‘Cancelling’ cancel culture?

A study on the impacts of cancel culture on freedom of speech and journalism

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Preface

“Hiding the way we feel can serve as social lubricant. It helps keep the peace. But what happens when such behavior multiplies beyond the individual? To entire societies. What happens when large numbers of people disagree with something that is happening, but each of them in their own heart says: “You know what…forget it. I’m just gonna smile and go along.”

Even worse, what happens when large numbers of people say the opposite of what they really feel? Perhaps because they’re afraid of what might happen if they spoke the truth.” (Hidden Brain, 2022).
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>UNGA</td>
<td>United Nations General Assembly</td>
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<tr>
<td>WRI</td>
<td>World Resource Institute</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of figures

Figure 1. The hermeneutic circle  16

List of tables

Table 1. List of participants  19
Abstract

Cancel culture can briefly be described as the active attempt to silence a person that has expressed an opinion that offended someone whether it was intentional or not. This thesis will present how cancel culture is understood, perceived and experienced by journalists, communication professionals, and media experts, as well as how, according to them, it impacts freedom of expression and journalism. The findings are analyzed from a theoretical framework of the public sphere and participatory democracy. The conclusion shows that cancel culture can both serve as a means to address social injustices while also threatening freedom of expression and, by that, journalism. Cancelling journalists, because they have reported on controversial issues that others have found offensive, can result in more self-censorship among journalists which can have negative consequences for democracy itself. Further research is encouraged to investigate the impacts of cancel culture on the field of journalism and ultimately its impacts on freedom of expression and democracy.

Keywords: Cancel culture, social media, freedom of expression, journalists
# Table of Content

1. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 9  
   1.1. Purpose, aim and contribution ......................................................................................... 10  
   1.2. Research questions .......................................................................................................... 11  
   1.3. Outline ............................................................................................................................ 11  
2. Previous Research .................................................................................................................. 12  
   2.1. The purpose of journalism ............................................................................................... 12  
   2.2. Cancel culture and journalism ......................................................................................... 13  
   2.3. Social media and cancel culture ..................................................................................... 14  
   2.4. The digital media landscape ........................................................................................... 14  
   2.5. Cancelled journalists ...................................................................................................... 15  
3. Theories and concepts .......................................................................................................... 17  
   3.1. The public sphere and participatory democracy ............................................................... 17  
   3.2. The Harm Principle and freedom of expression .............................................................. 19  
   3.3. Journalism and self-censorship ....................................................................................... 20  
4. Methodology .......................................................................................................................... 22  
   4.1. Participants ..................................................................................................................... 22  
   4.2. Semi-structured interviews .............................................................................................. 24  
   4.3. Data analysis .................................................................................................................... 26  
   4.4. Alternative methods and limitations ............................................................................... 27  
   4.5. Self-reflexivity .................................................................................................................. 28  
5. Results & Analysis ............................................................................................................... 29  
   5.1. Understanding cancel culture .......................................................................................... 29  
   5.2. Impacts on freedom of expression and journalism .......................................................... 33  
6. Conclusion .............................................................................................................................. 39  
   6.1. Future research ................................................................................................................ 40  

References .................................................................................................................................. 41  

Annexes ..................................................................................................................................... 46
1. Introduction

One of the first cancel culture references can be found back in 1991 from the film *New Jack City*, where the character Nino Brown dumps his girlfriend by saying “Cancel that bitch. I’ll buy another one.” Moving to 2014, the term gained more attention from an episode of VH1’s reality show *Love and Hip-Hop: New York* where one of the cast members Cisco Rosado also tells his girlfriend “You’re canceled”. With Twitter already being a popular social media since 2006 the use of the quote shortly appeared on many user accounts. What precedes social media and the above examples actually has a deeper meaning and can be traced back to the 1950s and 60s civil rights movements and boycotts in the US where the idea was to promote Black people empowerment and to address social injustices. Forwarding to 2015, according to Romano (2020) in an online article in *Vox*, cancel culture spread via Twitter, and was used as a reaction to someone doing something you personally disapproved of. The cancel culture that has gained most attention recently is where people cancel public figures and celebrities (e.g., J.K. Rowling, Kevin Hart and Ellen DeGeneres to name a few) whose behavior has supposedly offended a specific person, company, or other entity (Romano, 2020).

The title of this thesis ‘Cancelling’ Cancel Culture? was born from a conversation with an anonymous source who shared their story about being cancelled because they wrote and published an article about cancel culture that I will address in the analysis chapter. The irony simply had to become a part of the thesis and title where the quote in the preface by *Hidden Brain* is used to explain the complexity of cancel culture and its potential impacts on journalism, freedom of expression and society.

As cancel culture evolved, journalists and entire publications have been put on trial in court of public opinion. In a roundtable discussion (“Conversations on Cancel Culture”) hosted by *The Wrap* in 2021 consisting of a panel of editor-in-chiefs from, among other, *Charlie Hebdo* and *HuffPost* it was stated that: “Cancel culture, as we’re defining, is impacting media journalism and the journalistic institutions,” and that “the warp and woof of social media” and “waves of outrage” from social media pose a danger to free speech (Yee, 2021). With no determined definition of the concept, it has however so far been described as promoting the canceling of people, brands and even shows and movies due to what some consider to be offensive or problematic remarks or ideologies (Sossi, 2021). Sossi (2021) from *The Conversation* argues that journalism and freedom of expression is a fundamental function of a democracy where
cancel culture can prohibit the protection of these rights. He further says: “Once guilty in the court of public opinion, there is no appeal. […]. We no longer reconcile differences with respectful conversations” (Sossi, 2021). Similarly, The New York Times’ editorial board has reflected on cancel culture:

If people feel free to express their views in their communities, the democratic process can respond to and resolve competing ideas. Ideas that go unchallenged by opposing views risk becoming weak and brittle rather than being strengthened by tough scrutiny. When speech is stifled or when dissenters are shut out of public discourse, a society also loses its ability to resolve conflict, and it faces the risk of political violence (The New York Times Editorial Board, 2022).

Cancel culture, thus, has been viewed, on the one hand, as a threat to freedom of expression and journalism, but, on the other hand, can in itself be understood as the practice of freedom of expression (Nott, 2022). With this background, the below section will explain why cancel culture should be researched and how this study can contribute to the field of journalism.

1.1. Purpose, aim and contribution

This thesis aims to contribute to the field of journalism studies with empirical data and analysis on the interpretations of cancel culture and the impacts that it may have on journalism and freedom of expression. It will focus not only on the perceptions and experiences of journalists but also other media and communication practitioners. The thesis will broadly explore the field to tap into the current discussions regarding cancel culture among different actors. By doing this, other journalists, communication professionals and media scholars can continue building on the existing work of this thesis to further explore the many aspects of the concept. It can serve as a segue into several journalistic research fields that could be useful in monitoring cancel culture to understand it more and to avoid that it results in journalists and citizens self-censoring. Finally, freedom of expression should not be taken for granted and in democratic and liberal societies it is important to remind people about importance of discussing controversial topics regardless if they personally agree with them or not.

As will be presented in the below chapter 2. Previous research, the public sphere may be changing as it has gone from serving the public agenda and interests to focusing more on personal goals and emotions (Habermas, 1964). In addition to this, cancelling those with
controversial opinions has become a concern for liberal democracies where protecting the freedom of expression and journalists is becoming a challenge (Taylor & Hessayon, 2022). The empirical material consists of interviews with journalists, communication professionals and media experts. To achieve the aim of the study and respond to the research questions below, the study also benefited from overview of previous research and online discussions on the topic.

1.2. Research questions

- How is cancel culture defined, perceived, and experienced by journalists, communication professionals and media experts?
- How, according to them, does it impact journalism and the freedom of expression?

