

Chapter 6: Cancel Culture: Online Shaming and Caring

Discussion case #1

An undergraduate philosophy student has battled depression throughout her time in college. Towards the end of her degree, she posts about her story on TikTok, and she talks about all the many factors contributing to her hopelessness about the future: she's battled other health problems, struggled making friends, and watched her family members go through personal difficulties from afar. Many people empathize deeply with her, posting encouraging messages and links to resources. Some people even use Venmo to ensure that she can afford therapy.

1. Is it possible for strangers to genuinely care about someone they've never met?
2. There is always the possibility that people posting about their struggles are lying, especially when there is money to be made from it; should this possibility affect how we feel and act when it comes to such posts?

Discussion case #2

As a 15-year-old boy, Jacob posted a series of sexist jokes and memes on Facebook and Instagram. At the time, his audience was mostly a small circle of friends, and the tone was what he now describes as immature and stupid attempts to be edgy. He never thought about the possibility that someone outside of his intended audience might see these posts.

Now 30-years old, he has matured. He has a Master's of Social Work, runs DEI and anti-racism workshops, and curates his social-media platforms to advocate for social justice and marginalized communities. He is generally successful at this, and he presents himself online in a way that is thoughtful, engaged, and widely respected among progressive activists.

A user on X compiles screenshots of his old Instagram and Facebook posts, which had never been deleted. The thread goes viral. Many of his followers are shocked. Some demand accountability. Others begin calling him a fraud, accusing him of rebranding for clout. A few activist organizations he works with publicly cut ties.

Jacob issues an apology, promising to be better and do the work required to change. But the backlash continues.

1. How responsible, if at all, is Jacob at 30 for posts he made at 15?
2. Did the X user who compiled Jacob's old posts do something unacceptable?
3. How should we judge whether someone has *really* changed?