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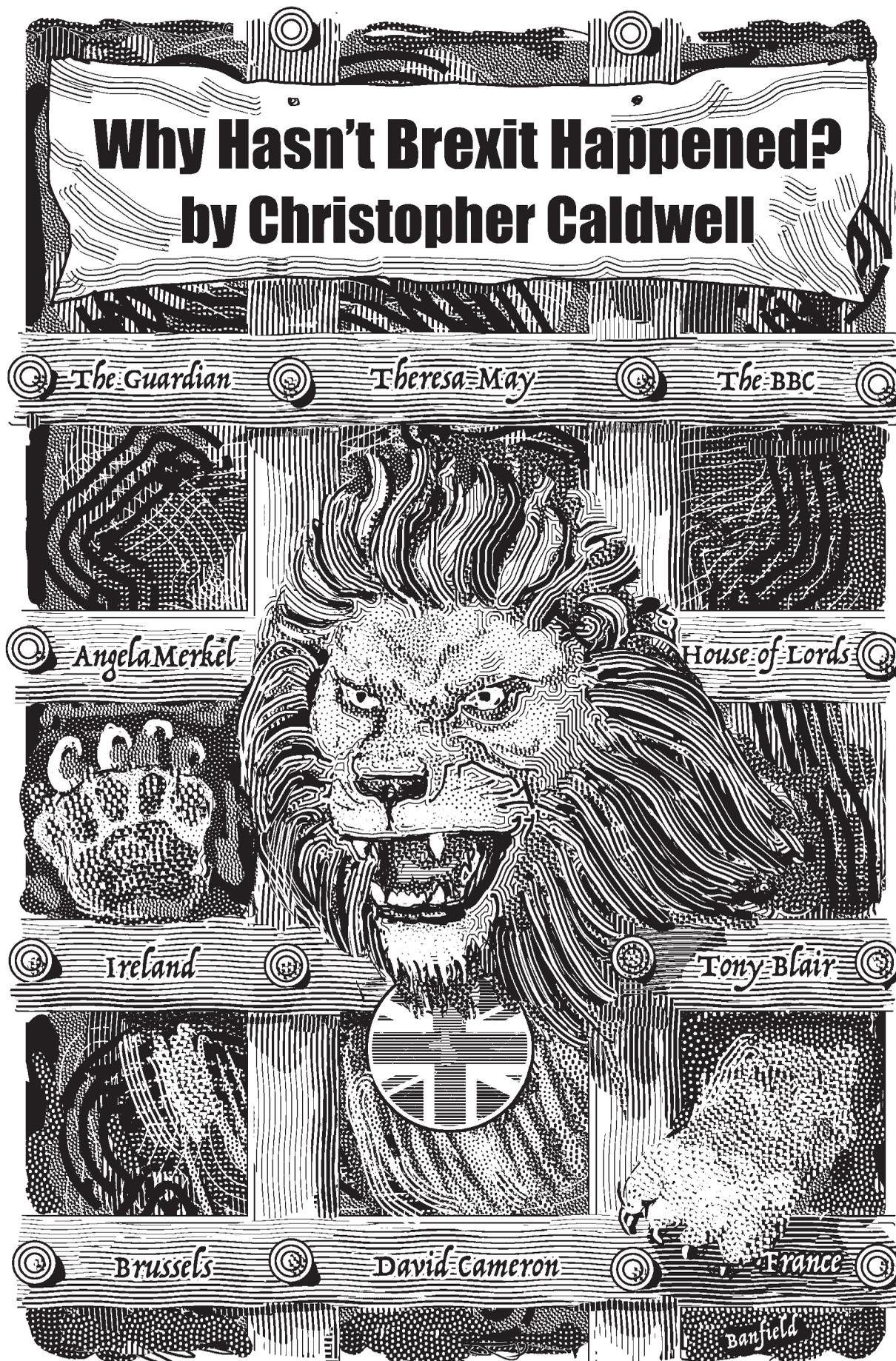
Angelo M.
Codevilla:
**Getting Real
About Russia**

