



## **Metajournalistic Discourse And Reporting Policies On White Nationalism**

By: **Gregory Perreault** and Kimberly Meltzer

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**Perreault G**, Meltzer K. Metajournalistic Discourse and Reporting Policies on White Nationalism. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*. January 2022. doi:10.1177/01968599211072452. Publisher version of record available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/01968599211072452>

# Metajournalistic Discourse and Reporting Policies on White Nationalism

Journal of Communication Inquiry

1–21

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DOI: 10.1177/01968599211072452

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## Abstract

In 2016 and 2017, several newsrooms presented guidelines for using the term “alt-right” in the wake of events such as the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (USA) and the US presidential campaign of Donald Trump. This study analyzed metajournalistic discourse regarding the use of the term “alt-right” including internal newsroom policies and updates to newsroom manuals and externally published public discourse. The analysis tracks how news organizations and academic and trade journalism associations participated in discourse about the use of “alt-right,” and their peers’ policies around use of the term. The study finds that discourse shifted from requiring contextualization of the term in the first wave to requiring journalists to define the term or not use it at all in the second wave that began with the Charlottesville rally. Journalism organizations acknowledged, at times endorsed, and used each other’s statements in developing their own understandings as an interpretive community and a community of practice.

## Keywords

metajournalistic discourse, coverage of hate groups, reporting policies, coverage of hate speech, journalists as interpretive communities

## Introduction

During and since the 2016 U.S. Presidential election campaign, hate speech and white supremacist rhetoric have become more public and visible in the United States and

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elsewhere in the world. In particular, this speech has been espoused by, and associated with, groups that have either self-labeled or have been labeled by others as ideologically “alt-right,” short for alternative right. However, a variety of different understandings existed about the definition of alt-right. The term “alt-right,” short for “alternative right” was coined by Richard Spencer, the president of the National Policy Institute, in 2010. Spencer is known for leading a rally in Washington DC following the election of Trump in which members “raised their arms in Nazi salutes and declared ‘Hail, Trump’” (Greene, 2017). According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the term refers to a “set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that ‘white identity’ is under attack by multicultural forces using ‘political correctness’ and ‘social justice’ to undermine white people and ‘their’ civilization” (Southern Poverty Law Center). The use of the term “alt-right,” is contested among journalists in part because it grants white supremacists the power to name themselves and provides the veil of a new phenomenon to disguise long-standing racism (Mohajer, 2017). Journalists would want to report on white supremacist or nationalist groups given a sense of the danger posed by their beliefs to an open and inclusive public sphere (O’Donnell, 2009). Yet journalists have a history of being leveraged by such groups who view news reporting as a potential platform for their views (Perreault et al., 2020a, 2021; Perreault & Paul, 2019).

This research examines an exceptionally challenging form of reporting—how journalists cover white supremacist and white nationalist groups. Yet part of the challenge is in the terminology itself. This study explores how legacy news outlets discussed “alt-right” when the term was applied through a qualitative textual analysis of their meta-journalistic discourse and the policies developed to guide the use of the term between 2016 and 2018.

## **Background**

The U.S. presidential campaign of Donald Trump was notable for the legitimacy it granted to white supremacists. This is in part because the campaign platform spoke to many of the interests of the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis and the Patriot movement—he called for a hard stance on immigration and used classic racist language in articulating the need to keep Muslims and Mexicans out of America. For example, he referred to Africans as coming from “shithole” nations, and argued that after seeing America, Nigerians would never “go back to their huts” (Graham et al., 2019). Whereas prior administrations had explicitly denounced white nationalists, in numerous instances, Trump’s personal Twitter account retweeted posts by the alt-right (Sainato, 2017). Journalists amplified these posts in their reporting of them, which fits with the activities of journalism historically (Scharlott, 1988). Far from having an innately oppositional stance to white nationalism, journalism has been complicit with racism and provided a platform for it (Baugut, 2020; Scharlott, 1988). Journalists have struggled to cover pro-diversity protests (e.g. Black Lives

Matter)—in that journalists too often cover such events “from the perspective of elite power holders” (McLeod, 2020). Hence, coverage of those protests “continues to reinforce stereotypes of black incivility and denigrate the legitimacy of black outrage” (Jackson, 2020).

Less than a year after Trump’s election, the white nationalist Unite the Right rally occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia, August 11–12, 2017. Many attendees, whose views more explicitly reflected neo-Nazis, Confederates, and Ku Klux Klan, operated under the self-identified term “alt-right.” The rally at times turned violent toward counter protesters, with one white nationalist ramming his car into a crowd of people—killing one person and injuring 19 others. Trump attracted negative attention during this time for refusing to denounce those who had gathered for the rally and arguing that there was “hatred, violence and bigotry on many sides” (Merica, 2017).

