

Case studies informing Freedom in the Arts
The New Boycott Crisis

These 18 anonymised case studies are drawn from research for FITA's report *The New Boycott Crisis* (February 2026). Based on extensive interviews with artists, venue managers and intermediaries, they explore how artists, venues and agents respond to public pressure, controversy and reputational risk.

Across both positive and negative examples, the case studies highlight what helps organisations stay calm, fair and effective under scrutiny, and what can lead to escalation or avoidable harm. Together, they offer a practical resource for making proportionate, well-judged decisions when pressure is high.

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Case Studies for Artists

Positive Outcomes

Case study 1:
Theatre artist targeted by an open letter

Setting

A mid-scale UK theatre programme announces a guest artist whose identity and perceived political associations become the focus of an online campaign.

What happened

Within 48 hours, the theatre receives an open letter calling for cancellation, followed by a staff petition and a small number of direct complaints to senior leadership. Social media posts claim the theatre is "unsafe" and accuse it of "platforming harm".

Pressure points

- Staff fear of reputational damage
- Fundraising team anxiety about sponsor reactions
- Artist receives abusive messages, including attempts to contact family members

Response

- The theatre activates a single point of contact for communications
- Leadership logs all pressure and separates safety claims from ideological claims
- The theatre issues a short holding statement and does not debate online
- The artist is advised to stop responding publicly and to document abuse
- Front of house are briefed and staff are given a clear line to take
- Security is reviewed and protest is planned for, rather than treated as a reason to cancel

Outcome

The event goes ahead. There is a small protest outside which remains peaceful. Complaints continue online for a week then fade. The theatre later adopts a public freedom of expression statement and a clearer cancellation protocol.

What helped

- Clear internal process and single spokesperson
- Not rushing into statements or apologies
- A safety plan that enabled the event to proceed
- Briefing staff early to prevent internal misinformation

What made things worse

- Early internal emails that treated reputational anxiety as a reason to cancel
- Staff discussing the situation publicly before a line was agreed
- Delayed response to harassment directed at the artist

Case Studies for Artists

Positive Outcomes

Case study 2:

Author faces boycott demands linked to identity and associations

Setting

A writer is invited to speak at a literature event and appears in marketing. Campaigners demand the invitation is withdrawn due to the author's identity, past work or perceived affiliations.

What happened

A small network of activists contacts the venue, the host organisation and the author's agent. They frame the issue as "community safety" and request that the author sign a political statement as a condition of participation.

Pressure points

- Compelled speech pressure on the author
- Partner organisation concern about backlash
- Fear of social media escalation leads to internal hesitation

Response

- The agent asks for all requests in writing and clarifies who is making the decision
- The author declines to sign any statement and uses a short values-based reply
- The host organisation focuses on lawful limits and due process, not ideology
- The team agrees one calm public line and sticks to it
- The author's online presence is temporarily restricted, with a trusted person monitoring messages

Outcome

The event proceeds with a moderated Q and A and clear behavioural expectations for the audience. The author receives ongoing online criticism but the professional network remains intact. The partner organisation later agrees a policy that it will not require political declarations from artists.

What helped

- Treating compelled speech as a red flag
- Written clarity on decision-making and reasons
- Consistent messaging across the agent, author and host
- Moderation and audience conduct expectations

What made things worse

- Attempts by well-meaning colleagues to "explain" online
- Overlong statements that created new angles for attack
- Informal, undocumented changes to agreements

Case Studies for Artists

Positive Outcomes

Case study 3:

Music act threatened with cancellation due to sponsor controversy

Setting

A music festival faces external pressure about a sponsor. Campaigners demand artists withdraw in solidarity and ask performers to publicly condemn the sponsor.

What happened

Artists are contacted directly and told that playing the event equals endorsement. Some performers publicly withdraw. The targeted act is pressured to follow, with insinuations that refusal will be "remembered".

