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Alexander Marlow, editor in chief of Breitbart News. Credit Mark Peterson/Redux, for The New York Times

### Down the Breitbart Hole

Steve Bannon once said it was the platform for the alt-right. Its current editors disagree. Is the incendiary media company at the nerve center of Donald Trump's America simply provocative — or dangerous?

By WIL S. HYLTONAUG, 16, 2017

The editor in chief of Breitbart News is a 31-year-old craft beer enthusiast from Los Angeles named Alexander Marlow. Probably starting about here, the official style guide of The New York Times Magazine would have me refer to him as “Marlow,” but this is a story about storytelling — about the stories we choose to tell and the way we tell them; the fictions that we entertain when we claim to write nonfiction — so I’m going to blow past the usual journalistic claptrap and just refer to our subject as Alex, because that’s what everybody who knows him calls him, and people who don’t know him tend to call him something much worse.

Alex has been the editor of Breitbart for about four years. In 2008, he was the first employee hired by its founder Andrew Breitbart, and he began to lead the editorial staff when Breitbart died in 2012, although it would be another year and change before he claimed the title of editor in 2013. However you cut it, that puts Alex in charge of Breitbart long before last year’s election, responsible for the daily decisions about what to cover and how. If right now you’re thinking that it’s kind of weird how you’ve been reading about Breitbart more or less constantly for the past year, following the daily exploits of former employees like Steve Bannon and Milo Yiannopoulos, but this is the first time you’ve ever heard of Alexander Marlow, that’s by design. People close to Alex refer to him variously as “a shut-in,” a “misanthrope” and a “hermit,” who communicates with his staff primarily by phone/text/email and doesn’t have a lot of friends. In fact, if you have come across Alex before now, it was probably in mid-June, when some of the people on the business side of Breitbart persuaded him to appear on the HBO show “Real Time With Bill Maher.”

Before we get into that debacle and the jeweler’s-loupe clarity it gave to Breitbart’s predicament, you should know that in the weeks leading up to the appearance, Alex was nervous for all the wrong reasons. It seemed as if every time we got together, the topic of the show would arise, with Alex saying something along the lines of how much he hoped it wouldn’t happen. It wasn’t that he worried what Maher would ask him or how he should respond. Alex grew up in one of the crunchier enclaves of Los Angeles, went to school at Berkeley and lives today in Washington on the boundary between Dupont Circle and Georgetown, which is another way of saying that he has spent his whole life surrounded by liberals who can’t figure out why he doesn’t get it. More than most of us, he is accustomed to defending his job and his opinions to the postman, the neighbors and his wife’s colleagues with a faint, forbearing smile and quickly changing the subject if the vibe starts going south.

What troubled him about the Maher appearance had nothing to do with the interview per se. It was the fact that after trying for years to maintain a certain balance in his public life — broadcasting his thoughts on Breitbart’s website and radio program but declining most invitations to appear on television and public stages — he was apprehensive about trading 15 minutes of face time on cable TV for the precious anonymity that allows him, for example, to shamble through his neighborhood every afternoon, walking his two dogs, without running into the rabble of protesters who have been known to picket Breitbart offices, or being spit upon by the 30-to-1 ratio of Democratic voters at the dog park.

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Also, at a more basic level, he was feeling self-conscious about his looks. Alex is maybe six feet tall, with a thick head of dark hair that he brushes in the slapdash manner of a kid giving in to his mother, and he speaks in a bracing, nasal timbre that recalls a Wayans brothers imitation of white people asking for directions. Entering his 30s, he is well aware that his physique is filling out, hovering on the gauzy line between sturdy and stocky. I remember in particular a dinner that we shared about three weeks before the show, when he confessed, as we shoveled handfuls of stewed Ethiopian vegetables into our faces, that he’d been trying all week to stay off carbs and slim down for Maher.

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“The thing is,” he said with a sigh, “if I gain 10 pounds, seven of them go to my face.”

I mention this not to harp on a person’s ordinary insecurities but to give you a sense of how little importance he gave to the substance of the coming show. Among the topics that preoccupied our conversation — the precipitous rise of Breitbart; its elusive place in the taxonomy of conservative thought; its asymmetric impact on the last election and the subsequent migration of its staff into the West Wing, with writers like Julia Hahn and Sebastian Gorka decamping for senior policy positions, even as the company itself achieved a kind of mythic boogeyman status on the left — I don’t think either of us paused to consider that any of these things would be clarified in a few minutes of television.

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Photo



Marlow working from home in Washington. Credit Mark Peterson/Redux, for The New York Times

Obviously, you can pull up a [clip of the show](#) and watch what happened, but here's the gist. Maher and Alex are sitting in one of those weirdly dislocated sitting areas that you find on talk shows and in upscale trailer parks, and after some prefatory glad-handing, they get into Breitbart's gossamer-thin coverage of the Russia investigations.

"You do ignore stories, would you not agree to that?" Maher asks.

"On purpose," Alex replies.

"Do you agree that Russia did meddle and try to fix this election?"

"Russia absolutely was trying to interfere," Alex says.