This brought discussions of the alt-right back into news industry and mainstream discussion continuing through coverage of the mass shooting in Las Vegas, Nevada on October 1 of that year. In short, public discussions on the alt-right then appeared largely in two waves, and this is when news organizations conducted policy-making regarding both reporting on white nationalist groups who identified as “alt-right” as well as the use of the term “alt-right” itself. Policy making occurred amidst mediated discussion of the “alt-right” ideology in which journalists engaged in a sort of virtual water cooler chatter—known as a metajournalistic discourse—through their editorials, blog posts and stylebook revisions.

## Metajournalistic Discourse

Discourse in which journalism is the object of discussion itself, or in which journalists discursively negotiate their interpretation and coverage of outside objects, has been conceptualized as metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016). It also includes discourse which involves both of those realms. Metajournalistic discourse operates under the assumption that journalism serves as “a practice capable of supplying valid knowledge of events in the world” (Carlson, 2016, p. 350) and emerges from interpretive processes among journalists who have to make sense of the world around them as well as situate their role within it. The discourse serves the “double-duty” of providing meaning for the journalistic community and defining journalism to the public (Berkowitz, 2000). Carlson’s (2016) metajournalistic discourse presents a discursive grounding for three interrelated theoretical elements: paradigm repair, journalists as interpretive communities, and boundary work. The latter two of these theoretical elements of metajournalistic discourse reflect integral processes undertaken in the journalistic policy making surrounding the “alt-right.” This section will explain the nature of this theoretical perspective and its elements to contextualize the policies.

In one element of metajournalistic discourse represented here—journalists as interpretive communities—Zelizer (1993) conceptualizes communities of journalists who discursively articulate, negotiate, and maintain the norms, and values of their craft.

Through this interpretive process, journalists work together to interpret and categorize actors like the alt-right (Carlson, 2016). The individual text is embedded in “larger discourses about news” (364). These discourses are valuable for reifying established values in journalism (Vos et al., 2012). Among these values, the value of objectivity remains particularly resilient. In the United States, journalistic autonomy is “supposedly protected by...objectivity” among other norms (Tandoc et al., 2013, p. 551) yet Tandoc et al. (2013) argue that the perceived audience remains influential in journalistic coverage in reality. So, in some cases journalists’ objectivity value appears as a sort of “objectivity trap” – journalists will be labeled as biased by one side of a political issue to threaten journalists into offering falsely “balanced” coverage between two competing ideas that are not equally valid (Craft & Davis, 2016, p. 216). This results in a distorted public presentation of the issue. The writings of Black journalists including Wesley Lowery and Nikole Hannah-Jones have called new attention to the problematic nature of objectivity: “the mainstream has allowed what it considers objective truth to be decided almost exclusively by white reporters and their mostly white bosses. And those selective truths have been calibrated to avoid offending the sensibilities of white readers” (Lowery, 2020). Lowery writes that he has “been among a chorus of mainstream journalists who have called for our industry to abandon the appearance of objectivity as the aspirational journalistic standard, and for reporters instead to focus on being fair and telling the truth, as best as one can, based on the given context and available facts.” Far from being a new argument, Lowery writes that scores of journalists across generations have advocated this approach. Explaining her own approach to journalism, Hannah-Jones (in Howard, 2017) said, “I’ve never subscribed to the view that the journalist is this objective observer. I’m not, and none of us are. Every decision we make, who we’re going to talk to, who we’re not, how we frame a story, where we place the story in the paper, whether we give that story 30 s or five minutes, these are all subjective decisions, they’re all value judgments.” In the context of hate speech, the objectivity trap could appear as a tendency to report on left-wing extremist organizations – such as “Antifa,” the anti-fascist movement – as equivalent to the alt-right. This would lead to a similar distortion by diminishing the harmfulness of the latter.

In another element of metajournalistic discourse analyzed here—boundary work—journalists operate to discern appropriate practices from inappropriate practices. All professions engage in some degree of boundary work through disputes with neighboring professions about where certain work fits (see Banjac & Hanusch, 2020; Belair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018; Perreault & Bell, 2020; Meltzer, 2019). These disputes are critical for understanding how “distinctions such as professional/amateur, producer/user, and journalist/non-journalist are forged, maintained, and continuously reconfigured” (Lewis, 2012, p. 10). These barriers are not static but discursively constructed (Carlson & Berkowitz, 2014; Perreault et al., 2020b) and reflect mindsets that “inform how news is produced and consumed” (Carlson, 2016, p. 360). Among all of those who practice journalism, many communities of practice exist and cohere around common interests and practices. The organizations who engaged in discourse

about the “alt-right” can be said to constitute a loose and informal journalistic community of practice (Meltzer & Martik, 2017). Journalism covering hate groups, through this framework, could be considered an essential democratic activity (Perreault et al., 2020a) and a “significant battleground for the discursive struggle over journalistic boundaries” (Johnson & Kelling, 2018, p. 3).

