

Portland State University

PDXScholar

Book Publishing Final Research Paper

English

Spring 2021

Uncovering the Dirt on Cancel Culture: An In-depth Analysis of Publishing's Relationship with Controversy

Alix Martinez

Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/eng_bookpubpaper



Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), and the [Publishing Commons](#)

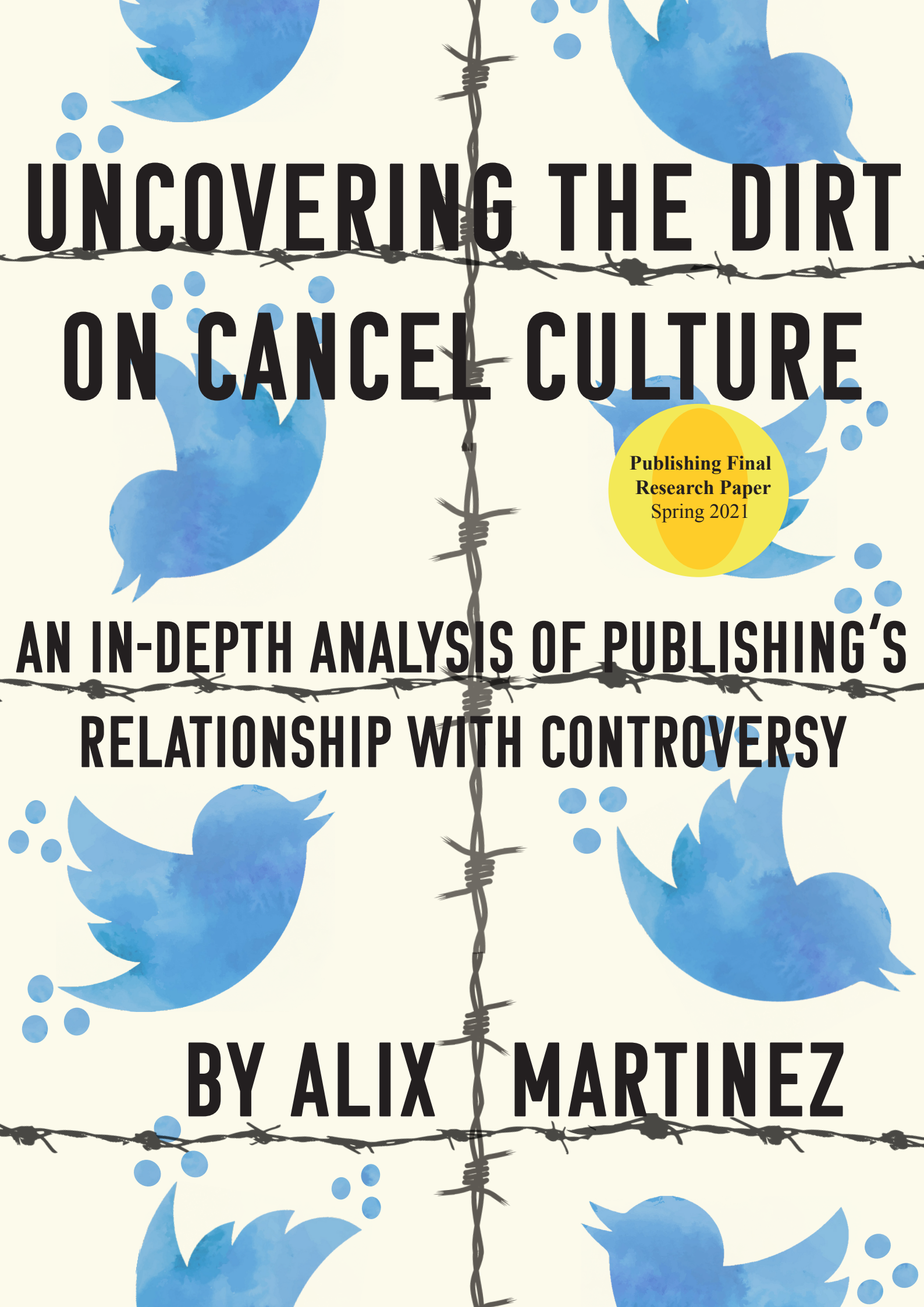
Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Martinez, Alix, "Uncovering the Dirt on Cancel Culture: An In-depth Analysis of Publishing's Relationship with Controversy" (2021). *Book Publishing Final Research Paper*. 58.

https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/eng_bookpubpaper/58

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Book Publishing Final Research Paper by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.



UNCOVERING THE DIRT ON CANCEL CULTURE

**Publishing Final
Research Paper
Spring 2021**

AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF PUBLISHING'S RELATIONSHIP WITH CONTROVERSY

BY ALIX MARTINEZ

Research Question

What impact is “cancel culture” having on the publishing industry? What can publishers learn from this highly controversial topic, particularly about millennial readers?

Abstract

Cancel culture is a social phenomenon that has risen from the massive amounts of online users finding common issues and speaking up about them *en masse* on social media platforms. In recent years, this has become even more obvious as it is reported that social media users' consumption has risen up to 72 percent more from the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.¹ This has brought the topic into the forefront of many debates and people are taking issue with it. These issues can vary but one thing is for sure: cancel culture does not appear to be slowing down anytime soon. We can see some of this with recent examples such as author J.K. Rowling, actress Gina Carano, and businessman Mike Lindell, to name a few.² Each example dealt with a statement or action that was deemed problematic by a sizable population, such as J.K. Rowling's tweets that were seen as transphobic. Her tweets resulted in fans, actors from her films, and even those working on her newest title at Hachette to condemn her, some even refusing to work on her content at all.³ Any and all industries are capable of being canceled and publishing is no exception. This paper investigates how publishers can coexist with cancel culture despite the negative reputation it has garnered. Rather than take aim at combating cancel culture, publishers can create an open dialogue to further the important conversations taking place. This paper closely examines *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins to highlight the issue, outcome, and larger conversations that were ignited as a part of cancel culture. This book gives insight into all sides of cancel culture, from the issue all the way to the conclusion as well as lasting effects of the controversy.

