

Chatterbox #302 – What is cancel culture?

AD-FREE

Episode description

In this Chatterbox episode, Andrew and Anna discuss the controversial topic of cancel culture. Cancel culture refers to the recent culture of mass criticism and ostracization of people in power after they have said or done something offensive. Because of social media, word spreads quickly when famous people commit a crime or even simply say something inappropriate. The responses to these behaviours can happen so fast that an actor could go from beloved celebrity to hated figure overnight. But is this culture helping or hurting us? If you've got an opinion on this topic, this is the perfect episode for you—listen and see if you agree with Anna and Andrew's thoughts!

Fun fact

One of the first notable uses of “cancelled” meaning “to force someone out of a position of power” is in the 1991 Wesley Snipes action movie New Jack City. Since then, the verb “to cancel” gradually grew in popularity, but the term “cancel culture” only became popular in the late 2010s.

Expressions included in the study guide

- Behind the scenes
- To not sit well with
- In the spotlight
- To shut someone out
- To bounce back
- To push the limit



Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Andrew: Chatterbox episode 302. What is cancel culture? Featuring Andrew and Anna.

Hey there, Anna.

Anna: Hi Andrew and hello listeners. Now today, we've got a really fascinating topic prepared for you all. And we're going to be talking about cancel culture, which has had an absolutely huge impact on the pop culture of English-speaking countries over the last several years. So Andrew, we're going to dive into this topic. And we're going to start by explaining it and breaking it down for you all, and then we're going to share our thoughts and opinions about it.

Andrew: That sounds awesome, Anna, and I'm really looking forward to our chat. I think this is an important topic to talk about. Now, cancel culture is something that nobody really talked about maybe 10 years or so ago, but in the last decade has become a really, really common phrase. And I would be shocked if most of our learners haven't at least heard about cancel culture in some form or another before, because it's just such a huge part of the culture of English-speaking countries these days, and really over the last decade or so.

So, we're gonna break it down for you guys. And first we'll talk about what exactly cancel culture is and then Anna and I will share some of our opinions about this topic. So maybe, Anna, I'll throw it over to you. And if you could just kind of break this down for us and let us know what exactly do we mean when we talk about cancel culture?

Anna: Sure, I guess the idea of cancel culture and maybe as you said, Andrew, people will have heard a little bit more about this, maybe the listeners have seen this happen. Maybe they haven't heard the word cancel culture or the term, but they've seen this type of

thing happening. I think it's definitely been something that's been more in the public eye over the last couple of years, especially. It's kind of got a lot more intense, maybe since the pandemic and this type of thing.

So cancel culture really is the idea that celebrities, people who are in the public eye should be cancelled if they do or say something really offensive. And I guess, what do we mean by saying something offensive or something unacceptable? Well, normally, in the cases that we've seen over the past few years, I guess it's when people have said something that has been considered sexual abuse, violence, or making a racist comment, a sexist comment, homophobic, transphobic, etc. So, I think that probably sums up the definition of cancel culture, what it's about.

And it's really got to a point where companies don't want to work with people anymore, right, Andrew? I mean, it's like a big thing for that relationship between celebrities and companies and how they work together.

Andrew: Exactly, Anna. So, what we're seeing is that celebrities that do something offensive, like maybe they do an action, like they're involved in some sort of sexual scandal or something, or if they make a comment that could be offensive as well, we're seeing that they are being cancelled, right? That's the way that we talk about it, we say they are cancelled or they've been cancelled.

And what that really means is just that different companies don't want to work with this person anymore. It could be an actor, it could be an athlete, it could be like an academic, a famous professor, or even a politician, and just nobody really wants to work with that person anymore because their reputation has been so damaged and so tarnished due to their behaviour that companies feel it is a risk to their brand image to work with them. So it could be the case that, like, a company is maybe sponsoring an athlete, and then they don't want to sponsor that athlete anymore. But it could also be the case that a movie company doesn't want to cast an actor or an actress in their movie anymore because maybe they feel that that could damage the potential sales of the movie. So I think when

we're talking about, you know, getting cancelled or being cancelled, and we're talking about a person, then that's really what it means.

