

The Alt-Right: Strategy and Race

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14 May 2019

The Beginnings and Growth of the Alternative Right

The ideology of the early Alternative Right can be traced to two sources: paleoconservatism and the European New Right. Paleoconservative ideology stemmed in part from the earlier “America First” movement of the 1940s.¹ It is almost as if history repeats itself: the Alternative Right rallied behind Donald Trump in the 2016 election cycle-- a candidate whose campaign slogan was, among other things, “America First”. Paleoconservatives supported Senator Joseph McCarthy during his foundationless crusade of Communists in the American government; their successors supported Donald Trump in his unprecedented but successful campaign to become President of the United States. The other ancestor of the Alt-Right, the European New Right (ENR), was a movement that attempted to rework fascist ideology through incorporating other ideologies with the primary goal of rejecting the principles of human equality.² Whereas race, and more specifically white nationalism, is arguably the focal point of the Alt-Right, it makes sense that they are derived from a group who believed that racial segregation was the only way to achieve true antiracism.

When discussing the foundations of the Alternative Right, one must discuss Richard Spencer. Spencer coined the term “Alternative Right” in 2008, long before the movement would become nationally prominent due to their online antagonism. At the time, Spencer was the editor of a magazine that was known for being at odds with the conservative establishment-- and though Spencer would leave to found a new publication on *AlternativeRight.com*³, he would not leave his position as being opposite mainstream conservatism. Here, Spencer and his writings

¹ Lyons, Matthew N. "The Origins and Ideology of the Alternative Right." *Political Research Associates*. doi:10.1163/2210-7975_hrd-9826-2016001.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

would begin to forge partnerships with many White Nationalist publications, and the two ideologies would become so intertwined that Alternative Right would become synonymous for white nationalism. In 2011, Spencer founded the National Policy Institute (NPI), which is a white nationalist think-tank. The NPI would focus greatly on the promotion of white nationalism, and would be instrumental in the rise of the Alternative Right through a series of conferences. By bringing many different groups together at these conferences, the Alt-Right would begin to prove that there is strength in numbers and that what was formerly considered to be fringe ideology was not actually as outlandish and fringe as was previously thought.

Today, the Alternative Right is inherently associated with online “troll culture” and the utilization of the internet to promote their message. The White Nationalist movement has a history of capitalizing on opportunity, one such example being the use of the emerging film industry in the early twentieth century to spread racism through films such as D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915).⁴ According to the *Anti-Fascist News*, “the ‘alt right’ now often means an internet focused string of commentators, blogs, Twitter accounts... all of which combine scientific racism, romantic nationalism, and deconstructionist neo-fascist ideas to create a white nationalist movement that has almost no backwards connection with neo-Nazis and the KKK.”⁵ The Alt-Right intended their message to be as inflammatory as possible and seemingly still takes pride on their ability to be unapologetically conservative. Perhaps that is one of the biggest distinctions between the Alt-Right and mainstream conservatives: the Alternative Right refuses to tone down their message in order to make it more palatable to those who are more centrist, or

⁴ Daniels, Jessie. "The Algorithmic Rise of the “Alt-Right”." *Contexts* 17, no. 1 (2018): 60-65.
doi:10.1177/1536504218766547.

⁵ Lyons, Matthew N. "The Origins and Ideology of the Alternative Right." *Political Research Associates*.
doi:10.1163/2210-7975_hrd-9826-2016001.

in other words, have more mainstream political beliefs. They, in their own words “think a lot of nasty thoughts that keep leftists up at night...” and “... might as well embrace it.”⁶

The paradox of the Alt-Right is an interesting one: on one hand, the Alternative Right is unapologetic and they refuse to dilute themselves in order for their beliefs to be accepted, but on the other hand they hide in plain sight with think-tank names like the National Policy Institute, which sounds more like a bland government entity than a haven for white supremacists.

However, this paradox is resolved with the fact that the NPI is not particularly successful at concealing its white nationalist ties, but that it does not care. This ties back into the bold nature of the Alternative Right: when their attempts to blend in fail, they do not care because they do not need to-- their message is promulgated, and in fact, it spreads more quickly in the open, so they have no need to be surreptitious.

