MEDIA AND THE ‘ALT-RIGHT’

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The American extreme right has long been on the cutting edge of media technology. This was largely driven by necessity. Following the civil rights era, explicit expressions of racial prejudice became increasingly taboo. More traditional, mainstream media venues – including conservative venues – began shutting out open racists and anti-Semites (Hawley 2016). Thus, the racist right has had to be creative when it comes to spreading its message. The so-called alt-right, short for ‘alternative right’ and a recent manifestation of the American white nationalist movement, was, for a time, unusually effective in its media strategy. When it came to spreading its message and gaining attention, the alt-right punched well above its weight, given its small size and limited resources. In the pages ahead, I will describe the alt-right’s media strategy, noting how it evolved in the face of new efforts to limit its online presence.

First, however, I must make a few comments about terminology. I vacillate on whether, when discussing the alt-right, it is proper to use the past or present tense. Although the term alt-right remains widely known, it is now very rarely used as a self-description. The movement has suffered so many setbacks over the last three years that the label itself is considered toxic. For the first years of the movement’s existence, the term was useful precisely because it seemed so anodyne. Now that this is no longer the case, adherents to the ideology have split on whether to use a more explicit term like white nationalist or instead try to downplay its racial agenda and blend in with the larger Trumpian populist movement.

Second, although this volume is focused on the phenomenon of populism and the media, I do not consider the alt-right, overall, to have been a populist movement. This is not to say that the alt-right did not have populist elements. However, the alt-right, at its core, did not express a populist worldview. Its main thought leaders were explicit elitists, and contempt for average Americans – including white Americans – was a common theme within the movement.

As Cas Mudde put it,

Populism as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.

(2004, 543)
This description does not quite fit the alt-right as it, overall, was much more sceptical of ‘the people’ than most populist movements, including right-wing populist movements, such as the one that helped propel Donald Trump to the White House. I agree with Richard Marcy (2020a), who argued that the alt-right should be viewed as a vanguard movement’, which is qualitatively different from a mass social movement.

We can find movements that promote ideologies analogous to the alt-right in many countries. Some of these movements have borrowed strategies developed by the alt-right and its precursors or even coordinated across national borders (Zúquete 2018). Nonetheless, the alt-right was a primarily American phenomenon, and this analysis will be limited to the United States.

The alt-right’s predecessors

Early observers of the alt-right noted that the movement was notable for its use of humour (Gray 2015; Wilson 2017a; Nagel 2017; Hawley 2017). In its internet propaganda, it tended to use the ironic tone common in many online subcultures. To outside observers, it was not always clear when an alt-right voice was being sincere and when it was simply ‘trolling’ for the nihilistic pleasure of sowing discord. Although the technology they used was up to date, this strategy on the alt-right’s part was less novel than many people realised. In many ways, the alt-right simply brought a very old playbook into the twenty-first century.

George Lincoln Rockwell’s American Nazi Party, founded in 1959, was one of the most significant extreme-right groups to emerge in the US after World War II (Simonelli 1999). Rockwell, the son of vaudeville actors, deliberately cultivated an outlandish persona. Rather than downplay his racism and try to quietly influence the conservative movement and the Republican Party, as many on the racist right were doing in this era (Lowndes 2008), Rockwell and his supporters flew Nazi flags, marched with weapons, wore Nazi armbands on the sleeves of their brown shirts, and published a magazine called The Stormtrooper – and this was an era in which World War II was still a recent memory. This was not an organisation trying to reach out to ordinary, middle-class white Americans, at least not at first. There was a logic to this extremism, however.

Rockwell had an important insight into the American media. He realised that being outlandish was the best strategy for drawing attention to himself. Had he been a run-of-the-mill, middle-class American racist, presenting his views in the most calm and reasonable way he could, he never would have attracted cameras and interviews. He would not have been able to compete with more established right-wing groups in the US. Rockwell understood that the media loves an outrageous story and wild characters, and he provided both. The American Nazi Party created a spectacle. By being outrageous, he became a magnet for reporters. He was interviewed, for example, by Alex Haley in the pages of Playboy. His speeches drew curious onlookers. In the long run, Rockwell hoped to turn this fame into real influence. After becoming a household name, Rockwell wanted to drop the Nazi uniform and put on a suit and tie. From there, his influence could grow. Rockwell described his strategy as follows:

> The first phase is to reach the masses: you can do nothing until you’ve reached the masses. In order to reach them – without money, without status, without a public platform – you have to become a dramatic figure. Now, in order to achieve that, I’ve had to take a lot of garbage: being called a nut and a monster and everything else. But by hanging up the swastika, I reach the masses. The second phase is to disabuse them
of the false picture they have gotten of me, to educate them about what my real program is. The third phase will be to organize the people I’ve educated into a political entity. And the fourth phase will be to use that political entity as a machine to win political power.