1.3. Outline

Following this introduction, chapter 2 Previous Research will provide a thorough background on cancel culture. Chapter 3 Theories & concepts will consist of the theoretical frameworks of public sphere and participatory democracy and the concepts of freedom of expression, the Harm Principle, self-censorship. These will be used to analyze materials collected to answer the research questions. Chapter 4 Methodology will present how the interviews were conducted and how the interviewees were contacted as well as the course of action to collect other materials and data analysis. Chapter 5 Results & Analysis will present and interpret the results from the interviews and discuss the results according to the theoretical framework. Finally, chapter 6 Conclusion will summarize the work and provide an answer to the research questions as well as suggestions for future research.
2 Previous Research

This chapter will present some of the current debates on the impacts that cancel culture has on freedom of expression and journalism. It brings up the topic of the purpose of journalism, the digital media landscape and how social media can enable inclusiveness while also allowing the cancelling of journalists through its platforms. A brief overview of how cancel culture has been described and viewed by scholars is also provided to serve as a base for the following discussion. Finally, case studies of three cancelled journalists are presented that will be further discussed in chapter 5 where one of these cases was provided and discussed with one of the informants. The other two case studies were selected when researching online. According to Elliot & Holt (2020), researchers, politicians and journalists want to see more efforts into the existing research on social media and online discussions on freedom of expression, cancel culture and woke activism where attention should be dedicated to threats to journalists and media scholars (Elliot & Holt, 2020 p. 108). Today’s increasingly complex media environment, where the boundaries between media producers and audiences become blurred (Ekman & Widholm, 2014 p. 78) requires studies in journalism to include perspectives on topics such as social media and press freedom (Brüggemann, Engesser, Büchel, Humprecht & Castro, 2014 p. 1062).

2.1. The purpose of journalism

The primary purpose of journalism according to Kovach & Rosenstiel (2014) is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing. Journalism also creates a community where if freedom is to be suppressed one must first suppress the press. With the internet, social media, blogs and mobile devices the media landscape has changed and is enabling citizens to create their own journalism where journalists may serve as carrying on and amplifying the conversation of people themselves, making their contribution to the public sphere all the more relevant. However, at the same time as there is an opportunity for journalism in the digital age, a challenge emerges when the threat from the state is no longer censorship but suppression of the press by using technological tools and trying to replace verified news with their own content (Kovach & Rosentiel, 2014). Similar to the above, the purpose of journalism has been described to empower and provide citizens with the information they need to make best decisions for their lives, communities and their government (American Press Institute, 2022)
Cancel culture is today not only targeting celebrities for offensive acts or opinions but is also moving its way into the newsroom where writers have had their articles cancelled and editors have been fired for publishing controversial opinions or headlines. For instance, in 2020, Suzanne Moore, a journalist at the *Guardian* resigned after being accused of being transphobic. After having expressed concerns about the transgender movement she was overwhelmed with harassment and even death threats (Shields, 2020). It is argued by Rao-Poolla (2020) that cancel culture prohibits the debate as many fear the repercussions for exercising their right to freedom of expression. It is necessary to have open discussions with people who have opposing opinions in order to fully understand any topic. When people are turning to cancel culture, it discourages journalists from reporting on controversial topics which can have negative consequences on the profession and democracy as a whole (Rao-Poolla, 2020).

### 2.2. Cancel culture and journalism

The impacts of cancel culture have led to various levels of self-censorship and concern where the silencing of people’s opinions, even those considered extreme, threatens the democratic progress (The FIRE, 2022). Balkin (2004) argues that there is an aspect of social conflict that is enabled through technological innovation. Through telecommunications networks, citizens can create competing content and route around media gatekeepers (Balkin, 2004). Citizens are no longer mere consumers of mass media content but are active participants in content production (Al-Saqaf, 2016).

Nossel (2020) argues that free speech, on the one hand, fosters social change but can also be harmful, hence punishment may be warranted. When social movements gain support, it should be recognized that free speech enables the progress. However, sometimes the opposite takes place when an opposition is formed. The people working for the movement are then demanding punishment for the oppositional institution or individual who has been offensive. In this case, both sides are exercising their right to free speech. On the other hand, according to Nossel (2020), punishment for free speech can sometimes be legitimate especially if its intent is to threaten, harass or violate the law. This can be especially important when a person in a powerful position is harming certain people based on their gender, race or sexual orientation. A common example was when former president Donald Trump condemned cancel culture but was simultaneously using his power of office to retaliate against journalists (Nossel, 2020).
2.3. Social media and cancel culture

Cancel culture has become a topic that divides people in general. One side believes that it is a tool that helps to call for accountability and social justice through collective action and to combat current issues that may harm their communities (Robertson, 2015 p. 54) The other side sees it as a threat to freedom of expression, journalism and the democratic rights upon which it rests (Nott, 2022). Freedom House (2022), an American human rights organization, states that the ability for journalists to freely report provides a platform for exchanging ideas and information. However, if restricted, for instance by cancel culture, these essential services of a democratic society are diminished and can lead to misinformation with negative outcomes for both its leaders and citizens (Freedom House, 2022).

Robertson (2015) explains cancel culture in the following way. “A celebrity or other public figure does or says something offensive, and this is followed by a public backlash, often fueled by politically progressive social media. Then come the calls to cancel the person, that is, to effectively end their career or revoke their cultural cachet, whether through boycotts of their work or disciplinary action from an employer” (Robertson, 2015 p. 54). A current debate revolves around legislators requesting social media companies to intervene and prevent extremist propaganda and threats as well as personal attacks. However, such approach has been met with counterarguments regarding the prohibition of freedom of expression (Elliot & Holt, 2020 p. 108). This has also led scholars to discuss positive and negative freedom and media institutions. It becomes a complex issue as regulations should not impose on freedom and the right of people and could ultimately have a negative effect on democracies (Robertson, 2015 p. 54).

2.4. The digital media landscape

It is thought that social media changed the democratic discourse as it provides new platforms for debates with different norms and rules than those of the pre-digital media world (Elliot & Holt, 2020 p. 107). The emergence and popularity of Twitter and Facebook has, for instance, contributed with positive change as it engages citizens in communication channels and news journalism. With this, citizens create contra-flows of news and are adding to the new production in a more diversified manner (Ekman & Widholm, 2014 p. 88).
As mentioned in the previous section, with this development, associated risks emerge. The openness and inclusiveness were the main value of social media but vulnerability is becoming an increasing issue. According to Ekman & Wilholm (2017) some claim that journalism has lost its monopoly over public information and that news flows outside traditional news institutes are challenging traditional journalism by providing alternative ways of communication. Therefore, if all institutions are to some extent media institutions, then we need to rethink some theories and practices in the field of journalism and its relationship between news media, audiences and democracy (Ekman & Widholm, 2014 p. 79):

Digital communication through social media is fast, accessible to anyone and easy to use, without any costs for journalistic institutions that are set under hard economic pressures […] That can lead potentially to a breakdown of established source-journalist relations and to a decline of “the negotiation-through-conversation” that has characterized journalism for centuries (Ekman & Widholm, 2014 p. 89).

Social media does not only allow for access and fast communication but could also be viewed as the enabling platforms for cancel culture. The below section will exemplify how cancel culture has used social media to target established journalists.

2.5. Cancelled journalists

In order to provide the reader with a brief overview and understanding of the process of cancel culture, its triggers and consequences for the targeted journalists, I have found three examples of when journalists, according to their own words, were cancelled. These are Alexi McCammond at Teen Vogue, Emily Wilder at Associate Press and Eve Barlow, a freelance journalist, who have had an experience of being cancelled. These will provide concrete examples of when journalists have been specifically targeted by the public and their employer due to their actions or expressions on social media.