The Alt-Right characterizes themselves as “white nationalists”, which they say differs from “white supremacy”. Richard Spencer says that “Race is real. Race matters. Race is the foundation of identity.”⁷ He defines “white” as “a worldwide constellation of peoples”, which seems to be extremely inclusive of cultures all around the world, piecing together distinct peoples into one “constellation”, but in reality, Spencer’s movement prioritizes “White America”, those who founded the nation-- which also discludes women-- and argues that the most coherent times in the nation’s history were when the nation was primarily Anglo-Saxon and Protestant.⁸ Some will argue that “supremacists” believe that a particular race, gender, or other group is inherently better than, or superior to, others. “Nationalists”, they say, are simply those

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Spencer, Richard B. "What It Means To Be Alt-Right – AltRight.com." AltRight.com. August 11, 2017. Accessed May 10, 2019. <https://altright.com/2017/08/11/what-it-means-to-be-alt-right/>.

⁸ Ibid.

who believe in the interests of one's own nation.⁹ However, when one believes that the "best interest" of their nation means creating "ethno-states", which are states that are defined by either race or ethnicity¹⁰, it seems to be that perhaps these "nationalists" are also supremacists. Why else would they want to rid their nation of other races if they thought that these other races made contributions to society? The other side of that coin is that since they want to live in a nation of white people, they believe that white people *do* make positive contributions of society. In fact, wanting to live in a nation that is solely white means that the Alternative Right believes that white people can function completely autonomously, without needing the assistance of the people of any other race or ethnicity.

This completely undermines the contributions that people of color have made to American culture: it was slaves who built the White House, after all. American culture: from food, to music, and to tradition would not exist without the influence of people of color. African Americans created hip hop and jazz, two of the most prominent genres of music. In fact, many European settlers would not have survived their first year in North America if it had not been for the guidance of the Native Americans; a minority group that has frequently been usurped by white americans. Clearly, wanting to live in a nation that consists of only white people, and thinking that this nation would not only survive but thrive beyond the nation that we have today, means that the Alternative Right believes that white people are supreme to others-- making them not only white nationalists, but clearly white supremacists. The history of this country has proven that separate but equal is not equal. Historically, this has been so glaringly obvious that a panel

⁹ Perlman, Merrill. "The Key Difference between 'nationalists' and 'supremacists'." Columbia Journalism Review. August 14, 2019. Accessed May 10, 2019. https://www.cjr.org/language_corner/nationalist-supremacist.php.

¹⁰ Spencer, Richard B. "What It Means To Be Alt-Right – AltRight.com." AltRight.com. August 11, 2017. Accessed May 10, 2019. <https://altright.com/2017/08/11/what-it-means-to-be-alt-right/>.

of white judges were forced to overturn *Plessy v Ferguson* and rule that separate but equal is inherently unequal, specifically in schools but also in other public facilities. If schools cannot be separate and equal, it is impossible that entire nations can be separate but equal. In the definition of the word “white nationalist”, Merriam-Webster says that a white nationalist is one who “espouses white supremacy and advocates enforced racial segregation”. If the very definition of white nationalism mentions white supremacy, it is probable that nationalism and supremacy are inherently intertwined and that nationalists are indeed, supremacists.

The Alt-Right online

The Alternative Right is now synonymous with the Internet. While it may seem that the movement resides in the deepest, darkest corners of the web, the reality is that they are actually found on open-sourced websites that anyone can become a member of, such as 4chan and Reddit. The internet allows for the unprecedented spread of information, and the Alternative Right has become extremely adept at using this tool in order to further their message. Even though formerly lighthearted mechanisms such as memes, “trolling”, and blogs, the Alt-Right movement has risen to national prominence.¹¹

Jesse Daniels theorizes that the Alternative Right is able to intentionally capitalize on a “colorblind” technology industry and utilize loopholes in technology to allow for an “algorithmic” rise of their movement.¹² While the idea that technology is capable of being racist seems outlandish, it is important to remember that technology reflects the biases of its creators, and that since minorities are underrepresented in fields such as development, technology is

¹¹ Heikkilä, Niko. "Online Antagonism of the Alt-Right in the 2016 Election." *European Journal of American Studies* 12, no. 2 (2017). doi:10.4000/ejas.12140.