Pressure points

- Peer pressure and fear of blacklisting
- Confusion about whether performance equals endorsement
- Venue staff under strain, with inconsistent public messaging

Response

- The artist's team refuses to engage in public argument and issues one clear line
- The agent asks the festival for its written position, security plan and cancellation thresholds
- The festival clarifies its sponsorship policy and separates sponsor debate from artist safety
- The act proceeds, with additional stewarding and clear communications to staff

Outcome

The performance goes ahead without incident. Online criticism is intense but short-lived. The festival later revises contracts to include clearer clauses on cancellation and public statements.

What helped

- A single agreed line and no reactive posting
- Distinguishing association from endorsement
- Clear sponsor policy and decision matrix at venue level
- Security and stewarding treated as enabling, not capitulating

What made things worse

- Other artists announcing withdrawal without checking facts
- Festival delays in briefing staff and performers
- Media coverage amplified by inconsistent messaging

Case Studies for Artists

Negative Outcomes

Case study 4: Music artist reacts publicly and escalation follows

Setting

A mid-profile music artist is booked to perform at a festival that becomes the target of an online boycott campaign linked to a sponsor and partner organisation.

What happened

The artist is contacted directly by campaigners on social media and accused of “endorsing harm” by performing. Feeling personally attacked and under pressure to respond, the artist posts a series of emotional responses on social media, attempting to explain their position and intentions. These posts are widely shared, taken out of context and reframed by critics. Other artists begin commenting publicly. Festival organisers panic and issue unclear internal messages while monitoring the reaction.

Pressure points

- Artist responding in real time while distressed
- Lack of a single agreed message
- Public disagreement between artists, organisers and campaigners
- Social media accelerating misinformation

What went wrong

- The artist engaged publicly before seeking advice or support
- Multiple statements created confusion and new lines of attack
- Festival organisers failed to slow the situation down or provide clear guidance
- Online pressure was treated as a crisis requiring immediate reaction

Outcome

The artist withdraws from the festival “by mutual agreement”. The withdrawal is framed publicly as a moral stance, which further inflames debate. The artist experiences sustained online abuse and professional relationships are damaged. The festival later admits the decision was rushed.

What could have helped

- Pausing before responding publicly
- A single holding statement or no statement at all
- Clear guidance from organisers to artists
- Separation of sponsor debate from artist safety

Case Studies for Artists

Negative Outcomes

Case study 5: A theatre panics and fails to protect artists

Setting

A theatre announces a programme involving an artist whose identity or perceived associations trigger an online campaign and an internal staff petition.

What happened

Within days, senior leadership receives complaints framing the issue as “safety” and “values alignment”. Without assessing whether there is a credible threat, the organisation issues a public apology stating that it has “listened” and will cancel the event while “reviewing its processes”.

The artist is not consulted before the announcement. Staff are confused about messaging. The apology implies wrongdoing without specifying it.

Pressure points

- Fear of reputational damage
- Internal staff pressure and leaks
- Conflation of discomfort with safety
- Desire to appear responsive and compassionate

What went wrong

- Cancellation occurred without due process
- Public apology was issued without legal or contractual review
- The artist was exposed to reputational harm and online abuse
- The institution failed to distinguish protest from risk

Outcome

The event is cancelled. The artist is publicly stigmatised and loses future work. The theatre faces criticism for lack of clarity and fairness. Trust with artists is damaged and staff morale suffers. No further incidents occur, suggesting the original safety concern was not credible.

What could have helped

- A pause and internal assessment phase
- Separation of ideological disagreement from safety risk
- Consultation with the artist before any statement
- A holding statement rather than an apology

Case Studies for Artists

Negative Outcomes

Case study 6: Activist campaign destroys a literary award

Setting

A long-established literary award faces pressure from campaigners demanding that certain authors be excluded due to identity, nationality or perceived political associations.

What happened

Activists organise a coordinated public campaign accusing the award of being unethical and unsafe. Judges are targeted online. Sponsors are contacted. Under pressure, the award body announces changes to eligibility criteria and resignations follow. Confusion over rules and values leads to public disagreement among judges and trustees. Authors withdraw pre-emptively.