¹ Suzin Wold, “COVID-19 is Changing How, Why and How Much We're Using Social Media.”

² Kelly Sadler, “Top 10 Recent Examples of Cancel Culture.”

³ Emma Pocock, “Harry Potter Stars And Fan Community Reject J.K. Rowling's Statement n 'Trans Activism' And Gender Identity.”

Methods

The methods used in this research aimed to analyze statistics and data that showcased the real-world consequences of cancel culture. The initial step was analyzing qualitative data, such as scholarly articles on the topic of cancel culture and applying it to the publishing industry. Further, supporting this were articles posted on highly visible websites, such as *Vox* and *LA Times*, about cancel culture in relation to books that have experienced this social phenomenon to some degree.

A survey was conducted as a next step to help identify what age groups are using social media and engaging in cancel culture. This survey was posted on social media exclusively and included the platforms Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. The respondents were aimed at a general audience to represent the average consumer. The survey also determined the level of awareness or familiarity with the concept of cancel culture.

A case study was conducted using the highly controversial title *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins. Quantitative research was gathered primarily through NPD Bookscan's detailed sales data. Marketing information was found on Edelweiss+ to further determine any specialty sales tactics used. Both findings were analyzed to determine the part cancel culture had, if any, in the sales of this title.

Supplemental information was taken from review data found on Amazon book reviews, during the timespan of December 2019 to February 2020 at the height of the controversy. Amazon was utilized due to the visibility of the platform in the sales of books as well as the ability to narrow down the scope of the reviews more accurately.

Cancel Culture in Context

Cancel culture is a controversial term that primarily originates on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and other online spaces where the sole purpose is to generate social engagement. This term has come to encompass the mass opinions of online users that come together to condemn negative behaviors and actions. One notorious example is the #MeToo movement, a social media hashtag that aims to provide sexual assault victims and survivors a place to share their personal stories. This particular example has

made waves since the hashtag first made its rounds on platforms, then to more traditional media outlets. This example in particular took aim at sexual abusers and harassers in Hollywood that would otherwise “get away” with their actions given their status and power. #MeToo was a collective and powerful movement that represented the support for victims and the end of allowing perpetrators to continue with their immoral and illegal, actions. A prominent example is Harvey Weinstein, who perpetrated sexual assault for years in Hollywood and ruined the careers and lives of women, without being openly condemned. Cancel culture put a stop to this as well as his career, and Weinstein was finally convicted in 2020 of at least some of his crimes. While there is no question that there is still work to be done, the movement has sparked productive results and necessary conversations.

It is also important to note that “the term ‘cancel culture’ may be new, but the human impulses propelling it are old.”⁴ Cancel culture developed as people flocked to social platforms to find communities to join; almost anyone who is familiar with this term would consider it a social media trend that is popular to participate in. It leaves much room for negativity, such as the spread of out of context information and mass bullying. Given the format of social media—specifically limited characters—it perpetuates the spreading of misinformation as there is not enough room to include all the facts. Coupled with the fact that users behind a screen feel more emboldened to say things they otherwise may not in person, this can lead to toxic behaviors and harmful outcomes to those that are the target of cancellation. In that same vein, bringing attention to these issues, no matter how small, allows people to be informed and decide on their response. An example of readers using the information gleaned from cancel culture is last year’s situation with Mark Halperin and his new release *How to Beat Trump: America’s Top Political Strategists on What It Will Take*. Halperin’s book “sold just 502 copies in its first week” as a result of his cancellation due to sexual harassment accusations.⁵ This failure in sales had little to do with not being marketed correctly, and everything to do with the anger and outcry caused by the #MeToo movement. The act of publishing this book was seen as forgiving the author for his past actions as he never saw true justice in the eyes of many people.⁶ This

⁴ Robert Henderson, “The [Activism] of Cancel Culture.”

⁵ Katie Mettler, “Nobody Is Buying Mark Halperin’s Book; The Disgraced Journalist’s Publisher Lambastes ‘Cancel Culture’.”

⁶ Marc Tracy, “Apologies and Scorn Greet News of a Book by Mark Halperin.”

is evidence that cancel culture is more than a trend; it was a useful tool that helped inform readers of the author's actions, allowing them to choose not to accept future support for his works.