Anna: Absolutely. And I think it's really clear, Andrew, as well, and we mentioned this before the podcast, to make a big distinction between two categories. On the one hand, there are people that have been "cancelled" for something maybe they've said that people find offensive, but they're not necessarily breaking the law. They haven't been through a court process or whatever. Whereas there are also other people that have been involved in a criminal case. They have broken the law and they have also been through this process of being cancelled.

So, I guess there's two important distinctions there to make as well in terms of why people have been cancelled or whatever. And it is, it's like this idea of kind of pressing the delete button, OK? And people are like, OK, we don't want to hear from this person anymore. We feel that this person shouldn't be given the same opportunities that they had before due to something that they've said or done. But there's definitely an important distinction to make between people who have broken the law or been convicted of something and people who have said something that's been deemed offensive, but they haven't necessarily broken the law. I guess that's also an important distinction to make, right?

Andrew: That's a very important distinction to make, I think. And, you know, we've seen over the last several years, some really big names in the entertainment industry in the USA. People like Bill Cosby, who is a really famous comedian and TV star. His whole reputation was completely tarnished. Like, he had this really good reputation as being a family man and a really clean comedian. Like, even when he would perform his stand-up comedy routines, he would never swear or never say anything dirty, which is really what most comedians do, right? So he had this, like, really clean public image.

But in fact, **behind the scenes**, he was a monster. And he's been involved with maybe over 50 sexual assault cases, and he's just a real monster **behind the scenes**. So in that kind of case, absolutely a person like that should go to jail, right? They should be cancelled, they should be in prison, they broke the law, clearly, and there should be, you

know, the typical legal punishment for that kind of criminal activity. That's really clear, I think.

But then, as you said, there are people who haven't really broken the law, but they've maybe shared an opinion that just **doesn't sit well** with some people. And, you know, sometimes it could be really obvious that that person said a bad thing, or they have, you know, some kind of hateful feelings in their heart that they're sharing. And then you're like, "I don't really like that. I don't want to support this person. Like, that person isn't really who I thought they really were."

But sometimes it's not quite as clear. And that is where the controversy around cancel culture comes up, is these cases where it's not exactly clear what somebody did or if they said is really worthy of them being cancelled. There's no real fine line there, which makes this a very controversial issue, cancel culture in North America, at least.

Anna: Yeah, it is controversial. And when I think about this, there's a couple of really key things that I think about. Number one, if we reflect on all the times that we've said something that maybe could be misinterpreted in a certain type of way, or people always misinterpret things that other people say. And like you said, Andrew, it's a real grey area. What one person can say can be interpreted as something very different to another person. And it comes back to the question of who decides what's offensive? Because that's a really big question.

Andrew: That's the big question, right.

Anna: If we think about, you know, as I said, all the times maybe we've said something and we've regretted it. Like, everybody is human, everybody makes mistakes. But then, of course the argument is, but these are people **in the spotlight**, and these are celebrities. So maybe they should have a little bit more responsibility about the things that they say, because they have maybe more power or influence than me, for example, or you.

They've got a bigger audience, a bigger platform. So that would be the argument for that. Yes, everybody makes mistakes and says things that, sorry, I want to be clear that I'm

focusing here on the category of people who haven't broken the law, but people who have said something that may be seen as offensive. We all make mistakes, we all say things that we don't mean sometimes. But these people have more responsibility over what they say, or do they? So, it's like, it throws up a lot of really kind of quite difficult questions to answer.

And for me, it's this big thing about forgiveness. Are we prepared to forgive people who make mistakes or not? Because that's what cancel culture is about, cancel culture is about clicking that button and saying, "No, we don't want to hear from you anymore. We don't want to see anything from you anymore." And it's about kind of do we give people second chances or not? It just throws up a lot of really, really difficult questions for me. What do you think about it? What are some of the questions that it throws up for you?

Andrew: Yeah, I totally see your point of view. And it seems like these days, we aren't giving people second chances, right? As a society, when somebody makes a mistake once then it's kind of that's it. Like if you say the wrong thing once, then that could be the end of your career. And one of the issues with this is that it really makes for this kind of environment of fear. People are afraid to speak their mind, people are afraid to share any opinion that could be in the slightest bit controversial because they don't want to offend anyone at all. So we see conversations about politics or different social issues, people aren't really talking about them as much these days because they do not want to accidentally offend someone because that could result in a backlash of public opinion.

