

With Breitbart gone, what becomes of his empire?

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In this Feb. 11, 2010 file photo, conservative media publisher and activist Andrew Breitbart is seen during an interview with the Associated Press at his home in Los Angeles. Breitbart, who was behind investigations that led to the resignations of former Rep. Anthony Weiner and former Agriculture Department official Shirley Sherrod, died Thursday, March 1, 2012 in Los Angeles. He was 43. (AP Photo/Reed Saxon, File)

(AP) -- Can you have Breitbart.com without Andrew Breitbart?

The death Thursday of the combative online blogger and publisher leaves open the question of what will become of a thriving colony of conservative websites for which he was owner, prolific contributor and relentless salesman.

Always the provocateur, Breitbart recently dangled the possibility that he

had politically damaging videos of President [Barack Obama](#) from his early days.

He used his websites to promote a hidden-camera video with actors posing as customers that led the downfall of the liberal Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, or ACORN. He posted [explicit photos](#) of former Rep. Anthony Weiner that caused the New York congressman eventually to resign, but an edited video caused former U.S. [Agriculture Department](#) official Shirley Sherrod to resign over since-reversed perceptions she was a racist.

Breitbart was known for his showman instincts and waging war with liberals "but he really had a vision of the multimedia future that a lot of us do not possess," said Republican strategist Jonathan Wilcox, who knew Breitbart and also teaches a course on politics and celebrity at the University of Southern California.

The technology and staff are in place for websites, including Big Government and Big Journalism, to continue but "the superstar is not there ... and that's going to be the challenge going forward," Wilcox said.

Joel Pollak, a Breitbart editor, said a retooled website was in the works and would go forward. It wasn't immediately clear who would take over the company, which once ran out of Breitbart's basement and now employs about a dozen people. Pollak didn't respond immediately to an email inquiring about the Obama videos.

Breitbart, 43, died after collapsing shortly after midnight during a walk near his home. He was rushed to the emergency room at [Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center](#).

He suffered [heart problems](#) a year earlier, but his father-in-law, actor Orson Bean, said he could not pinpoint what happened. Larry Dietz,

watch commander at the Los Angeles County coroner's office, said an autopsy was likely.

"It's devastating," Bean told the AP.

Breitbart used the Internet to ignite political scandal and expose what he saw as media bias, even if he sometimes had to edit the facts to do it. In a new media age, he argued that anyone with a laptop could reshape public discourse, and his takedown of Weiner established him as a conservative media hero.

He relished public combat with liberals - a YouTube clip last month shows him bellowing at Occupy Wall Street protesters, "Stop raping people, you freaks!" Yet conservatives and tea party activists who loved him saw a crusader against corrupt politicians and what he called the hopelessly liberal "old media guard."

He was filled with contradictions. He was a self-avowed enemy of the mainstream media, yet subscribed to The Associated Press and admitted loving the venerable news agency's photos that came from afar. "It's a love-hate relationship," he confided at a quiet moment. He pleaded with conservatives to drive relentlessly forward - walk into the line of fire, he would say - yet the final sentence from his prolific and often caustic voice on Twitter was, ironically, an apology for calling a follower a "putz," just in case he misunderstood a message to him.

The converted Hollywood lefty who partied his way through Tulane University was also, at home, a soft-spoken father of four. He chose to live on enemy turf, Brentwood, the tony Los Angeles enclave favored by the Hollywood elite he so often mocked.

His business partner and lifelong friend, Larry Solov, once said Breitbart had two speeds: lighthearted jokester and fiery culture warrior. "They

flip back and forth," Solov said. "And there is not that much in between."

Breitbart leaves behind the websites that waged daily war with what he considered liberal bias infecting the media, college campuses, unions and the entertainment industry.

"The core of what Andrew did was bring new citizen journalists into the new media," Pollak said. It "was, and still is, what we do."

His anchor site, Breitbart.com, was visited by 1.7 million people in January, according to website tracker comScore Inc. Though other political sites are far larger - his mentor, Matt Drudge, attracted more than 4 million visits that month - his profile was elevated by public appearances, the Weiner scandal and relentless speechmaking, particularly at tea party rallies, where he was a favorite.

