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Coulter, Milo, and the censorious history of ‘no-platforming’

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Free speech and liberal college campuses are in the midst of an epic throwdown at the moment. On occasion, if a scheduled speaker is deemed offensive — such as Ann Coulter or Milo Yiannopolous — student activists will try to get the speaker disinvited. There’s a term for that: “no-platforming,” a British expression that’s made the trip to the colonies.

And it’s not just liberals: No-platforming is something both sides of the political spectrum deploy and denounce.

The term originated in the UK in the 1980s and is associated with the UK National Union of Students, a powerful confederation of student unions from nearly all colleges and universities in the country. Early on, “no-platforming” meant that people holding offensive views — such as fascism or racism — weren’t welcome on campuses. “By now it is accepted that the goal of no-platforming is to stop hated figures from speaking not just on campus but to audiences more broadly — before public assemblies, on broadcast media, you name it,” writes Walter Olson on the Minding the Campus blog. “No platforming” often appears alongside other terms found on campuses and in arguments: “microaggression,” “safe space,” and “trigger warning.”

“No-platform” stands out as a term, not just because it’s cumbersome, but because it’s a negation of a word use we rarely see: Not many people talk about “platforming” someone these days. The Oxford English Dictionary does include several uses of “platform” as a verb, but they refer to advocating for a cause, previewing a film, or creating a physical platform. A use in Paul Fatout’s 1960 book “Mark Twain on the Lecture Circuit” would sound odd today: “He avoided lecturing because he could not think of a lecture worth delivering; furthermore, after twenty years of platforming, it was time to subside.”

The “no” also makes “no-platforming” stand out, as very few verbs take this form. A few exist in baseball where a pitcher can “no-hit” (play a game without allowing any hits) and an umpire can “no-ball” (indicate a pitch was a strike rather than a ball). Grand juries can reject cases by no-billing, as seen in a 1910 use from a publication of the American Political Science Association: “In Chicago a grand jury ‘no-billed’ 68 cases sent to it by 13 different judges of the municipal court.” The most successful such word is probably “no-show,” a word that pairs well with “no-platform.” If a speaker is nearly no-platformed, they might avoid the whole hullabaloo by no-showing.

Opinions on no-platforming vary, and they can be found all over the political spectrum. On Twitter, [@non_bona_dicta](#) made an admirable defense of the practice: “Racist speech in America is actionable speech and as long as that’s the case no-platforming it is an act of self defense.” Others (such as [@BWagnerelli](#)) see it as futile: “Quick note about ‘No Platforming’: Actually doing it is impossible these days. Any mole you whack will find a place to pop up again.” Support for no-platforming varies, but few would argue the word has a pleasant sound. A tweet by [@CounterMoonbat](#) makes a comparison with a possible Euphemism of the Year: “‘No-platforming’ sounds like ‘re-accommodation.’”

Whether “no-platform” is understood euphemistically or literally is key to arguments over the term. People who take the term at face value tend to argue that free speech doesn’t entitle anyone to particular venues. Aaron R. Hanlon argued this point in the New Republic, “Rejecting campus speakers is not an assault on free speech. . . it’s a value judgment.” But folks who consider the term a slippery evasion of “censored” will praise its failure, as seen in an article from The Christian Institute: “The University of Oxford has taken a stand for freedom of expression by resisting calls by pro-transsexual activists to ‘no platform’ Dame Jenni Murray” (who was criticized for stating that people shouldn’t change their sex). One person’s value judgement is another’s thought police.

Don’t expect the hubbub over no-platforming or free speech vs. hate speech to go away anytime soon. On campuses and elsewhere, there’s no easy answer to the question “To platform or not to platform?”