Alexi McCammond, a 27-year-old female journalist, was about to become the editor-in-chief at Teen Vogue in March 2021 when tweets from her teenage years emerged that were considered anti-Asian and homophobic. In 2019 McCammond had already publicly taken responsibility for these tweets and apologized. However, Teen Vogue staff members wanted to see McCammond fired and reached out to Condé Nast Publications (the company that owns Teen Vogue) to ensure McCammond’s resignation before even starting the job. Pending this, McCammond apologized again in the hopes that the situation would improve. But eventually,
advertisers started pulling their funding and ultimately Condé Nast and McCammond decided to part ways and issued an official statement on the matter (Blair, 2021).

Similarly, to Alexi McCammond, Emily Wilder was working at AP when old posts revealed her pro-Palestine activism in college (Singh, 2021), by participating in *Jewish Voice for Peace* and *Students for Justice in Palestine*. A campaign against Wilder by the Stanford College Republicans put pressure on AP which resulted in Wilder’s contract being terminated due to an “undisclosed violation” of AP’s social media policy (Ellefson, 2021). AP explained that journalists cannot take sides in public forums when reporting on conflict (Singh, 2021). Wilder claims that AP surrendered to the public pressure and therefore decided to cancel her. Other journalists used Twitter to show their support for Wilder while also criticizing AP for their decision to fire her (Ellefson, 2021).

The third example echoes the above cases. Eve Barlow, a freelance journalist, was cancelled by her colleagues and received online hate after criticizing the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement for vandalizing synagogues in the summer of 2020 during the George Floyd protests. She tweeted: “Woke up to see that synagogues in LA have been graffiti’d during the riots with the words FREE PALESTINE and F*** ISRAEL, and that dua lipa is spreading antisemitic posts on her IG feed” and “how dare you bring the jewish nation and community into the killing of black American lives”. Following these tweets, editors stopped replying to her e-mails while staff and other writers unfollowed her on social media (Cavallier, 2022).

These examples discussed in the media and previous research demonstrate that cancel culture is now also focusing on journalists and not only celebrities or those in powerful positions as has been the “traditional” targets. As already explained, the importance of journalism and freedom of expression may be compromised which makes this an important yet underestimated topic that requires more attention and caution. That is why I have chosen to focus on how journalists are specifically impacted by this movement to better understand both threats and opportunities in a digital media landscape. I hope that this contribution will encourage more people to continue researching cancel culture and its impact on journalism. Without journalism and freedom of expression, entire societies would suffer as the free flow of information and pluralism would decrease.
### 3 Theories and concepts

This chapter presents the definitions of the concepts of John Stuart Mill’s Harm Principle, freedom of expression according to Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and self-censorship. I find these concepts helpful for the coming interpretation of my empirical materials, especially in relation to the first research question (How is cancel culture defined, perceived, and experienced by journalists, communication professionals and media experts?). The chapter also addresses the concepts of the public sphere and participatory democracy that will build the theoretical framework for my analysis, especially in relation to the second research question (How, according to them, does it impact journalism and the freedom of expression?).

#### 3.1. The public sphere and participatory democracy

The definition most commonly used to describe the public sphere is by Habermas (1964) where he explains the public sphere as something that should be accessed by all citizens as private individuals. Collectively, citizens behave as a public body which guarantees the freedom of assembly, association and the freedom to express and publish their opinion about matters of the general interest and public (Habermas, 1964). Bridges (2021) discussing cancel culture and the digital public sphere further emphasized that Habermas’ formulation builds on rationality and that the arguments that citizens make in the public sphere must be reasonable, logical and sensible which will then generate a public opinion. Bridges continues to explain the changing media landscape and how the emergence of the Internet in the late 1990s was viewed as an unfiltered space, open to all that would empower those who had previously been marginalized by traditional media and the public debate (Bridges, 2021). Following the innovation of the internet, according to Çela (2015) scholars brought the attention from the classical meaning of the public sphere to the a new notion of a “networked public sphere” where public opinions are shaped through the exchange on online platforms. With this, a new public sphere can facilitate discussions that promoted the exchange of new ideas and opinions on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Anyone can connect and communicate freely and come together for a certain cause or interest (Çela, 2015 p. 196-197).

However, with social media taking the stage, an issue arose where its users are now basing their arguments on emotions rather than the rationality that Habermas originally envisioned in a pre-digital era. The truth then becomes subjective and rational arguments become more
distant as a mode of discourse (Bridges, 2021). Furthermore, journalists are working on behalf of the public interest to hold political, social and economic powers accountable. Journalists can act as the stand-ins for millions of people in a democracy who may not have the forum to express their collective voice (Garman, 2019). Today, one can argue that the very purpose of free speech has moved from the promotion of democratic liberation about public issues to now promote individual autonomy or personal fulfillment (Balkin, 2004).

As Morlandstø & Røe Mathiseni (2019, p. 76-77) formulate it:

Journalism plays a vital role within the public sphere, related to function such as information, interpretation, interrogation, representation and advocacy. An important institutional feature of journalism and news media is their role as channel and arenas for communication. Journalism is committed to a societal contract that requires a link between journalistic professionalism and democracy. Journalism’s role within the public sphere is to fuel, encourage, facilitate and act as a platform (Morlandstø & Røe Mathiseni, 2019).

Regarding the freedom of expression, it has also been suggested that opinion-based journalism could be a genre to renew this societal contract as audiences could benefit from this guidance and analysis in an increasingly complex and fragmented world to better understand society:

Digital communication has gradually changed the public sphere. On the one hand, citizens gain a variety of avenues to participate. On the other hand, the public sphere is becoming more fragmented (Morlandstø & Røe Mathiseni, 2019 p. 76-77).

The participatory democracy model aim is to increase the participation of underrepresented and marginalized groups and has similar characteristics to the libertarian model that promotes free expression. Anyone with access to the internet can in principle produce any media content especially through interactive platforms such as social media but the professionalization can be lower where opinions dominate the content (Mishra & Kern-Stone, 2019 p. 23). Social media such as Facebook and Twitter have been utilized for social movements and as a means to communicate with citizens on a global level (Mercea & Loader, 2015). Similarly, to Mishra & Kern-Stone (2019), Gachau (2018) argues that social media can facilitate communicative exchanges for those who are otherwise underrepresented by mainstream media and contribute to a more diverse discourse that challenges the views and opinions of the dominant publics. These underrepresented groups can select, control and filter media content according to their specific needs and concerns rather than having traditional media dictate to them by the dominant classes (Gachau, 2018).
Participatory democracy, thus, can help to better understand cancel culture as an approach to address social injustices through social media and tap into alternative news outlets. As indicated above, participatory democracy aims to ensure that marginalized and underrepresented groups are heard which can contribute to a more diverse media content and discourse. It also describes how the media landscape has changed as social media emerged where anyone with a social media account can become a content producer and therefore challenging traditional media with more perspectives.

By analyzing journalists’ and specialists’ views of cancel culture from a public sphere perspective, it can help understand how cancel culture is impacting journalism and what the consequences could be if journalists are silenced or self-censor out of fear. These two theories, together, also explain how cancel culture could be used to work both for the public interest as well as for people’s individual interests.

