

Final Draft

In today's volatile political landscape, there is one thing we can count on to make us feel heard, the First Amendment. The freedom of speech. The thing that makes Americans able to voice their opinion about anything they want. Or is it? Cancel culture has been a part of social media protest for years. Examples of Shane Gillis, Dave Chappell, and Mel Gibson, as well as many other popular faces, have felt the effects of Cancel Culture throughout the years. [cite] These examples have all said things that caused outrage from the American people. That outrage caused people to boycott their performances. This is what Cancel Culture was meant to be: a way for marginalized groups who have felt wronged to take back power by withholding their presence from the people who have wronged them. Cancel Culture is not performed by government officials that do not like what people are saying. In the example of Jimmy Kimmel and his late-night television show *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*'s suspension from being aired after a joke about the assassination of Charlie Kirk, the Trump administration, along with conservative broadcasting networks, was the one that decided to take Kimmel off the air, not the people protesting. The media that ostracized Kimmel without looking deeper into what he said are also to blame for his mistreatment. The way the media framed Kimmel's "cancellation" created a false condemnation of the star. Without doing research about his case, many people would never know what he said but only what the media had to say about him.

I will be analyzing two videos from *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* as well as discourse from his suspension to show how Cancel Culture, when used incorrectly by certain people, can be used as a disguise for censorship and violate the First Amendment. In this paper I ask , "Who can be

canceled, and how does canceling work? How do arguments about Cancel Culture characterize conflicts about free speech and social responsibility? And how can different politically affiliated news media sources change how people think?

Charlie Kirk, Jimmy Kimmel, and Cancel Culture.

Charlie Kirk was a prominent conservative activist and co-founder of Turning Point USA, a student organization aimed at promoting conservative values among young people. Kirk was known for his conservative political views such as limited government, free markets, and Christian nationalism. He frequently criticized progressive policies and institutions, including diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, and was a vocal opponent of Critical Race Theory. Kirk was a major advocate for debate between political parties, frequently visiting college campuses to debate students on pertinent political talking points such as race, gender, and gun rights. (Britannica 2025) On September 10, 2025, Kirk was assassinated while speaking at a university event in Orem, Utah. President Donald Trump posthumously awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. (Britannica 2025) His death sparked worldwide controversy.

Jimmy Kimmel is an American late-night television host. Kimmel started off his career in television with “Win Ben Stein's Money” and later starred in “The Man Show” His most popular show “Jimmy Kimmel Live” started in 2003. The show quickly became one of the most popular programs in American late-night entertainment.(Britannica 2025) The show blends celebrity interviews, live music performances, comedy sketches, and topical monologues that comment on current events, politics, and pop culture. Over the years, “Jimmy Kimmel Live!” has evolved

from a traditional late-night show into a platform for both comedy and political discussion. Kimmel has used his show to address serious topics, such as healthcare reform, gun control, and immigration. In September of 2025, he was temporarily suspended from his show after some comments he made about the assassination of conservative activist Charlie Kirk. The FCC pressured broadcasting companies with tighter regulations which led to ABC preempting his show. FCC Chairman said, “Frankly, when you see stuff like this, I mean, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. These companies can find ways to change conduct, to take action, frankly, on Kimmel, or there’s going to be additional work for the FCC ahead.” (Brendon Carr FCC Chairman) The FCC does not have direct say over what can and cannot be broadcast but can use financial penalties on broadcasting companies to control what is put onto local television channels.

Cancel Culture refers to the mass withdrawal of support from public figures or celebrities who have done things that aren't socially accepted today. This practice of “canceling” or mass shaming often occurs on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook. Cancel Culture comes normally from the audience boycotting or refusing to buy tickets for the canceled person's show. It is up to the population to actually cancel someone. In Jimmy Kimmel’s experience, some people argue that the current administration in power put pressure on ABC to suspend him. Others say that the reason he was fired is because his ratings were at an all-time low and the comments about Kirk did not help him return to favor with his audience. The confusion comes from how the media frames these ideas. Trump originally stated that Kimmel was taken off of the air due to his low ratings. He stated in an interview "Jimmy Kimmel was fired 'cause he had bad ratings more than anything else and he said a horrible thing about a great

gentleman known as Charlie Kirk. And Jimmy Kimmel is not a talented person, he had very bad ratings and they shoulda fired him a long time ago," This idea was spread through conservative news outlets. (FOX NEWS) The way he says that he was fired for the poor ratings frames his suspension as something other than a First Amendment violation. People can see the FOX NEWS clip and justify Kimmel being taken off air because of his ratings.