Jenny Beth Martin of the Tea Party Patriots, the movement's largest umbrella group, credited him for "his willingness to fight for our values boldly and brashly."

Republican candidates for president were quick to offer praise and condolences after learning of his death. Newt Gingrich tweeted: "Andrew Breitbart was the most innovative pioneer in conservative activist social media in America. He had great courage and creativity."

Condolences also came from liberal critics as Breitbart's book "Righteous Indignation: Excuse Me While I Save the World!" rose toward the top of Amazon.com's sales rankings.

"We've disagreed more than we've found common ground, but there was never any question of Andrew's passion for and commitment to what he believed," said Ari Rabin-Havt of Media Matters, a liberal watchdog

group and frequent Breitbart nemesis.

Breitbart was skilled at finding issues that pushed conservative buttons while pulling Internet traffic to his websites.

"I do what I do because the mainstream media chooses not to do it," Breitbart said in a 2010 interview with AP. "The game of the left controlling the narrative ... is ending."

Breitbart played by his own standards. He faulted what he called the mainstream media for all manner of shoddy work and bias, but his aim could go off course, too.

Sherrod, who is black, was ousted from her job as the USDA's state rural development director for Georgia in July 2010 after an edited video surfaced of her making what appeared to be a racist remark. She is seen telling an NAACP group that she was initially reluctant to help a white farmer save his farm more than two decades ago, long before she worked for USDA.

Missing from the clip was the rest of the speech, which was meant as a lesson in racial healing. Sherrod told the crowd she eventually realized her mistake and helped the farmer save his farm.

Once the entire video surfaced, Sherrod received numerous apologies from the administration - including President Barack Obama - and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack asked her to return to the department to work on civil rights issues.

She declined Vilsack's offer but later sued Breitbart, his employee, Larry O'Connor, and an unnamed "John Doe" defendant for defamation. A lawyer for O'Connor said Thursday it's not clear whether the case will proceed against the other two defendants, who were seeking to dismiss

the case in federal court.

In a statement Thursday, Sherrod said she was surprised to hear of Breitbart's death. "My prayers go out to Mr. Breitbart's family as they cope during this very difficult time. I do not intend to make any further comments."

The 2009 hidden-camera video that eventually brought down ACORN showed staffers offering advice on taxes and other issues to actors posing as a prostitute and pimp - a technique that would be frowned on in journalism schools. Some employees appeared willing to support illegal schemes involving tax advice, misuse of public funds and illegal trafficking in children. A Government Accountability Office report cleared ACORN of criminal activities.

Even so, public pressure led Congress to block previously approved funds from going to ACORN and to stop future payments. Roughly 10 percent of ACORN's funds came from federal grants and the group eventually disbanded.

Weiner's downfall began on May 28 when Breitbart's website posted a lewd photograph of an underwear-clad crotch and said it had been sent from Weiner's Twitter account to a Seattle woman.

Initially, Weiner lied, saying his account had been hacked. But he pointedly did not report the incident to law enforcement - a step that could have led to charges of wrongdoing far more serious than mere sexting. At one point, he told an interviewer that he could not "say with certitude" that he wasn't the man in the underwear photo.

One of two adopted children, and the son of a Santa Monica restaurateur, Breitbart traced his conservative conversion partly to the 1991 Senate hearings on Clarence Thomas' nomination to the Supreme

Court, which he considered unfair. Before rising to prominence, he was a long-serving underling at the Drudge Report, and was also there during the formative days of the Huffington Post.

Breitbart seldom showed restraint with critics and seemed to savor the negative attention his antics earned him. He once told reporters from the stage at a tea party convention, "It's not your business model that sucks, it's you that sucks."

After Sen. Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts died in 2009, Breitbart tweeted, "Rest in Chappaquiddick" and called him "a special pile of human excrement." When critics questioned his tone, he tweeted they "missed my best ones!"

Breitbart is survived by his wife, Susannah Bean Breitbart, and four children.

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