3.2. The Harm Principle and freedom of expression

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was drafted by representative from different legal and cultural backgrounds from every region in the world. Adopted at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in 1940 it serves as a common standard for all people of all nations and sets out the fundamental human rights to be universally protected. Article 19 in UDHR states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference to seek, received and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers” (United Nations, 2022). Article 19 also provides the basis for the function of journalism through freedom of press and when deliberately targeted and threatened, media freedom decreases which ultimately threatens democracy (Matar, 2021). According to Amnesty International (2022) everyone has the rights to agree and disagree and that freedom of expression is central for a democratic society and for people to enjoy their human rights (Amnesty International, 2022). A free press and journalists’ right to free speech to produce news, information, ideas and opinions allows the public to hold authorities and those in power to account (News Media Association, 2022). This definition is used throughout the thesis understanding freedom of expression as also encompassing freedom of press and opinion. The reason why this was selected is because cancel culture is used on social media where no national jurisdiction applies. If the aim of the thesis would have been to specifically investigate cancel culture in a country, then national laws could apply.
John Stuart Mill’s *Harm Principle* states that people should be free to act however they wish unless it causes harm to someone else. As cancel culture has been explained as someone reacting to another person who they consider to be offensive or to have problematic opinions by cancelling them, it is important to remember the harm principle as it creates a line between *harm* and *offense*. This will guide the analysis in chapter 5 to help determine the potential threats of cancel culture and its impacts on freedom of expression and journalism. It is argued that one has the right to offend other people and that having one’s feelings hurt does not constitute harm (The Ethics Centre, 2016). In a nutshell, Mill’s explanation builds on that offense is minor compared to harm and defines harm as an act that causes injury or prevents the interests of specific people and their rights (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2018). One does not have the right to incite violence as it physically hurts and injures certain individuals. Yet, today, it has become clearer that some expression may be as damaging as a physical attack especially regarding those in power and their oppressive actions towards minorities (The Ethics Centre, 2016). As formulated by Humphreys (2020):

[...] speech has consequences and the people concerned about racist speech are rightly concerned that racist speech and racist world-views do actual harm. Mill is alive to that but he thinks, in a liberal society, we can have these discussions which don’t require the actual suppression of those attitudes without them even being given a critical hearing (Humphreys, 2020).

This will partially be the emphasis of the results and analysis chapter as cancel culture aims to silence those who have been offensive. By promoting open dialogue people can understand other perspectives rather than turning to cancel culture because it does not fit their ideological or personal values.

### 3.3. Journalism and self-censorship

Taylor & Hessayon (2022) argue that free speech is the right to express one’s opinions without censorship or restraint and unfortunately, in many parts of the world, authoritarian governments have prevented this through censorship which can be defined as: “the changing or the suppression or prohibition of speech or writing that is deemed subversive of the common good” (Anastaplo, 2022). The cancellation of those with controversial opinions has therefore become a concern in liberal democracies and the protection of freedom of expression (Taylor & Hessayon, 2022).
More specifically, self-censorship has been defined in journalism studies as the individual self-restriction of one’s freedom of speech to avoid saying or doing something that offends others for fear of physical harm or reputation risks. Self-censorship can however also be a necessary part in the practice of journalism (Grøndahl Larsen, Fadnes, & Krøvel, 2020). For instance, journalists might choose to not report on certain topics which can be a mere editorial judgement call. But when a journalist wants to share certain information but refrains from doing so, because of safety or their reputation, then it is self-censorship. Journalism helps citizens enjoy their freedom of expression by encouraging public debate while informing about important issues and ideas. Self-censorship stifles this free flow of information and ideas which can become a momentum for regimes and authoritarian states to reinvent the truth and spread their propaganda (Day, 2021).

To ensure that freedom of expression and journalism is protected it is crucial to remember the difference between censorship and cancel culture. Thus, the above definitions will come useful into the discussion in chapter 5 where its impacts on journalism and freedom of expression is presented as some argue that cancel culture results in journalists self-censoring and being intimidated to report on sensitive topics.
4 Methodology

This chapter describes how the research has been conducted as well as why certain methods were chosen over others. The approach to answer the research questions will be presented as well as the validity and reliability of the analytical procedure.

4.1. Participants

In order to identify my informants, I started by searching for people who are related to the field of journalism through social media; mainly through LinkedIn (see grounded theory regarding the sampling below). Through a simple search using the key words: journalist, social media, Meta, Facebook, freelance journalist, Instagram, and environmental journalist several people were found and reached out to. One of the original ideas with this thesis was to reach out to environmental writers and journalists and ask them regarding disinformation on climate change issues and if cancel culture could potentially be used as a tool to limit this on social media (see interview question 4 below). However, as environmental journalists or writers are a limited group of journalists this was decided to not be the focus and instead, I reached out to a broader group and those who were willing to participate in an interview.

I also wanted to better understand the many aspects of the concept and therefore decided to reach out to, not only journalists but also, communications professionals (working at NGOs and other types of organizations) and media experts (in particular, lecturers at departments of journalism at Södertörn University and Gothenburg University). The participants have, thus, been divided into two groups: journalists and thematic specialists (see Table 1). These two groups will not be analyzed from a comparative perspective but I found it useful to discuss the topic with other professionals to better understand how they see the limits of freedom of expression and how censorship impacts journalists and freedom of expression (second research question). The same rationale was used when reaching out to lawyer at City of Stockholm as I wanted to understand the rights that we have and when it is valid to overrule democratic rights for the best of society.

I managed to find many informants who are currently living in Kenya as I am working and living in Kenya since 2020 and have therefore developed a personal and professional network who offered to contribute with their views. The purpose was not to target a specific country but rather a coincidence due to me residing there. Through my personal network, it was possible
to discuss cancel culture further with staff at BBC News Indonesia. The participants from *BBC News Indonesia* and *WRI* provided their input from a social media point of view as this is an integral part of the subject. The participant from Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Sweden provided valuable information on some of the current threats to journalism and how cancel culture can be viewed as both something positive and negative. Another reason for the geographical spread of the participants is due to cancel culture being a global phenomenon and anyone with access to social media can be involved in cancel culture activities.

Further interviewees were also identified by asking for contacts through my personal and professional network (snowball sampling). 12 people in total were interviewed. All the interviews were conducted in March-May 2022 via Zoom, in English and lasted for 30-60 minutes. All were recorded after obtaining consent from the participants.

**Table 1. List of participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Professional title</th>
<th>Source of contact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Journalists</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mel Myendo</td>
<td>BBC News Africa</td>
<td>Freelance journalist</td>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Linda Ökero</td>
<td>Pulse Live Kenya</td>
<td>Contributing writer</td>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Hereward Holland</td>
<td>Thomson Reuters</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>Personal Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Thomas Schueneman</td>
<td>Warming is Real (NGO)</td>
<td>Environmental writer and journalist</td>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Valdy Baraputri</td>
<td>BBC News Indonesia</td>
<td>Reporter</td>
<td>Personal network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thematic specialists</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Britt Börjesson</td>
<td>Gothenburg University</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>Website, e-mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Katarina Carlsson</td>
<td>Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Sweden</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Website, e-mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Niamh Brannigan</td>
<td>World Resources Institute (WRI)</td>
<td>Communication and Engagement Director</td>
<td>Professional network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Sofia Hellbom Kardouni</td>
<td>City of Stockholm</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>Personal network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Walid Al-Saqaf</td>
<td>Södertörn University</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>Academic network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Famega Syavira Putri</td>
<td>BBC News Indonesia</td>
<td>Social media lead</td>
<td>Personal network</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When writing a thesis that contains personal data, all students at Södertörn university must comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Ultimately, any personal data that has been collected for the thesis can only be used for this specific purpose. Consent forms were distributed to all participants in this project and they could at any point withdraw their consent. Prior to submission, all participants were informed of their contribution used in the thesis. A step-by-step guide was provided by the supervisor of this thesis as well as discussions on potential ethical issues that may arise. For this thesis, no sensitive personal data (i.e., sexual orientation, religious belief, political ideology etc.) were disclosed or collected. All participants were asked prior to the interview if they consented with being recorded and if I could use their full name and professional title where one participant requested to be anonymous. The recordings were stored in a secure cloud in OneDrive. Once the thesis is graded all the materials will be removed from the cloud.

