

(From <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/15/business/media/the-life-and-death-of-andrew-breitbart.html?pagewanted=all&pagewanted=print>)

The New York Times

April 13, 2012

The Provocateur

By [DAVID CARR](#)

ON the last night of February, Arthur Sando was having a drink at the Brentwood Restaurant and Lounge in Los Angeles when a bearded silver-haired man took a seat next to him, ordered a glass of pinot noir and began typing into his BlackBerry.

Mr. Sando quickly realized he was sitting next to Andrew Breitbart, the conservative blogger and author, and the two began to chat. As with almost any encounter with Mr. Breitbart, the next 90 minutes between the former strangers was punctuated by laughs, some outrageous political assertions and repeated interruptions as Mr. Breitbart checked his smartphone.

“We talked politics, television, college and living in Los Angeles,” Mr. Sando said, adding that Mr. Breitbart had a single glass of wine during the conversation and seemed to be in both good spirits and good health. “He said that conversations like ours were why he liked to go to bars and talk with people who had different political beliefs.”

Mr. Sando paid his tab and left. Not long after, Mr. Breitbart, 43, settled his own bill and apparently headed to the nearby home he shared with his wife, Susie Bean Breitbart, and their four young children. Minutes after exiting the bar, he collapsed in front of a Starbucks like a “sack of potatoes,” one witness said. Paramedics were unable to revive him. Later, his father-in-law, the actor Orson Bean, said that Mr. Breitbart had a history of heart ailments. (A final coroner’s report, with the official cause of death, is expected this month.)

The following morning, Mr. Sando, a marketing executive from Los Angeles whose encounter with Mr. Breitbart was first reported in The Hollywood Reporter, grabbed his iPhone. The first thing he saw was a headline saying Mr. Breitbart had died.

“I thought it was a prank,” he said in a recent telephone interview. “I thought he might have been in the habit of sending fake headlines to people he had encountered with different political opinions.”

It was a common response, particularly among people who knew him well. After a lifetime of pranks, capers and so many people wishing him dead, it would have been just like Mr. Breitbart to stage his own demise.

“I kept thinking, he is going to pull something off here,” said Representative Louie Gohmert, Republican of Texas, at a memorial held at the Newseum in Washington three weeks later. “He’s going to find out who hates his guts and who loved him, and I kept wanting to hear back, ‘O.K., the gag’s up.’ ”

On the Web, there was a huge outpouring of both invective and grief. Dark, unsubstantiated theories that he was murdered mushroomed immediately, while 24 of his friends used the hashtag #DJBreitbart on Twitter to offer a playlist of his beloved ’80s music. His own Twitter account (which included more than 80 tweets sent on the day before his death) now sits as a frozen memorial.

In the days following the death of Mr. Breitbart, many of his admirers adopted a meme of “I am Breitbart,” and vowed to continue his work. But even though his Web site, run by his business partner and lifelong friend Larry Solov, is fully staffed and unveiled a redesign after his death, there could be no real replacement.

For good or ill (and most would say ill), no one did it like Mr. Breitbart.

ANDREW BREITBART jacked into the Web early and never unplugged. As someone who worked on the Drudge Report and The Huffington Post in the early days and was busy building his own mini-empire of conservative opinion and infotainment at Breitbart.com, he understood in a fundamental way how discourse could be profoundly shaped by the pixels generated far outside the mainstream media he held in such low regard.

Mr. Breitbart, as much as anyone, turned the Web into an assault rifle, helping to bring down Acorn, a community organizing group, with the strategic release of undercover videos made by James O’Keefe, a conservative activist; forcing Shirley Sherrod, an Agriculture Department official, out of her job with a misleadingly edited clip of a speech; and flushing out Representative Anthony D. Weiner, Democrat of New York, when he tried to lie about lewd pictures he had sent via Twitter.

Less watchdog than pit bull (and one who, without the technology of the 21st century, might have been just one more angry man shouting from a street corner), Mr. Breitbart altered the rules of civil discourse.

Mark Feldstein, a journalism professor at the University of Maryland, said that Mr. Breitbart “used the tools of invective and polemic to change the conversation, to try to turn it to his advantage.”

Mr. Breitbart was a ubiquitous presence on and off the Web, though not one who ever managed to have significant business success there. His star rose along with the Tea Party, of which he was an early and frequent defender.