Publishing itself has become quite familiar with cancel culture and its many forms in recent years. By looking at Amelie Wen Zhao's debut YA title, *Blood Heir*, from 2019, it is clear why some publishers may quickly denounce this culture as "problematic." *Blood Heir* came under fire when one reviewer deemed the representation of slavery in Zhao's work to be offensive.⁷ This now deleted post then gained momentum when other users heard of this issue despite the fact that many of them had not had the ability to read the book themselves. The group of people came together to hold Zhao accountable, taking the original poster's word as fact rather than informing themselves on the issue. This then became an issue of bullying and harassing the author until she felt the need to pull her own title from publication, despite support from her publisher to go forward with her original publication date.⁸ The issue here was not that someone had a problem with Zhao's novel, rather the fact that a mob mentality took over and failed to fully grasp the context in which Zhao wrote her book. Many were angered over the "anti-Blackness" of her novel and were offended with her depiction of American slavery, without considering the fact that Zhao is not American and was attempting to portray the issues of human trafficking in Asian countries.⁹ This is a clear example showing how cancel culture can spread misinformation quickly and even cause career-ending consequences if not dealt with "correctly." Had critics taken a moment to fully inform themselves—or simply wait until publication—on what they were "canceling," the conversation may have been more productive for Zhao and the literary community. Many have still come to the conclusion that cancel culture was just fancy terminology for bullying through instances such as this, but that does not reflect the fact that these situations can teach publishing companies imperative information about their target audiences. As Shelby Talbot points out in her article "Don't Cancel 'Cancel Culture,'" this phenomenon is able to inform popular authors and publishing entities who do not face the same "world-rocking" effects as smaller,

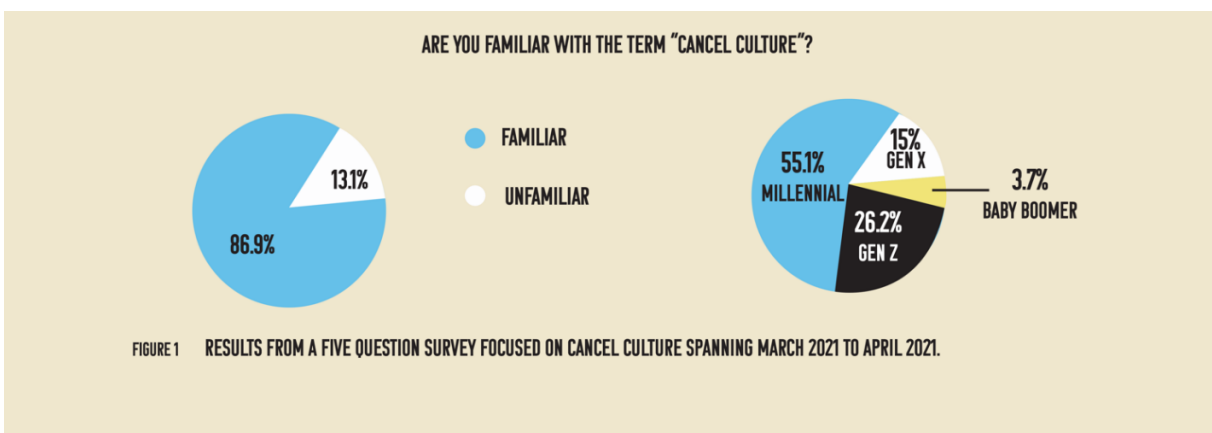
⁷ Aja Hoggatt, "An Author Canceled Her Own YA Novel Over Racism Accusations. But Is It Really Anti-Black?"

⁸ Alexandra Alter, "She Pulled Her Debut Book When Critics Found It Racist. Now She Plans to Publish."

⁹ Aja Hoggatt

largely unknown authors due to “their wealth, influence, and success”¹⁰ on what readers expect from them on important topics such as diversity in the industry or their behavior as a whole. *American Dirt*, a topic this paper covers more thoroughly in a later case study, is another great example of these largely positive outcomes, due to the intense backlash it received that led to a larger conversation within publishing as a whole. Cancel culture may not be an ideal informant, but publishers can learn where they are falling short in today’s social climate by looking at where readers, writers, and authors are taking issue.

A final key factor to understanding cancel culture that publishers—and every other industry—must take into consideration, is finding out who the primary participants are. Evidence shows younger millennials and Generation Z are the main source of cancel culture activity for a number of reasons. One of the main factors that allows these generations to have such a powerful effect is the fact that they are “digital natives.”¹¹ Younger generations know how to effectively engage their demographic, recognize current trends, and tap into relevant topics to their generations. In a survey conducted for this research regarding cancel culture in the publishing industry, about 80 percent of respondents were considered millennial or Gen Z. and this directly reflected each respondent’s knowledge of the term “cancel culture” (Figure 1). The survey was conducted publicly using the three of the most popular social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The results highlight that active engagement is primarily in the hands of these younger audiences who are vital to the future of publishing.



¹⁰ Shelby Talbot, “Don’t Cancel ‘Cancel Culture’.”

¹¹ Jim Fong, “Beware Higher Education: Cancel Culture and Generation Z Are Here to Stay.”

***American Dirt*: A Case Study**

Cancel culture made an unforgettable appearance in the publishing sphere when *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins was on the precipice of the release date. Many positive reviews and blurbs were coming out regarding this work and Cummins's title was even featured by Oprah Winfrey in her book club.¹² The influx of positivity was interrupted by a negative review penned by Latinx author Myriam Gurba, detailing the problems she found with the representation in the book. The review also brought to attention an attempt to silence her honest opinion of *American Dirt* by the literary magazine that originally requested her review, which was then published on *Tropics of Meta*. This emotionally charged review sparked a flurry of negative responses and articles blasting Cummins for what many considered offensive storytelling and marketing. It also called into question why Cummins felt she had a right to tell the story of a character she had little in common with and during a time where immigration was, and still is, such a hot button issue.¹³ Waves of people came together online to demand answers as to why a woman—who publicly identified as white—felt she had a right to tell the story of a woman in the Black, Indigenous, and people of Color (BIPOC) community when there are underrepresented BIPOC authors looking to tell their own stories.¹⁴

The events leading up to the controversy, after Gurba's article was published, further stoked the flames as the literary magazine's response to her review included that Gurba "lacked the fame to pen something so 'negative.'"¹⁵ This brings up the larger issue of censorship of smaller, less powerful voices such as Gurba on many platforms. The inevitable avenue for Gurba, and those in similar positions, was to take matters into their own hands and onto online spaces. This review quickly saw an influx of supporters online rally around Gurba in a powerful way that allowed her to have a solid platform to share her voice. Cancel culture in this case became a necessity for those who did not have the same scope of resources as a large company or figure, such as fame, money, and influence. This mass canceling was a catalyst that sparked a powerful social media

¹² Christian Toto, "American Dirt: 'Cancel Culture' Embraces Book Burning in the Digital Age."