4.2. Semi-structured interviews

The purpose of qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews, is to seek knowledge related to important questions from the interviewees themselves. For the gathering of information for this thesis six questions were formulated and have been edited along the way as other interesting questions were discovered on the growing knowledge about cancel culture (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

As previously stated, cancel culture is a complex topic which is why open-ended questions were used to reveal insights into the research topic that had otherwise not been considered. With the limited structure that comes with open-ended questions it was possible to follow any direction during the interviews. In some cases, this went even beyond the initial intended focus of the thesis. Follow-up questions based on the respondents’ comments or answer became a productive way to increase the data on another perspective about the same phenomena (Hoffmann, 2007 p. 330).

It is further important to note some limitations that have been identified by Flinders (1997) on semi-structured interviews: firstly, the interviewee can be inarticulate about how they understand their world. Cancel culture being an already elusive concept with no agreed-on definition made it difficult for people to answer in a black or white matter as you can argue both sides depending on the purpose and aim of a cancel culture campaign. Secondly, the interviewees’ understanding may be taken for granted by the interviewer. Interviewing the
participants, I assumed that they would have an in-depth knowledge on the subject. However, as already mentioned, this is a complex topic that is difficult to understand and realize what positive and negative impacts it might have on freedom of expression and journalism. Thirdly, those who participate may not specifically have the information researchers are looking for. An example of this is from two of the conducted interviews where the participant thought the topic was on non-digital cancel culture instead of social media cancel culture. Despite this, the questions were asked in an even more open format which eventually led the conversation into social media cancel culture. Finally, the fourth limitation is people’s reluctance to reveal their experiences (Flinders, 1997).

Following the first 10 interviews, the research questions were reformulated. For the second research question it was necessary to interview more people specifically on the impact that cancel culture has on freedom of expression and journalism. Below are the first and the second set of questions that were asked. The second set of questions focused more on the impacts that cancel culture may have on journalism and freedom of expression as I wanted more input for research question number 2.

First set of questions for the first 10 interviewees:

i. In your own words how would you describe social media cancel culture?
ii. What are the impacts of social media cancel culture?
iii. How is social media cancel culture impacting the freedom of press and expression?
iv. What impacts could social media cancel culture have on disinformation?
v. What are your thoughts on social media companies and their platforms’ code of conduct in relation to freedom of press and expression?
vi. Is there anything else you would like to add to this discussion?

Second set of questions for the last two interviewees:

i. In your own words how would you describe cancel culture?
ii. What impacts does cancel culture have on journalism, freedom of expression and press?
iii. What are the positive and negative impacts of cancel culture?
iv. Do you believe cancel culture is a trend or will it continue as it has up until today?
v. Is there anything else you would like to add to this discussion?
4.3. Data analysis

As indicated in chapter 3, the analysis was conducted by applying the theories of the public sphere and participatory democracy, as well as the concepts of self-censorship, freedom of expression, and the Harm principle. Theoretical framework, thus, supported the analysis by explaining how social media has enabled more inclusive and participatory content production but also how the change in media landscape has made social media users to their own editors. The change in the public sphere from enhancing the public interest to becoming more personal and opinion-oriented also helped to explain how cancel culture is used and what some of the outcomes have been for journalists as well as potential future threats for journalism.

The hermeneutic circle approach has been used in this thesis. Ultimately, by using a hermeneutic circle approach, initial understanding of cancel culture was challenged as more knowledge was added to the discussion which created new understandings. For this topic, it should be emphasized that biases regarding cancel culture should be handled with care and should be analyzed on a case-to-case basis. As mentioned above, there are two sides to this discussion where some view cancel culture as a tool to address social injustices while others see it as an infringement to freedom of expression and thus also as a threat to journalism itself. The analysis therefore re-evaluated initial understandings of cancel culture based on new knowledge brought by the open-ended questions in the interviews (Le Cunff, 2022). Hermeneutic thinkers such as Heidegger and Gadamer believed this method to be favorable as it created an inescapable and positive element of understanding as the analysis seeks to ask more questions (see justification above in 4.2) (Grondin, 2015). The analytical process is carried out by continuously interpreting, reflecting and discussing cancel culture as more information emerges which leads to a circular process of re-examining data (IGI Global, 2022).

Figure 1. The hermeneutic circle (Le Cunff, 2022).
For this thesis, grounded theory was also used to formulate the research on cancel culture. Firstly, as already determined, the area of interest is cancel culture and its perception, definition and impact on freedom of expression and journalism. The data was collected through in-depth interviews using open-ended questions. By using this method, theoretical preconceptions are avoided and interview questions are adjusted as theory emerges. After having conducted the interviews, specific parts of the interviews were transcribed that can best be used to answer the research questions. Following this, a theory had developed, and it was possible to analyze the data and give it meaning and understand what the data says and how it is relevant where professional and personal experience from the interviewees offer an understanding of cancel culture and the analytical process is used to contribute with understanding of the phenomena (Mitchell & Noble, 2022). Basically, the data collection and analysis occurs until a theory has been developed where no additional data adds more insight to the theory (e.g. that cancel culture impacts the freedom of expression and journalism). With grounded theory it allowed the collected data to guide the analysis and theory development which can lead to new revelations of cancel culture. As I collect, I analyze the data and as I learned more, I continued to collect data. I started by selecting participants loosely based on the initial research questions and I selected the next person to interview based on the analysis that was carried out from the previous participant. After the interviews, I transcribed the interviews and broke them into individual excerpts. I compared similar excerpts that occur between different people, and I continued doing this until I learned the same thing over again even from new participants and there is no need to collect further data or analysis (Delve, 2022).

4.4. Alternative methods and limitations

An alternative methodology could include quantitative data collection. As will be discussed in the chapter 5, cancel culture cases are not black or white and should be evaluated on a case-to-case basis. Therefore, by using quantitative methods, it could be possible to track several detailed scenarios and conduct a survey where journalists or civilians could provide their view and whether they believe it was “right” or “wrong” that the person in question was cancelled. By using quantitative methods, it could perhaps become clearer what the public opinion is. A survey as such could then be limited to a certain geographical area, for instance in a state in the U.S., as the literature review and the online sources showed that the debate on cancel culture is particularly strong there.
As opposed to selecting people on their merits or professional title, it could have been useful to compare the thoughts and experiences of journalists between, for example, such contrasting contexts as Sweden and Kenya. For this thesis, due to its scope, both in time and data, this did not become part of the thesis as it would require more interviewees specifically working in those two countries. More time would have to be allocated for a selection process as well.

One of the limitations of the focus I chose, was that my study did not concern civilians and, thus, no conclusions can be drawn concerning the public opinion. This impacts the results as it focuses on specific professionals. Considering the small sample group, the thesis could have significantly benefited from having more informants who would be willing to discuss their perception and how their future work may be impacted. It should also be mentioned that the long-term impacts of being cancelled is not reflected in this thesis. For instance, the examples of cancelled journalists could have been reached to understand better how their professional career is today.