Now, when we say backlash of public opinion, most of this is online too, right? It's not, like, there are mobs of people going to movie studios and protesting outside, although we have seen some of that as well. But most of it is online, right? It's just like, we call it like a Twitter mob, like people just tweeting away when somebody does something offensive.

So, yeah, it creates this environment where people are afraid to talk about anything other than just, you know, very basic, everyday issues. And I don't think that is really good either. Like, I feel like people should be able to express themselves. And we should be able to tolerate some nuance with different ideas. But it seems like the way that the culture

is moving these days is that is not OK anymore. It's like one and done. You offend somebody once, then there's no room for forgiveness, and you're cancelled.

Anna: Yeah, absolutely. And there was an interview that I watched, I really like to always hear different perspectives on these types of topics. And I watched an interview with a woman who, in the UK, she had been cancelled essentially. Some of the comments she'd made had been considered very offensive. And she actually went into a lot of detail about the kind of the really dark side of cancel culture and the fact that she had lost her home, because they'd come after her with legal cases, essentially litigation. And they tried to go after her in terms of her money, and she lost her home because of the situation. So, there's also a dark side to this as well, like, there's obviously another person on the end of this who is getting cancelled. They are human beings, they're not a robot. So there is a dark, really dark side of cancel culture as well.

But then it comes back to the question, doesn't it? But you should have a little bit more responsibility about what you're saying. Or do you really think this is a good thing to say? Like sometimes you see the comments that people make and you think, did you really think that was—not necessarily even a good idea, but why would you think that? Like, why would you think that? But again, it comes back to this thing of who decides? And the big thing that a lot of people say is, is your right to not be offended bigger than my right to free speech? Which is a massive question because they're kind of, like, like you can't have both.

Andrew: Right? You can't really have both. And where's the line between them, right?

Anna: Yeah, it's difficult. It's really blurry. It's a really, really tricky, it's a really tricky one.

Andrew: And maybe our listeners can hear from the way that I'm talking about it, and I think maybe you as well, Anna, it is that we're not even really clear where we stand on cancel culture, because it's really case by case. And it's impossible to draw the line, right? Like, I don't really believe in unlimited free speech for really hateful people, right? I don't want to interact with people who are just spouting off racist comments online all the time.

Like, I think that should be removed from the internet. We don't need to interact with that. We don't need to see that. But then sometimes other things celebrities have said or done, I think it's not really a big deal. But they're getting cancelled over that. Like, that's not really fair.

Or sometimes what will happen is somebody will become famous and then some social media users will dig through all of their past Twitter to try and find something that they've tweeted from like, I don't know, 5 years ago, or a decade ago, that maybe even at the time wasn't really considered to be offensive. But now the culture has changed so quick that looking back on it, you're like, oh, that's offensive, if they were to make the tweet today, but maybe a decade ago, it wasn't really, maybe it wasn't in good taste, but it wouldn't really be considered offensive. But then people are getting cancelled over that. And that also brings up some interesting moral questions, like should people be cancelled because of past opinions? Maybe they don't even think that way anymore. Maybe they were just, like, immature and stupid a decade ago, and they're being punished for that comment they made a long time ago. So, I don't know, it's a complicated issue.

Anna: It's really complicated. And, I mean, just coming back to the point you said before about, of course, there's some things that kind of all human beings could agree are not good, that you shouldn't believe or you shouldn't feel, you shouldn't say. I think most people would agree that there's things that we don't want to hear, we don't want to listen to. But then it comes back to this expression, "You can't have your cake and eat it too," because if you have, OK, but we don't want you to say these things, but we can say all of these things. So it comes back to this idea of free speech has to be free speech.

And then it also comes back to that question, I said right at the beginning, who decides what's offensive and what's not? Who decides? Because everybody has different things. I would be offended by something maybe that a comedian says that you wouldn't be offended by Andrew and vice versa. So, who decides? And like you said, each of these cases are so different. I'm thinking in particular of a woman called Kathy Griffin, who's an

American comedian who was cancelled, let's say, because she held up a severed head of Donald Trump in one of her videos or skits or whatever.

Andrew: As a prop, not the real head, right?