Pressure points

- Fear of sponsor withdrawal
- Trustees unclear on legal and governance duties
- Judges acting independently rather than collectively
- Media framing the controversy as a moral reckoning

What went wrong

- Governance structures failed under pressure
- Eligibility rules were changed mid-process
- There was no clear authority or decision-making framework
- Activists were allowed to redefine the award's purpose

Outcome

The award collapses in the short term and in the medium term becomes dormant. Trust is lost among authors, publishers and judges. The campaigners move on, while the institution cannot recover its credibility or function.

What could have helped

- Clear governance and eligibility rules
- Firm distinction between protest and decision-making
- Collective decision discipline
- Early, neutral public communication

Why these cases matter

Collectively these cases demonstrate that damage is most often caused not by protest itself, but by panic; not by pressure, but by speed; not by accountability, but by apologies without clarity; and not by criticism, but by public reaction without process. Together, they demonstrate why calm structures, clear roles and disciplined communication are essential when organisations are under pressure.

Case Studies for Venues

Positive Case Studies

Case Study 7: Book festival stands firm under activist boycott

Setting

A UK book festival plans an International Women's Day programme celebrating women writers from a range of backgrounds and perspectives. One invited speaker is known to hold gender-critical views.

What happened

Ahead of the festival, activists launch a boycott campaign, accusing the festival of "platforming harm". Other invited writers and speakers are contacted directly and pressured to withdraw in solidarity. Several do.

The campaign escalates on social media, with calls for the festival to cancel the event or remove the speaker.

Response

- The festival leadership issues a clear, calm public statement affirming its commitment to freedom of expression and plural debate
- The festival confirms it will not withdraw invitations on the basis of lawful views
- Writers who choose to withdraw are allowed to do so without criticism or retaliation
- Vacant slots are filled with replacement speakers
- Staff and volunteers are briefed with a single agreed line

Outcome

The festival goes ahead as planned. Attendance remains strong. The boycott campaign loses momentum once it becomes clear the festival will not capitulate. The director later reflects that standing firm early prevented prolonged escalation.

What helped

- A clear institutional position stated early
- Calm refusal to engage in online argument
- Respecting individual withdrawals without conceding institutional ground
- Confidence in the festival's purpose

Message for festivals

Standing up to bullying behaviour early often causes it to retreat.

Case Studies for Venues

Positive Case Studies

Case Study 8: Music venue reconsiders cancellation and protects free expression

Setting

A music venue schedules a gig by a band whose members are targeted online because of identity and perceived political associations.

What happened

Following complaints and pressure on social media, the venue initially considers cancelling the gig due to “reputational concerns”. The band is informed informally that the event may be withdrawn.

Response

- The band engages constructively with the venue’s management
- They explain the legal and contractual implications of cancellation
- They clarify the distinction between performing music and endorsing political positions
- The venue reviews its obligations and decision-making process

Outcome

The venue reverses its initial inclination to cancel. It issues a short, neutral statement affirming its commitment to artistic freedom and confirming the event will proceed. The gig sells out. There are no safety issues. The venue later adopts clearer internal guidance on handling external pressure.

What helped

- Direct, calm dialogue between artist and venue
- Attention to legal and contractual responsibilities
- Avoiding public apologies or over-explanation
- A short, values-based statement

Message for venues

Understanding your responsibilities often clarifies your confidence.

Case Studies for Venues

Positive Case Studies

Case Study 9: Publisher enables Hebrew publication through creative resolution

Setting

A writer objects to their work being published in Hebrew, citing political concerns. A publisher has already planned a Hebrew-language edition with an international partner.

What happened

The author asks the publisher to prevent the Hebrew publication from going ahead. The request raises concerns about discrimination, contractual obligations and freedom of expression.

Response

- The publisher does not act unilaterally or publicly
- A constructive solution is proposed
- The author is offered the option to redirect their royalties from the Hebrew edition to a cross-community charity working across political and religious lines
- The publisher reaffirms its commitment to making literature available across languages

Outcome

The Hebrew edition is published. The author’s concerns are addressed without imposing restrictions on language or audience. The situation resolves without public controversy.