¹² Daniels, Jessie. "The Algorithmic Rise of the “Alt-Right”." *Contexts* 17, no. 1 (2018): 60-65. doi:10.1177/1536504218766547.

capable of being effectively racist. One particular example that illustrates the technology field's diversity problem is a soap dispenser that would work for light colored skin, but not dark colored skin. It is theorized that the dispenser uses an optic sensor to detect when a hand is underneath-- and cheaper sensors can struggle to identify dark skin from its surrounding.¹³ This indicates that the team that developed the dispenser did not have representation from people of color. If they had proper representation, they would have likely caught this bug-- since they did not, this flaw was overlooked and the product was sold with a perfectly preventable imperfection.

Clearly, it is very possible for technology to be effectively racist, and as was previously discussed, the white supremacist movement has a history of capitalizing on new technology to promulgate their message. The technology that Daniels discusses particularly as having these implicit biases lies within the algorithms that power the internet. The Alt-Right is known for its use of the internet, and the white supremacist movement is known for its ability to capitalize on new technology, so it would follow that the Alternative Right is particularly skilled at exploiting loopholes in an inherently racist and virtually ubiquitous technology. The idea that race is coded into these platforms allows those seeking confirmation for their racist beliefs to be instantly validated and allows new white nationalists to be connected with the movement's seasoned veterans.¹⁴

The exploitation of algorithms is not the only strategy that the Alternative Right uses to promote their ideology. Perhaps the best example of the alt-right using other virtual tools to further their message lies within their appropriation of Pepe the Frog. Pepe, seemingly a

¹³ Fussell, Sidney. "Why Can't This Soap Dispenser Identify Dark Skin?" Gizmodo. August 17, 2017. Accessed May 10, 2019. <https://gizmodo.com/why-cant-this-soap-dispenser-identify-dark-skin-1797931773>.

¹⁴ Daniels, Jessie. "The Algorithmic Rise of the "Alt-Right"." *Contexts* 17, no. 1 (2018): 60-65. doi:10.1177/1536504218766547.

lighthearted cartoon character, became a subcultural online phenomenon-- particularly on 4chan, which is a known Alternative Right breeding ground. To many who have not had exposure to the Alternative Right, their message, and their use of memes, the idea that a meme is racist seems ridiculous. Though the Alt-Right is unabashed in their message, this perception is beneficial to them because it makes those who oppose them seem weak. The left wingers who call Pepe racist seem like the “snowflakes” the right wing, and especially the Alternative Right, like to characterize them as, and the mainstream conservatives who denounce the meme seem old and out-of-touch with the younger generation. Again, those who are unfamiliar with the context surrounding Pepe find it ridiculous that a cartoon could be racist, and it makes those who oppose the Alternative Right seem overly sensitive.

Subculture is hard to describe because it evolves so quickly and can become layered with many different contexts, all of which are necessary in order to understand it. For instance, a popular image among the Alternative Right is Donald Trump as Pepe the Frog. To many, this image has little to no meaning. However, to those who understand that Pepe has been appropriated by the white nationalist movement, and also understand that the white nationalist movement zealously supports Donald Trump, that particular meme is almost like a calling card. Since this imagery requires so much context to understand, those “get it” are likely to agree with the movement to begin with. Those who do not care about the movement and do not agree with it are less likely to put in the effort to research the context, and as a result are more likely to dismiss the image-- scrolling by it without a second thought, perhaps due to the fact that the internet provides a never ending stream of information, and that as a result one cannot expect to understand every reference.

This subculture creates a form of intergroup bias: if you are a member of the Alternative Right, you are in on the joke and you are a member of the group. Otherwise, you are not-- you are an other. The Alternative Right, in this aspect, forms a sense of community online. This is promulgated through online forums such as 4chan and in threads such as “subreddits” on Reddit, where users can enter a search term and be instantly connected with many like-minded individuals. This also creates a great sense of confirmation bias, because users immediately find page after page of those who have a similar beliefs to them. As a result, they have no reason to question their beliefs, which in turn makes them retreat further into their beliefs, become more stubborn, and refuse to even consider other points of view. This intergroup bias leads the Alternative Right to believe that they are, in fact, superior to those who do not think the same way that they do. Those who detest the Alt-Right are, in fact, just weaker than they are. The Alt-Right believes that the only reason others do not agree with their beliefs is because those “others” are too sensitive to see that ethno-states and white nationalism are actually the best thing for this nation. Because of their confirmation bias, they are able to dismiss every argument against this as liberal, oversensitive whining.