Anna: As a prop, of course, as a prop. And she actually goes into detail. She's done a lot of interviews about this. I think she's even written a book about how she was cancelled and all of the things that she lost, and people just **shut her out**. And I mean, should she have been cancelled for that? Who knows? I mean, I'm not really sure that I know the answer to that, or what I would think about that. I don't know, as you said, it's so individual. Each case of this is very different. It's very hard to give a blanket all these people should be cancelled for this, or nobody should be cancelled if they say this. For me, it just throws up so many different questions that I don't know. I don't know. It's really a hard topic for me to come to a conclusion on.

And like you said about the past, should people be judged for things they say in the past that maybe they don't even believe anymore like you said. I do think that people's beliefs change, and can adjust. And when we learn more things, and when we experience more things, we change our ideas about things. Or we meet new people and we get a different perspective, and we change our ideas about something that we didn't know before. Do you think it's an effective thing to do, cancel culture?

Andrew: That's a great question. And I'm not exactly sure because as far as I know, sometimes it can actually have the opposite effect, that the people who want somebody to be cancelled, right, like a celebrity says something offensive and there are people who are offended, and those offended people want to get the celebrity cancelled. That is the kind of the goal here, right? But, in fact, sometimes that has the opposite effect. And we saw with the author J.K. Rowling, who wrote Harry Potter, she has been quote-unquote cancelled because of some comments that she made about women's rights and transgender rights. And because of that, she received a ton of backlash online. And many people called for her to be boycotted, and don't support J.K. Rowling. And there is a big controversy with her publishing company as well.

However, in the end, her book sales increased dramatically. She saw a huge surge in book sales once this incident occurred. So, really, we saw the opposite happen. The people who are offended by her comments wanted her to be cancelled, but her supporters went out and supported her. And in fact, she probably made a lot of money over this. There's that saying, like, all publicity is good publicity. She was in the news a lot over this. So maybe it actually helped her in the end. So who knows if it's effective or not? Maybe in some circumstances, it could be? I think definitely, you know, that distinction that we made before about criminals, I think that's good, criminals should be punished according to the laws, so that's very clear. But, yeah, I don't know. What do you think, Anna? Do you think it's effective at achieving its goals, cancel culture?

Anna: It's just super, super messy. Honestly, I don't even know how to answer that question, Andrew, actually, whether I think it's effective or not, I'm not sure. I'm sure some people who have been cancelled would say that it's been very effective, and I think it can destroy people's lives. And is that a right thing or not? I really don't know. I'm not sure.

Andrew: Yeah, I don't know. I think it also maybe depends on how popular the celebrity is, and how talented the celebrity is. We see, like, for example, the comedian Louis C.K. was cancelled. But now he's kind of coming back and he's just doing his own thing. He's performing again at comedy clubs and he's releasing his own material directly to his website. So he has a lot of fans that still support him and don't really necessarily agree that what he did was worthy of him being cancelled. So he's making a comeback now.

And we see that usually what happens is a celebrity will be cancelled, they'll go underground for 3 years, 4 years, and then they'll try and make a comeback. And many are successful, like things kind of calm down. People forget or re-evaluate and maybe think, "Oh, what you said or what you did, was it really bad enough that I should just ignore your talent forever?" Like, you know, these people are celebrities usually because they're talented, right? They're amazing actors or comedians or musicians. Like, is the offensive thing that you did so bad that I cannot enjoy your art again in the future? I mean, that's a question that everybody has to ask when it comes to each specific case. But many times,

celebrities are able **to bounce back** a few years down the road. And we've seen examples of that, too. So maybe that's just another piece of evidence to say that cancel culture isn't really effective in the end. I'm not sure.

Anna: I don't know. And I mean, there's also another argument as well, where it's like, look, if you don't like what somebody says, don't listen to them. Like, especially in the case of comedians. There's some comedians that I like, there's some comedians that I don't like. There's a lot of people that say that comedians operate in a space which needs to be protected, because they are operating in an area or zone which is, you know, making jokes and part of that is **pushing the limit** and being offensive. And, yeah, if you don't like a comedian, don't listen to them. I mean, it's like when people walk out of comedian's shows.