### 4.5. Self-reflexivity

One of the advantages with choosing a topic such as cancel culture is that there are two sides to the story with both negative and positive attributes. By not disclosing or choosing a side but rather trying to understand its meaning and impact, I tried to be as objective as possible. The interview questions also specifically asked the interviewees to provide and reflect on both the negative and positive views of cancel culture. It is also important to mention that none of the interviewees had any personal or professional agenda with contributing with their input. The anonymous source in this thesis was contacted due to their professional work as a journalist. It was not until during the interview that they disclosed that they had also been cancelled. I do not believe that the source’s intentions were to share the story as it was not revealed until more than half the interview has been conducted. The source was very cautious with explaining that the explicit details of the case cannot be disclosed in the thesis as it may cause personal and professional problems for them. This made me confident in thinking that the source had no intention to do anything but simply share the case as an interesting input to help explain cancel culture.
5 Results & Analysis

The findings presented in section 5.1. Describing cancel culture will present the empirical data from interviews with the journalists and thematic specialists to answer the first research question: How is cancel culture defined, perceived and experienced by journalists, communication specialists and media experts? The second section, 5.2. Impacts of cancel culture will present the results that will be used to answer the second research question: How, according to them, does it impact journalism and the freedom of expression? This chapter will further interpret and explain how the results are connected to the theories and previous research of the thesis. The analysis will be carried out by applying the theoretical frameworks of public sphere and participatory democracy while the concepts of freedom of expression, the Harm Principle and self-censorship will be used as an added layer to better understand the results from research question 1.

Firstly, it is important to again remember what was already stated in the introduction of this thesis: that those who are cancelling and those who have supposedly offended someone, are both exercising their right to freedom of expression (Nott, 2022). What becomes an issue is when the function of journalism is deliberately targeted and threatened as that decreases the media freedom and democracy (Matar, 2021).

5.1. Understanding cancel culture

When reviewing the information that has been provided by the interviewees there seems to be a common theme regarding the perception of cancel culture. Besides agreeing on that it is a difficult concept to understand it does appear to be described by the informants representing all the three professional groups as: the active attempt to silence someone that has, through action, offended someone whether it was intentional or not.

To start off, Börjesson (interview, 2022) at Gothenburg University provides a historical context of the emerging of cancel culture which is closely related to boycotting and is described by her as a group of people either boycotting a public figure (or someone providing a service) with regards to a comment or action that may have been perceived as racist or perhaps just something that is not in line with what the person would normally agree with. An early example of cancel culture, before social media, were the boycotts during the social movements in Sweden in the
1970’s where people took a stand against the apartheid regime in South Africa by refusing to buy goods and services originated from the country (Börjesson, 2022). On this note one can argue that the original concept of the public sphere was applied as it allowed its citizens to collectively act as a public body on matters of public interest (Habermas 1964). The idea of participatory democracy also becomes valid as it aims to increase the participation of underrepresented and marginalized groups (Mishra & Kern-Stone, 2019). My interpretation of this information makes it possible to potentially argue for the positive use of cancel culture as the purpose is to hold powerful people or governments accountable for wrongful action. These movements and actions are not simply based on one’s personal opinion but aim to serve public and transboundary interests as well.

Moving into the digital era, social media was described in the Previous research chapter to have changed the democratic discourse as it provides new platforms for debate with different norms and rules of the pre-digital era (Elliot & Holt, 2020). In March 2021, Linda Okero, wrote an article “Replace cancel culture with accountability culture” for Pulse Live, an online news website in Kenya, where she claims that cancel culture is an example of mob mentality with little space for mistakes or change (Okero, 2021). In an interview for this thesis, Okero further explains that social media has become an emerging platform that enables people to exercise cancel culture to hold people accountable. She adds that she personally does not believe in cancel culture as a concept as it does not allow the space for important discussions and that it is becoming a challenge to enforce responsible postings and content creation (Okero, 2022). It has also been described by Myendo (interview, 2022) at BBC News Africa as mob psychology (Myendo, 2022).

Carlsson (interview, 2022) from Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Sweden has described cancel culture as the acts to shut down people or organizations because of their opinions (Carlsson, 2022). Similarly, Al-Saqaf (interview, 2022) at Södertörn University describes cancel culture as an attempt to shut down certain individuals from interacting, being endorsed by or conducting the same activities at the same level as they previously have. In these circumstances, the people who are cancelling are shaming a certain person to ensure that they are no longer promoted (Al-Saqaf, 2022). Schueneman (interview, 2022), also adds to this discussion that cancel culture can be used to shame someone and to attack them personally where little value is added to any important discourse (Schueneman, 2022). As previously stated by Amnesty International (2022), everyone has the right to agree and disagree and that
freedom of expression is central for a democratic society and for people to enjoy their human rights (Amnesty International, 2022). As described by Balkin (2014) in the previous research, the very purpose of free speech has moved from the promotion of democratic liberation about public issues to now promote individual autonomy or personal fulfillment (Balkin, 2004). Even if it is difficult to generalize it appear to me that anyone can refer to their own truth as a universal truth. This can become an issue not only to journalists but to democratic societies as a whole. Some people seem believe that only certain individuals should be allowed to express their opinions because, according to them, anything that does not agree with their ideological values can be considered “wrong”. For instance, some people may find it difficult to listen to people with far-right views. But if we want a democratic society with freedoms and rights, we should allow these to be heard so that discussions can take place to avoid political turbulence or social divides.

Yet one more important aspect occurred during an interview with Brannigan (2022). She also sees cancel culture as a threat to free speech. She describes it as contributing to political polarization and to dismissal of rationalism. What concerns her is the lack of forgiveness and compassion and how cancel culture does not distinguish between intent to harm and lack of intent to harm or insult. She also goes on to explain the case of Alexi McCammond:

I believe that people generally evolve over time due to social currents and trend and what a person might say ten years ago in that particular environment at that time may be more acceptable than it was today. And to judge somebody for what happened 10 years ago […] is so unfair, especially for younger people. It has gone too far and it intimated people from saying what they think and they are afraid of having contrary views (Brannigan, 2022).

This focus on the lack of forgiveness is surprising especially considering that McCammond has already addressed and apologized on the issue twice. Was this case of importance to the public sphere and public opinion or was this simply a personal attack from someone who had been offended by discovering this old tweet? Considering that McCammond was not of age and that she was not a powerful political figure with its own personal agenda, I believe this to be a case of offense rather than harm. A question remains regarding the Harm Principle as both harm and offense can be subjective. As has already been stated, cancel culture cases are perceived by the interviewees to entail offense rather than physical harm. As explained earlier, according to the Harm Principle people should be free to act however they wish unless it is incitement to violence as it physically hurts or injures certain people. Whereas you have the
right to offend other people and having your feelings hurt does not constitute harm (The Ethics Centre, 2016). More research is probably required to conclude whether we as citizens in a liberal society can have difficult and controversial discussions without suppressing those holding these thoughts before they have even been heard (Humphreys, 2020). Without this, I would argue that it becomes difficult to inform oneself with other perspectives that might make people tolerate each other’s opinions or perspectives. It is also difficult to make an informed decision if only one information or view is provided. Even more important is to question who has provided that information and for what purpose.

The anonymous source that was interviewed for this thesis shared their experience of being cancelled (which, as mentioned in the introduction, inspired the title of this thesis introduction). In brief, this person wrote an article about cancel culture for a newspaper that shall also be unnamed. This person started their career as a journalist as they wanted to write about how a certain political group on social media are infringing on free speech which in itself is hypocritical as the group description specifically stated that it is advocating free speech and combating cancel culture. The journalist joined the social media group to do more research on the ongoing discussions and content. After some time, the journalist posted a message on the group expressing how they actually contradict their own objectives as they do not allow free speech and are openly exercising cancel culture on other members of the group. As a result, the journalist was blocked from the group. This ironic experience was then used as inspiration for an article and once it had been published online, the creator of the social media group contacted the editor of the newspaper demanding them to delete the article by threatening and accusing Anonymous (interview, 2022) to have committed misconduct and posted misogynist content on the group. The newspaper took down the story but after further investigation it became clear that the accusations were false with no evidence and the article was again published online (Anonymous, 2022).