Without the internet, it is unlikely that the Alternative Right would have experienced the boom that they did, whereas much of the growth of the movement came about because of the strategic use of the flow of information that the internet provides. The Alt Right is able to successfully and strategically use the internet, its algorithms, and its allowance for the fast and wide promulgation of information to garner a following, and at the same time, garner national attention.

The Alternative Right and the 2016 election

Though the Alternative Right has existed for over a decade, it was not until the 2016 election that they came onto many people's radar. This is because for the first time, their movement was validated by an outlandish presidential candidate. In fact, for the first time, a candidate directly espoused their beliefs, even reposting images directly from Alternative Right sources on social media. As a result, the movement reached a new all-time high because they were validated by someone with a large following and a large amount of national prominence. They became a particularly loud and antagonistic faction of his following, and began to hail him as a sort of Hitler-esque figure. Their movement would begin to call Donald Trump their "Glorious Leader", and they reacted positively to his dogwhistle racism and xenophobia¹⁵, tactics that have been successful for candidates such as Richard Nixon in the past. Seeing as their ancestors had supported Joseph McCarthy on his Red Scare crusades, it would follow that the Alt Right would support a candidate who uses scare tactics that are similar to McCarthy's. Both Senator McCarthy and Donald Trump rose to prominence by making shocking yet unfounded claims that created fear. McCarthy made people fear Communists; Trump made people fear Immigrants. Ironically, those who spent so much time criticising liberals for celebrating "know-nothing celebrities"¹⁶ in politics found their own celebrity to celebrate.

Using their typical online tactics such as memes, the Alternative Right proved to be some of Donald Trump's most vehement supporters. When Trump retweeted an image of Hillary Clinton surrounded by Jewish stars with the caption "The Most Corrupt Candidate Ever", the Alt-Right celebrated this as a victory-- a candidate who was willing to go along with their racist and xenophobic tactics; a validation of their beliefs. When Hillary Clinton called Trump and his

¹⁵ Heikkilä, Niko. "Online Antagonism of the Alt-Right in the 2016 Election." *European Journal of American Studies* 12, no. 2 (2017). doi:10.4000/ejas.12140.

¹⁶ Ibid.

supporters a “basket of deplorables”, the Alt Right quickly turned this term into a meme and a rallying cry, much like Elizabeth Warren’s supporters did with “nevertheless she persisted”. In their own words, the Alternative Right felt that they had “willed Donald Trump to victory”.¹⁷ The Alternative Right and Donald Trump seemed to be in a symbiotic relationship: Donald Trump validated their movement, and in return the Alt-Right supported him all the way to the White House, where they were rewarded with the appointment of Steve Bannon. Bannon was the head of the Alt-Right news source, Breitbart, was heavily involved in Trump’s campaign, and would become Trump’s chief strategist. Having an Alternative Right leader in the White House was a large victory for the movement and it landed them a sense of political legitimacy that they had formerly not possessed.

The Alt-Right cannot call themselves Nazis because the term, and the movement it represents, are repulsed by the American people. However, they are not afraid to make thinly veiled references to their German counterparts. At an Alternative Right conference, NPI President Richard Spencer was videotaped as saying “Hail Trump! Hail Victory! Hail our people!” while the (white) attendees of the conference raised their right hands in a Nazi salute, the same one that was used to hail Hitler during his reign over Germany. Spencer also referred to the media as “Lügenpresse”, otherwise known as the German word for “lying press”, which was a term used during World War II to discredit any media that went against Hitler’s message.¹⁸

In relatively recent memory, the term “nazi” has been used to describe more menial things: with feminazi meaning a radical feminist and grammar nazi meaning one who is particular about following the rules of grammar. As a result, the American people are becoming

