

TWITTER, WHAT'S THE VERDICT?

Aya Imam

Sitting on my bed with my phone in my hand, I'm tapping through today's Instagram stories, our generation's CNN. Watching the horrific videos and pictures of the genocide happening in Sudan, I stumble upon my friend Ameen's story, and it's captioned: "Any Sudani not participating or advocating against the atrocities happening in Sudan, consider yourselves blocked. You should be ashamed for not looking out for your brothers and sisters." It stops me, and I keep my finger pressed to my phone screen to prevent it from swiping away. I tell myself, "No that's not you; you posted on your story; you're fine." But actually it is not fine. When did being afraid to get blocked by someone become a motive to advocate for a cause? I was passionate about the Sudanese genocide, but why did I need to post something on my story in order to prove my virtue? Ameen suggested that people who didn't post messages had committed some atrocious crime, and they should be punished. How does that help the cause? I am starting to see more posts like Ameen's, in which one friend attacks and convicts another peer online; hiding behind screens, they are numb to the cruel and dehumanizing effects of their words.

As children, the first stories we hear are tales of good and evil, whether it be "Little Red Riding Hood," "Cinderella," or even "The Tortoise and The Hare": they all have this element of guilt and innocence; they typically feature a villain who is inherently evil and deserves punishment and the hero who is perfect and completely good-hearted. We have been raised since such a young age to see a guilty or innocent party in any situation we encounter, and Ameen did the same. Ameen carries his Twitter and Instagram activism like a trophy and possesses this holier-than-thou mentality; I guess he thinks that gives him the authority to call out those who don't follow in his footsteps. He gave them the same kind of judgment that we gave to the Wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood" and the evil stepmother in "Cinderella." We have become accustomed to this way of reducing the complexities of a narrative; we rarely stop to think about the consequences or destruction caused by the little tools in our hands when we use them to judge others based on those reductions.

With only the 140-character click of a tweet, for instance, users rush to expose and take down different celebrities almost every week. A sea of people rush to “cancel” shamed celebrities, burn their albums, take their shows off the air, as every aspect of their lives is inspected and attacked. This culture of calling out an individual for their mistakes or lack of sensitivity has educated many people on important social and political issues, and I agree that wrongdoers must atone for their sins. Does Harvey Weinstein deserve the backlash he’s received? Yes, 1000% yes. But does James Charles—a very famous YouTuber who was initially called out by another Youtuber for endorsing the “wrong” vitamin brand—deserve the false accusations of being a sexual predator (which, in turn, resulted in millions of people unfollowing and unsubscribing from him)? No, I don’t believe he deserved that. It seems that we have now become unable to separate the Harvey Weinstains from the James Charleses and that any indiscretion seems to be evidence enough for that person to be cancelled by Twitter. I believe that this culture is educating people on important issues facing many people; however, I wish sometimes that the call-out didn’t always have to come with the cancel.

Novelist and essayist Leslie Jamison explores our tendency to reduce narratives to their most simplistic forms in her essay about incarcerated citizens, “Authors of Injustice.” In this review of the anthology *Anatomy of Innocence: Testimonies of the Wrongfully Convicted*, Jamison examines how, as writers and readers, we place people into categories of innocent heroes and guilty villains. Jamison argues that this dynamic “do[es] not capture the plight of the incarcerated,” due to the fact that their stories are not that straightforward (1). Jamison argues that this instinct to simplify and categorize, which she sees as embedded into our genetic makeup, allows for high incarceration rates and extreme abuses and human rights violations to continue in the United States without the bat of an eye from most. But Jamison argues that these judgments don’t actually rehabilitate the inmates, and that they allow for hate to brew against both the institution and against the people who put them into these harsh environments. I can see how elements of this guilt-or-innocence dynamic that Jamison explores trickle into our new cancel culture. We see the people who have been canceled as a guilty party, and so we apply the same amount of apathy towards them that we would apply to those who have been incarcerated or towards the villains in our favorite childhood stories. I’m curious how our overconsumption of morally simplistic narratives has contributed to this new era of callout/cancel culture.

In his essay “The Mortality Wars,” *New York Times* writer Wesley Morris explores the dangers of our new and destructive call-out/cancel culture. He says that this culture has bred a youth too sensitive to any criticism and offended easily by any view that isn’t their own. Morris agrees that those who take advantage of the weak or disadvantaged deserve punishment, but he disagrees with the method that social media takes to remedy these issues. Morris uses *The Cosby Show* to exemplify cancel culture today. He argues that Bill Cosby’s behavior, as horrible and disgusting as it is, has no relation to *The Cosby Show* as a piece of art and that Cosby should be the only one who has to pay for his crimes, not those who enjoy the show as well. Morris highlights the clash between creating or assessing art with the desire to be morally correct and creating or assessing art based on its quality, stating that a culture tethered to “moral correctness” rebirths censorship and creates a society afraid of being cancelled (1). The way that the public villainized Cosby’s family, and even the fans of the show, mirrors the ways that incarcerated citizens are being reduced to their “guilty” label and vilified, as described by Jamison.