This example relates to Robertson’s (2015) perspective, as described earlier, on cancel culture. She explained cancel culture as when a celebrity or public figure does or says something offensive; a public backlash, often fueled by politically progressive social media ensues. Then comes the call to cancel the person to effectively end their career whether through boycotts of their work or disciplinary action from an employer (Robertson, 2015). As mentioned by Nossel (2022) one can argue for both sides of free speech. It fosters social change but can also be harmful (Nossel, 2022). But the people engaging in this particular political group as, mentioned
in the above example with Anonymous, were then demanding punishment for the oppositional individual who they believed had been offensive. In this example, the journalist wanted to highlight the content that was posted in this group that was supposed to be actively advocating free speech and to work against cancel culture. I believe it is important to inform citizens who may be affected by the actions of these groups. Looking back at the definition of article 19 of the UDHR which includes freedom to hold opinions without interference to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers (United Nations, 2022). Hence, a free press and journalists’ right to free speech will enable them to produce news, information, ideas and opinions that allows the public to hold authorities and those in power to account (News Media Association, 2022). Without the work of Anonymous (2022) it would be difficult for citizens to understand what exactly is being discussed by these political groups and how their agenda could possibly affect their daily lives and democratic society. Further impacts of cancel culture on freedom of speech and journalism will be explained below in section 5.2.

5.2. Impacts on freedom of expression and journalism

A mutual view among the informants is that cancel culture can infringe upon or violate the fundamental democratic rights such as freedom of expression which is concerning for journalists. If article 19 of UDHR is to be applied, then everyone has the freedom to express themselves. Yet, one of the informants, Myendo (interview, 2022) again highlights that in today’s climate you may need to think about what you are spreading and if it is misinformation that can affect people in a negative way. Everyone can self-regulate themselves but it also seems to depend on their own personal agenda (Myendo, 2022). Similarly, another informant, Holland (interview, 2022), argues that on social media, the users have become their own editors and it is not a certainty that they will filter their content which is sometimes how hate speech and conspiracy can emerge and then become a threat to freedom of speech and journalism. He continues by saying that the challenges that cancel culture poses is that it does not allow you to engage in the issue but is rather used to call someone names and tends to be a reductionist argument that people use as someone basically attacking a person rather than providing a counter argument (Holland, 2022). In the publication from the American Press Institute (2022) in the earlier chapters, they explained that in a digital age journalism is no longer only threatened by state censorship but the suppression of the press through technological tools that are trying to replace verified news with their own content. However, they also argue that with the changing media landscape due to social media, journalists may serve as carrying on and
amplifying the conversation of people themselves (American Press Institute, 2022) and thus the public sphere.

From these statements, I can see a potential pattern where the representation in the public sphere is shrinking and that the role of journalism is being overruled by alternative media or news sources to ensure that marginalized and underrepresented groups have the same space and forum to express themselves on as traditional journalists have. Ultimately, based on the input from these specific informants, cancel culture does not seem to be serving the public interest or enabling the public sphere. However, with social media, as explained in chapter 3, it allows people to filter and reach media and information that is, to them, of personal interest and importance rather than selected by a dominant elite. This is then challenging traditional media to become more diverse to foster positive social changes.

Al-Saqaf (interview, 2022) from Södertörn University explains that cancel culture can have negative impacts on a person who has worked their entire life to build a reputation (such as journalists) where one incident leads to that person’s career and private life being negatively impacted. There are individuals who are constantly attacking other people without evidence and not giving the person who is attacked a chance to respond. This can be harmful and innocent lives can be affected (Al-Saqaf, 2022). An example is the case of Emily Wilder as described in chapter 2. Having participated in pro-Palestine activism in college Wilder was cancelled by Stanford College Republicans where AP fired her and claimed that their journalists cannot take sides in public forums when reporting on conflict (Singh, 2021). As mentioned in the section on public sphere, opinion journalism may actually contribute with more understanding and guidance for the general public in a complex and fragmented world (Gachau, 2018). Interestingly, it does not seem like Wilder was even working for AP as this was during her college years, but she was targeted anyways for actions that she may not disagree with or regret today.

Al-Saqaf (interview, 2022) argues at the same time that cancel culture can work as a positive force when someone has repeatedly over years, escaped prosecution or from being held accountable through the justice system. If all fails, social media and cancel culture could potentially be a tool to bring them to account if strong and cohesive evidence is provided in a cancel culture campaign (Al-Saqaf, 2022). As in the case with Anonymous (interview, 2022) above, there was no evidence that Anonymous had committed misconduct in the social media
group but the creator of the group still went out of his way to try and cancel them (Anonymous, 2022). Blocking or censorship in general is never a good thing according to Al-Saqaf (interview, 2022) where cancelling someone because you simply disagree is wrong unless someone is influential and promotes an agenda that could result in long-term damage in a democratic society (Al-Saqaf, 2022).

Continuing the discussion on censorship, Börjesson (interview, 2022) explains that censorship is applied by the state to prevent someone from spreading certain material where cancel culture has the same effect but on a smaller scale. This is where journalists become especially important. If anyone wants to infringe on freedom of expression and press, they first have to attack journalists as they are at the forefront for protecting these rights. Freedom of expression is important as it makes people who they are and to limit people’s freedom of expression is an infringement on democratic rights. Sometimes feel good personally to limit those who spread unpleasant thoughts but those thoughts are also important to discuss as it allows people to be heard and to hear other perspectives which is the only way to evolve as a society (Börjesson, 2022). As also stated by Okero (interview, 2022) that openly discussing difficult issues makes people learn to do better and be better. Stifling important conversations leaves little room to have conversations that contribute to social growth (Okero, 2022). As previously stated in chapter 3, Gachau (2018) argues that social media can facilitate communicative exchanges for those who are otherwise underrepresented by mainstream media and contribute to a more diverse discourse that challenges the views and opinions of a dominant public (Gachau, 2018).

I would suggest that for journalists to remain the gatekeeper of freedom of expression it would be useful to widen the perspectives and ensure that issues and topics are covered that affects not only a certain elite or class but also those who may not have the same privileges, to ensure a pluralistic media coverage. Using social media would therefore be an enabling environment to spread information and to tap into the digital public sphere to better understand what is of interest and importance.

Continuing the discussion to infringement on democratic rights from a legal perspective, Hellblom Kardouni (interview, 2022), a lawyer at City of Stockholm explains that during certain conditions, the freedom of speech can be infringed upon in a Swedish context. For instance, the freedom of speech can be limited when incitement against ethnic groups take place. To ensure that people are protected from harm, the freedom of speech is then limited. “Sometimes it is a matter of simple math when the absolute rights [the right to life] outweigh
the *relative* rights [freedom of expression]” (Hellblom Kardouni, 2022). Carlsson (interview, 2022) at RSF Sweden also explains that cancel culture could potentially be a useful tool when it is obvious that the line has been crossed from expressing yourself to intentionally spreading wrongful or harmful information (Carlsson, 2022). Anonymous (interview, 2022) adds by explaining that every democratic society has its tradeoffs where you have to live with all opinions, whether you personally agree or not (Anonymous, 2022).

As previously described, the public sphere has been described as citizens behaving as a public body which guarantees the freedom of assembly, association and the freedom to express and publish their opinion about matters of the general interest and public (Habermas, 1964). Bridges (2021) explains that the public sphere must be reasonable, logical and sensible which will generate a public opinion. Syavira Putri (interview, 2022) the social media lead at *BBC News Indonesia* thinks that when people use cancel culture to attack those with different opinions it can become dangerous for journalists. This creates a social media campaign to discredit them while also attacking their personal life. It can contribute to journalists self-censoring to avoid this kind of backlash from groups (Syavira Putri, 2022). Taylor & Hessayon (2022) suggested earlier that the cancellation of those with controversial opinions has become a concern in liberal democracies and the protection of freedom of expression (Taylor & Hessayon, 2022). If journalists self-censor out of fear it creates issues for the general public as the free flow of information and ideas will be stifled which can create a momentum for powerful people and entities to promote their own agenda (Day, 2021).