Maheer looks satisfied by this, and they spend a few minutes bemoaning the campus left and radical Islam; then Maheer excuses himself to preside over the panel, but about half an hour later, Alex comes back onstage for [a segment called Overtime](#). Now he's sitting on the panel with the foreign-policy guru Ian Bremmer, the activist and comedian Eddie Izzard and a counterterrorism expert, Malcolm Nance, who turns to address Alex directly.

"I sort of have a bone to pick with you," he says. [There was this article](#) about a 35-year counterterrorism expert who claimed that they wanted Trump Tower attacked. That was written in Breitbart. I got 31 death threats from that."

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Alex gets a look of stunned silence, and Nance continues. "I spent decades hunting terrorists," he says. "So that's [fake as hell](#)."

"You don't have to share your bona fides with me," Alex says.

"But your followers threatened my family, my children, my wife," Nance says. "You can apologize to me now."

"Show me the story," Alex says. "If the story is as you describe it, I'll be happy to offer an apology."

Now the rest of the panel jumps in and the conversation drifts to other concerns, but the corridors of social media have lit up. Soon the clip is trending at No. 4 on YouTube, and the triumphal banner on Daily Kos says: "Malcolm Nance Unloads on Breitbart Editor." Meanwhile, an equal and opposite reaction is brewing on the right. As a reader of The Times, you might have the impression that Russian meddling in the election is a settled fact, but in [certain precincts of the right](#), the claim amounts to heresy. So even as the clip of Nance and Alex is fostering a liberal catharsis, one of the more strident writers associated with Breitbart, Lee Stranahan, who has quit the site and now works for the Russian state-backed media organization Sputnik, posts a YouTube clip of his own. Under the headline "TRAITOR IN CHIEF," he denounces Alex for acknowledging the Russian hack; then he starts a campaign for Alex to be fired, sends an open letter to Breitbart's co-founder and chief executive, Larry Solov, and tells a reporter at The Daily Caller that Breitbart is coming undone not only because Alex is "standoffish," "arrogant" and "smug" but also — and here's the kill shot in right-wing media — because he "does not get basic narratives."

For a moment, then, on the third weekend of June, it was possible to behold in a single television incident both the fracturing of the American public sphere into discrete fields of reality and their temporary reconvergence around the unlikeliest of propositions. Whether you trusted Daily Kos or The Daily Caller, whatever you thought about Russian hacking, however you placed yourself in relation to the dueling Manichaean orthodoxies of contemporary politics, for a few minutes everybody seemed to agree that just six months after tipping a presidential election, Breitbart was in retreat.

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Photo



Marlow during the recording of a Breitbart Sirius XM radio talk show in Washington. Credit Mark Peterson/Redux, for The New York Times

In the *short annals* of journalism, there's no real precursor for Breitbart. I don't mean to suggest that this is because of the site's political agenda — the history of journalism is a cacophony of strident writing as far back as you want to look. You can pore through the earliest examples of what we'd consider a newspaper, *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* of the early 1700s, and you'll find yourself in a familiar landscape of hit pieces and hot takes; continue into the middle 1800s, and you encounter the unalloyed activism of Horace Greeley, whose *New York Tribune* campaigned with equal fervor against slavery and against women's rights. What makes Breitbart distinct, then, has nothing to do with accuracy or bias; it's the convergence of scale and time. It's the way the site appeared to materialize overnight, from the outermost periphery of the media, and to dominate the political conversation in a pivotal election.

Maybe it's hard to remember anymore what you thought of Breitbart two years ago, but if you were like most people, you didn't think about Breitbart at all. The average voter had no idea the site existed, and by the time its stories slipped into the mainline arteries of public discourse, most people were already hearing more *about* Breitbart than they would ever hear *from* Breitbart. Take a quick survey of your friends and see how many visited Breitbart last week or can name two articles that appeared on the site in the past three months. Then ask the same people what they think of Breitbart's influence on the election, and watch how loud the room becomes. It's startling the way the word "Breitbart" has become iconographic, referring not really to the website or the company but to an amorphous mass of revanchist opinions for which Breitbart receives credit or blame. We're all so certain that Breitbart is spewing a fountain of bigotry every day — denigrating women and riling up anti-Semitism, wailing about "black crime" and "rannies" — that few of us devote much time to observing it for ourselves. As a result, we haven't done a great job of figuring out what exactly Breitbart is or what Steve Bannon meant when he described it as a "platform for the alt-right."

Shortly after the election, my friends at *The Times* told me there was an internal debate over what to call Breitbart. Somehow, the words "news organization" seemed too generous, and anyway, didn't encompass the weird power it had amassed — this company that began as a smattering of websites about Hollywood, government and the media, then morphed into a sprawling multimedia conglomerate with offices overseas, including an eight-person bureau in London and a daily radio program on Sirius XM, all financed by shadowy right-wing figures and buttressed by a mob of fervent readers whose engagement in the comment section, for example, dwarfs the comments at this newspaper by roughly a factor of 10, even as those readers/commenters/trolls remain, to most of the outside world, a mysterious horde of indistinct origin and uncertain intent.

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This leads to a curious phenomenon as the Trump presidency proceeds and we begin to see long articles about Breitbart by writers who are clearly more familiar with the conventional wisdom about the website than with anyone on its staff. Writing about Breitbart has become one of the few instances in American journalism where it's considered passable to publish a major feature speculating on the internal machinery of a company without naming a single source inside. A recent cover of *Newsweek* showed Alex hoisting Donald Trump on his shoulders, without any discussion of who Alex is, how he rose to power at Breitbart or what he believes.