There's a really offensive British comedian who some people find hilarious, and some people find him absolutely just really distasteful. OK, if you don't like it, don't listen to it. Don't go to the shows. You know what you're gonna get. So you know you're gonna get offensive jokes, so just don't consume it, don't participate in it. So there's also that argument as well. There's just so many different points of view too, and I'm not saying whether I agree with that or not. I'm just trying to give some different perspectives or the way that people look at these things.

So great topic, but I don't know if we've covered, if we've made any conclusions, really, to be honest. But I think that is it, it's just a grey area. It's difficult to come to a decision about it, in my case, anyway.

Andrew: Everyone, I think we will wrap it up here for now. It was an interesting conversation, Anna. Thank you for shedding some light on this issue for us.

Anna: No, no problem. It's been really fascinating. I've really, really enjoyed talking about it.

Andrew: That brings us to the end of this lesson. Talk to you next time. Bye.

Detailed Explanations

Behind the scenes

Adverbial phrase

In the beginning of the episode, Anna says that she thinks it's important to make a distinction between two types of getting cancelled: getting cancelled for doing or saying something offensive that isn't necessarily against the law, and getting cancelled for committing a crime. Andrew agrees and mentions the example of Bill Cosby. In Andrew's opinion, he deserved to be punished and cancelled for the heinous sexual crimes he committed **behind the scenes** of his acting career.

Behind the scenes is an adverbial expression that describes actions that are taken outside of the public eye. For example, the audience of a musical enjoys the singing and choreography of the actors on stage, but they do not see any of the rehearsals or costume changes that take place **behind the scenes**.

Actions can be done **behind the scenes** either because the action doesn't need to be done publicly or because the subject wants to keep the action a secret. For example, food preparation is typically done **behind the scenes** at restaurants. However, two corrupt politicians may meet and make a deal **behind the scenes** because they do not want the public to know about it.

Here are a couple more examples with **behind the scenes**:

Rose: Look! The boss is going into the conference room with the regional manager again.

Terry: Again? That's so suspicious. That's the third time this week he's stopped by for a private meeting.

Rose: It is suspicious. I wonder if they're planning something **behind the scenes**.

Terry: Nothing that affects our jobs, I hope.

Tatiana: Dad, I found out today that I didn't get a part in the school play ... But they told me I can help as a member of the backstage crew.

Ed: Sorry to hear that, sweetie, but I bet you'll still have a great time helping out the production! You'll get to be a part of all the exciting stuff that happens **behind the scenes**.

Tatiana: Yeah. I can't help but be a little disappointed, but it might be fun helping the girls put on their costumes!

To not sit well with Idiom

While some people are cancelled for committing terrible crimes, Andrew mentions that another big part of cancel culture is cancelling people for saying and doing offensive things. It's easier to agree with cancelling a dangerous criminal, but Andrew says it isn't always clear if you should cancel someone who made a statement that just **didn't sit well with you**.

When something **doesn't sit well with someone**, it makes that person uncomfortable or upset because it doesn't agree with their values or they find it difficult to accept. For example, if your friend gets very angry and yells at your waiter at a restaurant, you might later tell him, "The rude comments you made to the waiter **didn't sit well with me**. I don't think waitstaff deserve to be treated like that."

This idiom can also be used to refer to your own actions. For instance, let's say a woman goes out on a first date and the man tries to give her a pair of diamond earrings. She might refuse them and tell him, "I'm sorry, but it **wouldn't sit well with me** to accept such an expensive gift on our first date."

This expression is rarely used in the positive, but it is possible. For example, a philosopher's moral stance on an issue might **sit well with you**.

Here are a couple more examples with **to sit well with**:

Greg: Did you hear how Thomas was talking about his girlfriend just now?

Lia: I did. I can't believe he would say such sexist things about his own girlfriend.

Greg: Me neither. I was shocked. That really **didn't sit well with me**. I think I need to tell him how inappropriate that was.

Olivia: Wow, that stand-up comedy routine was just awful.

Rudy: Oh my god, I'm glad you thought so, too. What a jerk!

Olivia: I think I'm pretty open-minded about crass humour, but some of those jokes just **did not sit well with me**. When did transphobia become so popular in stand-up comedy? I'm getting so sick of it.

Rudy: Agreed. I think a good stand-up comedian would be able to get people to laugh without making fun of minorities.

