly, discussing not only the plot but also the politics of the show (Chatman, 2017).

Inside this ecosystem of networks composed of Black Americans, we find "…the related subgroup of the predominantly Black network of Twitter users known as 'Black Twitter,'" says Florini (2019, p. 19). Black Twitter is "a meta-network, comprised of smaller subnetworks that emerge from interpersonal connections and shared interests" (p. 22). For the author, Black Twitter has proven

3   Black Twitter is not the only black digital network existing on the platform. Graham and Smith have studied Black Twitter and Black Conservatives on Twitter (#BCOT) as potential counterpublics (Graham and Smith, 2016, p. 441)

itself as an important tool for mobilizing the Black community. She exemplifies with Trayvon Martin's killing in 2012 and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman in 2013: Black Twitter organized to make these events gain national attention, which led to the mobilization of the Black Lives Matter movement. As Clark (2020) stated, Black Twitter gained greater prominence in the summer of 2013, in which several cases – referenced in Tweets by the users in Sacco's dataset – gained attention, such as celebrity chef Paula Deen's use of racial slurs ("Hey Justine, Maybe Paula Deen is looking for a communications director" – User 161). Moreover, the killing of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of Zimmerman left lasting effects on the network: Jackson, Bailey and Welles (2020) say that #TrayvonMartin became a larger "…symbol of the broader condition of racial bias and injustice in America"; they also show "…how the narratives constructed by a particular publics are lasting and how particular stories carry symbolic weight even when events lie in the past" (p. 118-119).

We can first conclude that Sacco's cancellation is inserted in this much larger context, that of a Black Twitter that had been organizing and mobilizing for years around common cultural practices, humour, and activism. Her case happened a few months after a peak in activity and outrage when public discourse against racism was heightened. This context is evidently reflected in some of the Tweets, which compare her racism to that of Martin's killer: "Going to North America. Hope I don't get shot by George Zimmerman. Just kidding! I'm white" (User 23 and User 163). Likewise, users inserted Sacco in the cultural conversations in Black Twitter. It is telling that the most retweeted message on the #HasJustineLandedYet network is a joke referring to the TV show *Scandal*. The show starred black actress Kerry Washington, who portrayed Olivia Pope, the best PR professional in Washington D.C. User 5 tweeted as if that character was telling Sacco: "Olivia Pope: 'Gurl, you're on your own with this one'." The tweet was then reproduced by Kerry Washington herself and was retweeted 864 times. Sacco's case is, in this way, the continuation of a conversation about racism and privilege in the United States. It is one among the many others Black Twitter has addressed in the past few years, and they promptly situate her within this dialogue by comparing her tweet to these past cases that, nonetheless, still carry weight and symbolism inside the counterpublic.

We see, then, that Twitter allowed a subaltern counterpublic to find a new space of mobilization and exchange and to give bigger visibility to their values, interests, and methods. If, in the process of building deviance, power differentials make it possible for one group to impose their rules of right and wrong, Twitter significantly altered these power differentials and provided a

new space for Black Americans to express their concerns and demand respect for their values.

Finally, and most importantly, we see that Sacco was not simply unlucky to be retweeted by a professional with a large following. For sure, having Sam Biddle as a whistle-blower made it possible for the cancellation to start, but we also need to consider that, at least a part of her cancellers was an organized online network that had already the practice in acting coordinately through hashtags (Jackson, Bailey and Welles, 2020). For years, Black Twitter had been constructing connections among its users through activism, culture and fandom (Chatman, 2017; Florini, 2019; Clark, 2020; Jackson, Bailey and Welles, 2020), allowing it to act in the face of a new racist offence swiftly.

We can not assume that all participants in Sacco's network are part of Black Twitter. Users themselves point out that the cancellation is a union of white and black Twitter: "Wow, twitter is SO much funnier when white twitter and black twitter *gets together* for a laugh" (user 165). However, Black Twitter is a part of the #HasJustineLandedYet network. Because of that, we must at least remain cautious in assuming that cancellations are unorganized and instantaneous or led by actors such as the state and the press. Sacco's cancellation, at least for some users, did not sprout out of thin air but was part of continuing anti-racist activism. Furthermore, considering the tragic and violent events against which Black Twitter had been fighting, Sacco's joke gains a different dimension. It was yet another drop in the ocean of racism in the United States.

Non-governmental organizations, governmental organizations for social aid and social activists

Thrall *et al.* (2014) show how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) compete for their audience's attention in the mediatic sphere: "To win the competition for news media attention, NGOs need organizational resources such as money, credibility, technical capability, and close relationships with political elites" (p. 139). Despite the overall optimism in the literature about networked media as a more democratic space that would bring more visibility to the work of NGOs, the authors argue that resources and previous visibility in traditional media are still significant to make an impression in an environment like Twitter. Having a social media presence is a costly process for human-rights-oriented organizations.