I'm reminded of an incident earlier this year, when an article in *Business Insider* reported that the staff of Breitbart had been ordered not to write critically about Jared Kushner anymore. The article explained this in the context of byzantine palace intrigue: Bannon, after butting heads with Kushner, was rumored to be planting negative articles about him in Breitbart, but Kushner's allies caught on and complained to Trump, who ordered Bannon to stop the fighting. All of which made for delicious gossip but didn't appear true. In the days leading up to that article, I sat in for maybe a dozen editorial calls with Alex and his staff, who don't have a physical newsroom in Washington but gather twice a day by phone. Throughout that time, Alex repeatedly asked for more dirt on Kushner, whom he considered a "Wall Street Democrat." Just that morning, I heard him instruct a staff member to call the White House every day and try to get Kushner on the phone. When the *Business Insider* article appeared a few hours later, Alex was livid, not because it was true — Alex vigorously denied it — but because, true or false, it shaded any story he wanted to publish. He had already heard from his senior White House correspondent, Charlie Spiering, who was working on a profile of Kushner and wanted to know if there was anything to this claim that he was supposed to back off.

"That's what happens," Alex said as we shuffled along a shady trail near his apartment that evening. "I told him not to let them get in his head — just write the piece." But when I met up with Spiering a few days later, he had decided to kill the story anyway. "No matter what I write, people will read it as a response to that article," he said. "If it's tough on Kushner, I'm Steve's attack dog. If it's not, I backed off for Steve." It seemed as if Breitbart was descending into a Droste effect. A story about the writing of a story came as news to the story's writer and caused the writer to stop writing the story in an effort to rewrite the story about the story.

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Photo



Charlie Spiering, Breitbart's lead White House correspondent, in the White House briefing room. Credit Mark Peterson/Redux, for The New York Times

Amid all the speculation about Breitbart, one of the more grounded analyses is a project at Harvard, where a law professor named Yochai Benkler has been studying the company's rise and influence. A few weeks ago, I met up with Benkler in his office, and we sat at a long table cluttered with books and papers to discuss his findings. Benkler was a muscular figure in his early 50s, with cropped gray hair and a trim gray beard, and he wanted to make clear from the outset that his work on Breitbart was A. the collaborative undertaking of more than a dozen interdisciplinary colleagues throughout Harvard and M.I.T., and B. a total mistake.

"We didn't set out to study Breitbart," he said. "Breitbart came from the data, not the other way around."

The project, Benkler said, began with a friendly argument about how the internet works — whether it serves mainly as a distribution network for the articles on major media, or if small blogs and websites can funnel their own stories back into the mainstream press. "I had taken the position that it created significant democratization and open pathways for diverse voices to speak," Benkler said. His friend and colleague at M.I.T. Ethan Zuckerman disagreed. "Ethan thought you saw more amplification and circulation of stories from the mainstream."

Normal sorts of people might settle this debate by shrugging that nobody can say for sure and ordering another round. Benkler and Zuckerman decided to build a colossal database called [Media Cloud](#) and spend the next decade hovering up websites to see how information travels. Benkler brought in a programmer named Hal Roberts, and they began to examine the coverage of specific stories. In 2013, when George Zimmerman was acquitted in the death of Trayvon Martin, Zuckerman and a team at M.I.T. examined how various media outlets influenced public opinion. The data showed that for all the attention given to local news and activism, the mainstream media continued to shape major turning points in the story. In the debate between Benkler and Zuckerman, this was: point, Zuckerman.

But last spring, as Donald Trump was hurtling toward the Republican nomination in defiance of every analyst everywhere, Benkler got a call from the Open Society Foundations. This being an article about right-wing media, let's insert the disclaimer that O.S.F. was created by George Soros, the billionaire activist who haunts the fevered imagination of the right in about the same way the Koch brothers terrify the left. At the time, nearly everyone assumed that Clinton would win the election, but people at O.S.F. were still intrigued by the rise of Trump. "They said: 'Something different is happening.'" Benkler recalled. "We need to understand what."

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Benkler made some tweaks and pointed his machine at the election. The list of websites it scooped up each day was dizzying. "We begin with several thousand sources," Benkler said, "and then we look at links in all those stories, and we crawl out to grab them. If they fit the keywords that we're looking for — any candidate name, anything around the election — we put them in the data set. Then we go to the links in those stories, and draw in those, and go to their links. Usually by the time we've done this 15 times, there are no new stories."

At the same time, Benkler's team developed a method to determine the political association of any website's audience. If an article was posted by people who retweeted Hillary Clinton, they characterized the publication as one with a liberal readership. If an article was posted by Trump retweeters, they assumed the publication's readership was conservative. I can hear you thinking, "Retweets do not equal endorsements," but it turns out they mostly do. But when they encountered articles linked to by supporters of both candidates, they looked to see which side linked more often, then characterized the audience as center-left or center-right.

