



How should the news media talk about the 'alt-right' movement?

Seth Meyers and others have urged the media to ditch the term 'alt-right' in favor of 'white nationalism' or 'neo-Nazism.' Others say those phrases don't convey the movement's complexity.

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Comedian Seth Meyers joined the chorus of voices calling for an end to the term “alt-right” Wednesday night, urging the media to instead refer to members of the movement as “white supremacists” or “Nazis.”

"Since the election of Donald Trump and the ascension of his right-hand man, Steve Bannon, there have been fears about the rise of white supremacy," the host of NBC's "Late Night" said. "Yet the media seems to be bending over backwards to normalize the so-called alt-right movement."

"Alt-right is the name they picked for themselves," he continued. "You don't have to use it. If zombies wanted to be called 'post-life brain foodies,' we'd still call them zombies. If it looks like a duck and talks like a duck and steps like a goose, it's a Nazi."

Mr. Meyers' concerns about the normalization of the self-described "alt-right," a largely-online movement rooted in white nationalist sentiment that emerged onto national political scene during President-elect Donald Trump's campaign, reflect the concerns of many as the media grapples with how best to report on the newest – and most controversial – voice in American politics. Some, like Meyers, have called on the media to ditch the term "alt-right," saying it sugarcoats and normalizes the extreme views held by those who identify with the movement. But others argue that removing the term from national discourse and replacing it with blanket terms such as "white nationalism" or "neo-Nazism" erases the nuances and context that are critical to understanding, and ultimately squashing, the movement.

"This is a bit of a dilemma, because it is the case that not everybody that would identify with the alt-right is a white supremacist or a white nationalist or racist, that there are people who just don't like the traditional way conservatism has gone," says Norman Ornstein, a resident scholar

at the Washington-based American Enterprise Institute and co-author of "It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism." "But I also think it's undeniable that white nationalism, white supremacy, and racism are a major part of what this movement represents. Just calling them the 'alt-right' is sanitizing, because it's a benign term...It's something darker than that," he says in an interview with The Christian Science Monitor.

Observers of the alt-right, including Mr. Ornstein, recommend that reporters use the phrase but offer a description of the movement to provide context for readers. This method is recommended by the Associated Press, and is used by publications, including The Christian Science Monitor and The Guardian.

Meanwhile, some others, such as the left-leaning publication ThinkProgress, have banned "alt-right" from their lexicon, opting instead to use terms like "white nationalist" or "neo-Nazi."

"The point here is not to call people names, but simply to describe them as they are," wrote the ThinkProgress editors in a statement. "We won't do racists' public relations work for them. Nor should other news outlets."

But those who study the alt-right say that simply describing the movement as white nationalist, without providing additional context, doesn't convey its complexities.

"In the case of the alt-right, I think that the tendency has been to want to simply do away with the term and use the term 'white nationalist,' but I don't think that captures the stew of hate," Nicole Hemmer, an assistant professor of presidential studies at the University of Virginia's Miller Center in Charlottesville, told The New York Times. Umbrella terms such as white nationalism, she said, fail to reflect the alt-right movement's distinct history, media presence, and other hostilities, such as its "hard-core misogyny."

George Hawley, a professor of political science at the University of Alabama who is working on a book about the alt-right, doesn't believe the term "white nationalist" is necessary an oversimplification of the alt-right's views, as it is, "at its core...a racial movement."

Still, he tells the Monitor in an email, "there is diversity of opinion within the alt-right on racial questions, from those who would simply like to normalize white identity politics and make them a regular part of politics to genuine neo-Nazis." And, he says, "I do think it is an oversimplification to label the entire alt-right as a neo-Nazi movement, as much of the alt-right seems to genuinely despise the more outlandish neo-Nazis that are in the big alt-right tent."

Some have argued that using phrases like "neo-Nazi," which may describe only a faction of the alt-right, can be not only misrepresentative, but even counterproductive in holding members of the movement publicly accountable for their beliefs.

"Insisting too narrowly on semantics actually gives the alt-right's adherents a script to avoid scrutiny of their ideas," writes Jacob Siegel for The Daily Beast. "They can just show that they're not actually nationalists – perhaps they believe in stateless empires instead – or counter accusations of white supremacy with racial hierarchies that place Jews and Asians above whites in terms of intelligence."

The most important thing, defenders of the term "alt-right" say, is not the label itself, but the context in which it's presented.

"Ultimately, words coined to obscure ugly realities usually end up absorbing whatever connotations they were meant to conceal," writes Julian Sanchez, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, in an op-ed for The Washington Post, noting that the phrase "concentration camp" began as a euphemism.

"The Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan and the Cambodian Khmer Rouge are (or were) all violent racist movements – and using the specific names instead of referring to them as 'violent racists' does not seem to have been much of an obstacle to recognizing them as such," he adds. "They're all also distinct historical phenomena, and our understanding of them would not be enhanced if we insisted on using the same generic description for all of them."