¹³ Toto.

¹⁴ Myriam Gurba, "Pendeja, You Ain't Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature."

¹⁵ Myriam Gurba.

hashtag called #DignidadLiteraria for social media users, and the Latinx community specifically, to focus their constructive efforts on. From the DignidadLiteraria website we can see that “DignidadLiteraria is a network of committed Latinx authors formed to combat the invisibility of Latinx authors.”¹⁶ This positive movement started with the mass outcry against *American Dirt* but intended to tackle the prevalent and ongoing issue of representation in publishing. It aimed to circumvent attacks on the author as they recognized the issue as bigger than one figure, and Cummins was just one small part of an industrywide issue. Gurba even wrote a later article for website Vox to express that her anger was in part at Jeanine Cummins but was primarily aimed at the fact that “Big Publishing [was] to account for this fiasco.”¹⁷ A press conference was held between the DignidadLiteraria group and Flatiron Books as a result of this social media movement, which led to actionable promises from the press to do better for the Latinx community.¹⁸

Cancel culture went very public with *American Dirt* as there were major key players, such as Oprah, standing behind this book. While there were productive dialogues and conversations due to the visibility of the issue that came about, cancel culture also showed its ugly side. Cummins was shamed and bullied, even resulting in a canceled book tour due to fear for her own safety.¹⁹ These actions put a negative spin on the actual progress that was made to the industry and no doubt put an emotional burden on the author. This is an example of cancel culture’s complexity, as thousands of social media users have the ability to jump into the controversy with little information and ill intentions thus sparking a variety of actions and reactions.²⁰ One thing that is clear is that *American Dirt* can teach publishers that they need to pay closer attention as social media use attracts more and more readers and writers with strong opinions that demand to be heard. It is also a fact that one post, statement, review, and so on, can spark something bigger than publishers are ready to contend with, in just a matter of days.

¹⁶ “#DignidadLiteraria Press Conference.”

¹⁷ Myriam Gurba, “I Called out American Dirt’s Racism. I Won’t Be Silenced.”

¹⁸ Lauren Aratani, “American Dirt Publisher Agrees to Increase Latinx Inclusion amid Controversy.”

¹⁹ Christian Toto.”

²⁰ Gwen Bouvier, “Racist Call-Outs and Cancel Culture on Twitter: The Limitations of the Platform’s Ability to Define Issues of Social Justice.”

Sales and Marketing Analysis²¹

For the purpose of this section, *American Dirt* will be compared closely with NPD Bookscans's sales numbers of another one of Oprah's Book Club picks of 2020: *Hidden Valley Road* by Robert Kolker. This section does not take genre into consideration, as the point is to compare a controversial book with one that had what can be described as an "average" publication and no substantial supplementary publicity. Kolker's novel, like *American Dirt*, was selected by Oprah the same month the book was intended to publish, but his work was selected without any notable controversy surrounding the title.²² This analysis is an interpretation of the numbers and marketing. It is by no means able to cover the entire scope of what made *American Dirt* such a high-selling novel, but it attempts to explain some of the key factors that potentially contributed to the large initial sales and sustaining numbers even after the controversy has since found somewhat of a resolution.

Looking directly at the first week each book was published, we can see huge divide in number of sales. *Hidden Valley Road* reached peak sales in the first week of publication [REDACTED]. *American Dirt* on the other hand saw initial sales from the week of [REDACTED]. This huge gap in initial sales between these books could be because of several factors but is likely due to the incredible amount of coverage that was given to Jeanine Cummins and her book following the controversy sparked by Gurba's article in December 2019, in conjunction with Oprah's influence. I also looked at sales for other titles that Oprah announced in conjunction with their publication date to see her general effect on titles in their first week of sales (figure 2). I excluded outliers such as prominent authors and celebrities, like Michelle Obama, as they already have an expansive platform that guaranteed a large number of sales from the start.

²¹ NPD BookScan. Sales Numbers.

²² "Oprah's Book Club: The Complete List."



The importance of comparing these two writers' works is that both had a previously established career, long before their most current works were selected by Oprah for her book club. There is a clear jump in sales for both authors from their most recent works, that were associated with Oprah, and their past titles. Cummins's sales for her most successful title, sans Oprah, *A Rip in Heaven*, has only reached [REDACTED] in sales compared to the [REDACTED] earned from Oprah's Book Club January 2020 pick, *American Dirt*, currently holds. Kolker similarly has reached [REDACTED] for his title *Lost Girls: An Unsolved American Mystery* that has since been surpassed by the April 2020 book club pick, *Hidden Valley Road*'s current sales [REDACTED]. Going further into more recent sales, the effect of cancel culture is seen immediately. *American Dirt* has not fallen below [REDACTED] [REDACTED] whereas *Hidden Valley Road* is only [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. These sustaining sales show a clear discrepancy and are in large part due to the prevalent visibility given to *American Dirt* through articles, reviews, and even an Oprah special that aired on Apple TV, in response to mass calls for removal of *American Dirt* from her book club list.²³

²³ Rebecca Alter, "Why Is Everyone Arguing About the Novel *American Dirt*?"