Metajournalistic discourse surrounding boundary work typically begins with the identification of deviance. This identification is aimed at reaffirming “what is acceptable and what is professionally deviant” (Carlson & Berkowitz, 2014, p. 390) and this is done through developing discursive narratives aimed at pinpointing unethical practices to expel them from the field (Johnson & Kelling, 2018). That said, Hallin (1986, 1994) argues that the boundary work conducted by journalists is “tied to the degree of consensus among political elites” (11). Hallin (1994) presents a model of three spheres, from inner to outer: (1) a sphere of consensus, (2) a sphere of legitimate controversy, and (3) a sphere of deviance. This model describes the social behavior of journalists, and thus, the spheres have gradations within them and indistinct boundaries between them (Hallin, 1994). When consensus is agreed-upon and widespread, journalism is less active and more likely to reinforce and maintain the consensus. But when the consensus breaks down, journalism becomes “increasingly critical and diverse in the viewpoints it represents” given that it is harder for political elites to control it (Hallin, 1994, p. 54). As a topic moves from the consensus sphere to the legitimate controversy sphere, Hallin (1994) argues, journalists adjust their reporting norms. At first, they simply recite official statements, then journalists balance statements with responses from opposing groups, and eventually finally, they undertake investigative reporting to question how official sources have represented the topic.

Coming back to the centrality of objectivity as an organizing norm emphasized in journalism, the objectivity norm “guides journalists to separate facts from values and to report only the facts” and prescribes reporting that is “cool, rather than emotional, in tone” (Schudson, 2001, p. 150). The journalist then is required to report on news without slanting or shaping it. One can readily see how such a norm would be difficult in emotionally charged reporting such as that on white nationalists, and not provide the “moral clarity” that Lowery (2020) argues is needed. According to Vos et al. (2012), journalists voiced misgivings about the norm almost as soon as it was introduced, recognizing there would be issues in which journalists would naturally appear slanted just by using the most accurate information and terminology. While some journalists are still quick to defend the objectivity norm, they do so with a recognition of its limitations given an acknowledgement that the world is “increasingly complex and needed to be not only reported but explained” (Schudson, 2001, p. 164).

## The Alt-Right

The term “alt-right” was coined in 2010 by white nationalist Richard Spencer, who launched a webzine *The Alternative Right* to grant a more mainstream-palatable terminology to white nationalist ideology. The term was distilled to “alt-right” and

popularized through anonymous web forum 4chan and far-right group /pol/. The group's rise to public perception came in part through the 2014 GamerGate controversy, in which harassment and doxxing were used to resist increasing diversity in the gaming community (Perreault & Vos, 2018, 2020). Alt-right differs from prior white supremacist ideologies because of its online presence—social media has been integral to its growth—and because of its discursive outreach to mainstream discourse (Southern Poverty Law Center). Taylor (2020) notes that alt-right “is an amorphous term that encompasses a spectrum of far-right actors that includes white nationalists, ‘race realists,’ neo-Nazis, far-right academics, esoteric antimodernists, and the misogynist manosphere” (Taylor, 2020, p. 15). Taylor (2020) uses the terms “far-right” and “alt-right” interchangeably, given that—as Winter (2019) argues—the “alt-right” is simply Spencer's attempt to mainstream a broader set of far-right ideologies.

While “white nationalist” is sometimes used synonymously with the term “white supremacist,” according to the Columbia Journalism Review (Perlman, 2017), white nationalists claim that “the essence of the United States as a nation is carried exclusively in the social, cultural, economic, and political practices of early European settlers” and have the “goal of ensuring white people exercise power over people of color” (Berlet & Sunshine, 2019, p. 484).

Hartzell (2018) argues with her rhetorical analysis that “alt-right” rhetoric is positioned as a rhetorical bridge between white nationalism and mainstream public discourse. Similarly, Figenschou and Ihlebaek (2019) argue that the rhetorical strategies used by far-right alternative media are predominantly aimed at criticizing and undermining mainstream journalism. Several scholars have noted the rise in populist journalism and media discourse cross-nationally (Hellmueller & Revers, 2017; Jacobs, 2017). Others warn of the dangers of conflating “right wing,” “populist,” and “alt-right” (Piggot, 2016). While populist may mean anti-elite and anti-establishment, “alt-right” connotes racist and hateful beliefs and speech (Southern Poverty Law Center). The ambiguous nature of the term “populist journalism” itself enables it to be deployed in reference to progressive or white-nationalist discourse. While there are distinct connotations to the terms, there also meaningful reasons “to use more than one label from time to time or even simultaneously” when describing activities related to the “alt-right” (Hainsworth, 2008, p. 9).