Allen C.
Guelzo:
**U.S. History
After Zinn**

Robert R.
Reilly:
**Harry V.
Jaffa**

Carl W.
Herstein:
**Law & Man
at Yale**

Matthew
Continetti:
**All the News
That's Fit
to Slant**



William
Voegeli:
**The Woke Left
Against Israel**

John Daniel
Davidson:
**Ben Shapiro's
Western Civ**

Steven F.
Hayward:
**George F.
Will**

Victor Davis
Hanson:
**Tom Cotton's
Sacred Duty**

Michael
Anton:
**Bronze Age
Pervert**



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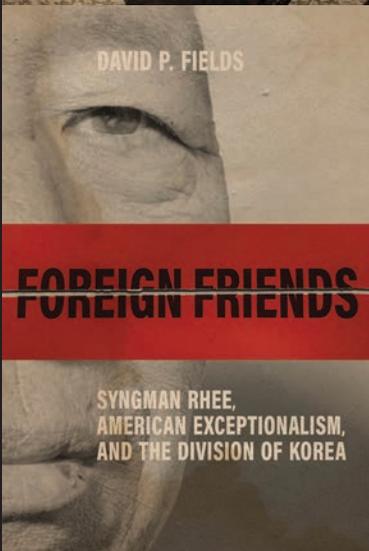
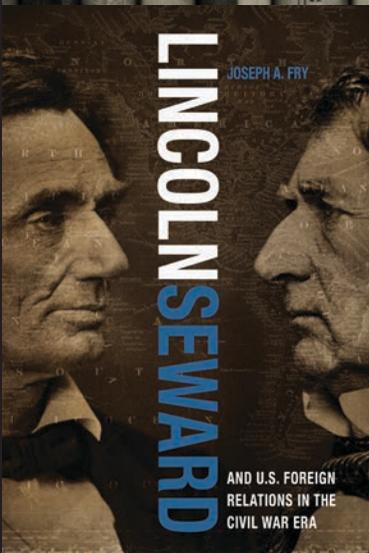
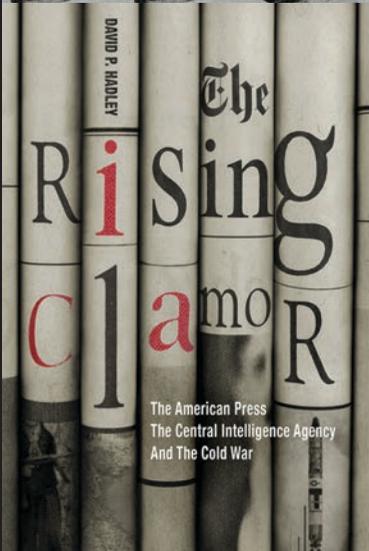
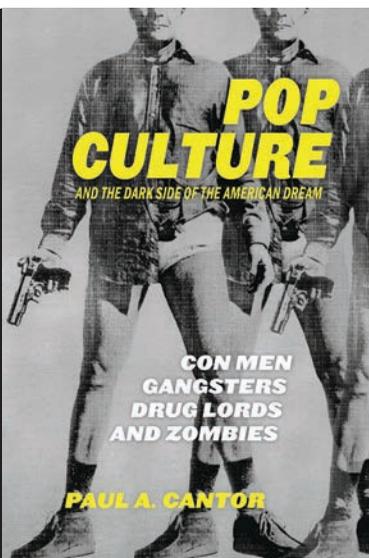
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that the reader was a democratic citizen who needed to be informed. The new conception is that the reader is a bundle of preferences, desires, and affinities ripe for manipulation. “BuzzFeed’s technologists,” Abramson writes, “knew how to use mind tricks and pressure points, how to twist arms, dangle carrots, and use reverse psychology. They had it down to a science: blend one part tough love into two parts obsequious flattery, filter that through nostalgia, and glaze it with scot-free optimism.” Whatever that is, it is not shoe-leather reporting.

THE INTERNET IS A GREAT LEVELER. Print institutions used to observe certain boundaries between the newsgathering and business departments, and between editorial and advertising content. Abramson describes the process by which publishers transgressed those boundaries. They did so out of necessity. They had to find alternative sources of revenue once print advertising disappeared. Programmatic online ads did not cover losses. The answer, according to *BuzzFeed’s* Peretti, was so-called “native advertising.” This was a euphemism for marketing pitches that read like news or feature articles.

“The digital era had enshrined a new business model as the industry standard,” explains Abramson.

[P]laces like Vice and BuzzFeed would give away their journalistic content for free to win adherents to the publisher’s brand identity, then use this leverage to present sales pitches for their sponsors’ sales pitches, soft-pedaling them to the same unsuspecting readers whose loyalty they had won. Their unsponsored editorial work sold readers on how awesome and uncompromising they were. And the depth of that connection with readers was what they sold to advertisers, charging them for the opportunity to compromise it.

The *Post* and the *Times* were reluctant to adopt a model that collapsed the distinction between news and business. Then they succumbed. As the line between reporting and advertising dissolved, so too did the line between fact and opinion. *BuzzFeed* eschewed detachment and dispassion for advocacy and commitment to minority, women’s, and LGBT rights. Later, a front-page article in the August 7, 2016, *New York Times* reported that “Trump Is Testing the Norms of Objectivity in Journalism,” norms most reporters were more than happy to abandon if it cost Donald Trump the presidency.