Benkler fiddled with a laptop to show me how this looked in practice. He pulled up an image of [a messy blue and red scribble](#) against a white background. On closer inspection, this turned out to consist of thousands of tiny dots. Each represented at least one article in their database and was shaded red or blue to indicate the political association of its readers. The more times a website's article was shared on Facebook, the bigger the dot grew. This meant you could determine at a glance whose articles were shared most often.

Looking at the blue parts of the image, nothing was surprising: The largest circles were CNN and The New York Times, each shaded pale blue to indicate a center-left association. But the other side of the image showed just one big red circle: Breitbart. It was three times the size of Fox News and maybe a dozen times larger than any other news source on the right. If you wanted to know who was driving the Republican agenda in 2016, you didn't need to look much farther than the massive crimson orb parked on Benkler's screen.

Benkler sighed. If the Trayvon Martin study challenged his theory about the democratizing power of the internet, the Breitbart study offered an unsettling confirmation. "An important part of what happened in this election is that a marginalized community, with views that were generally excluded, forced their way into the mainstream," he said. "Now, whether that's 'democratizing' or not depends on how much emphasis you put on people being able to contest an election versus how much you put on civil rights, protection of minorities, rule of law. You could say that if it translates into denigration of minorities, it's antidemocratic. But as long as you are focused on the question of 'Do you have an intensely engaged minority able to clarify its message so clearly that it can contest politically in a way that it couldn't before?' then it's a democratizing effect."

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Photo





Spiering (center) and reporters during a briefing at the White House. Credit Mark Peterson/Redux, for The New York Times

Alex began to develop political ideas as a teenager at the Harvard-Westlake preparatory school in Studio City, where taking a contrarian position generally meant steering right. Like many young conservatives, he gravitated to talk radio, particularly the afternoon program of Larry Elder, whose broadcast regularly featured another local teenager, Stephen Miller. Just one year ahead of Alex at Santa Monica High School 10 miles away, Miller was already becoming the bombastic force we saw on television this month, when, in his current role as a presidential adviser, he stood at the White House lectern doing battle with the CNN correspondent Jim Acosta over immigration policy. [Even as a kid](#), Miller liked to fulminate against immigration and decry the ambient leftism of coastal California. Inspired and intrigued by Miller's radio tirades, Alex applied for an internship with Elder. Although he and Miller wouldn't meet in person for several years, their common experience of adolescent rebellion against the surrounding progressive monoculture seems to have intensified their political conviction in a way you might call radicalization. This is a current in American life we've not yet fully processed, but history will record a preponderance of today's right-wing leaders who emerged in the toniest quarters of the nation's bluest states. Apart from the obvious examples of Andrew Breitbart and Steve Bannon, annealed in Hollywood, you can think of Julia Hahn, who attended Alex's high school and is now working with Bannon in the White House, and Ben Shapiro, the former Breitbart writer from Los Angeles who founded The Daily Wire — or for that matter, the populist billionaire New Yorker in chief.

Unlike pretty much all of the above, Alex never adopted a swaggering Rush Limbaugh bravado. He never even thought of himself as a Republican. Even today, his basic menu of ideas is fairly conventional fare. He thinks the federal government is clumsy and wasteful, that rich people get too many breaks, that mucking around in other countries is risky, that anybody entering the United States should pass through customs and that nobody should be defined by his or her gender, race, religion or sexual orientation. He is fond of pointing out a conflict between the traditional American ideal of a "melting pot," in which individual differences blend into a common culture, and the more recent understanding of multiculturalism, which tends to celebrate differences. Other than that, it's difficult to know where he'll land on many issues. He often declines to land at all. On several occasions, when I mentioned something in the news, he responded: "I haven't made up my mind." And I lost track of how many times he told me: "I'm not an opinion guy." A few months ago, when the Trump administration announced that it was scaling back plans on the border from a "big, beautiful wall" to something that looked more like a chain-link fence, he sparked the wrath of two staff members by announcing on an editorial conference call that it looked O.K. to him.

Alex hired Charlie Spiering as the site's senior White House correspondent. A farm kid from rural Wyoming, Spiering arrived in Washington a decade ago for a plum internship with Robert Novak, and then made a solid reputation writing for the website of The Washington Examiner. I got to know Spiering pretty well this spring, and I reached out to some of his former colleagues from The Examiner who moved on to bigger jobs, and one night I had a pleasant chat with his sister, Jamie, who is a professor at Benedictine College in Kansas with a Ph.D. in philosophy. There are a lot of things you can say about Spiering — he doesn't dig very deeply into his material or ask many hard questions at briefings — but he's a perfectly straightforward, down-the-line conservative from a religious background, who brings to his work about the same level of bias as every other political reporter I know. When Breitbart first approached to offer him a job, Spiering said no. "You don't want it to be the last job you ever get," he said. "I knew their reputation." After a long courtship, he accepted on the condition that he be allowed to write what he calls "straight news." I'm not sure what that really means, and it takes about 10 seconds of looking at Spiering's articles to notice the political outlook that shapes what he decides to cover, like border policy and nuclear energy, but I've yet to encounter [any of his articles](#) with more loaded language or explicit bias than your typical story in a typical newspaper.