That’s the plan. They all overlap, of course. Right now we’re about 50 percent involved in phase two; we’re actually beginning to educate people – in interviews like this one, in speaking engagements at colleges and the like. The other 50 percent is still phase one – just raising hell to keep people aware that there’s such a thing as the American Nazi Party, not caring what they call us, as long as they call us something. (Haley 1966, 80)

Whether this could have worked is unknown – Rockwell was murdered by one of his disgruntled former followers in 1967. Rockwell’s dramatic demise also set a precedent for the American extreme right. Many subsequent groups were similarly undone by unhinged members within their ranks. Several later white nationalist groups – including groups associated with the alt-right – were eventually ruined when their members engaged in criminal behavior, bringing lawsuits and financial ruin to their organisations, which always operated on shoestring budgets.

There was another element to Rockwell’s flamboyance. The theatrical element of the American Nazi Party raised questions about its sincerity. Rockwell and his supporters drove around in a Volkswagen van covered in racial slurs. They dubbed the van ‘the hate bus’. He created a small record label called Hatenanny Records. Rockwell also made outrageous predictions. He claimed with absolute certainty that he would shortly be elected president of the United States, for example. The absurd aspects of the American Nazi Party often made it difficult for many people to take it seriously. This created a degree of confusion around the organisation. We saw similar confusion with the alt-right. The distinction between edgy humour and serious radicalism was often blurry. Some alt-right figures, such as Andrew Anglin of the Daily Stormer, specifically cited Rockwell as an inspiration.

As media changed as the twentieth century progressed, white nationalists were typically early adopters of new technology. Tom Metzger, for example, took advantage of public-access television in the 1980s, creating a programme called Race and Reason. Metzger was also an early user of the internet, creating a website in the mid-1990s and hosting an online radio show.

Historically, the discussion board Stormfront has been one of the most important white nationalist websites. The site, created by former Ku Klux Klan leader Don Black, went online in the mid-1990s and continues to operate. The site also hosts Black’s radio programme. Stormfront includes the political and philosophical content one would expect at a white nationalist forum but also has boards on popular culture and dating. Although Stormfront is the most visited white nationalist forum, many others have been online for many years, such as Vanguard News Network.

Stormfront’s influence on the alt-right was surprisingly minimal. There were certainly many people who were involved with Stormfront and created alt-right content, but of the people considered significant figures in the alt-right, I am aware of none who describe Stormfront as a formative influence. There was a more important difference between Stormfront and similar sites and the alt-right at its peak of success. These older white nationalist message boards received a lot of traffic, but they were also insular online communities. If you were not actively seeking out white nationalist material, you could spend massive amounts of time online for many years without even knowing such sites existed.
The alt-right’s origin and early media use

When the term *alt-right* was born in 2008, it was not associated with great innovations in media usage. It was entirely online, but its use of the internet was not immediately novel. For its first few years, the alt-right was not a movement of any sort and was instead simply a term associated with a couple of webzines run by Richard Spencer – Taki’s Magazine, followed by a site simply called Alternative Right. During its earliest days, the phrase *alternative right* was also not exclusively associated with any specific racial ideas; various right-wing ideologies that dissented from mainstream conservatism fit under the broad umbrella term.

Spencer’s websites hosted short blog entries, longer articles, and podcasts. Alternative Right was relatively short lived as Spencer ceased editing the site in 2012 to focus on other projects, especially running the National Policy Institute, a small white nationalist think tank. He shut down the site entirely a year later. It appeared that the term was going to disappear entirely. When it reemerged on social media and sites like 4chan (at that point usually shortened to alt-right) a few years later, it gained new popularity from the ground up, rather than due to any kind of top-down strategy.

It was during this short interim period that the far-right online had an important warm-up before its real breakthrough in 2015 and 2016. So-called Gamergate provided an early demonstration that anonymous online trolls with no formal organisation or leadership could make a real-world impact. It further served to introduce several people who would later be influential in the alt-right to a larger audience.