Other Scholarly Work

Caroline and Don Baker's chapter "Cancel This!: Influencers React to Cancel Culture and Deplatforming" uses case studies of Isabella Avila, Chris Harrison, and Judy Gold to show how cancellation operates unevenly across social power: Avila's rapid fall from influencer status after resurfaced teenage messages demonstrates how emerging creators suffer more severe consequences than established figures such as Jimmy Kimmel, while Gold's discussion of comedy emphasizes that humor's intent is often lost online, making comedians particularly vulnerable to misinterpretation. The authors note that "a challenge with posting jokes and skits online is that intent gets blurred because the nuance of a live performance is lost." Their discussion of platform control draws attention to the difference between the constitutional restrictions on government censorship and private companies' organized speech regulation. This difference is significant in situations where the FCC pressures broadcasting companies into removing content.

In Ryan Wong's "Revisiting Cancel Culture," he adds balance to the conversation by identifying benefits such as enforcing accountability in instances such as Harvey Weinstein and the #MeToo movement. He also includes the risks of Cancel Culture including performative

canceling, social coercion, and agenda-driven punishments. His article helps to clarify why the suspension of Kimmel acts more like a suppression of speech than a correction of the people.

Kathleen McGarcey Hidy's legal analysis lays out that nongovernment companies can lawfully restrict speech. This allows political figures to sidestep the First Amendment by pressuring companies to force shows they don't agree with off the air. This directly relates to the FCC and President Trump's actions against Jimmy Kimmel.

The firing of Jimmy Kimmel serves as a compelling case study in how media framing shapes public perception and drives social consequences. Drawing on insights from *The Dynamics of Issue Frame Competition in Traditional and Social Media*, by Lauren Guggenheim, it becomes clear that news outlets strategically deploy language and emphasis to align events with their ideological agendas. An example the authors provide would be liberal media may highlight systemic issues like gun control, while conservative outlets often individualize blame through narratives of mental illness. Just as in the case of Jimmy Kimmel, Conservative news stations were spreading the idea that Jimmy Kimmel deserved to be pulled for what he said about Charlie Kirk (FOX NEWS), and liberal stations were more focused on the unconstitutional actions the FCC took against Kimmel. (CNN) Similarly, Lucia Picarella's *Intersections in the Digital Society* lays out how fake news and cancel culture intersect to skew public discourse. In Kimmel's case, many audiences were led to believe he was mocking Charlie Kirk, when in fact he was critiquing Trump and MAGA supporters. This misrepresentation contributed to Kimmel's suspension by distorting public opinion on what Kimmel said.

In Stella Preston's "How Free is Your Speech on Social Media? Reconciling the Circuit Split Created by the Eleventh and Fifth Circuit's Decisions on Anti-Censorship Laws Governing Social Media Platforms," She examines key legal battles that shaped the boundaries of the First

Amendment surrounding digital spaces. She references earlier precedents in broadcast media to explain how speech is regulated across platforms. The legal understanding of the First Amendment as it refers to broadcasting companies is vital to understanding Jimmy Kimmel's suspension. Unlike purely online cancelations, Kimmel had the FCC take action against what he said. Her work helps me trace how legacy broadcast policies and financial incentives shape distinct forms of sanctions, giving me a sharper distinction between censorship and cancel culture.