What helped

- Refusal to treat language as endorsement
- Creative problem-solving rather than confrontation
- Respect for both contractual obligations and individual conscience
- Keeping the issue out of the media

Message for publishers and festivals

Creative solutions can uphold freedom of expression while defusing conflict.

Why these cases matter

Across these examples:

- Institutions held process under pressure
- Artists were protected rather than managed as risks
- Clear boundaries reduced escalation
- Confidence, not appeasement, resolved conflict

These are not exceptional cases. They show what happens when institutions **trust their purpose and act proportionately**.

Case Studies for Venues

Negative Case Studies

Case Study 10:

The silent cancellation and informal blacklist

Setting

A publicly funded theatre programmes a new work by an artist whose views are rumoured internally to be “unacceptable”, despite no public controversy, complaint or breach of policy.

What happened

Before the show opens, senior staff raise concerns informally. No formal complaint is made, but internal pressure builds. Leadership fears potential backlash and possible legal consequences if the work is cancelled outright, as the artist is known to have professional support.

Rather than cancelling, the theatre quietly withdraws all marketing activity. There is no social media promotion, no press outreach and no education or audience engagement work. Internally, staff are discouraged from discussing the show.

Attendance is low. After the run, the poor box office is cited informally as evidence that the artist “failed”. Rumours circulate within the sector that the artist is “difficult” or “unpopular”.

Outcome

The artist’s work closes early and is not revived. No official explanation is given. The artist later discovers they are no longer being considered by other venues, despite positive reviews and no recorded complaint.

What went wrong

- Informal staff pressure replaced due process
- Silence was used as a form of cancellation
- Reputational harm was created without accountability
- Failure was manufactured, then used as justification

Why this is damaging

This approach avoids legal risk while creating **maximum reputational harm**. It enables informal blacklisting while preserving institutional deniability.

Anonymity note

This is a composite of multiple cases across theatre and dance. No specific venue, city or production is identifiable.

Case Studies for Venues

Negative Case Studies

Case Study 11: Private speech, public punishment

Setting

A musician is booked for a series of upcoming shows at a venue. In a private online chat, the musician makes a comment that is legal and commonplace but politically unfashionable.

What happened

Screenshots of the private chat are leaked online without context. A backlash follows, with demands for cancellation. The venue receives complaints accusing the musician of holding “harmful views”.

Without consulting legal advice or assessing proportionality, the venue cancels all scheduled performances by the artist. No opportunity is given for clarification or response. The cancellation is framed publicly as being “in line with our values”.

Outcome

The musician loses income and future bookings. Other venues quietly withdraw invitations. The incident becomes a warning example within the sector about private speech.

The venue later struggles to articulate a clear policy on cancellation and faces criticism for acting disproportionately.

What went wrong

- Private speech was treated as a public offence
- No distinction was made between legality and popularity
- Collective punishment replaced individual assessment
- Values language was used to avoid process

Why this is damaging

Punishing lawful private speech creates a climate of fear and self-censorship and exposes venues to serious reputational and legal risk.

Anonymity note

This case deliberately avoids naming platforms, genres or venues and reflects patterns seen across music, comedy and spoken word.

Case Studies for Venues

Negative Case Studies

Case Study 12: Quiet withdrawal becomes public controversy

Setting

A book festival programmes a strand exploring ideas around cancellation, dissent and free expression. A new book engaging directly with these themes is scheduled to be discussed.

What happened

Ahead of the festival, internal concerns are raised by staff that the book may “inflare tensions”. There is no external campaign, no complaints and no safety risk.

Rather than addressing the issue openly, senior leadership quietly removes the book from the programme. No public announcement is made. The author is told the decision is due to “programming considerations”.

The festival continues to promote itself publicly as a space for debate and dialogue.

The turning point

Unlike other cases, the artist chooses to go public. The author publicly states that their book was withdrawn due to internal pressure and that no formal complaint or risk assessment was shared with them. The statement is factual, restrained and does not accuse individuals.