Social media has definitely heightened our rush to make judgements of guilt or innocence, as it has become so easy for us to deem someone guilty from afar and then show them no sympathy. Let’s take Gabby Douglas, the first African American gymnast to win the individual all-around event at the summer 2012 Olympics in London. In 2017, a tweet of hers resurfaced in light of the Larry Nassar scandal, where 135 gymnasts accused Larry Nassar of sexual assault. In her tweet, Douglas stated that “dressing in a provocative / sexual way entices the wrong crowd,” and “it is our responsibility to dress modestly and be classy.” First, I want to state that I do not agree with Douglas’s statement on sexual assault, as this is a classic example of victim blaming; however, I believe the backlash that Douglas received even after her apology was more than she deserved. Users on Twitter began attacking her, insinuating that she deserved to be stripped of her titles because these were her teammates who were being sexually abused. One user said: “No more interest in Gabby Douglas after some questionable statements she made with that nasty gymnastic doctor.” Another said: “Gabby Douglas and her raggedy ass is cancelled.” This would have been a great opportunity to educate Ms. Douglas that her type of thinking (blaming the victim) is a part of the problem, but this culture has turned to bashing and shaming people as opposed to educating and forgiving them.

Cancel culture has now transcended social media and started infiltrating our classrooms and college campuses. In their *Atlantic* essay, “The Coddling of American Minds,” Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt explore how students’ hypersensitivity to certain subjects has negative consequences for the culture of college campuses. Lukianoff and Haidt focus on how universities have implemented trigger warnings for any images, readings, films, or even music that might make a student feel uncomfortable; they argue that these warnings have only intensified the delicacy of the student. Complaints of discomfort can even lead to the termination of professors who don’t implement trigger warnings into their lectures, and can lead students to feel that they are being “attacked” by a film or piece of art. The authors argue that universities shouldn’t “protect students from words they will inevitably encounter,” because that leaves the individual more vulnerable outside the university’s sheltered walls (23). Lukianoff and Haidt examine how students’ sensitivities are rooted in what David Burns, writer of *Feeling Good*, calls “mental filtering.” Burns’ concept describes when people focus only on the negative details in a situation, which in turn causes the individual to see the entire situation as negative. This practice only leads to more polarization of people with different views. College is where our opinions and ideas should be challenged, but mental filtering only allows us to live in our own echo chambers, where any thoughts that differ from our own are immediately demonized. Trigger warnings should be abolished from classrooms, and university administrators shouldn’t feed into students’ fear of feeling emotionally unsafe. This false sense of over-protection will be ripped out from under them the day they receive their diplomas, along with their ability to handle any situation that is slightly uncomfortable.

In his film *Us*, director Jordan Peele attempts to bridge the divide between the limiting narratives of innocence and guilt. The protagonist Adelaide faced a traumatic childhood incident at a carnival, when she encountered a girl who looked exactly like her, Red. The movie follows Adelaide from a young girl to adulthood, where she now has a family of her own. We see Adelaide and her family battling with their other selves, called the “tethered” (an abandoned government experiment, in which citizens were carbon copied to control and manipulate them). Later, Adelaide figures out that everybody else also has a tethered self, who have all escaped together and are essentially starting a revolution by killing everyone. In the final moments of the film, we learn that when Adelaide first

encountered Red at the carnival, Red abducted Adelaide and assumed her place, leaving the real Adelaide underground. Throughout the film, we have been watching adult Red, rather than Adelaide.

Peele veers slowly away from the classic horror movie format, as he begins to humanize the “villains” in this story and illustrates them more as products of their environment who are seeking justice and equality. Peele blurs the lines between good and evil by making us feel empathetic for the “villains” in the film. This leaves the audience with a lingering, uncomfortable feeling as Peele breaks down all of the characterizations that he built up in the beginning and middle portions of the film: we are left with two groups of people who cannot be assigned simplistic labels like “innocent” or “guilty.”

Movies and stories should continue to break out of formulaic narratives, so that, as consumers, we can become more comfortable in the grey area that exists between pure innocence and pure guilt. That grey area is, as Jamison suggests, where most of us lie. Because our media sets impossible and unrealistic standards for our heroes, we get mad too easily when our celebrities, professors, or peers do not hold up to those standards. If we tear down these narratives in our books and movies, then maybe our classrooms and social media will follow.

More and more, on Instagram, I’ve begun to see trigger warnings on people’s stories and posts. It boggles my mind to see how sensitive we’ve become to hurting others or getting cancelled ourselves, and I am tired of seeing all the fake activism that consists of people posting one picture on social media in fear of getting canceled, too. Beyond social media, this culture has affected the way we teach each other and how we interpret situations.

However, the majority of the people affected by this culture are still young, and we can still change. Lukianoff and Haidt introduce a solution to “mental filtering,” designed by cognitive psychologists, where you learn to detect and correct different mental distortions. We should start teaching students these techniques in the classroom instead of increasing trigger warnings. Instead of using our triggers as an argument, we should ask ourselves, before reporting a photo or bashing a celebrity: “Why am I triggered by this?” Emotions should have little impact on what should be displayed in a lecture hall or what should be published in a school newspaper. It probably sounds so cynical, but letting our emotions guide us through what is right and wrong is how we ended up with our narratives of either innocence or guilt, our trigger warnings, and our cancel culture.

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