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Alex admitted that it can be challenging to hire reporters from a traditional background. "There are many people out there who don't want the stigma of Breitbart," he said. "I try to convince people it's worth it, but whatever job you take next, they're going to ask about your affiliation with Breitbart." Even so, he said that at this point, he would most like to fill the staff with "a hundred reporters like Charlie," who will bring a reliable conservative bias to their work but leave behind the shouty hysterics. He is reluctant to describe this as a shift in the Breitbart culture, but it clearly is, and it's clearly intentional. After losing Bannon and Gorka and Hahn to the White House; accepting the resignation of Yiannopoulos, who was [caught advocating statutory rape](#); and firing the editor Katie McHugh over [a string of odious tweets](#), Alex has left himself with a roster of writers who are startlingly inoffensive. In fact, the masthead is more varied and international than most of the news organizations where I've worked, and Alex has a pretty good record of promoting women and minorities, at least by the industry's abysmal standards — including the lead defense correspondent, the national security editor and the copy chief, all of whom are women of color.

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Photo



Spiering talking to a representative for Stetson after a "Made in America Week" event at the White House. Credit Mark Peterson/Redux, for The New York Times

What undercuts or complicates this is that many of the site's more objectionable articles were written by people from the demographic most likely to take offense. There's an awkward but arguably strategic inversion of identity politics in play, for example, when you realize that the writer who covers Latin America for Breitbart is a fluent Spanish speaker whose far-right libertarian outlook comes from the Cuban exile community, and that [one of the most incendiary pieces](#) to carry the notorious "black crime" tag was written by a man named Jerome Hudson, who, like some other black conservatives, worries that the focus on police brutality is siphoning outrage [away from gang violence](#). For that matter, the writer of [an infamous article](#) calling Bill Kristol a "renegade Jew" is Jewish himself — and was attacking Kristol for, among other things, being insufficiently supportive of Israel.

Breitbart often disparages its political opponents as "globalists" and "corporatists," which is easy to interpret as an anti-Semitic dog whistle. Recently, for example, the site [joined a right-wing campaign](#) to delegitimize Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, the national security adviser, over a litany of policy differences, including his interest in détente with Iran. When a Breitbart article appeared two weeks ago linking McMaster to a foundation financed by George Soros, the website [quickly posted a response](#) arguing that it "makes sense" for Breitbart to think "the worst thing it could possibly reveal about H. R. McMaster is that he has a thirdhand connection to a Jewish guy." No criticism of Breitbart irritates its leadership more than the charge of anti-Semitism. That's partly because many of the top figures at Breitbart, including Andrew Breitbart, Larry Solov and the entire editorial team when the site relaunched in 2012 — Joel Pollak, Ben Shapiro and Alex — were all of Jewish descent, but also because a fundamental commitment on the site is to a borderline fanatical advocacy for Israel.

Then there's [the execrable headline](#) about young Muslims being "time bombs." The author of the article is a guy named Rabecm Kassam, who is the editor of Breitbart's bureau in London. I was in town for the British election in June and spent a few days with Kassam, who turned out to be an erudite figure who, as a young man, attended prayers at a mosque several times a week, but after losing his faith and souring on the religion, has made it his purpose to explain to the world why. One day we were walking around Westminster when he stopped in front of a large building and said: "This is where I left Islam."

"In there?" I asked, looking at the building.

"Out here," he said.

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Photo





Raheem Kassam, editor of Breitbart's bureau in London, in Washington. Credit Mark Peterson/Redux, for The New York Times

As a student at the University of Westminster, Kassam gravitated to other young Muslims on a campus where the official organization for Muslim students was a hotbed of radicalism. [A report in The Guardian](#) later described the group as "dominated by hard-line, ultraconservative believers who refuse to speak with female Muslim staff members." One graduate of the school was Mohammed Emwazi, the Islamic State executioner known as Jihadi John. In the fall of 2008, Kassam was preparing to go into a lecture hall when he says another student approached him on the sidewalk where now we stood. "He said: 'Don't go in there,'" Kassam told me. "I asked why, and he said: 'They're watching a video of the Twin Towers coming down and cheering.'"

Later that evening, Kassam and I traveled to a neighborhood of East London known as Tower Hamlets for dinner, where we encountered graffiti celebrating the Taliban and were harassed by young men who took offense at the sight of Kassam. Most of the locals on the street were dressed in traditional garb, with maybe half the women cloaked in niqabs and hijabs, whereas Kassam was wearing a blue blazer whose inner lining was patterned on the American flag. All day, the lapels had been flapping open to reveal the stars and stripes, but in Tower Hamlets he buttoned his blazer and kept his head down. "Do you know what Islam says about apostates?" he asked quietly. "The penalty for leaving the religion is death."

As far as Kassam was concerned, the extremist interpretation of Islamic texts like the Quran and the hadiths is not a perversion of the faith but a historically sound reading. This is an incendiary claim to say the least, and anybody familiar with a bit of history will notice that Islam has been practiced in all sorts of ways over the past 14 centuries, just like the other major religions — but it's notable how many prominent ex-Muslims, like [Sarah Haider](#) and [Majid Nawaz](#), take a similar line to Kassam's; and however you interpret their hostility to Islam, it's difficult to paint someone like Kassam, a child of Indian immigrants from East Africa, with the broad brush of xenophobia.