Venue response

The festival is now forced into a reactive position.

- Leadership issues a defensive public statement citing “staff wellbeing” and “complex internal discussions”
- No clear rationale for the withdrawal is provided
- The venue avoids addressing why the decision was taken covertly

The situation escalates, drawing more attention than the original programme item would have done.

Outcome

The festival’s credibility is questioned publicly. Trust with authors and audiences is damaged. Internally, staff remain unclear about who has decision-making authority.

The artist experiences both support and backlash but succeeds in exposing a lack of process.

What went wrong

- Internal dissent was allowed to function as a veto
- Programming decisions were made covertly rather than through governance
- Silence was used as a risk-management strategy
- Once the artist spoke publicly, the institution had no coherent process to defend

Why this is damaging

When institutions act quietly to avoid controversy, they often create greater controversy once decisions are exposed. Going public removes deniability and forces institutions to account for their process.

Key contrast with other cases

- In earlier worst-case examples, artists stayed silent and suffered reputational harm
- Here, public speech shifted risk back onto the institution
- The escalation was caused not by the artist speaking, but by the absence of transparent decision-making

Anonymity note

This is a composite case reflecting patterns across multiple festivals and publishers. It does not reference any specific organisation, location or individual.

Case Studies for Agents

Positive Case Studies

Case Study 13:

A band holds together under ideological pressure

Setting

A successful touring band experiences internal conflict after members express differing political views publicly. Online attention intensifies the disagreement. Fans take sides and pressure mounts for the band to “take a position”.

What happened

Communication within the band breaks down. There are threats of members leaving. External partners begin to ask whether upcoming dates are secure.

Agent response

- The manager refuses to engage in ideological mediation
- A clear boundary is set: the band is not required to hold a unified political position
- The focus is redirected to professional commitments and shared goals
- Members agree a simple principle: political disagreement does not equal disloyalty
- Public silence is maintained while internal conversations continue privately

Outcome

The band continues touring. Over time, the experience strengthens internal trust and clarifies boundaries. Audiences respond positively and the band’s reputation for independence grows.

What helped

- Refusal to arbitrate belief
- Reframing disagreement as normal, not existential
- Keeping focus on professional work
- Avoiding public escalation

Message for agents

Agreeing to disagree is often more stabilising than forced consensus.

Case Studies for Agents

Positive Case Studies

Case Study 14:

Agent de-escalates pressure on a writer

Setting

A writer is invited to appear at a book festival. Activists contact the festival and other authors, calling for the writer’s removal due to lawful but controversial views.

What happened

Other speakers are pressured to withdraw. The festival expresses concern about reputational damage and asks the agent for reassurance.

Agent response

- The agent asks the festival to clarify whether there are any safety or legal concerns
- A short holding response is agreed while pressure is assessed
- The agent discourages the writer from responding publicly
- Communication is channelled through formal routes rather than social media
- The agent reminds the festival of its stated commitment to plurality and debate

Outcome

The festival confirms the event will proceed. Pressure subsides as attention moves elsewhere. The writer appears without incident.

What helped

- Separating reputational anxiety from risk
- Slowing timelines
- Keeping the writer out of the direct line of fire
- Using the institution’s own stated values calmly

Message for agents

De-escalation often comes from asking the right questions, not offering reassurance.

Case Studies for Agents

Positive Case Studies

Case Study 15:

A promoter takes a calculated risk

Setting

A comedian has been unofficially avoided by some promoters due to past controversy, despite no legal or contractual issues. A promoter and group of venues discuss whether to programme the artist.

What happened

There is concern about backlash, but also recognition that audiences are interested and that venues want to signal openness to diverse viewpoints.

Promoter response

- The promoter works closely with venues to assess actual risk rather than anticipated reaction
- Security and staffing are planned proportionately
- Public communication is minimal and factual
- No attempt is made to pre-empt criticism with apologies or statements

Outcome

Shows go ahead with strong ticket sales. There is little public backlash. Other promoters quietly follow suit.