Therefore, taking advantage of the visibility of the trend presented itself as (1) topical for actors who dealt with the HIV/AIDS crisis and (2) a good

opportunity to gain more visibility in the #HasJustineLandedYet network. Indeed, besides Black Twitter, another set of actors used the hashtag as a form of activism to advance fund-raising and awareness for the HIV/AIDS cause. A series of NGOs, individuals and even American governmental offices entered the network to try to call attention to the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa and gather funds.

The most important example of the use of the network by NGOs was the case of Aid for Africa. During Sacco's cancellation, an unidentified person—not the NGO—bought the justinesacco.com web domain and redirected it to the Aid for Africa donation webpage (Aid for Africa, 2013). Twitter users classified this move as "Well played" (e.g., users 115 and 116) and deserving of "a Nobel prize" (user 117). The NGO itself then used the momentum and posted several tweets using the hashtag #HasJustineLandedYet and redirecting the users to the mocking URL, for example: "Go to [justinesacco.com] and donate to Aid for Africa. A coalition of 80+ orgs helping communities in Africa". The move brought several different meanings to the cancellation. Users saw it as an example of good versus bad PR (User 109) and a way of turning something bad into good (Users 9, 110 and 111). Moreover, the move had an element of funniness: the redirection of justinesacco.com to an AIDS charity sounded like an irony with a charitable twist.

Other users also used the hashtag to benefit the AIDS/HIV cause. User 112 and user 113 created a webpage full of resources to donate and to learn more about AIDS/HIV and Africa. The authors of the webpage were very clear in their tweets about their intentions of making the case not about Sacco, but about awareness and charity: "Following #hasJustinelandedyet? Why not help make AIDS history *instead*? Give via [link for the website]" (user 112); "Please RT *Snark is cheap* and AIDS is real. [User 112] and I made it easy to learn & donate [link for the website]" (user 113). Other users also indicated other charities as a better response than attacking Sacco: "It's terrifying how quickly #HasJustineLandedYet turned into a dogpile. Let's practice *purposeful* outrage and donate: [amfAR.org]" (user 114). Likewise, other AIDS-related charities (AIDS Health Care, ONE, We Care, Dignitas International), and even official US government initiatives, like the US Agency for International Development (USAID), AIDS. gov and the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS (PEPFAR), actively used the hashtag to promote their causes.

That is, Sacco's cancellation represented an opportunity for actors related to the underlying cause of AIDS in Africa to bring awareness to their actions and to try to gather more resources. The participation of these well-intentioned

actors was not negligible: Aid for Africa was the second most mentioned actor in the network, being mentioned by other 1,719 unique users, behind only Justine Sacco herself, with 3,320 mentions.

Nonetheless, this response is still supported by the public shaming of Sacco. It uses humorous hashtags and gives more visibility to the case and Sacco (feeding the cancellation) so that these NGOs and governmental bodies obtain visibility on Twitter. NGOs, activists and governmental bodies do not start the cancellation, but they give it more visibility and a righteous purpose: cancelling is now associated not only with degrading someone but also with supporting a good cause.

Traditional media

Traditional media vehicles have a complex relationship with social media. Firstly, the former uses the latter for a variety of functions: "In particular, they are using it in four ways: to disseminate news, to market stories, to establish relationships with news consumers, and as a tool for reporting" (Broersma and Graham, 2012, p. 403). Secondly, social media works as a *news source* that informs traditional vehicles, which either use social media posts to colour an existing story or as a story in itself (Broersma and Graham, 2012; Paulussen and Harder, 2014).

Indeed, one of the uses of Twitter during Sacco's cancellation was as a means to share information about the case in its various moments. Users shared news links that summarized the case, for those others who were "late" (user 122), "missed" what had happened (user 124), or did not know why #HasJustineLandedYet was trending (user 126). They also informed others when Sacco was fired (user 127), landed and deleted the tweet (user 132).

In this process of information sharing among Twitter users, traditional media played an important role, covering the case, bringing more visibility to it outside of Twitter, and even bringing in new information to the detriment of Sacco. Indeed, checking the links posted in the tweets, we see that several media outlets covered the case: *LA Weekly*, CNN, Buzzfeed, *USA Today*; *Le Nouvel Obs*, *The New York Times*, BBC News, Mashable, CTV News, *The Daily Mail* – to name a few. Moreover, some news vehicles also tweeted themselves, distributing the news about the case and becoming some of the networks' most influential actors, with many retweets, for example, @CTVNews, @LAWeekly and @BBCWorld.