Analysis of the Episodes

“Trump Grieves By Talking About \$200 Million Ballroom, MAGA Hits New Lows & Guillermo at the Emmys”

The first video I am analyzing was originally aired on Jimmy Kimmel's late-night television show *Jimmy Kimmel Live*. It opens with Jimmy Kimmel thanking his audience for joining them after a Monday night football game, which he immediately segues into a joke about Donald Trump. He calls out the irony of Donald Trump's social media post about the NFL making drastic changes to the kickoff rule. The joke being that Donald Trump himself makes very drastic and fast-paced changes in his political career. After the first joke, he goes into how TikTok is being sold to an American company. Here he makes another joke about Donald Trump's son, saying, "This deal is very important to Donald Trump because TikTok is his son Don Jr.'s only friend." He also jokes about how MAGA billionaire Larry Ellison, who is the one attempting to buy TikTok, looks like a James Bond villain. After this joke gains some laughter, he immediately goes into what was deemed so offensive that Kimmel was fired. He starts with, "We hit some new lows over the weekend with the MAGA gang desperately trying to characterize the kid who

murdered Charlie Kirk as anything other than one of them and doing everything they can to score political points from.” I felt a shift of energy from the live crowd, as there was no laughter after his original line. Kimmel then talks about how the president was more focused on the renovations of the white house than he was on the death of one of his close friends. He shows a video of President Trump being asked by a reporter how he was holding up after the death of Charlie Kirk, in which Trump said, “I think very good, by the way. Look at the truck; they just started construction of the new Ballroom for the white house.” This video brought some laughter from the crowd. He even quips that President Trump is in the “fourth stage of grief, Construction.” Kimmel continues his jokes, saying that Trump’s behavior is comparable to a four-year-old mourning a goldfish rather than a grown man grieving the loss of a close friend. Kimmel shows another video of Donald Trump on Fox News talking about his new ballroom instead of the death of Charlie Kirk. Kimmel jokes that the reason the President is calling so much attention to the new ballroom is because he is looking for another reason for people to be distracted from the Epstein list. This joke in particular raised quite a response from the crowd. Kimmel then goes on to call out Donald Trump in another interview from Fox News where Trump says in response to an interview question regarding people who want to take revenge for Charlie Kirk’s death, “If you want to take revenge, do it in the ballot box.” Kimmel actually respects the first part of Trump’s answer. even going as far as to say it was very presidential to call for a peaceful way of showing the beliefs of the American people. However, Kimmel shows the rest of Trump’s answer in which he says, “I can’t even say go to the ballot boxes because in certain places like California, they don’t even have ballot boxes.” This draws some boos from the audience as well as Kimmel’s sarcastic response of “OH, well in that case, start the Purge.” Kimmel then segues into a bit about Kash Patel and the FBI’s investigation of Charlie Kirk’s

shooter. Kimmel criticizes Patel's response to his false claim that the FBI caught the shooter when they did not. After his jokes about the blunder of Kash Patel, he goes into a tweet Marjorie Taylor Green had to say about the left. She wrote, "There's nothing left to talk about with the left. They hate us. They killed our nice guy who actually talked to them peacefully, debating ideas. Then millions on the left celebrated and made clear they wanted us dead. To be honest, I want a peaceful national divorce" Kimmel goes on to have a perfectly timed joke about how Green's husband also would want a divorce if he had to deal with her at home. This again gained laughter and a round of applause from the crowd. After all of the jokes he finishes the episode with shoutouts to other late night television hosts and other popular people who gained awards at the emmys. In the span of seven minutes, Kimmel rattled off twelve jokes about President Trump and other conservative people. Nowhere in his monologue does he say that the assassination of Charlie Kirk was justified nor did he call for any other violence to occur. Federal Communications Commission Chairman Brendan Carr said that ABC late-night host Jimmy Kimmel appeared to "mislead" the American public about facts regarding conservative activist Charlie Kirk's killing. (CNBC) I did not think that Jimmy Kimmel was actively trying to mislead anyone, but trying to make a joke at the expense of the Republican party. I also think that the FCC chairman claiming that Jimmy Kimmel should be seen as a reliable source of information is quite laughable. It seems to me that the FCC chairman was grasping at straws to find an excuse to pull Kimmel from the air. Carr was nominated by President Trump to serve as a Commissioner in 2017 and then again by President Biden in 2023. Confirmed unanimously by the Senate three times, President Trump designated him as Chairman on January 20, 2025. (FCC) I can see how Carr would find offense in the jokes about the person who appointed him as chairman.

Jimmy Kimmel is Back!