While some studies examine how journalists cover groups like the “alt-right” in the United States and find that their struggles are in part a result of the expectations for speed in reporting, lack of training and fear (Johnson et al., 2021; Perreault et al., 2020a, 2021), related research focuses on journalistic coverage in other Western countries (Baugut, 2020, 2021; Perreault & Bell, 2020). In Germany, Baugut (2020) found that Jews perceived that local journalism actually fostered the thinking of antisemitic groups. However, as Baugut (2021, p. 14) argues, German journalists seek to combat this through numerous role applications depending on the context of reporting, and furthermore the “Journalists’ personal perspectives as citizens may motivate them to act in line with their political convictions even when this requires deviation from what they perceive to be the general task of their profession.” In other words,

journalists were willing to depart from their norms, to more actively work in the interest of targeted Jews. The stakes are quite high given that a survey of 15 countries across Europe indicated that the mere exposure to populist—a social identity developed in regards to a *dangerous other*—messaging had the ability to encourage support for populist ideas (Hameleers et al., 2021). As Wolfgang (2021) argues “White nationalists seem particularly capable of rallying supporters and using mainstream spaces to spread their message... but the opposition appears to be less capable of responding in kind in order to limit the spread of hate” (16).

## Journalistic Policy Making

Policy making represents an explicit way that journalists “place the broad sweep of aspirations and values set out in ethical codes firmly in the context of their day-to-day work” (White, 1976, p. 3). A policy is a way of articulating, broadly, what a group “ought to do rather than...what they actually do” (Howlett, 2005, p. 32). Yet often the latter comes into the metadiscourse in articulating the former; in other words, current practices have a way of informing “ought to” future practices (Rebillard & Touboul, 2010). The discourse regarding the “alt-right” is not the first-time journalists have puzzled over the use of particular terms in policy development. In the past, journalists have publicly negotiated the use of the terms “torture,” (Bennett et al., 2006; Yuhas, 2014) and “terrorism” (BBC Editorial Guidelines; Beckett, 2016) in their coverage. News organizations also issue policies or guidelines from time to time in response to new situations or challenges, such as the Associated Press’s (2017) and *The New York Times*’ (2017) guidelines on social media use by employees, and the AP’s style change to capitalizing the B in Black in news reports (Daniszewski, 2021).

Hence, this study sought to answer the following three research questions:

**RQ 1:** How do journalists discursively construct policies for reporting on the ‘alt-right?’

**RQ 2:** How do journalists discursively define the term ‘alt-right?’

**RQ 3:** How do journalists conduct boundary work regarding the ‘alt-right?’

## Method

Given that the “alt-right” was a subject of deep concern among journalists following the election of U.S. President Donald Trump and more acutely following the protests and violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, we were interested in understanding how journalists discursively constructed policies regarding the definition of the “alt-right,” and policies regarding the coverage of the alt-right.



With an eye to understanding this, we looked at the metajournalistic discourse that occurred surrounding the policy making during the 2016 Presidential Election and the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia that began on August 11, 2017. We gathered metajournalistic discourse following Trump's nomination as the Republican candidate for president—May 3, 2016—to where public discussion following Charlottesville turned to the Las Vegas shooting on October 1, 2017. We noted additional pieces of discourse through August 2018 (including the AEJMC policy). We decided on this time frame in order to gather a mix of large media events (the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, Unite the Right Rally, and the Las Vegas Shooting), and because this is when many of the elite news organizations first put policies on the books regarding the term. Initially, Google searches were performed with the terms “journalism” and “alt-right” to identify the key moments in policy making regarding alt-right coverage and to identify the key policies put in place following both the election of Donald Trump, his subsequent hire of Steve Bannon, who described his news organization as catering to the alt-right, and then the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville. In keeping with prior research on metajournalistic discourse, we sought to draw the data out of “industry publications and general news sites” (Vos & Singer, 2016, p. 2). The database Factiva was then searched for the top 10 circulation newspapers<sup>1</sup> in the United States using the term “alt-right.” This returned 522 articles. In addition to the journalism organizations who published articles about the term “alt-right,” the journalistic metadiscourse also included three trade and academic journalism associations/organizations, The Poynter Institute, AEJMC, and Columbia Journalism Review. After duplicates were removed, this provided a dataset of 430 individual articles. Out of this complete dataset, the vast majority of what was published was commentary on the “alt-right”—as opposed to metajournalism on the reporting process related to the “alt-right.” We focused on the original journalistic policies and published works that explicitly referenced those journalistic policies. This winnowing process created a sample of 22 pieces of discourse related to policy making on the “alt-right.”

Both researchers engaged in a process of qualitative textual analysis using open coding and an iterative constant-comparison method (Strauss, 1987, in Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) in which we read the saved articles and took notes on themes present related to the research questions. While the constant comparative method is often associated with grounded theory, Fram (2013) argues that constant comparative analysis is well suited to both etic coding, driven by theory and literature, and emic coding, driven by themes that emerge from data analysis.