However, the media participation did not simply amplify the visibility of the case: we argue that the media helped form the identity of Sacco as an outsider

and the image of the cancellation as a powerful instrument that had concrete consequences. The former process was observable in the Buzzfeed community article on the case, the latter in the *New York Times* piece.

The first tweet in the network about the *New York Times* piece about Sacco's cancellation is "PR nightmare on @nytimes ([NYTimes link]) sipping orange juice in the sky with no clue" (user 138), followed by "What starts on Twitter never stays on Twitter #HasJustineLandedYet [NYTimes link]" (User 139). In both comments the users used the *New York Times* piece to dimension the cancellation: Sacco is flying without having a clue she is now featured in the NY Times; her cancellation is bigger than Twitter: it is now being featured in the NYTimes. We see, then, that the *New York Times* piece did not work only by making Sacco's case visible: the piece itself became a topic of discussion – being featured in the *New York Times* shows the size of the case and its reach.

Another article that enters the conversation, not just amplifying it but also influencing it, was the piece created by the Buzzfeed community, "16 tweets Justine Sacco regrets". The article compiled Sacco's old tweets that could also be considered offensive. Users expressed incredulity ("Just. Wow" - user 128) and alarm ("Yikes" – user 24) in response to these old tweets. For the users, these old tweets were proof that Sacco was the person who authored the AIDS message since they showed her habitual lack of common sense: "If she claims her account was hacked, how does she explain these [old tweets]?" (user 149). The old tweets help to confirm an idea of Sacco as someone low – the AIDS tweet was not a lapse, just routine.

We see, then, that cancellations are not a pure product of social media: legacy media vehicles also have an active role in amplifying it. They make it more visible outside and inside Twitter and contribute to forming the image of the cancelled person and the cancellation.

For-profit companies

For-profit companies also participated in Sacco's cancellation, as seen in the cases of Gogo, Empire Avenue and several spam accounts. Indeed, Gogo, an in-flight internet provider, announced its product by making fun of Sacco: "Next time you plan to tweet something stupid before you take off, make sure you are getting on a @Gogo flight! Crown: @JustineSacco". Even though Gogo later apologized for the tweet (Vingiano, 2013), we see that it had an impact: Twitter users congratulated the company for its savvy ad, saying, "Well played, @Gogo. Well. Played" (user 141).

Furthermore, the communication company Empire Avenue also promoted itself using the hashtag. The company tweeted, trying to capitalize on the trend: "You can invest in our virtual stock [company link] if you think we'll perform better than Justine." The next day, the company asked its followers which web domain it should redirect to a charity– like what was done for Aid for Africa. The company announced that "justPRsacco" was the winning suggestion and redirected it to the charity Concern Worldwide.

Finally, the hashtag was also used in spam messages, inviting other users to "boost" their followers by clicking attached links. These spam messages included not only the #HasJustineLandedYet hashtag but also others that were popular at the moment, like #2013TaughtMe and #ScottPilgrim. The presence of these sorts of accounts in the network has been noticed by Jackson, Bailey and Welles (2020), when describing the online activism in Trayvon Martin's case: "… the [Zimmerman] trial network also includes bots and other opportunistic accounts that exploited public interest in the trial to make money or promote products" (p. 110).

These examples show companies using the hashtag to make business – to announce certain products. Thus, actors used the Sacco story to increase their visibility in the network and advertise their products and goals.

Sacco's employer

To Saint-Louis (2021), the active element that differentiates "cancel culture" from other forms of online abuse is the *act of cancellation*, which, for that author, is when "…an event where organizations censor, fire, or encourage celebrities or commoners to resign following a breach of social norms, mores, and taboos" (p. 4-5). Are consequences necessary to characterize a cancellation? Saint-Louis (2021) solves this problem by differentiating cancel culture from cancellation. Either way, it is undeniable that employers and business partners play a significant role in cancellations, in the sense that they might impose financial consequences upon the cancelled.

 In Sacco's case, there were no tweets actively asking for her to be fired – but there were tweets assuming she would be fired. The first tweet about that assumption was on the 21st, at 02:54Z, by user 142: "So, @JustineSacco will probably get fired, if IAC does the usual. But could we get something more useful to happen?" One minute later, user 150 talked about "career suicide." Similar others followed; it was only at 04:56Z that we saw the first tweet informing that IAC had removed Sacco from their "contact us" page. It is after that user 145 celebrated that "The deed is done."