But he cut an odd figure for a conservative, holding forth with lectures on political theory that name-dropped Michel Foucault and other leftist thinkers. He could also be mordantly funny. (His Twitter avatar was an echo of the apocryphal Jesus imprint on a piece of toast.) Matt Labash,

senior editor at The Weekly Standard, described him as “half right wing Yippie, half Andy Kaufman,” in his column after Mr. Breitbart died.

In 2011, while various religious groups boycotted the Conservative Political Action Conference because of the inclusion of gay Republican groups, he helped hold a party for the gay groups.

He was conversant in pop culture — the Cure and New Order were particular musical favorites — and thought nothing of wearing in-line skates, his longish hair trailing behind him, as he confronted protesters at a rally outside a conservative event hosted by David and Charles Koch in Palm Springs, Calif., in 2011. Once he was done berating the protesters, he took some of them to dinner at Applebee’s.

Mr. Breitbart took in life in big gulps, but he spat out even bigger portions of bile. The day that Senator Edward M. Kennedy died, he called him “a special pile of human excrement” and tweeted, “Rest in Chappaquiddick.” Matt Yglesias of Slate returned the favor after Mr. Breitbart died, tweeting: “Conventions around dead people are ridiculous. The world outlook is slightly improved with @AndrewBreitbart dead.”

Many of his familiars called him a “happy warrior,” but worried about his health because he never seemed to unplug.

“If Twitter ever killed anyone, it was Andrew,” said Mr. Labash of The Weekly Standard. “Andrew was a magnet for hatred, and he used Twitter for a full frontal assault, a tool of combat,”

Friends and colleagues described Mr. Breitbart as both jester and provocateur, one who enjoyed soy lattes (a family friend sprinkled coffee grounds from Starbucks onto his grave) almost as much as waging war on what he saw as Democratic hypocrisy.

“Andrew was a kind of human pinball, always doing something while doing something else, but he never took himself all that seriously,” said Greg Gutfeld, the host of “Red Eye” on Fox News, who frequently booked Mr. Breitbart as a guest. “He was the least serious, serious person I ever met.”

A student of the tactics of the leftist organizer Saul Alinsky (if not his politics), Mr. Breitbart played defense by giving offense, subscribing to Alinsky’s theorem that “the real action is in the enemy’s reaction.” He wielded a network of conservative sources, including a number of members of Congress, four of whom spoke at his Washington memorial, to sow mayhem opportunistically.

As is often the case, there is no more ferocious advocate than a convert.

“He rejected the culture that produced him, and once that process began, it could not be reversed,” said Tucker Carlson, the founder of the Daily Caller, a conservative Web site. “My strong sense was that he loved the performance aspect, the drama of it all, and lived for those moments of provocation.”

WITH piercing blue eyes and ruddily handsome Celtic features, Mr. Breitbart looked more like a fresh-off-the-boat Irish storyteller than the son of a banker mother and restaurateur father in Brentwood. Adopted (along with a sister of Mexican descent), he was raised Jewish, and went to college at Tulane in New Orleans. He majored in American studies, and began a period of heavy drinking and drug use that he described as “debauched” in his 2011 book, “Righteous Indignation.”

After college, he bounced between Los Angeles and Austin, Tex., without much direction, but discovered a kind of religion and purpose after idly tuning in to talk radio and finding himself nodding in agreement to Rush Limbaugh and others.

Mr. Breitbart was activated as a conservative for good by the 1991 Supreme Court confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas, a process he believed was filled with politically motivated innuendo.

But his ferocious adoption of conservative values found real traction in his first true love, the early Internet. In a letter from his wife, Susie, that was read at his memorial by Mr. Solov, she suggested that her husband took one look at the Web and moved right in.

It read: “To Andrew, the Internet was a portal into the future. It works the way his mind worked — go here, turn left, click on this, go right, over here, back here, back where you started. Like one of those ‘choose your own adventure’ books from childhood. It all just made sense to him.”

After the Drudge Report all but tipped over President Clinton by pushing the Monica Lewinsky scandal into plain view, Mr. Breitbart realized that the Web had moved beyond a curio for techies.

“Andrew recognized very early on, before many people did, that the conversation was moving onto the Web,” said Arianna Huffington, who saw him in the weeks before his death. In the late ’90s, when he was her research assistant in her home, he happily pretended to dine on the mud pies that Ms. Huffington’s daughters made for him, and after he began having children, the two families, who lived near each other, remained close.

“He brought two things to the blog,” Ms. Huffington said of their early working relationship. “He knew when a big story was about to happen. But more important, he could find stories buried in the 13th paragraph, link them with other things and put a spotlight on them.”