The primary news organizations whose policies about alt-right are examined in this study — Associated Press, *The Washington Post*, NPR, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wired* — can be characterized as mainstream and published pieces that articulated their reporting positions following the Trump campaign in the United States (Howlett, 2005, p. 32; Goodwyn, 2017; Jervis, 2016). We conceptualized the policies as internal—indicated through newsroom policies and updates to newsroom manuals, and external—indicated through published public discourse. Additional organizations who followed-up, summarized, or explained the policies from the first six —*Politico*,

*Vox*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Guardian*, also participated in interpretive and metajournalistic discourse examined within this study (Frosch et al., 2017; Jonsson, 2017). We included a single *Guardian* article from March 2018 in our sample because *Guardian US* was part of a joint project with American news channel WNYC, on how to improve coverage of white supremacists. In addition, journalism-focused non-profits such as the Poynter Institute and the Association for Education in Journalism Mass Communication also developed policies at this time. It was clear that journalism organizations, including news organizations, were engaging in discourse with, and about, each other.

## Findings and Discussion

### *The Creation of Policies for Reporting About “alt-Right” During the First Wave: Contextualize*

RQ 1 raises the question of how journalists discursively constructed policies for reporting on the alt-right. The dominant policy presented through both formal and informal means is that the term ‘alt-right’—when applied—needs to be explained to avoid normalizing hate (Griffiths, 2016, November 28).

In the wake of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, numerous news organizations quickly issued policies related to the “alt-right.” On November 14, 2016, National Public Radio revised its Ethics Handbook to include a memo “Guidance on References to the Alt-Right” (Memmott, 2016). On November 28, the Associated Press issued their policy in a public blogpost “Writing about the ‘alt-right:’ offering what has become a central definition of the term as a “mix of racism, white nationalism and populism” (Daniszewski, 2016, November 28.)

In between these two publication dates, news organizations including *Politico*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today* and *The Washington Post* published news articles discursively engaging these policies and providing background on the alt-right. Particularly noteworthy was the November 22 profile of Richard Spencer by *The Washington Post* which drew more than 2600 reader comments—many asking *The Washington Post* to stop referring to white nationalists as ‘alt-right.’ As reported by *The New York Times* (Ember, 2016, November 28), this caused *The Post* to circulate a set of style guidelines in the newsroom the next day that explicitly clarified when and how the term could be used and “defined it in part as ‘a small, far-right movement that seeks a whites-only state’ whose adherents are ‘known for espousing racist, anti-Semitic and sexist points of view.’”

### *A Shift in Reporting Policies About “alt-Right” After the Charlottesville Violence*

A second set of policies emerged following the events at Charlottesville. Charlottesville caused news organizations to react quickly in trying to determine how to report on the

ideology and the groups that self-identified using the term. Much of the policy making and discourse surrounding these policies reflects the context of the event. At the time, U.S. President Donald Trump chided reporters for reporting on the alt-right while not balancing the story by reporting on the alt-left—who are at times described as “antifa” or “anti-fascists,” according to the *Washington Post* (Heim, 2017, August 11). He noted “you had a group on one side that was bad and you had a group on the other side that was also very violent” as reported in *Wired* (Lapowsky, 2017, August 15). In *Wired*, the journalist largely eschewed this in their policy noting the “false equivalency” of comparing “white supremacists and neo-Nazis to the people who endeavor to stop them” (Lapowsky, 2017, August 15). Similarly, during the Charlottesville events, the Poynter Institute, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication and *The Wall Street Journal* all offered policies; in addition, *The New York Times* published a glossary of terms.

In the metajournalistic discourse in *Wired*, the journalist did largely perceive it as fair to cover the alt-right in terms of their relationship with the President given that the President “appointed leaders of that movement...to his staff” (Lapowsky, 2017, August 15). In *Wired* magazine, the author represented much of the metajournalistic discourse through her argument that covering the alt-right represented an ethical challenge in that there is “no right approach” (Lapowsky, 2017, August 15). Journalists found themselves in the conundrum of either ignoring “these groups and risk allowing a potential public threat to go unreported” or to “risk amplifying their message” by shining “too bright a light on them” (Lapowsky, 2017, August 15). *Columbia Journalism Review* notes that by shining a light on them, journalists “risk turning a diffuse online subculture into a solid-state political movement” (Gourarie, 2016, August 30). The *Guardian* highlighted what it deemed successful ways to cover white supremacist and white nationalist groups, from “follow the money stories to investigations of lesser-known, extremely violent groups” (Beckett & Brenneman, 2018, March 6). If the press made a misstep in covering the “alt-right,” journalists largely perceived and recommended that the American press err on the side of overexposure.