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

more and more desensitized to the horrors of the holocaust, and while calling oneself a Nazi without any qualifications is still socially unacceptable, the Alternative Right has been able to hint at Nazi ideals without any serious repercussions. This is a result of the Alt-Right's ability to "shift the goal posts": meaning that they continually talk about things that are considered socially unacceptable, and in doing so they open up a dialogue. Conversations that were formerly taboo become less and less so, and eventually the entire realm of what is considered "okay" and what is not becomes shifted. While today one who refers to themselves as a Nazi would be harshly criticized, perhaps tomorrow the criticism will be slightly less harsh, and the day after it will be even less so until the American people become so desensitized to the horrors of the Holocaust that calling oneself a Nazi does not have the cultural connotation and the inherent tie to racism that it once did. This is proven through the jargon that the Alternative Right uses. If it walks like a Nazi and talks like a Nazi, perhaps it will one day become a Nazi. America cannot become desensitized to that.

The Alternative Right was re-energized when, after the Charlottesville white supremacist march, then-President Donald Trump chose to say that there were "bad people on both sides" and would not outright condemn the Alt-Right. This made the movement seem almost invincible: in Charlottesville they marched with tiki-torches, chanted racist sentiments, and raised their hands in the Nazi salute. One of the marchers even drove his car into a crowd of protesters, resulting in the death of Heather Heyer, whose last Facebook post was, fittingly, "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention."¹⁹

¹⁹Caron, Christina. "Heather Heyer, Charlottesville Victim, Is Recalled as 'a Strong Woman'." The New York Times. August 13, 2017. Accessed May 10, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/heather-heyer-charlottesville-victim.html>.

However, just as it seemed that the Alt-Right was invincible now it began to take a political toll on Donald Trump. As a result, he has started to disavow the Alternative Right. When confronted with Spencer's "Hail Trump" comments, the President said "Of course I condemn. I disavow and I condemn."²⁰, which is a stark contrast to his reaction to the Charlottesville march, which resulted in an actual fatality. The Alternative Right may have been influential in Donald Trump's victory, but it seems as though he does not feel he needs them anymore. Since they were previously in a symbiotic relationship, time will tell if the Alternative Right will continue to need Trump.

The Alternative Right's Focus on Race: The Alternative White?

The Alt-Right's entire movement seems to be entirely focused on race. If one google searches "who are the Alt-Right", the first result describes them as a "far white, white nationalist movement". All of the Alternative Right's ideas have something to do with race. They all seem to root from the idea that since white people founded the nation, America belongs to the white race.²¹ However, this disregards the fact that the nation's founders intentionally excluded women and people of color-- it is not as if they were given the opportunity to participate and chose not to, leaving all of the work to the white men while those who were not white and not male shirked their social responsibilities. This logic also excludes the fact that if the nation truly belongs to those who founded it, the Alternative Right should be just as prejudiced against females as they are against people of color. While the Alt-Right's also mistreats women and other oppressed groups, such as homosexuals, their primary focus and ideological center is clearly based on race.

²⁰ Heikkilä, Niko. "Online Antagonism of the Alt-Right in the 2016 Election." *European Journal of American Studies* 12, no. 2 (2017). doi:10.4000/ejas.12140.

²¹ Spencer, Richard B. "What It Means To Be Alt-Right – AltRight.com." AltRight.com. August 11, 2017. Accessed May 10, 2019. <https://altright.com/2017/08/11/what-it-means-to-be-alt-right/>.

If the “conservative instinct” is to prefer homogeneity over diversity²², the Alternative Right takes this to the next level, believing in segregation to the degree of ethno-states.

While some Alternative Right intellectuals claim that their movement is more than just a rebranding of the white nationalist movement, the face of the movement, Richard Spencer, has said that the ideas about race, such as the idea that some races are better at some things than others, are the ideological core of the Alt-Right.²³ They also use words like “identitarianism” to describe their movement. They define identitarianism as being about difference and the way that different groups of people express themselves through their cultures. However, when one looks deeper in these ideologies, they find that they are centered on ideas such as “race realism” and “human biodiversity” -- essentially, they are still centered on race. They may try to mask their ideology by assigning different words to describe it, but the definition reminds the same. The Alternative Right is centered around the focal point of race.

