



## Beer Cans and Cancel Culture: The Ethics of the Carson King Case



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On ESPN's "College GameDay" program, a 24-year-old's sign requesting beer money went viral and raised more than a million dollars from amused fans. The football fan and beer-lover, Carson King, purchased just one case of beer with the funds and donated the rest to the Stead Family Children's Hospital. Anheuser-Busch and Venmo matched the final sum, tripling the total donation (Ta, 2019). Initially, King was hailed as an "Iowa Legend" for his philanthropy. However, *Des Moines Register* reporter Aaron Calvin eventually uncovered and published two

racist tweets that King wrote as a high school student, quickly sparking controversy. Calvin's article ultimately led Anheuser-Busch to withdraw their public support for King, and although he retained some of his supporters, his previously glowing reputation was tarnished.

King's story is an exemplary case of a rising phenomenon of public shaming known as *cancel culture*. After an accusation of problematic speech or action, an individual is "cancelled" from a social group by being boycotted and ostracized. John Hirschauer argued that Calvin intended to cancel King by publishing his tweets. Hirschauer declared that Calvin's "decision to highlight two obscure, inflammatory tweets from a man's adolescence of a sentiment that Calvin admits are 'not representative artifacts of' the man being profiled, is the sort of spiteful 'gotcha' thinking devoid of proportion that fuels 'cancel culture' writ large" (Hirschauer, 2019). In Hirschauer's opinion, publishing the tweets was a malicious choice that disregarded King's good deeds and personal growth.

The *Des Moines Register's* executive editor, Carol Hunter, disagrees. She believes that Calvin acted ethically by providing comprehensive information about a public figure of interest. She explains that "The jokes were highly inappropriate and were public posts. Shouldn't that be acknowledged to all the people who had donated money to King's cause or were planning to do so?" (Andrew and Zdanowicz, 2019). Hunter argues that donors have the right to know about the man asking for their money. After all, if donors know that their donations could be associated with racism, they might choose to give their money to other charities that share their values. She maintains that Calvin's choice informed and empowered donors to make a better moral decision.

Calvin's decision to publish King's tweets could also be viewed as an effort to morally educate the public. A virtue of cancel culture is that it effectively signals that speech or behavior like King's is unacceptable. It draws attention to problematic speech and punishes it,



demonstrating to observers that they too should avoid such speech. On the other hand, the immediate “cancellation” of those who have made mistakes may not be the best way to educate them. By being shamed and isolated, they are cut off from informed and moderating influences. As a result, cancel culture may play a role in radicalizing individuals with problematic views and may actually discourage ethical growth.

Former President Barack Obama takes the latter view, explaining that cancel culture isn’t a way to effect change in others’ behavior. Shortly after King’s rise to fame and fall from glory, Obama argued that, “if all you’re doing is casting stones, you’re probably not going to get that far. That’s easy to do” (Reub & Taylor, 2019). In essence, merely shaming people for their moral errors isn’t enough to get someone to do better or to participate in the community in acceptable ways. According to Obama, “That’s not activism. That’s not bringing about change” (Reub & Taylor, 2019). By this view, Calvin’s publication of King’s tweets was not a noble act. Rather, it distracted attention from meaningful action—the hospital fundraising—to a more petty controversy about past mistakes.

Cancel culture—for better or worse—is changing how people engage with one another. In fact, shortly after Calvin released his profile on King, readers dug up a few of Calvin’s own old, offensive tweets (Shepherd, 2019). The *Des Moines Register* fired Calvin and he found himself cancelled along with King. This ironic twist of events leaves many to wonder: is this how the story should have played out?

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Is there an ethical problem with cancel culture? What values are in conflict in this case study?
2. Is cancel culture socially just? Can an apology or remorse by the wrongdoer suffice to excuse them from being “cancelled”?
3. Communicating true information is an important goal of journalism. Even so, would it have been morally permissible for Calvin to leave the racist tweets out of his profile on King if additional donation opportunities for sick children could have followed?
4. How is cancel culture and its punishments like or unlike the judgments and punishments prevalent in the court system?

### **Further Information:**

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**Authors:**

Grace Leake, Alicia Armijo, & Scott R. Stroud, Ph.D.

The UT Ethics Project/Media Ethics Initiative

Center for Media Engagement

University of Texas at Austin

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