### *Use of the Term is Discouraged, but When Used, it Must be Defined*

The predominant policy news organizations promoted following the events of Charlottesville was that alt-right was a term that needed to be defined “so that readers understand the specific viewpoints it encompasses,” as it was stated in the *New York Times* (Ember, 2016, November 28), and because “it is not well known and the term may exist primarily as a public relations device,” as noted in *POLITICO* (Griffiths, 2016, November 28). In the same *New York Times* article (Ember, 2016), a spokeswoman for the *Wall Street Journal* is quoted saying that the WSJ “prefers to be more precise about groups or individuals, reporting on their specific actions or statements.”

In developing their policies, journalists articulated concern on the shining of a spotlight on the alt-right in that it provides white nationalists with visibility that could only

increase their appeal; yet journalists were willing to do so to maintain objectivity, and avoid further accusations of being left-leaning “liberal media” in a polarized political climate. They mitigated that danger—or believe that they did—by emphasizing the need to clearly articulate for the reader what the “alt-right” represents in every story. Yet never articulated in the policies—or in journalists’ metajournalistic discourse regarding the policies—is that the journalists had already granted power to white nationalists to some degree by using the term. Despite the fact that the term was developed by a white nationalist—and at various times in the data, the journalists identified this—they nevertheless used a term that by design was meant to normalize and make more palatable these dangerous ideologies of hate.

RQ 2 raises the question of how journalists discursively define the alt-right. Most metajournalism reflected the definition of one journalist that the alt-right is the “same old hate...just with trendier packaging” (Nuzzi, 2016, November 23).

The AP noted that the alt-right term may be used loosely—as in modified with phrases such as “self-described” or “so-called alt-right”—as a way to avoid using the term “generically” (Daniszewski, 2016, November 28). Furthermore, the term must not be used without a definition, which they provided: “an offshoot of conservatism mixing racism, white nationalism and populism,” or, more simply, “a white nationalist movement.” That said, the Associated Press emphasized that although it should not be used generically this didn’t give a license for journalists to allow the group to define itself in that “We should... report their actions, associations, history and positions to reveal their actual beliefs and philosophy, as well as how others see them” (Daniszewski, 2016, November 28).

*The New York Times* created a glossary of far-right terminology following Charlottesville, in which they described the alt-right as having a goal to create a “white state” and destroy “‘leftism,’ which it calls ‘an ideology of death’” (Stack, 2017, August, 15). An opinion piece in the *Washington Post* by Olivia Nuzzi, who actually reports for other publications, described the “alt-right” as “burying racist and anti-Semitic ideas in fancy language” (Nuzzi, 2016, November 23). Furthermore Nuzzi (2016, November 23) notes in the *Post* piece, “if it salutes like a Nazi, you can safely call it one.” Yet Nuzzi, as with other journalists, argued that it is important to note that the alt-right is a “very American movement” and “it’s not hard to see how today’s alt-right has plenty to anchor itself to in the American story” (Nuzzi, 2016, November 23).

Other published accounts defined the alt-right in a range of ways stretching from a “domestic terrorist organization” (Novak, 2017, August 13) to a group equally committed to white supremacy as the “Ku Klux Klan or Neo-Nazis” (Kreiss & Mason, 2017, August 17) in<sup>2</sup> *The Washington Post* to a “loose constellation of far-right political groups that... uses Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube for recruiting and public broadcasting, Reddit and 4chan for lighthearted memes and trolling” in *The New York Times* (Roose, 2017, August 15). According to *The New York Times*, many newsrooms avoided the use of the term in favor of terms such as “white nationalism and far right” (Stack, 2017, August 15). Journalists often relied on other politicians to define “alt-right”—definitions that often reflected their response. For example, in an article for *USA Today*, Senator

Ben Sasse of Nebraska described the alt-right as “utterly revolting” and then-House Speaker Paul Ryan described it as a “scourge...to be confronted” (Williams, 2017, August 14).

The timeline of policy-making discussed in RQ 1 makes evident that there were two waves of policies and discussions by journalists about using the term “alt-right”: the Trump election and Charlottesville. In the time period between Trump’s presidential candidacy and before the Charlottesville riots in August 2017, journalistic policies and discourse focused on defining the term alt-right when it was used, and providing context. Beginning with the Charlottesville riots in August 2017, there was a noticeable shift in the focus of the discourse, arguing against the use of the term alt-right and recommending using the actual names of white supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan instead (Tompkins & McBride, 2017, August 12) to avoid “quoting inflammatory sources that promote hate speech...” (AEJMC, 2018, August 22). Given that the events of Charlottesville demonstrated actual violence associated with white nationalist groups, it seems reasonable to suggest that the visibility of the danger encouraged journalists to consider using more clarifying language when groups self-identified as “alt-right.” As the situation became graver, the recommendations by journalistic trade associations became stronger and more specific.