Due to the controversy though, *American Dirt* caught the attention of many who wanted to inform themselves or caught wind of the novel's backlash and wanted to see for themselves what the issue was. It also became a very prevalent topic to publishing industry professionals as a whole as they weighed in with opinions and insight.²⁴ What gave *American Dirt* the power to sell has much to do with the type of controversy it dealt with. Referencing the Mark Halperin book that only sold [REDACTED], it is clear that the issue surrounding *American Dirt* was more nuanced than his. Halperin's controversy and cancelation came as a result of his sexual misconduct, which is a nonnegotiable problem to society. Jeanine Cummins and Flatiron Books were able to unintentionally start a conversation concerning a complex racial issue within publishing, thus propelling her to further success as debates and opinion flooded online spaces.

One thing these factors have made clear about *American Dirt* is that it went far beyond the bounds of the intended target audience. From what can be seen on Edelweiss+ from the BISAC codes alone, this novel was not pushed towards readers of Latinx categories. The two BISAC codes listed are Fiction/Family Life and Fiction/Women with no reference to a specific community or region.²⁵ The entire story clearly centers around the Latinx and Hispanic experience yet seems to lack a BISAC code reflecting that market. The marketing clearly intended to reach a general, but broad audience with its robust plans, but one can infer that it was likely aimed at white millennial women, at least more so than the Latinx community. It also has a tagline as "one of the most important books for our times,"²⁶ suggesting that this novel was vital to Americans conflicted about immigration and other border issues. This again infers that *American Dirt* is aimed at educating an audience about the struggles of the Latinx community and humanizing them in what can be considered a politically polarizing time. Such was further supported by the available reading guide on the Flatiron Books website that accompanies the title.²⁷ Many questions are concerned with a reader's ability to identify with the main character or being surprised at the conditions of the journey. The Latinx community, some of the most avid consumers according to the *Immersive Media and Books 2020*

²⁴ Daniel Hernandez, "'American Dirt' Was Supposed to Be a Publishing Triumph. What Went Wrong?"

²⁵ Edelweiss+, www.edelweiss.plus.

²⁶ *American Dirt*. Flatiron Books

²⁷ Flatiron Books.

research,²⁸ were not only being robbed of an opportunity to share their stories, but also of the opportunity to read about it.



The screenshot displays three book entries from the Edelweiss+ platform. At the top is 'American Dirt (Oprah's Book Club): A Novel' by Jeanine Cummins, with a book cover image. Below it are 'The Crooked Branch: A Novel' and 'Pachinko (National Book Award Finalist)' by Min Jin Lee. Each entry lists the author, backlist status, on-sale date, ISBNs, format, price in USD and CAD, and various BISAC codes. The BISAC codes for 'American Dirt' include Fiction / Family Life and Fiction / Women. The comparative titles have more extensive lists of codes, including Fiction / Cultural Heritage and Fiction / Asian American.

Book Title	Author	Backlist	On Sale Date	ISBNs	Format	Price (USD/CAD)	BISAC Codes
American Dirt (Oprah's Book Club): A Novel	Jeanine Cummins	BACKLIST	January 21, 2020	9781250209764, 1250209765	Hardcover with dust jacket	\$27.99 USD, \$36.50 CAD	Fiction / Family Life ▲ Fiction / Women
The Crooked Branch: A Novel	Jeanine Cummins	BACKLIST	March 5, 2013	9780451239242, 0451239245	Trade Paperback	\$17.00 USD, \$23.00 CAD	Fiction / Family Life ▲ Fiction / Cultural Heritage Fiction / Women Ages 18 And Up, Grades 13 And Up Returnable: Y
Pachinko (National Book Award Finalist)	Min Jin Lee	BACKLIST	February 7, 2017	9781455563937, 1455563935	Hardcover	\$28.00 USD, \$35.00 CAD Discount Code: WCL	Fiction / Historical ▲ Fiction / Family Life Fiction / Cultural Heritage Fiction / Asian American Fiction / Literary

SCREENSHOTS FROM EDELWEISS+ OF AMERICAN DIRT'S BISAC CODES IN COMPARISON TO TWO OF THE LISTED COMPARATIVE TITLES

The controversy is an indisputable factor in *American Dirt*'s success in sales, as seen in the information detailed above. Had the book not been noticed by the Latinx community and become subjected to cancel culture—inevitably bringing forth an issue surpassing generational, racial, and gendered boundaries—it may have only seen a boost similar to that of *Hidden Valley Road*. While it can be said that Oprah and her slew of celebrity influencers raised *American Dirt* up, no one can say for sure how the sales would look without the controversy sending the book to the front of every social media trending page or news site.

What is a Publisher to Do?