As we can see, users assume, even before any word by IAC, that Sacco would be fired – and they end up being right. With the massive response to Sacco's tweet, the pressure on IAC unsurprisingly had an effect, as we can see in the company's statement: "'The offensive comment does not reflect the views and values of IAC. We take this issue very seriously, and we have parted ways with the employee in question,'" an IAC spokesman said in a statement" (Stelter, 2013b). It is interesting, then, that IAC reactively participated in the cancellation – the *risk* to the company's reputation was too high – by firing Sacco. It is noticeable that the company, in its statement, does not engage in the demeaning of Sacco, limiting itself to condemning the tweet. To a point, the company gives nuance to Sacco's character, framing her as a person "otherwise known to be a decent person at the core." However, this decency was not sufficient to save Sacco's job in the face of the potential reputational damage to IAC. The risk mitigation interest prevailed; IAC's participation, therefore, was essential by imposing an important consequence on Sacco.

Conclusion

We see that Sacco's cancellation attracted several different actors with different interests. Here, we highlighted *just a few* of them: counterpublics interested in changing the debate and the rules of the public sphere; non-governmental organizations, governmental organisms and activists trying to raise funds and increase awareness of the HIV/AIDS cause; traditional media using the case as news and giving it more visibility; for-profit companies trying to advertise their products; Sacco's employer responding to the risk to its reputation. Other actors, such as celebrities and influencers looking for visibility or Twitter itself, profiting on engagement and clicks, were not highlighted but must also be included in the cancellation network as relevant actors. Each of these actors had their reasons for joining the cancellation, and their participation gave more visibility to the case and furthered it, keeping the hashtag in the trending topics and bringing consequences to Sacco. From the analysis, we may draw a few conclusions.

Firstly, Trottier (2018) was right in pointing out that cancellations are a phenomenon composed of "an essentially limitless range of other phenomena" (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000, p. 608). We go beyond Trottier, in the sense that our empirical data shows a more flexible cancellation in which grassroots movements might be leaders, and the state participation might be negligible. Moreover, we can now establish that anyone with a potential interest in the

cancellation is a potential participant. As pointed out by Becker (1963), rule enforcers are entrepreneurs with an *interest* in the process of creating deviance. With the advance of mass self-communication, different actors can now expose their interests and advocate for them, which can be done in complex ways, such as networked counterpublics, broadcast media, or individual tweeting. The access to resources and communicational power allows more actors to advocate for what they want.

Secondly, our literature review did not predict the participation of NGOs, government organizations, and activists for the AIDS/HIV cause in the cancellation. However, considering the case and the visibility gained by these actors by using the hashtag, their participation is hardly surprising: using the cancellation to publicize their projects, raise funds, and increase awareness was within the interests of the NGOs and activists. Similarly, it was in the media's interest to cover the case of Black Twitter to bring up their grievances, for for-profit companies to advertise their products, and for IAC to protect its reputation. Better than listing participants of cancellations, it is to understand that *a cancellation is a deviance-creation process open to whichever entrepreneurs are interested in it*. In some cases, as explained by Becker (1963), these actors– like Black Twitter – will believe in the content of the rule being enforced. In other cases, the actors gain something from the rule enforcement. In Sacco's case, actors such as the press, celebrities, for-profit companies, Twitter, NGOs, government organizations, and activists gained visibility while cancelling Sacco – independently of their belief in the underlying cause. In this sense, scholars should be attentive to unusual and previously unnoticed actors participating in cancellations, who may advocate for numerous causes and in numerous ways, depending on the interests at play.

In this way, we should also understand the *interest* of the actors in a broad sense: cancellations will involve not necessarily only the express interest in shaming the cancelled and enforcing a rule upon them, but also the interest in participating and, in this way, gaining something with it: visibility, funds, sales, reputation. Thus, the cancellation is deepened as much by those who actively reprehend what the cancelled person did as by others who do not necessarily reprehend the wrongdoing but have a related interest in the cause. Cancellations, therefore, must be understood as a social phenomenon for creating a deviant through their public shaming, which can attract different actors with different objectives – some more virtuous and others more opportunistic.

Finally, this study is limited to the matter of *who* cancels and *why*. Our intention here was not to defend or criticize cancellations as a tool for advancing

social causes; this topic is still being studied in our current research on cancel culture. Nonetheless, it is worth noticing that this article has already presented some of the problems related to cancel culture as an instrument for social change: its use by other actors to advance opportunistic goals and the targeting of minorities – the very public that cancellations should protect. Moreover, in the future, other key problematic aspects should be considered by researchers, such as the disproportionality of the consequences, the use of punishment as entertainment, and the limited transformative effects of such actions due to their focus on individual responsibility instead of more considerable societal change.

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