Much of the definition making that occurred was based on the 2016 definition by the Associated Press, which argued that the term should be defined “in relation to their actions, associations, history and positions to reveal their actual beliefs and philosophy, as well as how others see them” (Daniszewski, 2016, November 28). Many news organizations including *Politico* (Griffiths, 2016) and *The New York Times* (Ember, 2016) duplicated this policy or built on it. This resulted in definitions linking the alt-right to their association with white nationalism, the Ku Klux Klan and Nazi groups. As in prior cases of reporting where journalists were torn in their coverage—as in, for example, whether more coverage of terrorism contributed to the public good or rather created a public harm—journalists were concerned that in using the term “alt-right” in their coverage they would be furthering the agenda of, and providing a platform to the self-professed “alt-right.” There was also the risk of conflating ideas and groups with significant differences, and the risk of confusing readers. Some news organizations were reflective on their own about this dilemma, while others acted after outcry from readers and calls for changes in reporting. In other instances of definition making—such as that which occurred surrounding *entrepreneurial journalism*—the definitions tended to be “vague enough to result in a variety of constructed meanings” (Vos & Singer, 2016, p. 12)—but this case could not be more different. In this case, journalists emphasized clear definitions of the “alt-right” and urged even greater clarity from the first wave of policy making to the second.

### *How Journalists Engaged in Boundary Work About Covering the “alt-Right” Across the two Waves*

RQ 3 questioned how journalists conducted boundary work regarding the ‘alt-right.’ A central component of boundary work involves the affirmation of appropriate norms

and practice and this is often done through identifying deviance. In the case of the “alt-right,” the objectivity norm proved particularly problematic. So here journalists used the “alt-right” as a way in which to cast boundaries on the objectivity norm.

From Hallin’s (1994) perspective, the process of conducting journalistic boundary work through discourse moved journalists’ reporting dilemma slowly toward the sphere of consensus. The process of boundary work in metajournalistic discourse begins with the identification of a problem behavior, value, or activity. Journalists identified reporting on the “alt-right” as the problem activity. Keen to avoid repeating the problem of amplifying and normalizing a hate group’s rhetoric, such as the reporting on the Ku Klux Klan in the 20th century (Scharlott, 1988), journalists quickly identified reporting on ‘alt-right’ as occurring within Hallin (1994) sphere of deviance, recognizing that journalists should not allow white nationalists to define themselves at rallies, and should not use the term “alt-right” without definition (Mohajer, 2017, August 14). This moved journalists’ reporting to the sphere of legitimate controversy. Journalists were torn. On the one hand, they perceived this reporting as an essential issue for journalists in which their audience *should* be able to read just the facts (Schudson, 2001) and be able discern the danger posed by white nationalists. On the other hand, they recognized the rhetorical strategy of the white nationalists—designed to leverage journalist’s objectivity norm to paint a rosy picture of their beliefs. So the metajournalistic discourse surrounding the policy-making and definition-making represents the legitimate controversy—journalists wanted to know how they could report on this topic effectively. Therefore, many news organizations would naturally be reflective on the policies of other news organizations—particularly the Associated Press—given a natural inclination to recite official statements in legitimate controversy. It would be natural to consider formal policies by groups such as the Associated Press and Poynter Institute as representative of the sphere of consensus, but these policies still operate within the sphere of legitimate controversy. Journalistic policies are not, of course, strictly binding (Craft & Davis, 2016). This is reflected by the metajournalistic discourse surrounding these policies.

Journalists conducted boundary work here to indicate that certain operations of the objectivity norm—both sides-ism and cool-headed labeling—just would not work here. Journalists identified the deviance in the “alt-right” in the first waves of definition-making and policy-making in 2016. As noted with RQ 1 and RQ 2, journalists quickly identified the societal and journalistic threat posed by the ideology. As indicated by the more explicit policies provided in the second wave of metajournalistic discourse, they drew boundaries on the operation of the objectivity norm that included more explicit description of the groups and their beliefs. In other words, the phraseology offered by individuals at Charlottesville of “alt-right” might appear safe on the surface given it’s not sensationalistic and it was self-identified by the individuals, but it was also not the most accurate description. Journalists pressed for clarity on the behalf of their audience and the objectivity norm was not providing it.