The second video I am analyzing is the first episode of *Jimmy Kimmel Live* to have Jimmy Kimmel back from his termination. The episode starts with flash cuts of news stations referring to Jimmy Kimmel. The first is Fox News anchor Jesse Watters saying “Breaking news on Jimmy Kimmel and Autism.” Watters’s hook is an attempt to link Kimmel and Autism. Leading the viewer to think he has the neurological disorder. I can’t help but see the hypocrisy of Brenden Carr’s claim that Kimmel spreading misinformation was the reason he was canceled, but Jesse Watters’s claim is fine. The next flashback is to another Fox News anchor stating “Jimmy Kimmel is coming back to late night Television” in a downtrodden voice. Then to another Fox News host saying “ABC chose to bring back their low ratings night time host.” This is obviously making snide remarks about Kimmel and trying to skew the reasoning of his termination from hateful speech about Charlie Kirk to his ratings. There are more flashcuts to a CTV news anchor saying “We are in for a monologue that will be a marker in late night show history”, a clip from a CNN panel saying “this will be a moment... a huge moment in American history.”, and an NBC anchor saying “it’s one of the most pivotal moments in broadcast history.” These are all examples of how Media Framing can work to push certain agendas. On many of the conservative news stations, the wording used paints Jimmy Kimmel in a negative light. Jesse Watters implying Kimmel has Autism and the news anchor claiming Kimmel had low ratings and thus deserved to be fired both are examples of how News outlets can try to spread negative light on Kimmel. On the other side of the spectrum, the more liberal leaning news outlets focused on the importance of Kimmel’s return. The opening credits end with Jimmy Kimmel and his co-host, Guillermo Rodriguez both dressed in silly costumes. Kimmel says, “Maybe we should...” to

which Guillermo finishes “Change.” Their reasoning behind the absurd costumes, I think, is to call out the absurdity that has surrounded Kimmel’s termination. The stark difference between the seriousness of the news clips and the goofyness of their costumes plays at the joking nature of his original statements that resulted in his firing. After the comic relief, Kimmel makes his appearance in front of the crowd, now dressed in a formal suit and tie. As soon as Kimmel walks through the curtain, the crowd erupts into cheers and applause, eventually even chanting “Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy.” The cheers and applause lasts for an entire minute from when Kimmel walks on stage to when he finally is able to speak. Kimmel’s first words were “Anyways, as I was saying before I was interrupted.” This is a quote from Jack Paar, the host of “The Tonight Show” in 1957. Paar was censored in 1960 for telling an offputting joke for the time.(PBS) I think that this callback to Paar is a great comparison to what has happened to Jimmy Kimmel. It shows that censorship has been an issue for late night television hosts for quite some time. Both had jokes that offended people in power which resulted in a hiatus in their airtime. After the applause from this comment died down, Kimmel says “If you are just joining us, we are preempting your regular scheduled program of *Celebrity Family Feud* to bring you this special report. This is a joke to juxtapose the seriousness of Jimmy Kimmel’s return after being censored and a fun, unimportant, game show. This is followed by more than thirty seconds of cheers from the crowd inside the studio. Kimmel then states, “I’m not sure who has had a weirder 48 hours, me or CEO of Tylenol. Tylenol had just been accused by Donald Trump’s Secretary of Health and Human Services RFK Jr. of causing Autism in newborns whose mothers took Tylenol while pregnant. Kimmel brings up this subject to compare the two situations brought about by Trump and his cabinet. Even after his termination he continues to call out people in power for outrageous things. Kimmel continues by saying “It’s been overwhelming, I’ve heard from many people in