Publishers and cancel culture have become very familiar with one another, but the question now is: how do they coexist? Cancel culture at first glance seems to set a goal

²⁸ Rachel Noorda, Dr. and Kathi Inman Berens, Dr., Panorama Project; "Immersive Media & Books: ConsumerBehavior and Experience with Multiple Media Forms."

of eliminating or destroying the “target” but really what it is, at its core, is a call for accountability. Publishers cannot go on and ignore it with hopes that the issues will consistently be swept aside as bullying and harassment, leading to the first step a publisher should take if they find themselves at the center of cancel culture: identification of the “genre” or category of the conversations. The following section has been broken up under three categories to better explain the complex sides of cancel culture:

- ◇ **“Accountability”** is most important and arguably the origin of cancel culture as a movement; it became a popular concept surrounding the case of Harvey Weinstein and the #MeToo movement. This usage of cancel culture was exclusively a call for the law to hold sexual abusers and offenders—that were previously deemed untouchable due to their status—accountable. Such canceling was for the benefit of the victims who are more often than not silenced. It also was a look into how social media is a powerful tool for activism and change. A publisher would ideally want to interact with a situation that fell under this category in order to recover from any perceived missteps. The goal for a publisher should be to take responsibility and start a conversation to spark change or growth within an industry that has identified as 79 percent white as recently as 2019, according to *The Diversity Baseline Survey* by Lee & Lowe Books.²⁹ Ignoring these calls for change is irresponsible and universally damaging for the reputation of the publishing industry as a whole.
Key identifiers: Distinct issue, long form/full explanation, posing questions, thoughtful critiques, discourse directed at publisher.

- ◇ **“Bullying”** is one of the next examples that is almost as prevalent as accountability. Social media is known to sensationalize comments and take things out of context. With massive spreading of misinformation and sometimes aggressive behavior, this is important for a publisher to act. A publisher should always stand by their author to protect them from any harassment, so long as it is unwarranted. A publishing company is able to withstand a barrage of hatred

²⁹ Lee & Low Books. “Where Is the Diversity in Publishing? The 2019 Diversity Baseline Survey Results.”

and negativity much easier than a singular person who could be getting vitriolic abuse online. A great example of a publisher responding to this is *Blood Heir* and Delacorte Press's response. This situation dealt with the complexities of race and culture, but the publisher recognized that Zhao's work was something they wanted to stand by, thus doing so. This kind of support meant that Zhao could still go on to publish her book despite the backlash she was receiving.

Key identifiers: Harassment, threats, review bombing, misinformation, personal attacks on author.

- ◇ **“Political”** cancel culture deserves its own category simply for the prominence it has in the field. This is a complicated subject that is well beyond the bounds of this paper to fully analyze, but it does occasionally play into the publishing world. Political disagreements in scandals often utilize cancel culture in interesting ways. One such example took place at Portland State University with Professor Bruce Gilley. The book he intended to publish with Rowman & Littlefield was halted due to concerns of his ideology surrounding colonization that culminated into a petition.³⁰ Gilley, after the press paused his book to review it, requested to cancel his own title and then wrote an article demonizing cancel culture. A statement by the publisher had to be made to correct the fact that they did not intend on cutting the title but wanted to take concerns into consideration when reviewing.³¹ This situation culminated in the false victimization of Gilley and blame placed on the public for their concerns. Publishing and politics have to work together on a slippery slope when there are divisive political ties and spreading of misinformation. Publishing should approach this type of discourse with care to sustain a space for free speech and thought.

Key identifiers: Talks about censorship/free speech, clear political leanings, mentions agendas, attacks personal values, constructive discourse from outside perspective.

³⁰ Bruce Gilley, “The Cancel Mob Comes Back for More.”

³¹ “No Cancel Mob at All for Bruce Gilley's Book.”

These “genres” are not exclusive to any situation and should be taken to identify the many sides of a controversy. Overlapping in cancel culture is a common occurrence, but isolating the voices in each argument can help navigate controversy. By prioritizing what element of these controversies to address and how, it may limit the overall negative impact to a press or company. One fact to keep in mind is it is much easier to ruin one career than an entire publishing company, as seen with the outcry against Simon & Schuster’s controversial ties with authors associated with Donald Trump.³² By letting the blame be focused on someone else rather than the company, it is ignoring the responsibility of the publisher to protect their authors as well as missing out on opening a constructive dialogue that could change the face of publishing. Any situation that may arise in the sphere of cancel culture should be dealt with absolute care; even if the situation may be seen as something as trivial as bullying, it still requires a response.

Conclusion

One of the most vital and undisputable takeaways from this research is that cancel culture is not going anywhere as long as there are social media and online communities fostering this type of engagement. Condemning cancel culture will only add fuel to the fire or, at best, stop the usage of the catchy name in lieu of another. Publishers will have to deal with passionate calls for accountability, ruthless bullying, and so much more in this digitally dependent age. It is their job to identify and choose a course of action when these situations arise. By actively interacting with cancel culture the publishing industry may be able to better shape itself to reflect the social climate of the present and generate worthwhile discourse. *American Dirt* is just one example of how publishers can own up to their mistakes and do it right. Flatiron Books saw where they went wrong and promised the Latinx community that they would enact change to do better for their Latinx readers. Just months after this promise was made, the press hired Nadxieli Nieto, one of DignidadLiteraria’s suggestions to Flatiron Books, as editor-at-large with the sole purpose