I'm aware that what Breitbart is doing when it publishes a writer like Kassam is to co-opt the principle of representation and use his identity as a shield to promote inflammatory ideas. Kassam was hired by Steve Bannon, whose own fixation on Islamic extremism takes a far more apocalyptic context and tone. But I still think it's worth holding in mind that when writers like Kassam or Hudson decide to write about the community they come from, they expect a certain prerogative to speak their minds without being labeled, as they so often are, traitors to their race.

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Photo



Kassam working in Washington. Credit Mark Peterson/Redux, for The New York Times

**To the extent** that there is a coherent ideology behind Breitbart, we've also done a crummy job of figuring out what it is. A good place to begin is with Andrew Breitbart, whose foundational philosophy is pretty thoroughly detailed in his autobiography, "Righteous Indignation." A lot of the book is your run-of-the-mill memoir, with stories from his childhood in suburban California, but the conceptual core of the book comes in Chapter 6, in which he argues that America was permanently transformed by the arrival of a handful of German philosophers in the 1930s.

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I won't delve into all the twists and turns in this theory, but the underlying contention is that a few refugee intellectuals from the Frankfurt School — Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse — were lucky enough to escape the Nazis for sunny California, and being constitutionally incapable of happiness, promptly began complaining. Their grouching and moaning and general sourpuss disposition soon filtered into academia, Hollywood and the media, then into the upper echelons of American snobbery, a.k.a. the Democratic Party. So today you have, per Breitbart, a "Democrat-Media Complex" whose principal aim is to disparage everything quintessentially American, by which he really means American — think Norman Rockwell archetypes and whatever social conventions they imply. This is extraordinarily reactionary stuff, but not especially political in the sense of electioneering. Andrew Breitbart was never as interested in backing candidates as he was in attacking the media and entertainment industries for corroding American traditions. When people asked Breitbart why he wasn't more involved in electoral politics, he liked to say that if you could reorient news and entertainment, the rest would follow. "Politics," he often said, "is downstream from culture."

Breitbart met Bannon in 2004 at a screening for [a documentary that Bannon made](#) about Ronald Reagan. In the meet-cute version that Bannon tells, they immediately embraced in a bear hug, and Breitbart bellowed: "Brother, we got to change the culture!" When Breitbart created his first websites, Bannon provided office space in Santa Monica and West Hollywood, and after Breitbart's death, Larry Solov asked Bannon to step in as the company's executive chairman. Breitbart had been planning to merge his early websites into a single title, and Solov didn't intend to make Bannon its editor. The sites were already largely autonomous, with senior editors managing the daily content. Solov planned to keep this arrangement, with Joel Pollak as editor in chief and Alex as managing editor, but he wanted Bannon to fill in for Breitbart as the company's outside personality.

Solov is about as media-shy a personality as exists in American life, and despite my most plaintive efforts, he opted not to speak to me for this article. But I heard that many of the editorial staff were skeptical of his decision to hire Bannon, who had never been formally involved with the websites and was known for his explosive outbursts about politics. When staff members expressed concern to Solov, he reassured them that Bannon's role would be limited to fund-raising and public relations.

For a few months, this proved true, but soon Bannon began to dial in to editorial conference calls; he began to interject suggestions, and then to make demands. At the same time, Alex was becoming increasingly central to the daily work flow. Unlike Pollak and Shapiro, he wasn't particularly fast or facile as a writer, but he was widely regarded as the best on staff at selecting which stories would resonate with readers, and he had a knack for punchy, half-comic headlines. Many of the other editors and writers believed he was already functioning as the editor. In the summer of 2013, Alex approached Solov and Bannon to ask for the top job. At a meeting in Los Angeles, where he made the case in person, he told me Bannon "had this little smile, like he wasn't sure he would go for it, but he liked that I was asking." Alex got the job.

Although staff members believed Bannon wouldn't have a role in website content, he continued to parachute into editorial decisions any time he wanted. Alex describes Bannon's approach as "theatrical," but other people are more blunt. When Bannon wanted a story assigned or changed, they say, he would call Alex and commence screaming. Alex occasionally pushed back, but far more often he deferred. The stories that Bannon pushed were some of the most ideologically driven. Under his leadership, the site's coverage of immigration focused not just on trade and jobs but on panicky stories about the coming of American Shariah. So you could say that Bannon influenced only a handful of stories each week, but it's probably more accurate to say that he guided every editorial decision that mattered.

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Photo





Breitbart's Pentagon correspondent, Kristina Wong, at the Pentagon. Credit Mark Peterson/Redux, for The New York Times

**Bannon's worldview** is often associated with two books that he has praised. One is "The Fourth Turning," by Neil Howe and William Strauss, which argues that societies pass through four distinct phases every 80 years, the last of which America entered in 2008 and involves a radical overhaul of the social order. The other book is "The Camp of the Saints," by Jean Raspail, a French novel from the 1970s in which a horde of murderous dark-skinned immigrants invades the lily-white center of Europe. Bannon is a prodigious reader whose walls are lined with thousands of volumes, and he is enough of a showman/provocateur/insensitive jerk to go around promoting the most alarming title he recently inhaled. But there's at least one substantive volume worth adding to this list. In "Special Providence," the author Walter Russell Mead identifies four prevailing schools of thought about American politics: a Hamiltonian tradition, concerned with commerce and trade; a Wilsonian tradition of foreign intervention; a Jeffersonian tradition of an insular society defined by its civil liberties; and a Jacksonian tradition that's even more insular and martial, unconcerned with global outreach. The Jacksonian tradition comes across as Mead's real interest and fundamentally populist. Its adherents tend to be regular, simple folk, who may not articulate a Jacksonian paradigm but understand its governing philosophy by somatic impulse. They are skeptical of fancy talk about global leadership, and they despise the uxorious American elite, who have in turn abandoned them.