In the spotlight Expression

Anna says that one of the arguments for cancelling celebrities for doing offensive things is because they are **in the spotlight**. Because of this, they ought to take more responsibility for what they say because of their influence and position of power.

Unlike behind the scenes, someone who is **in the spotlight** is exposed to constant public attention. This expression comes from the spotlight that illuminates someone on a stage so that the audience can see them clearly. If you are **in the spotlight**, it is as though there is a light shining on you and everyone can see what you're doing.

People who are **in the spotlight** tend to be famous people: actors, politicians, celebrities, professional athletes, and so on. Being **in the spotlight** can be a positive or a negative situation. For example, attaining a world-record number of victories this season can put a tennis player **in the spotlight**. However, a scandal about a CEO's affair can put him **in the spotlight** and tank his company's stock prices.

In the spotlight shouldn't be confused with in the limelight, which means the same thing but is almost always used in a positive way. For instance, an aspiring actress might say, "I would do anything for my acting career to take off so I can finally be in the limelight!"

Here are a couple more examples with **in the spotlight**:

Nina: Liam, do you think you'd like to give a talk on our company's behalf at the conference next spring?

Liam: Really? Me?

Nina: Yes! Upper management and I have been really impressed with your performance during the last quarter.

Liam: OK, I'd love to. Wow, I've never been **in the spotlight** like that at a conference before. I've got a lot of preparing to do.

Melanie: Did you hear about the leaked correspondences between the governor and that major conglomerate?

Robert: I sure did. Seems like he's been a part of some major corruption.

Melanie: I was shocked when I read about that. And all of this is happening right before an election, too. Boy, if I were him, I'd be sweating **in the spotlight** right about now.

To shut someone out

Phrasal verb

Towards the end of the episode, Anna mentions a comedian named Kathy Griffin and her experience being cancelled after a controversial sketch during which she held up a prop that looked like Donald Trump's severed head. After the stunt, she received a huge amount of backlash and was completely **shut out** by her fans and peers.

To shut someone out means to deliberately exclude someone. You can **shut someone out** from something concrete like an organization or a location (he **shut his sister out** of their house) or you can **shut someone out** in a more general, social sense (my former best friend suddenly **shut me out** of her life). When Anna says that the comedian Kathy Griffin was **shut out**, she likely means that people no longer offered to have her on their shows or they refused to work with her.

You can also use **shut out** with memories or sensory experiences like sound or light to say that you're trying to prevent them from reaching you. For example, you could say that your noise-cancelling headphones do a great job of **shutting out** the sound of your brother practicing the guitar.

Here are a couple more examples with **to shut someone out**:

Brenda: Chris, I've got a question.

Chris: What is it?

Brenda: Don't tell her I told you this, but Emily feels like you've been deliberately **shutting her out** of the decision-making process for the new project. Is that true?

Chris: I haven't been **shutting her out** on purpose at all. I had no idea she felt that way. I'll be sure to try and ask for her opinion more during tomorrow's meeting.

Justine: Honey, you look sort of down. Is anything wrong?

Matthew: Nothing's wrong.

Justine: Did something happen at school?

Matthew: No. I'm fine. Just leave me alone, OK?

Justine: Matthew, I feel like you're **shutting me out** again. If you have a problem, you can talk to me. I'm your mother and I'm always here for you.

To bounce back

Phrasal verb

Close to the end of their discussion, Andrew and Anna question whether cancel culture is that effective at punishing the offending person. Andrew mentions that there are a lot of examples of celebrities who are able to maintain a loyal fanbase despite getting cancelled, or that they face a dip in popularity but end up **bouncing back** later on in their career.

To bounce back is a phrasal verb meaning to recover from a problem or setback. It's often used to talk about health (he finally **bounced back** from his bout of the flu), financial success (thankfully, our stock prices have **bounced back** after that startling decline), or mood (my sister is having a rough time with her breakup, but she'll **bounce back** soon enough). The idea comes from bouncing a ball on the ground: the ball goes low and hits the ground, but then goes back up.

When **bounce back** refers to recovering from a negative situation, it should be used as an intransitive verb—it does not have a direct object that receives the action. However, if you use **bounce back** as a transitive verb, the meaning changes to literally bouncing a physical object back to where it came from. For instance, if you're playing basketball with a friend, you might yell, "Hey! **Bounce the ball back** to me!"