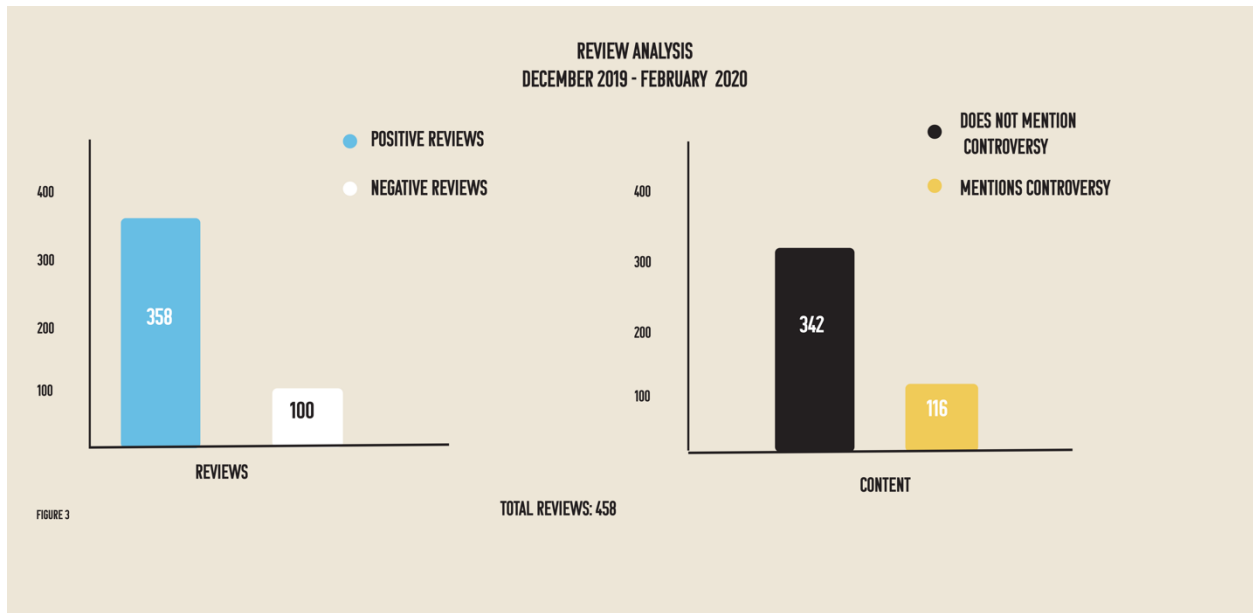
³² Jeffrey A Trachtenberg, “WSJ News Exclusive | Simon & Schuster Employees Submit Petition Demanding No Deals With Trump Administration Authors.”

of acquiring and advocating for Latinx and BIPOC authors.³³ This publisher made efforts for actionable change and revealed that efforts to support minority voices in publishing is not only encouraged, but it is expected.

American Dirt was a huge success and saw an increased benefit directly linked to the controversy that surrounded it. The positivity clearly outweighed the negativity as seen in the reviews collected from Amazon that have held the book at a solid 4/5 stars (figure 3). This led to a question that was asked early on in this research: should this level of controversy be something a publisher aims to repeat? The clear answer is no. Publishers cannot afford to alienate an audience of their most avid readers³⁴ time and again simply for a bump in sales. Adding onto that is the fact that controversy is not a guarantee for success. What may have worked for *American Dirt* may lead to the career ending consequences for another press, author, and/or anyone else involved. The controversy of *American Dirt* was not simply a boost in sales and a few negative reviews but a huge damage to Flatiron Books and the industry's reputation. Temporary numbers are not enough to break the trust of consumers that will inevitably put their money where they feel valued and appreciated. At the end of the day, a customer's loyalty is more valuable than a singular book's income.

³³ "Nieto Joins Flatiron." *Publishers Weekly*.

³⁴ Noorda and Berens.



I encourage the bookish community to take into consideration the immense power they hold on social media. One article or post today can lead to a huge movement in the matter of minutes as social media moves at rapid speeds. This puts a monumental responsibility on consumers and companies alike to make the right choices with their platforms. Cancel culture is not just a trend to jump on to gain followers or attention, it is a powerful tool that can change whole industries if utilized effectively. This influence should not be used to bully and harass, rather it is a powerful way to speak out when power and money aim to silence. Cancel culture is here to stay, at least for now, so adapting and engaging are essential to bring about the changes we want to see in our industry.

Acknowledgments

I would like to give a huge thanks to the faculty of the Book Publishing program for their expertise and encouragement throughout my time at Portland State. In particular, Robyn Crummer-Olson, Jessie Carver, Dr. Kathi Berens, and Dr. Rachel Noorda. All of these wonderful, brilliant women have made such an impact and their belief in my ability was a huge part in finishing this paper.

Thank you to my family, but specifically my dad, Randy, and sister, Toni. Both of you irritated me countless times in the process of writing this and I will never forget it. You also were great cheerleaders, and I valued your input whenever I asked, no matter how vague.

Finally, I would also like to thank the wonderful support system I have found in Hannah, Alex, and Mary. From FaceTime calls to thousands of texts, these three have supported and inspired me through this entire program and for that I am forever grateful. Also, thank you to McKenna for being such a generous friend and sharing her expertise whenever I needed it. Without all of them this paper might never have happened.