After Breitbart's death, Bannon began to steer the site in a more nakedly political direction. If politics was downstream from culture, Bannon was downstream from Breitbart. He began to use the company as a tool for political action, coordinating with the site's activist investors Robert and Rebekah Mercer and using the website to support candidates and partisan causes. At the root of this lay the agenda described in Mead's book: American workers were under siege by clueless elitists whose embrace of open borders, trade agreements and environmental zealotry was destroying the working class.

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Every aspect of this argument can be readily contested. The coal industry isn't disappearing because of peacenik environmentalism; it has been [supplanted by superior technology](#), from shale extraction to wind turbines. The same is true of American retail and manufacturing: It's easy to blame NAFTA when factory jobs disappear, but for each position that relocates to Mexico, many more are [lost to automation](#). This created an odd circumstance as Bannon steered Breitbart into direct political action. One way of thinking about that shift is to say that Breitbart offered the people most affected by advancing technology a way to harness its power. If the computer revolution has eviscerated the demand for labor to sustain a working class, it has also, at least temporarily, provided that eviscerated class with a place to rally around a protectionist candidate.

The last thing Yochai Benkler noted before I left his office at Harvard was that his team had performed a textual analysis of all the stories in their database, and they found a surprising result. "One thing that came out very clearly from our study is that Breitbart is not talking about these issues in the same way you would find on the extreme right," he said. "They don't use the same language you find on sites like VDARE and The Daily Stormer" — two sites connected to the white-nationalist alt-right movement. He paused for a moment, then added: "Breitbart is not the alt-right." Yet precisely because articles on the site were often less extreme than their own worst headlines, Breitbart functioned as a legitimizing tether for the most abhorrent currents of the right wing. Benkler referred to this as a "bridge" phenomenon, in which extremist websites linked to Breitbart for validation and those same fanatics could then gather in Breitbart's comment section to hurl invectives.

You could interpret this phenomenon in at least two ways. The conventional understanding has been that Breitbart editors shared that underlying bigotry but were clever enough to shroud their intentions in the obscurantist veneer of tweedy-sounding gibberish about Andrew Jackson. The other possibility was more mercenary — that many of the writers and editors at Breitbart really were inclined to a pedestrian politics, but they were happy enough to welcome bigots if it meant increasing traffic. Here I think of Ben Shapiro. When he [announced last March](#) that he couldn't support Trump, he was instantly deluged with anti-Semitic messages on Twitter and by email. Shapiro quit the company days later, and the anti-Semitic vitriol "revved up into super high gear," he told me. By summer, he was receiving hundreds of threatening messages each week, with horrific illustrations that showed Jews being slaughtered in death camps and executed point-blank. Shapiro said he was shocked to discover that anti-Semitism was still rampant on the right. "I've spent my entire life in the conservative movement," he told me. "And I was under the impression that the anti-Semitic wing of the party was basically dead." Shapiro claims that by some potent mechanism of denial, he had managed not to see the bigotry endemic to his own comment section. Even now, after a contentious departure from Breitbart, he says he doubts that many of his former colleagues realize how deplorable their commenters can be. "They're mostly just seen the way a lot of websites see their commenters, which is: 'Oh, God, these idiots,'" he said. "I think there was a lot of opportunism going on. If they could get traffic from those people, then they got traffic from those people."

Shapiro's story suggests a more complicated view of Breitbart's relationship to the extreme right: not an exponent of all the most incendiary rhetoric but its willing conduit. Under Bannon, the site seemed content to welcome its alt-right base. This is what Bannon meant when he described the site as a "platform for the alt-right," and what Yiannopoulos was doing in March 2016 when he published "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right." Maybe the difference between these things is slight — between espousing hatred and indulging it — but how you parse that distinction will shape the way you interpret what Alex is doing now.

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Photo



Wong asking a question at a Pentagon briefing on the Islamic State. Credit Mark Peterson/Redux, for The New York Times

If you visited Breitbart regularly in recent months, you could see a shift underway. On any given afternoon, you were still likely to encounter headlines about “illegal aliens” invading the country, but if you clicked on the link, you landed on an article that was extraordinarily dry — usually just a rundown of some politician’s speech, or a dry recitation of governmental statistics. Not to say the site was no longer right wing — the act of choosing what to cover and how to position it with a headline is a powerful bias unto itself — but weeks could pass in which few of the articles on Breitbart had anything like the attitude and opinion baked into dozens of mainstream sites.