the last six days, I've heard from ALL the people in the last six days. Everyone I have ever met has reached out 10-11 days" He brings up these people reaching out to show the support he has gotten from everyone regarding his unfair termination. He even brings up his former boss who fired him from a previous job who reached out to him. He says, "The guy who fired me from my first radio job in Seattle, where we are not airing tonight by the way." He calls out his ongoing battle with certain broadcasting companies who will not air his show. He then goes on to list out many of the other late night show hosts that reached out, including people from other countries. He says, "I heard from late night hosts in Ireland and from Germany. The guy from Germany even offered me a job. Can you imagine, This country has become so authoritarian that the Germans are like, Come here." This is a direct reference to the authoritarian Nazi regime from WWII. He is comparing Hitler's Nazi Germany to the United States. The Nazis outlawed criticism of the government and Hitler in 1934. It was considered treasonous to even tell a joke about Hitler. (Holocaust Encyclopedia) Unfortunately, it seems the same thing has happened to Jimmy Kimmel. Kimmel then goes to thank his audience for their contribution to his reinstatement. He says "Thank you to those who supported our show, who cared enough to do something about it, to make your voices heard so that mine could be heard." Here, he calls attention to the outcry that the American people had that had a hand in getting him reinstated. Calling attention to the American people who went to social media shows examples of Media Framing as well as Publics and Counterpublics. It shows that the outcry from the American people was framed in a way that protected Jimmy Kimmel from being terminated for good. Without their cries for his return, who's to say he would have ever come back to late night television. It also shows that the counterpublic that Kimmel created when he was fired was strong enough to stand up to the original public. Directly after thanking his supporters, he goes

on to show thanks to those who disagreed with him, but believe he has a right to share his beliefs anyway. He shouts out conservative people like Ben Shapiro, Clay Travis, Candace Owens, Mitch McConnell, Rand Paul, and Ted Cruz as those who support his right to speak his mind while not agreeing with what he has to say. He then shows a soundbite from Ted Cruz saying, "I hate what Jimmy Kimmel said and I am glad he was fired." This obviously was the opposite of what the audience was expecting, which led to some laughs. Kimmel plays into the joke by saying, "Oh wait no the other part." The show then cuts to the rest of the soundbite of Ted Cruz saying, "But let me tell you, if the government gets in the business of saying we don't like what you the media is saying. We're going to ban you from the airwaves if you don't say what we like, that will end up bad for conservatives." I found Cruz's choice of words interesting here. He specifically says it will end up bad for conservatives, not everyone, just conservatives. This choice of words is only looking out for Cruz's political party. This is different from what Kimmel is commending. He is praising his political adversaries for standing up to censorship on their enemies behalf. Ted Cruz is only looking out for himself and his political allies. After his shoutouts and praise, Kimmel gets into his apology/clarification of what he was terminated for. He says, "It was never my intention to make light of the murder of a young man" He is instantly choked up and showing very strong emotion after saying this. It is clear that the events of the past few days have been weighing on him quite heavily. He then says, "I don't think there's anything funny about it" and explains that he posted a message about Charlie Kirk's death earlier that day. He also acknowledges what he said could be seen as illtimed or offensive. He also states that he believes that violence is never the answer. He then goes on to say how grateful he is that he lives in a country that even allows him to have a show like *Jimmy Kimmel Live*. He talks about how places like Russia and countries in the Middle East would throw him in jail or worse

for saying the things he does on his show. He says that he took our freedom of speech for granted before he went through all of this. He even goes as far to say that him being pulled was unamerican in nature. Kimmel then goes after the FCC commissioner Brendan Carr. He shows a quote from the commissioner giving threats to broadcasting companies saying “We can do this the easy way or the hard way,” “These companies can find ways to change conduct and take action against, frankly, Jimmy Kimmel, or there's going to be extra work for the FCC.” Kimmel states that this threat is a direct violation of a first amendment and compares the FCC commissioner to a mafioso crime boss. Kimmel also calls out the hypocrisy of Carr by showing a tweet from 2022 saying “political satire is one of the oldest and most important forms of free speech. It challenges those in power while using humor to draw more people into the discussion. That’s why people in influential positions have always targeted it for censorship.” He does the same for Donald Trump, showing a clip of him saying “If we don’t have free speech, we don’t have a free country.” Later in the episode, Jimmy Kimmel comes back on stage and gives some information about where his show is being broadcasted. He says, “Welcome back to Jimmy Kimmel Live, where we are still on air for most of the country, except ironically, in Washington D.C. We are off the air in Nashville, New Orleans, Portland, Oregon, Salt Lake City, and St. Louis,” and makes a joke about how none of his wife’s family is able to watch the program. I think this is a great example of Warner’s Publics and Counterpublics. The counterpublic that Jimmy Kimmel is creating is in direct conflict with the FCC and the Trump administration trying to take him off air.

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