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Keep calling the alt-right ‘the alt-right.’ Soon, it won’t be a euphemism anymore.

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Fear and uncertainty always tempt us toward magical thinking. On the right these days, we find it in the conviction that **uttering the magic words “radical Islam”** is critical to the fight against terrorism. On the left, lately it has taken the form of an emerging consensus that, like Lord Voldemort, the motley crew known as the “alt-right” Must Not Be Named.

On the heels of a social media push to eschew the term “alt-right” as a euphemistic rebranding of old-fashioned white supremacy, editors at the popular lefty website **ThinkProgress announced Tuesday** that they’d be dropping the label in their future coverage. “A reporter’s job is to describe the world as it is, with clarity and accuracy,” they wrote. “Use of the term ‘alt-right,’ by concealing overt racism, makes that job harder.” For news outlets to continue using the moniker, they concluded, was in effect to “do racists’ public relations work for them.” **Other sites** did the same, and a **new Chrome extension** even came out promising to replace the term with the phrase “rebranded white nationalism.” The **Associated Press issued a stylebook ruling** on Monday that its writers should “avoid the term generically and without definition” on the grounds that “it is not well known and the term may exist primarily as a public-relations device to make its supporters’ actual beliefs less clear and more acceptable to a broader audience.”

The underlying premise here is correct: The term “alt-right” and the movement that claims the moniker are largely attempting to slap a hep veneer on a lot of old, ugly, atavistic ideas, and reporters should say as much in no uncertain terms. But refusing to use the label is nevertheless misguided.

In purely practical terms, the word isn’t going anywhere, if only because people who identify with the movement will continue to self-apply it. As long as that’s the case, it does readers no service to tiptoe around it, especially if editors think it’s important for readers to understand what they’re dealing with when they encounter the term in the wild. Fiery jeremiads against the movement’s racist doctrines aren’t much help without an explicit connection between the movement being rightly denounced and the people who use the term to characterize their beliefs. In practice, writers will probably achieve this by making sure to include the word in quotation marks to make clear who they’re talking about, or employ “artist-formerly-known-as-Prince” style circumlocutions, sacrificing clarity and directness for a bit of pointless virtue signaling.

Although terminology surely matters in political rhetoric, the fear that using the term “alt-right” will play into the hands of racists seems symptomatic of writers’ natural tendency to overestimate the extent to which words shape thought. Ultimately, words coined to obscure ugly realities usually end up absorbing whatever connotations they were meant to conceal. “Concentration camp,” after all, started out as a euphemism. Critics will only slow that process by being coy about associating the label with their condemnations. A writer who wants to make the label toxic should be all the *more* eager to use it.

Neither is this kind of self-imposed vocabulary restriction particularly helpful analytically. 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. 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. The connections and affinities between the alt-right and other white nationalist groups may help readers understand why this latest iteration of bad ideas is dangerous, but people concerned to oppose it will also need to understand the differences.

Especially when dealing with an evolving and multifaceted phenomenon such as the alt-right, insistence on hewing to some older label, such as white nationalist, is likely to end up being a cognitive handicap. Among those self-applying the alt-right label, for instance, are some people associated with “**GamerGate**” — an online movement defined largely by a shared sense of rage that women have opinions about video games. Progressives often talk about “intersectionality” — the idea that the superficially disparate causes of various marginalized groups turn out to be connected and interdependent. In the weird soup of ideas being marketed under the brand name “alt-right,” we find a dark reflection of this: There are unreconstructed white nationalists in the mix, but you’ll also find pseudo-intellectuals spouting bastardized evolutionary psychology **cribbed from “pickup artist” websites, college students** looking for a way to thumb their noses at campus pieties and a whole variegated galaxy of other fringe ideologies looking for a bigger tent to call home. Deciding in advance to view this Frankenstein coalition through a single lens — “it’s just white nationalism with a new coat of paint!” — is ultimately a way of ensuring you’ll be baffled as the movement’s ideas and agenda are shaped over time by the interplay of these different factions. It also makes it more difficult to understand how the alt-right is appealing to a broader audience than those traditional white supremacist groups — which may conceivably involve factors more complex than a snappy new name.

If you’re worried about the gradual mainstreaming of the alt-right, in short, stop fussing about what to call it. Think about how to stop it.

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