In my conversations with Alex, he was careful not to broadcast this change too vigorously. If I asked whether he would still hire a bomb thrower like Yiannopoulos, he immediately insisted that he would. “I’d love to hire another Milo,” he would say, going into a spiel about how the right needs to “get under the skin of the left just like you’ve been getting under our skin forever.” At a certain level, this seemed true. Alex edited Yiannopoulos for three years, and they remain in touch. But a lot of the Breitbart staff were relieved to see Yiannopoulos go, and [the most notable hire](#) of the last seven months was the financial reporter John Carney, from The Wall Street Journal. At the same time, the site was increasingly willing to challenge the Trump administration. After Shapiro’s departure, he accused Breitbart of becoming “[Trump’s personal Pravda](#)” and speculated that if Trump won, the site would function as state media. When I first began spending time with Alex, he was fond of saying “We won the election,” with little separation between himself and the administration. But as the spring turned into summer, it became clear that many of his battles remained. The site has fought against every significant Republican health care bill, challenged the president’s missile strikes on Syria and gone after myriad administration officials who depart from Breitbart’s worldview — including not only McMaster and Kushner but also Trump’s chief economic adviser, Gary Cohn, and his former chief of staff and press secretary, Reince Priebus and Sean Spicer.

How much of this comes at Bannon’s direction is hard to say. Bannon received an ethics waiver that allows him to remain in contact with Breitbart staff, and it would seem pretty obvious that some conspiring must go on. No writer on earth would allow a colleague to decamp for a job in the White House without pestering the daylight out of him for leads and scoops; what’s harder to explain is why so few of those leads and scoops turn up on Breitbart. When a White House leak does surface on the right, it’s far more likely to appear in a competitor, like Shapiro’s The Daily Wire or the blog of Mike Cernovich. Shapiro told me that he doesn’t think Bannon gives much to Breitbart at all. “The way Steve plays the game, it wouldn’t make a lot of sense,” he said. “If he’s going after Jared Kushner, he’s not going to do that through Breitbart, because it’s too obvious.” Charlie Spiering has yet to land an interview with the president, and in early June, Alex traveled to Sicily for the G-7 meeting, hoping to interview Trump himself — but Trump declined to see him. “It’s starting to become a pattern,” Alex told me recently. “They’re keeping us out of reach.”

We were sitting at a Mexican restaurant sipping mezcal, and I asked whether he felt he was trying to make Breitbart legitimate. At first, he scowled, but then he nodded. “Are we trying to become a legitimate news site?” he said. “Yes. The question is why. I don’t think we have a choice. We are so high-profile now, we get so much scrutiny, we have no choice but to get it right. That’s something that has changed over the past year. People read our stuff and pay attention. We don’t need to be outraged and hysterical anymore. We don’t need to wave our arms around, flailing madly because we don’t feel like we are being listened to.”

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I mentioned that I didn’t really believe he would hire another Milo Yiannopoulos.

“You may be right,” he said. “It was getting to a point where Milo was limiting Breitbart, and Breitbart was limiting Milo. Our stories should look like they could appear in any other publication. The bias now comes in story selection. We’re not going to cover the Russia scandal as much as we’re covering the cartels coming over the border.”

The problems with trying to legitimize Breitbart are, of course, abundant. One is that conventional news organizations are themselves in a fight for economic survival; another is that the whole concept of news is in the midst of a revision. Most reporters these days think of objectivity as a laudable but abstract goal. Trying to verify facts and elide opinion may push a writer to higher standards, but the overall thrust of journalism these days has been a move away from the construct of objectivity, not toward it.

—

It’s also not clear how many of Breitbart’s readers want a toned-down site. Alex has hired his sister to moderate comments, and his refusal to embrace the wild conspiracy theory that Russian hacking never happened is a sharp departure from a core conviction of many Breitbart readers. This is what Lee Stranahan meant when he described Alex as a “traitor” who “does not get basic narratives.” How many readers will accept a new narrative remains to be seen. Earlier this year, the tracking company Alexa reported that the site had plummeted on the list of most popular websites to No. 281 from No. 45; after an inquiry from Breitbart, the ranking shot back up to No. 59. Alex insisted that traffic is up 60 percent from this point last year, but even if that’s true and the readership remains loyal, another problem remains. Since the election, activists from a group called Sleeping Giants have begun pressuring advertisers to withdraw from Breitbart, and as of this writing, the group claims 2,484 [companies have pulled out](#). Alex acknowledged that the impact of the boycott has been severe. “It’s a fight,” he told me quietly one night. “That’s all I can really say.”

In moments like this, it was possible to feel sympathy for a man in his predicament. He confided to me on another night that like so many people he has tried to hire, he knows that working for Breitbart will occlude his future. “I don’t have a lot of security,” he said. “I think I’m the best person to be editor of Breitbart, but what does that mean to the rest of the job market? I don’t have a lot of outs.” I sometimes had the sense of him as a figure trapped in a myth — a man adrift on a rudderless ship, reeling from the tempest of Trump’s election, surrounded by the deck fires of incendiary staff members and trying to pull down the pirate flag in order to steer a new course, past the sirens of click-bait outrage, between the Scylla and Charybdis of Bannon and Breitbart, and he could feel the sea of global resentments beneath him, tossing him this way and that, a riotous current that he partly understood and partly rued but mostly just wanted to leave behind.

Wil S. Hylton is a contributing writer for the magazine. His last story was about [the Baltimore prosecutor Marilyn Mosby](#).

A version of this article appears in print on August 20, 2017, on Page MM30 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: The Mega Phone. [Today’s Paper/Subscribe](#)

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