The details of Gamergate are not important for this chapter. It began as a purported controversy about ethics in video-game journalism. It soon became a misogynistic harassment campaign, as gamers organised on platforms such as 4chan, Twitter, and Reddit. Developers, journalists, and activists who sought to promote a more inclusive gaming community and less misogyny in games were subjected to a barrage of insulting and threatening emails, as were their employers (Parker 2014). Gamergaters also targeted the corporate sponsors of major media venues, leading to a withdrawal of advertising revenue. Their attacks were a key reason the webzine Gawker shut down (Read 2014).

Gamergate was mostly unrelated to race as it focused mostly on gender questions in gaming (Hawley 2019). However, it set an important precedent in online discourse. It revealed the high degree of reactionary sentiment among young men on message boards and social media. People congregating at these online venues expressed shocking hatred towards those they deemed ‘social justice warriors’, accusing them of injecting ‘political correctness’ into video games – a form of media that had previously shown little interest in progressive pieties. The alt-right harnessed similar resentments and used similar tactics, on a much larger scale, in the subsequent years.

It was also during this period that websites that eventually became extremely influential within the alt-right were gaining in popularity. There were still sites presenting extreme right-wing arguments in a more traditional manner. After shutting down Alternative Right, Spencer started a new webzine called Radix. The white nationalist publishing company and website Counter Currents had been operating since 2011. Arktos Media began publishing far-right books in 2010 and continues to do so.

The alt-right’s recent media use

Given that the alt-right has existed for barely a decade (at least under that label), it may seem strange to divide its history up into different periods. However, internet culture seems to evolve
at a breakneck speed. There was a difference between the alt-right’s first iteration, when it was a small ideological project led by a small number of writers, and the alt-right during the 2016 presidential election. This first iteration of the alt-right mostly died out when Spencer, its initial originator, decided to drop the label. The subsequent iteration was largely a grassroots phenomenon, driven by trolls working completely anonymously or under one or more pseudonyms.

Richard Marcy (2020b) has argued that, as a modern vanguard movement, the alt-right has a relatively clear division of labor, despite having no top-down organisational structure. He divides the alt-right into ‘sensebreakers’, ‘sensegivers’, and ‘sensemakers’. Given the fluid and disorganised nature of the alt-right, these are not solid categories, and the same person may perform multiple tasks.

Those in the first category, the sensebreakers, are the face of the movement to the public. They are the ones seeking and gaining significant exposure from the mainstream media. They are the front-line activists leading rallies. They present themselves as uncompromising opponents of the status quo. Marcy argued that Richard Spencer was the most notable person in this category, though he noted that Spencer’s influence has waned in recent years. Although there were a few other figures who have sought to play similar roles in the alt-right (such as Patrick Casey and James Allsup), it is unclear if they will experience long-term success.

The sensegivers are the intellectuals associated with the alt-right. Although they are mostly not anonymous, they are not as eager for mainstream media attention as the sensebreakers. Their aim is to give their movement intellectual coherence, a solid ideological foundation that can support the work of others. More educated readers, listeners, and viewers are their target audience. Marcy identified Jared Taylor of the white nationalist group American Renaissance as the alt-right’s quintessential sensegiver. Taylor has been a leading voice in the white nationalist movement since the 1990s, but he has been considered an important figure in the alt-right since that term was coined. Taylor and others like him prefer to justify their arguments using peer-reviewed studies and academic language. Alt-right intellectuals tend to be especially interested in reviving ‘race science’, the idea that race is a biological category, and races have non-trivial biological differences. Other sensegivers also focus on reviving older varieties of right-wing thought, especially fascistic ideas that were popular in Europe in the inter-war period.

Marcy argued that YouTube has been an especially valuable tool for the sensegiving element of the alt-right. The platform has allowed the alt-right to upload high-quality videos, presenting their arguments on their own terms, for free. These videos can receive millions of views. This represents a major change in the use of video media by the far right. In the past, when television was the primary way people viewed video media, the far right was largely locked out of this medium. Their options were public-access television stations (which had a limited reach), VHS tapes (presumably delivered to people who already agreed with their message), and efforts to get mainstream news media to give them coverage (secure in the knowledge that this coverage would be universally hostile). Thanks to YouTube, this method of outreach became widely available to the far right for the first time. Recent scholarship suggests that YouTube has been an important means of online radicalisation (Ribiero et al. 2020).