In addition to the above, Baraputri (interview, 2022) a reporter at *BBC News Indonesia*, also thinks that cancel culture causes journalists to self-censor as they might fear that what they are reporting on is not aligned with people’s opinions, the collective opinion or the *right* opinion. By doing this, journalists are not only censoring themselves but are also actively avoiding disguising their view on a certain topic. In the extreme cases it can even enable oppressive government to function because no one dares to show dissent which the government can then use to control its people. Also, important to mention is that journalists will not report on the public interest if people are not expressing their opinions (Baraputri, 2022). If there is no public opinion, then there is no public sphere to represent either. Okero (interview, 2022) contributed to this discussion by explaining that when cancel culture intervenes it can be difficult for content creators because they feel intimidated to comment on issues such as the current situation in Ukraine or the LGBTQ movement in Kenya. It removes the room to have
conversations that contributes to growth on social media and it is no longer the safe space it set out to be (Okero, 2022).

If the purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing where suppressing journalists leads to threats for democracy and societies (Kovach & Rosentiel, 2014) I would argue that cancel culture is impacting journalism and freedom of expression in a negative way especially when journalists are targeted for expressing their opinions on their own social media as in the case with Eve Barlow in chapter 2. If journalists are supposed to protect freedom of expression, it should also be allowed for them to express themselves on social media provided that they are not encouraging violence or other harmful actions. In this case I would also emphasize that the timing of the tweets may have been what caused the cancelling of Barlow. The tragic death of George Floyd sparked the BLM movements and their protests against police brutality. For Barlow to criticize the BLM movement as they vandalized parts of L.A and wrote hateful things about the Jewish community was her way of opposing herself to the actions and not the purpose of the movement per se. However, since social media is not a discussion but merely 280 characters on Twitter it can easily be interpreted as offensive. Barlow being offended by the graffiti is also what caused her to post her tweet in the first place.

As previously stated, Habermas (1964) argued that journalists are working on behalf of the public interest to hold political, social and economic powers accountable (Habermas, 1964) and can act as the stand-ins for millions of people in a democracy who may not have the forum to express their collective voice (Garman, 2019). What has been described as a bigger threat to journalism than cancel culture according to Schueneman (interview, 2022) is when powerful people, such as Donald Trump, has labelled journalists as “the enemy of the people”. These powerful people and administrations want to cancel journalists that they do not agree with. Unfortunately, in the US they have the right to do that as part of their interpretation of freedom of expression. By doing this, the citizens will only listen to one source or one idea and the person expressing an opposing idea will also become the “enemy” of the people (Schueneman, 2022). As cancel culture is also targeting journalists where articles have been cancelled and editors have been fired for publishing controversial opinions of headlines (Shields, 2020) it restricts the essential services that journalism serves in a democratic society (Freedom House, 2022). There is a need to evaluate cancel culture on a case-by-case basis because currently, it is a gray area. It seems to be a trend that is here to stay because social media has become so
accessible to everyone (Syavira Putri, interview 2022). Knowing this about cancel culture, makes it all the more important to monitor it as the development and the use may become a larger threat especially when powerful people who may use it for their own agenda. It is worth exploring whether cancel culture itself should be cancelled or if it has a place in society and social media.
6 Conclusion

Cancel culture started off as a means to address social injustices through boycotts and to hold people accountable. With social media, a changing media landscape and the digital public sphere, cancel culture has become something much more personal that divides people. Some recognized cases of cancel culture have involved celebrities such as J.K. Rowling, Ellen DeGeneres and Kevin Hart. But, based on this study we now also know that cancel culture has spread from targeting celebrities to also making it into the newsroom. The first research question: How is cancel culture defined, perceived and experienced by journalists, communication professionals and media experts? can be answered with the following definition: the active attempt to silence someone who has offended you whether it was intentional or not.

What has been discovered during this study is that cancel culture is also described by the informants as a concept that has little room for understanding or forgiveness where young journalists have been punished for something that, from someone’s personal view, has been perceived as offensive. It has also revealed that according to article 19 of the UDHR and the Harm Principle it can be difficult to argue for cancel culture in these cases as they have not physically inflicted harm or encouraged incitement to violence. Furthermore, cancel culture has a negative connotation according to the informants where it also been added that despite this some of them can argue for the potential positive impacts that it can have in a society. For instance, where the judicial system may fail to hold people accountable cancel culture could be applied where an evidence-based cancel culture campaign can ensure to hold people accountable. However, as seen in the result and analysis chapter, cancel culture does not necessarily use evidence but is based on personal emotions instead of rationalism which does not necessarily contribute to the interest and agenda of the public sphere.

Cancel culture has been seen as freedom of expression and as a means to address social injustices to foster change. However, the answer to the second research question: How, according to them, does it impact journalism and the freedom of expression? may argue differently. Both sides of cancel culture have been discussed with the informants where it was stated that cancelling journalists, not only limits the free flow of information that journalism provides for the public interest and public sphere but it can also make it difficult to understand issues in a fragmented and complex world if controversial opinions become self-censored out

39
of fear. Based on the information in this study it has become clear that those who are cancelling do not necessarily believe that a certain person has the same right to express their individual or professional opinion. This, while the cancellers themselves are exercising that exact democratic right. According to interviewees, cancel culture is a trend that will stay with us and that may become a larger threat to journalism and general communication as people in powerful positions can use it to their advantage to ensure their own agenda. Journalists who self-censor out of fear for their reputation or life is a warning sign that should be investigated further and monitored to ensure that journalists can still protect the freedom of expression and thus our democratic society. This study has contributed to the field of journalism and media studies by explaining the use and process of cancel culture and what threats and opportunities there are for journalists and freedom of expression in a changing media landscape.

6.1. Future research

As the author of this thesis, I strongly encourage other scholars, journalists and media professionals to further explore this topic especially in regards to its impacts on the field of journalism and ultimately its impacts on freedom of expression and democracy. As cancel culture continues to create a divide between those who believe it is part of freedom of expression and those who believe it is a threat, it is essential to understand how it is used and how it is evolving with social media. More qualitative research could be done by interviewing primary sources, especially journalists, who have been cancelled and how it affects their current career and future professional lives.

The overlap between cancel culture and censorship is also of high importance as it enables and justifies infringing on people’s democratic rights. Cancel culture is already rooted in the U.S democratic system where, as previously stated, Donald Trump is calling journalists with opposing opinions “the enemy of the people”.


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**Interviews**


Annexes

Annex 1: Template for information letter and consent form

Information letter

Template
Information for participants in surveys conducted by a student as part of their course/programme.

Contact information for the students and supervisor: Södertörn University Social Science Department Master’s Programme in International Journalist, Master’s Thesis in International Journalism (112JO). Contact information for the student Linda Jonsson (21lijo2@suni.se) and supervisor Liudmila Voronova (liudmila.voronova@sh.se)

Data controller: The survey/student project is conducted as part of the Linda Jonsson’s education at Södertörn University, which is legally liable for the students’ processing of personal data. You can always contact Södertörn University via e-mail: registrator@sh.se or by calling +46 (0)8 608 4000.

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Best regards,

Linda Jonsson

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**Consent form**

Consent to participate in the study: ‘Cancelling’ Cancel culture?

I have been informed about the study in writing and I consent to participating. I am aware that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw my participation in the study without providing a reason. My signature below indicates that I choose to participate in the study and consent to Södertörn University processing my personal data in accordance with the relevant data protection legislation and the information provided.

**Signature**

**Name in print**
**Date and location**

Student: Linda Jonsson, xxx@xxx
Supervisor: Liudmila Voronova, xxx@xxx