Bibliography

- "#DignidadLiteraria Press Conference." Dignidad Literaria, dignidadliteraria.com.
- Alter, Alexandra. "She Pulled Her Debut Book When Critics Found It Racist. Now She Plans to Publish." 29 Apr. 2019. *New York Times*. www.nytimes.com/2019/04/29/books/amelie-wen-zhao-blood-heir.html.
- Aratani, Lauren. "American Dirt Publisher Agrees to Increase Latinx Inclusion amid Controversy." 3 Feb. 2020. *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media. www.theguardian.com/books/2020/feb/03/macmillan-latinx-american-dirt-dignidad-literaria.
- Austin, Patrick Lucas. "We're Online More Than Ever Right Now. Can the Internet Itself Keep Up?" 27 Mar. 2020. *Time*. time.com/5810991/internet-coronavirus/.
- Bennett, Jessica. "What If Instead of Calling People Out, We Called Them In?" 19 Nov. 2020. *New York Times*. www.nytimes.com/2020/11/19/style/loretta-ross-smith-college-cancel-culture.html.
- Bouvier, Gwen. "Racist Call-Outs and Cancel Culture on Twitter: The Limitations of the Platform's Ability to Define Issues of Social Justice." 10 Sept. 2020. Elsevier.
- Fong, Jim. "Beware Higher Education: Cancel Culture and Generation Z Are Here to Stay." 18 Aug. 2020, UPCEA. upcea.edu/beware-higher-education-cancel-culture-and-generation-z-are-here-to-stay/.
- Gilley, Bruce. "The Cancel Mob Comes Back for More." (2020). *The Wall Street Journal*. Eastern Edition.
- Gurba, Myriam. "I Called out American Dirt's Racism. I Won't Be Silenced." 12 Mar. 2020. Vox. www.vox.com/first-person/2020/3/12/21168012/racism-american-dirt-myriam-gurba-jeanine-cummins.
- Gurba, Myriam. "Pendeja, You Ain't Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature." 4 May 2020. *Tropics of Meta*. tropicsofmeta.com/2019/12/12/pendeja-you-aint-steinbeck-my-bronca-with-fake-ass-social-justice-literature/.
- Henderson, Robert. "The [Activism] of Cancel Culture." 30 Sept. 2019. *City*

Journal. www.city-journal.org/cancel-culture.

Hernandez, Daniel. "American Dirt Was Supposed to Be a Publishing Triumph. What Went Wrong?" 26 Jan. 2020. *Los Angeles Times*. www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-01-26/american-dirt-publishing-latino-representation.

Hoggatt, Aja. "An Author Canceled Her Own YA Novel Over Racism Accusations. But Is It Really Anti-Black?" 31 Jan. 2019. *Slate Magazine*. slate.com/culture/2019/01/blood-heir-ya-book-twitter-controversy.html.

"JK Rowling Joins 150 Public Figures Warning over Free Speech." 8 July 2020. BBC News, BBC. www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53330105?fbclid=IwAR0M5DDZxtC6Wux-o9vPRaPCUt7bHupNqEqnOfFowpw2K6oEWUoFdYfuqi4.

Lee & Low Books. "Where Is the Diversity in Publishing? The 2019 Diversity Baseline Survey Results." 10 Feb. 2020, *Lee & Low Blog*. blog.leeandlow.com/2020/01/28/2019diversitybaselinesurvey/.

Luu, Chi. "Cancel Culture Is Chaotic Good." 18 Dec. 2019. JSTOR, <https://daily.jstor.org/cancel-culture-is-chaotic-good/>

Mettler, Katie. "Nobody Is Buying Mark Halperin's Book; The Disgraced Journalist's Publisher Lambastes 'Cancel Culture.'" 7 Nov. 2019. *The Washington Post*, pp.

Ng, Eve. "No Grand Pronouncements Here...: Reflections on Cancel Culture and Digital Media Participation - Eve Ng, 2020." 26 July 2020. *SAGE Journals*. journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1527476420918828.

"Nieto Joins Flatiron." 8 Apr. 2020. *Publishers Weekly*. www.publishersweekly.com/pw/newsbrief/index.html?record=2663.

NPD BookScan. bookscan.npd.com/home?ds=303-0-.

"No Cancel Mob at All for Bruce Gilley's Book." 16 Oct. 2020. *The Wall Street Journal*. Eastern Edition.

"Oprah's Book Club: The Complete List." 7 Apr. 2020. Oprah.com, www.oprah.com/book/oprahs-book-club-hidden-valley-road?editors_pick_id=26790.

Noorda, Rachel, Dr., and Berens, Kathi Inman, Dr. Panorama Project. "Immersive Media & Books: Consumer Behavior and Experience with Multiple Media Forms" (2021). English Faculty Publications and Presentations. 74. https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/eng_fac/74

Pocock, Emma. "Harry Potter Stars And Fan Community Reject J.K. Rowling's Statement On 'Trans Activism' And Gender Identity." 24 June 2020. *Forbes*. *Forbes Magazine*.
www.forbes.com/sites/emmapocock/2020/06/23/harry-potter-stars--fan-community-reject-jk-rowlings-statement-on-trans-activism-and-gender-identity/?sh=7f611533295d

Sadler, Kelly. "Top 10 Recent Examples of Cancel Culture." 16 Feb. 2021. *The Washington Times*.
www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/feb/16/top-10-recent-examples-cancel-culture/.

Talbot, Shelby. "Don't Cancel 'Cancel Culture'." 3 Sept. 2020. *The Journal*.
www.queensjournal.ca/story/2020-09-03/pop-culture/dont-cancel-cancel-culture/.

Toto, Christian. "American Dirt: 'Cancel Culture' Embraces Book Burning in the Digital Age." 3 Feb. 2020. *The Hill*. thehill.com/opinion/technology/481147-american-dirt-cancel-culture-embraces-book-burning-in-the-digital-age

Tracy, Marc. "Apologies and Scorn Greet News of a Book by Mark Halperin." 19 Aug. 2019. *New York Times*. www.nytimes.com/2019/08/19/business/media/mark-halperin-book-deal-backlash.html.

Wold, Suzin. "COVID-19 Is Changing How, Why and How Much We're Using Social Media." 1 Mar. 2021. *Digital Commerce 360*. www.digitalcommerce360.com/2020/09/16/covid-19-is-changing-how-why-and-how-much-were-using-social-media/.