Here are a couple more examples with **to bounce back**:

Megan: Frederick, I heard your wife had knee surgery last month. How is she doing?

Frederick: Thank you for asking, Megan. It's actually been a pretty difficult recovery. She still needs assistance walking and her energy levels have been really low.

Megan: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. How long is the recovery period supposed to last?

Frederick: The doctor said it could take over 3 months, so we still have some time to go. I'm just hoping she'll **bounce back** soon. She's been pretty frustrated about it all.

Ricky: Do you listen to Kate Bush?

Isabelle: I just started to recently! I found out about her from Stranger Things.

Ricky: Me too! I read that her song was one of the most streamed songs on Spotify after the new season came out.

Isabelle: It's so cool how a musician's popularity can instantly **bounce back** just from one old song being played on a hit show.

To push the limit

Idiom

Anna mentions an argument against cancelling comedians in particular. Some people say that comedy should be a protected space because a fundamental part of it is **pushing the limit** and saying what people wouldn't normally say.

To push the limit means to test the boundaries of what's considered acceptable. Children will often try to **push the limit** with their parents in order to see what they're allowed to do. For example, if you tell your young child not to go in your home office while you're working, she might try to **push the limit** by putting one foot in your office to see if you notice or get mad at her.

When Anna says that comedians often **push the limit**, she means that part of the craft of comedy involves seeing how far you can go with a joke until it's no longer funny. A lot of comedy is subversive, meaning that it undermines existing expectations or systems, and many comedians have found great success from **pushing the limit**, while others have experienced major backlash.

This idiom shouldn't be confused with to push oneself to the limit, meaning to work as hard as you possibly can to achieve a goal.

Here are a couple more examples with **to push the limit**:

Grace: That was an interesting performance art exhibition.

Howard: Yeah, I've never witnessed anything quite like it. I was feeling a little strange about the audience being encouraged to go up and touch the performers. A lot of people were shoving and prodding them.

Grace: It certainly **pushed the limit** of consent.

Eli: Josie, do you think that nothing is off-limits in comedy?

Josie: Hmm, that's a good question. Well ... I think artists should **push the limit** of what's considered acceptable in all forms of art, including comedy. However, when comedians make super racist or sexist jokes, I don't think they're **pushing the limit**, but rather rehashing old, worn-out material. To me, it's neither interesting nor funny.

Eli: Well said. I think that's a great point.

Quiz

1. **If your friend tells you that the joke you made didn't sit well with him, he means _____.**
 - a) he found the joke unoriginal
 - b) he found the joke upsetting
 - c) he found the joke so funny that his stomach hurt
 - d) he found the joke confusing

2. **What is the opposite meaning of to shut someone out?**
 - a) to ignore someone
 - b) to be generous with someone
 - c) to avoid someone
 - d) to include someone

3. **If you've bounced back from the flu, you've _____.**
 - a) started to feel much better
 - b) started to feel much worse
 - c) gotten over the flu and then caught it again
 - d) received medicine for the flu

4. **You ask your friend to give a speech at your wedding, but she declines and says she isn't comfortable being in the spotlight. What does she mean?**
 - a) she doesn't like bright lights
 - b) she doesn't like expressing her feelings
 - c) she doesn't like everyone in the room paying attention to her
 - d) she doesn't like rehearsing for a speech

5. **Which of the following is NOT an example of something done behind the scenes?**
 - a) answering questions at a press conference
 - b) vacuuming the office after the workday is done
 - c) taking the trash out to the dumpster behind the restaurant
 - d) working on the post-production video editing of a film

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. Do you prefer working behind the scenes or being in the spotlight? Why?
2. Describe a time when something a friend or family member said didn't sit well with you. What did they say? Why was it upsetting?
3. Have you ever shut someone out of your life? Have you ever been shut out of someone else's life? Please describe.
4. What do you think about cancel culture? Is cancelling people an effective form of justice?
5. Who is the first famous person who comes to mind when you think of the term cancel culture? Do you think they deserved to be cancelled? How did it effect their career or public image?

Quiz Answers

1.b 2.d 3.a 4.c 5.a

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