Since the nineteen sixties, America has seen an unprecedented surge in the Civil Rights movement. Minorities today hold more rights than ever before, and there are still strong movements to make even more social progress. However, progress generally has some kind of societal backlash. For instance, after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of the 1960s, Southern Democrats reacted by re-aligning themselves with the Republican Party. It could be that the rise of the white nationalist movement is a result to the equality movements that have characterized our generation. As one group gains equality, the group that formerly benefitted from that group’s oppression can frequently misinterpret their loss of privilege as oppression. The Alternative

²² Bokhari, Allum, and Milo Yiannopoulos. "An Establishment Conservative's Guide To The Alt-Right." *Breitbart*. March 30, 2016. Accessed May 15, 2019.

<https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/>.

²³ Heikkilä, Niko. "Online Antagonism of the Alt-Right in the 2016 Election." *European Journal of American Studies* 12, no. 2 (2017). doi:10.4000/ejas.12140.

Right is a reaction to the racial equality movement, and they capitalize on white people's inherent racial resentment in order to gain popularity.

The idea of white resentment is closely tied to the backlash thesis: white people harbor resentment against minorities because they feel like minorities are receiving undue benefits, such as affirmative action. These people do not think that they are racist, rather, they see certain systems as being racist against white people²⁴. They hear "Black Lives Matter" and think "All Lives Matter" and do not understand why some systems give advantages to minorities. Minorities have been oppressed in the past, they think, but we have come a long way since then. However, they fear to speak these ideas out loud because they do not want to be labeled as being racist. The Alternative Right capitalizes on this resentment by validating it. They, at the very least, use subtly racist tactics to confirm and foster white resentment, thereby growing their movement.

Conclusion

The Alternative Right feeds off of attention, but just like ignoring playground bullies does not make them go away, the Alt-right cannot be disregarded into obliteration. Simply, their tactics are too loud. When Ghostbusters premiered with an all-female team, the Alt-Right was quick to attack the only black woman on the cast: Leslie Jones²⁵. Why they chose her and not one of the white women to attack is clearly based off of the color of her skin-- the Alt-Right's entire ideology is based off of race, it is obviously going to play a factor in who they choose as their target of the kind of bullying that has become typical of the Alternative Right. This creates a catch twenty-two for the media: if they cover the hateful messages that the Alt-Right circulates,

²⁴ Anderson, Carol. "The Policies of White Resentment (Carol Anderson)." Stuart Center / CEDC. Accessed May 10, 2019. <https://stuartcenter.org/resource/policies-white-resentment-carol-anderson>.

²⁵ Ibid.

they risk promulgating their message, but ignoring them will not make them go away and has its own potential consequences, such as the possibility that the media source will be accused of bias.

They take pride on “trolling”, where they intentionally provoke emotional responses from other internet users by making remarks that are clearly inflammatory. This trolling makes it hard to pin down exactly what their ideology is because it can be difficult to determine exactly what they are and are not joking about. By muddying the waters with half-joking inflammatory posts and masking their ideological core with misnomers and intellectual publications, the Alternative Right is almost like a dangerous chameleon. It becomes so easy to dismiss their ideology as being just more of a raucous on the internet and as juvenile behavior that will have no real impact because it will be dismissed by everyone else, too. When they are dismissed, the impact that they have on the American political system is completely underestimated. The Alternative Right has proven their political mettle with the 2016 election, and they should not be underestimated.

The Alt-Right has been successful this far in doing what conservatives have been previously unable to do: they are unapologetic in their message and they refuse to dilute their message to make it more palatable for the general population. They think that establishment conservatives bend too easily and care too much what people think. Instead of caring what others think, the Alt-Right promulgates a message that draws in people who are already likely to agree with their message while dismissing the others as snowflakes. In doing so, they have been able to shift the narratives of racial issues, and as a result shift what is and what is not acceptable in the national dialogue.

Even though Donald Trump has begun to dismiss the Alternative Right, their movement is unlikely to die out anytime soon. Though he has said that he denounces them, the 2020 election is coming up rapidly, and it would not be surprising to see the President begin to walk back his comments and embrace the Alternative Right once again if he sees them as allies that he needs in order to win the election. Their movement is new, their utilization of the internet is somewhat unprecedented, but their message is not. The Alt-Right is the latest in a long lineage of racism in America, and they will continue to be studied as their ancestors were.