What helped

- Confidence in audience demand
- Proportionate planning rather than over-reaction
- Alignment between promoter and venue
- Willingness to take a measured risk

Message for promoters

Holding your nerve can reopen space that has narrowed unnecessarily.

Why these cases matter

Across all three examples:

- Agents and promoters buffer against pressure rather than amplifying it
- Silence and proportion were used deliberately
- Role boundaries were maintained
- Pressure lost momentum rather than escalating

They demonstrate that: Good representation does not eliminate controversy. It prevents it from becoming damaging.

Case Studies for Agents

Negative Case Studies

Case Study 16:

Doxxing and unlawful targeting of an agent

Setting

An agent represents several artists whose work becomes controversial due to perceived political associations. Online activists begin targeting not only the artists but the agent personally.

What happened

The agent's personal details including home address, family information and private contact details are published online. Posts encourage others to contact venues, neighbours and professional partners. Some messages include threats and antisemitic abuse.

The agent is advised informally to "keep their head down" and avoid escalating the situation. No formal response is made.

What went wrong

- The agent did not recognise doxxing as unlawful behaviour
- Harassment was treated as reputational risk rather than criminal conduct
- No evidence was gathered or reported
- Pressure was internalised rather than addressed

Outcome

The harassment escalates. The agent withdraws from representing certain artists for personal safety reasons. Their professional reputation suffers quietly and unfairly.

Why this matters

Doxxing, harassment and targeted intimidation are not legitimate protest. They may constitute criminal offences, particularly where identity-based targeting such as antisemitism is involved.

What should have happened

- Immediate documentation of posts and threats
- Reporting to platforms and, where appropriate, police
- Legal advice sought early
- Clear separation between unlawful harassment and reputational pressure

Lesson for agents

You are not required to tolerate unlawful targeting. Silence can increase risk.

Case Studies for Agents

Negative Case Studies

Case Study 17:

A band destroyed by covert pressure and image management

Setting

A touring band experiences internal disagreement over political issues. One member holds views that differ from the majority but has not breached any law or contract.

What happened

The band is invited to perform at a controversial charity event. Online pressure suggests that refusal would be seen as “complicity”. The manager believes accepting the gig is necessary to protect the band’s image and avoid becoming a target.

Behind the scenes, the manager works to isolate the dissenting member, framing them as a reputational risk. The artist is pressured to participate or leave.

What went wrong

- The manager prioritised external perception over internal process
- Ideological disagreement was treated as disloyalty
- Silence was framed as moral failure
- The agent attempted to arbitrate belief rather than protect boundaries

Outcome

The artist leaves the band. Others follow in solidarity. The band collapses. Public scrutiny moves on, but careers are permanently damaged.

Why this matters

Attempting to manage image through ideological alignment often accelerates fracture rather than preventing it.

Lesson for agents

You cannot preserve a group by sacrificing process, trust or minority protection.

Case Studies for Agents

Negative Case Studies

Case Study 18:

An agent speaks for a writer - and escalates damage

Setting

An author with publicly expressed lawful views is shortlisted for a major book award.

What happened

Other shortlisted authors threaten to withdraw in protest. Media attention intensifies. Without consulting the writer, the agent issues a public apology seeking to calm the situation and protect the award. The statement implies that the author’s views are harmful and distances the agent from them.

What went wrong

- The agent spoke on the author’s behalf without consent
- Apology language implied wrongdoing where none existed
- The conflict was shifted into public view prematurely

Outcome

The controversy escalates online. The author feels abandoned and retreats from public engagement. Writing becomes more difficult and isolating. The award process collapses.

Why this matters

Public apology without authority transfers reputational damage directly onto the artist.

Lesson for agents

Speaking for an artist without consent is not protection. It is exposure.

What these cases show

Across all three cases:

- Pressure was internalised rather than managed
- Silence or appeasement was mistaken for safety
- Role boundaries collapsed
- Artists and agents absorbed the damage

These outcomes were not inevitable.

They were the result of **fear replacing judgement**.