Within the sensemaker group, Marcy identified two categories: trolls and lurkers. Trolls engage in the least risky form of activism, sharing alt-right ideas or simply attempting to sow racial discord online. They are the ones posting anonymously on social media platforms like Twitter and on image boards like 4chan. Although people in this category may be nothing more than atomised trolls making racist remarks online in their spare time, they nonetheless served a crucial purpose in the alt-right’s early days. Their relentless activity on social media and elsewhere was largely responsible for bringing attention to the alt-right.
The lurkers are an even larger number and represent the people consuming alt-right content without creating anything of their own. These people are at various stages of radicalisation. Some already fully agree with every one of the alt-right’s major points regarding race, immigration, and Jewish people. Others may lean towards the alt-right but maintain some misgivings. Some lurkers may simply be people who are curious to know what the alt-right or related movements are about and may or may not further engage with its ideas.

The alt-right also demonstrated the importance of podcasts to ideological movements. Most of the major alt-right websites hosted podcasts, on which important figures of the movement conducted interviews and discussed race, gender, popular culture, and current events. Within the alt-right, however, the website The Right Stuff was unquestionably the most influential in terms of podcasting. Its network included its flagship programme called The Daily Shoah (Shoah is the Hebrew term for holocaust.) This programme presented radical white nationalist content but did so in an entertaining fashion, modelling itself on radio ‘shock jocks’ like Howard Stern and Opie and Anthony. The show’s creators were serious ideologues, but they sought to gain listeners by presenting their message in a comedic manner, playing parody songs and flouting all conventions of ‘political correctness’ by infusing their commentary with racist jokes and slurs. This programme, perhaps more than any other, represented the ethos of the alt-right at its peak. The network also included the more serious programme, Fash the Nation. (Fash was short for fascism.) This programme provided commentary on current political events from a white nationalist perspective. Before it was banned from SoundCloud, Fash the Nation was that network’s most popular ‘conservative’ podcast (Wilson 2017b).

**Gaining mainstream media attention**

I mentioned earlier that anonymous trolls were a crucial group when it came to getting the alt-right on the media’s radar. Locked out of most mainstream publications – even nativist, race-baiting websites like Breitbart would not openly embrace the alt-right’s radicalism – the alt-right needed to manipulate other venues into helping them spread their message. They did so by relentlessly harassing mainstream journalists with large audiences. In some ways, the incessant harassment of media figures was done for its own sake. However, there was also a larger strategy at work, however. The alt-right wanted to be noticed, and at the time, the best way to do so was to get mainstream journalists and celebrities to speak and write about them. During my interviews with alt-right content creators, one stated this explicitly:

[Journalists’] lives are lived online on places like Twitter, and so what they see and report on tends to come to life through their articles – at times, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Normal people don’t live their existence online on places like Twitter, so most people had no idea we existed. We essentially created a false reality for them where they were drowned in responses by our Great Troll Army, to the point where journalists began to become afraid to write anti-white content out of fear of the online backlash. . . . The Alt-Right literally did not have a physical presence until recently; we practically memed ourselves into existence by hijacking the OODA [observe, orient, decide, and act] loop of journalists, getting them to write about this scary, secretive, mean online group, and drawing more and more eyes & converts when people began to tune in and see what our platforms were.

(quoted in Hawley 2017, 89)
This strategy worked quite well for gaining the nation’s attention in 2015 and 2016. Although it included a relatively small number of people, the alt-right was able to garner attention from major media by creating an exaggerated picture of its size and reach – creating a sort of digital Potemkin village on journalists’ computer screens. The effort eventually led to massive, worldwide recognition, reaching a peak when Hillary Clinton dedicated an entire speech to denouncing the alt-right in August of 2016.

In the long run, however, this strategy proved to also have negative consequences for the movement. When they convinced much of America that they were a large and growing threat to the basic norms of democracy, they started being treated as such. When greater steps were taken to take down the alt-right, the movement proved more brittle than many of its supporters realised.

The alt-right and popular culture

As was the case with twentieth-century white nationalism, the alt-right took a great interest in popular culture. This is because white nationalists have always insisted that forms of entertainment are essential to shaping peoples’ worldview (Leonard and King 2014). In fact, many on the far right have long argued that, in the long run, cultural products are more important than partisan political fights. Inspired by the twentieth-century Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, many voices on the far right argue that ideological hegemony in the culture must precede permanent political victories. In their view, the left has achieved such astonishing success in recent decades, despite conservative victories at the ballot box, precisely because it controls the culture via popular entertainment – though left-wing dominance in education and the news media is also important.