His expertise was less technical than intuitive, with a mad scientist’s touch for curating and packaging news that made it especially clickable.

“He didn’t have a deep understanding of technology,” said Jonah Peretti, who also worked on the start-up and now runs BuzzFeed. “He was a Web news junkie from the very beginning, with a quickness and obsessiveness that kept him up all hours.”

Although Mr. Breitbart helped start The Huffington Post, it became apparent within a month that the political chasm between him and Ms. Huffington was too great, and his attention span for office matters far too short.

Mr. Breitbart saw infinite possibilities on the Web, starting a series of Web sites — Big Government, Big Hollywood, Big Journalism — under the banner of Breitbart.com.

“I think that he took the guidelines and principles of talk radio, where you could say almost anything and get away with it, and applied it to the Internet,” said Eric Boehlert, a senior fellow at Media Matters for America, a liberal research center on the media, who battled constantly with Mr. Breitbart.

Mr. Breitbart specialized in teasing a small ember of a story, whether it was an inconsistency or a gaffe, and dumping gasoline on it until it blew up — sometimes on him, sometimes on others. “If you do a good enough job, you can force them to make a mistake,” he wrote in his book. “When they do, you must be ready to exploit it.”

Through a carefully managed release of clips from Mr. O’Keefe, the undercover conservative operative, he brought down Acorn, a huge nonprofit that found itself summarily defunded by Congress after its representatives appeared to offer help to Mr. O’Keefe and a colleague when they showed up posing as a pimp and a prostitute.

When there were rumors that Representative Weiner had sent sexually suggestive photos over his Twitter account, Mr. Breitbart pushed the story along with new revelations and eventually hijacked the podium at Mr. Weiner’s news conference to suggest that the congressman was lying. Mr. Weiner resigned soon after.

Working with Mr. O’Keefe, he also used heavily edited video clips to savage Ms. Sherrod, an obscure official at the Agriculture Department, by giving the appearance that she had made racially motivated financing decisions, when actually she had done the opposite.

At the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington in 2011, Mr. Breitbart was served papers for a lawsuit alleging that he had recklessly destroyed her reputation. A representative for Ms. Sherrod said settlement negotiations were continuing despite Mr. Breitbart’s death.

THREE weeks before he died, Mr. Breitbart took the stage at CPAC, the jagged tip of the spear on all things conservative. He entered to the refrains of “Guerrilla Radio” from the band Rage Against the Machine and implored the crowd, “You need to join me in my war against the institutional left!”

He went on to accuse the mainstream media of demonizing the Tea Party. At the end of his stem-winding summation of the recent history of the Democratic Party, he suggested that the election of President Obama was part of a putsch by the Democrats (“The rest of us slept while they plotted and they plotted and they plotted”) to seize the presidency.

“This is not your mother’s Democratic Party!” he thundered, and then later added, “Barack Obama is a radical, and we should not be afraid to say that.”

But he was not done. Mr. Breitbart was never done.

The following day, angered by the Occupy Wall Street protesters who circled the event at the Marriott Wardman Park in Washington, he stepped out of the hotel armed with nothing more than a wineglass and began bellowing at them while the cameras rolled.

“Behave yourselves! Behave yourselves! Behave yourselves!” he shouted, 20 times in a row for over a minute. And then he got a little more specific, alluding to a report that women had been assaulted in various Occupy encampments. “Stop raping people! Stop raping people! Stop raping people! Stop raping the people! You freaks! You filthy, filthy, raping, murdering freaks!”

The protesters surrounded Mr. Breitbart and began chanting back at him, while he seemed to bask in their umbrage. His work done, he was led back inside by hotel security officers, having started yet another viral storm on the Web. It turned out to be his last.

Following his memorial, his colleagues and friends gathered in a house behind the Capitol — Mr. Breitbart had rented a huge, ornate house he called “the Embassy” that served as both salon and a Washington base for his media company — to tell stories and reminisce. A family friend remembered watching Andrew, at age 2, bang his head on a concrete floor when he did not get his way, foretelling a life of stubborn conflict.

At both the memorial and the after-party, stories about his relentlessness and love of argument were legion. In her note read at the memorial, his wife reminded the crowd that Mr. Breitbart was willing to engage and argue with anyone. “I came home one day to our first apartment to find a couple of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” she wrote, “trying to wrap up the conversation and get out.”

The people in the audience, many of whom had spent countless hours locked in conversational combat with Mr. Breitbart, laughed long and hard at that one.