This research reaffirms the degree to which journalists rely on each other and the distinctive institutional policy makers (e.g. Poynter, Associated Press) to parse the

difficult decision making that occurs when sorting through challenging reporting like that of the “alt-right” (Carlson, 2018). RQ 1 raised the question of how journalists outlined policies for reporting the alt-right, and the analysis of metajournalistic discourse on this topic shows journalists torn between two obligations: an obligation toward providing the public with information regarding the alt-right and an obligation to avoid granting a platform for the alt-right. Largely, the analysis illustrates that journalists erred on the side of providing information on white nationalists—all the while describing the dangers of their coverage. This allowed journalists to create the perception of an “unbiased” and objective presentation (Tandoc et al., 2013). This showcases the degree to which the norms and goals of traditional media “continue to dominate” (Vos et al., 2012, p. 861). Journalists have traditionally striven toward objectivity and so, even when faced with an ideology that they know needs to not be legitimized, journalists were unable to shake the need to balance the story. From the perspective of Craft and Davis (2016) and Perreault et al. (2020a), they had fallen into the objectivity trap—giving credence to an ideology that did not have an equal footing in either moral grounds or factual grounds.

Through the lens of metajournalistic discourse, this analysis shows that news organizations and journalism associations participated in discourse about their own use of “alt-right,” and their peers’ policies around use of the term. In short, through their discussions “meanings of journalism are formed and transformed by actors inside and outside of journalism” (Carlson, 2016, p. 350) and in this analysis journalists acknowledged, and at times, endorsed, each other’s statements in developing their own understandings. All together, the six news organizations whose policies about alt-right were examined in this study and the additional organizations who followed-up, summarized, or explained the policies from the first six, plus the three journalism organizations that weighed in, can be said to constitute a loose and informal journalistic community of practice (Meltzer & Martik, 2017). Generally, we observed that the organizations’ stances coalesced and shifted after the Charlottesville riots. However, there were visible nuanced differences in that some organizations preferred not to use the term while others sanctioned its continued use accompanied by explanation or definitions. Their discourse illustrates the sort of insider-outsider narrative designed to define the validity of news practices and subjects (Carlson, 2016)—in this case, insider was broadly defined in relation to the development of clearly articulated policies on reporting the alt-right and clearly defining the alt-right. The policies developed on the alt-right that require clear context do the boundary work of placing the alt-right outside the bounds of appropriate practice. Yet in publication, by relying on sources to define the alt-right or by not defining the alt-right at all, news organizations risk complicity as a rhetorical bridge between white nationalism and mainstream discourse as was cautioned in the work of Hartzell (2018). The concern over legitimizing or publicizing the group remains valid if the group has not been placed rhetorically outside of the realm of appropriate practice (Hawley, 2017; Jacobs, 2017), or in the Hallin (1986) conceptualization, in the sphere of deviance.

### *Future Research and Limitations*

Our sample was limited in that the items returned in our searches for “alt-right” were by search criteria only the examples of journalistic discussion where the term “alt-right” was used. Consequently, in this study we were not able to identify and analyze organizations’ coverage that did not use the term “alt-right” or who chose not to cover white nationalist groups who identified themselves with this term. This means it is possible that other media organizations who either used different language to cover white nationalists—perhaps using more specific terms such as Nazi, white supremacist, or white nationalist—or decided not to cover them were left out. Future research could include searches and analyses to try to capture this other possible coverage. We also acknowledge that our scope was limited to a particular set of news organizations and the U.S. context. International research can continue to examine coverage of similar groups from global perspectives.

Given that hate speech and hate crimes continue to take place in the United States and elsewhere (Lynch & Volcovici, 2021; May & Hafner, 2018), the present study makes a vital foray into understanding the development of journalistic policy and practice about reporting on this issue. Our research was completed prior to the recent (spring 2020) protests for racial justice and an end to police violence in the wake of George Floyd’s death, but our research relates and can help inform scholarly investigations and analyses going forward that examine language used in news stories and organizational policies about that language.


### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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### **Notes**

1. Factiva is one of the most widely used databases subscribed to by universities in the United States for researching popular and trade press published content (Factiva.com (proquest.com)). It is an archive and repository of all news published going back decades from a large number of sources. According to Factiva, the “top 10 newspapers” by circulation (at that time) were: Washington Post, New York Times, New York Daily News, USA Today, Wall Street Journal, New York Post, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Sun-Times, San Jose Mercury News,



Chicago Tribune. The Factiva database is searchable by key words and Boolean searches, and also date ranges.

2. While Kreiss and Mason wrote as academic scholars whose piece was published in the Monkey Cage political analysis section of the *Washington Post*, rather than a reported story by a journalist, they contributed to the conversation in the way external actors often contribute to boundary making in metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016).

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**Dr. Kimberly Meltzer** (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania) is an associate professor of communication and the Director of the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Marymount University. Her research asks questions about how journalists perceive their own work, the work of their peers, and its effects on citizens. Dr. Meltzer's recent book, *From News to Talk: The Expansion of Opinion and Commentary in US Journalism*, tracks how journalists think about changes in the news environment, with a focus on opinion, commentary, and civility. Her first book was *TV News Anchors and Journalistic Tradition: How Journalists Adapt to Technology*.