The alt-right’s engagement with popular media predominantly takes the form of critique. A massive number of alt-right podcasts and articles were dedicated to analyses of the messages (explicit and implicit) in major Hollywood films and television shows. A major white nationalist criticism of popular culture is that so many of the leading figures in the movie and music industry are Jewish liberals, and thus, according to the Alt-Right’s narrative, they push an anti-white, pro-multiculturalism agenda.

Sometimes, the alt-right deliberately created controversies about popular culture, just to draw attention to itself. For example, some voices in the alt-right declared that they were organising a major boycott of a Star Wars film on the basis of a supposed anti-white narrative in the film. The boycott went nowhere, and the movie was a huge success, but they managed to get several mainstream news outlets to report on the story, again giving them free publicity.

For the most part, the alt-right has not sought to create alternative forms of entertainment to compete with the mainstream music and film industry. In some ways, the alt-right has done less in this regard than some of its ideological predecessors. In the 1990s, for example, white power album sales were an important source of revenue for groups like the National Alliance. Given the ease of accessing music for free on the internet, this would likely not be possible today. There are some alt-right content creators who engage in their own artistic endeavors – writing novels, creating parody songs, and posting comedic cartoons online – but this represents a small percentage of the alt-right’s overall activity.

Setbacks online

As the alt-right grew in prominence, major online media platforms began to increase their efforts to decrease the movement’s presence. The comment sections of major news outlets
were once an important venue for extreme right commentators. Any time a story in a major venue touched the issue of race even tangentially, the comment section underneath the story would quickly fill up with extreme right jeremiads (Hawley 2016). This trend actually pre-dated the alt-right. In response to these comments, unmoderated comment sections became less common. To keep out these right-wing trolls, online news sources began moderating their comments, requiring commenters to register, or simply abolishing comment sections entirely.

Other online media platforms have also sought to limit the alt-right’s influence. Reddit deleted the popular r/altright subreddit (Weinberger 2017). Twitter has more aggressively enforced its terms of service, kicking people off the platform when they engaged in hate speech or harassment and banning some hateful symbols (Rozsa 2017). There are ways to work around this. As Twitter allows anonymous accounts, someone whose account is deleted can simply create a new one by using a different email address. However, rebuilding an audience and network takes time. A person who once had tens of thousands of followers will need to start from scratch after losing an account and, furthermore, is always at risk of losing the new account.

YouTube has also begun to pursue stronger measures to reduce extreme right content on its platform (Karlins 2019). The site has deleted thousands of videos. YouTube also removed several alt-right channels completely. Some far-right content producers who were not blocked from the site had their channels demonetised, removing their ability to make money from ad revenue.

The alt-right’s ability to raise money online has also diminished. Amazon has cancelled the affiliate programme for many alt-right websites, blocking another source of revenue, and it has also begun banning certain alt-right books. PayPal has also deleted the accounts of several alt-right groups and individuals.

The most extreme example of online de-platforming came shortly after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The Daily Stormer, perhaps the most visited extreme-right website, lost its domain registration and DDOS protection. For a time, the site was not visible from ordinary web browsers and could only be accessed from the ‘dark web’. The site has since managed to get back online, however.

In response to this, there was a major push within the alt-right to resolve these problems by building their own online infrastructure. The results of these efforts have been mixed. The alt-right’s attempt to create alternative online fundraising websites seems to have failed. This is likely because the technical and material challenges of doing so have proved too high.

The effort to create alternatives to Twitter and YouTube have been qualified successes. The social media site Gab and the video-hosting site BitChute function reasonably well. The important thing to remember, however, is that the alt-right’s success resulted from its ability to interact with the mainstream. For the most part, ordinary internet users are still using the larger social media platforms, not the alternatives open to alt-right material. Thus, the extreme-right online is increasingly back where it was a decade ago, largely isolated in its own spheres, with less easy access to mainstream venues.

Conclusion

Over its short history, the alt-right has been a predominantly online phenomenon. Although its use of the internet was novel, many of its strategies were lifted (whether they realised it or not) from earlier iterations of the white nationalist movement. The internet is unquestionably where the alt-right achieved its greatest successes. In fact, its efforts to engage in real-world activism have mostly resulted in failure or – especially in the case of the Charlottesville rally – disaster. Their success was largely dependent on their ability to interact with people outside.
their movement on other major online platforms. Major online media sites have sought to place stronger restrictions on what people can post. This represented a major setback for the alt-right, from which it has not yet recovered. The white nationalist movement has proven resilient, however, and it is not going to just disappear, even if it drops the alt-right label entirely. It remains to be seen how it will regroup and attempt to regain influence in the years ahead.

References


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