The media that emerged from the technological whirlwind were digital-first platforms that integrated marketing with an outlet’s brand. *BuzzFeed* produced ads indistinguishable from its lists of “15 Hedgehogs With Things That Look Like Hedgehogs.” *Vice’s* in-house creative agency, dubbed “Virtue,” commodified dissent by infusing promotions from corporations and banks with its punk sensibility. The *Times* promoted trips to Iran and Cuba with the paper’s foreign correspondents, flacked wine clubs, and sold tickets to events featuring notable bylines. The *Post* got into trouble when its plans for “salons,” where lobbyists would pay to mingle with reporters, leaked to a competitor. Both the *Times* and the *Post* sold inserts to foreign governments who used the space, barely distinguishable from the rest of the paper, to extol the achievements of authoritarian regimes. Toward the end of the book, Abramson writes of her former paper: “The ever-growing T Studio had created 235 native ad campaigns for more than 100 clients, with branches in London and Hong Kong. With a staff of 130, it was bigger than the newsroom of Connecticut’s *Hartford Courant*.”

SUCH DRASTIC MEASURES ARE UNLIKELY to make journalism any more sustainable. Last April, Warren Buffett said the newspaper business was “toast” because the readers of most publications do not actually subscribe for the writing and editing. “They want to know what supermarket’s having the bargain on Coke or Pepsi this weekend and so on,” Buffett said. “I mean, it upsets the people in the newsroom to talk that way, but the ads were the most important editorial content from the standpoint of the reader.” Buffett stepped down from the board of the *Washington Post* in 2011, two years before the paper was sold to Jeff Bezos.

If readers are not particularly interested in reporting, then money-losing publications have two choices. One is patronage, i.e., find a rich donor. Another is somehow to monetize the prestige associated with certain titles. Editors of the *Economist* would like subscribers to finish an issue of the magazine feeling internationally aware and financially savvy. The editor of the *New Yorker* produces a magazine for his readers that he hopes comes across as progressive and urbane. Subscribe to the *New York Times* and you can help resist Donald Trump. People will pay for status, though not very much. And status is elusive. Only a few brands can offer it.

Digital challengers such as *HuffPo* and *Vice* paid little attention to quality control. “The Huffington Post held itself accountable



not to journalistic rules but to readers' enthusiasm," Abramson writes.

It did not purport to dictate the terms of the national conversation but rather to reflect it. It aimed not to change hearts and minds but to resonate with them. Company leadership was notably void of anyone with editing experience.

When incumbents such as the *Times* and the *Post* cut costs, editors were the first to go. By June 2017, the *Times* had terminated its 100 copy editors. "They were the editors who never got the glory, but they kept opinion from seeping into the news and saved the paper from misspellings, wrong titles, grammatical errors, and more serious mistakes," she notes.

The digital upheaval removed experienced professionals from newsrooms and replaced them with novice activists working for paltry wages. It was former Obama adviser Ben Rhodes who best summarized the new reality. "The average reporter we talk to is 27 years old, and their only reporting experience consists of being around political campaigns," he told the *New York Times Magazine* in 2016. "That's a sea change. They literally know nothing."

The removal of editorial safeguards coincided with the collapse of public trust in media. Abramson mentions journalistic scandals such as Dan Rather's use of forged memos in a story on George W. Bush's time in the Texas Air National Guard and the *New York Times's* promotion of fabulist Jayson Blair. Her account barely scratches the surface. The past

year has seen the media indulge in flights of speculation and hearsay regarding the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court as well as the content and consequences of Robert Mueller's report on Russian interference in the 2016 election.

INDEED, *MERCHANTS OF TRUTH* exemplifies the very problems it describes. Abramson needs an editor, too. Her narrative is repetitive, contains factual errors, and loses momentum near the end. She acknowledges the *Times's* liberal bias but is

Abramson is the perfect representative of an industry in terminal decline.

much more circumspect when it comes to her own. She says the *Times* "generally eschewed celebrity news," which is laughable to anyone who has had to endure its endless profiles of Frank Ocean, Lena Dunham, and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter.

Abramson refers to the "respected" former Supreme Court reporter Linda Greenhouse—respected by whom? Her main criticism of the *Times* is that it did not do enough to prevent the Iraq war. She calls *The Baffler* "an intelligent magazine for political and cultural analysis," which might be true, but it's also left-wing. Perhaps Jane Mayer of the *New*

Yorker is "one of journalism's most intrepid investigative reporters." She is definitely one of its most ideological and partisan.

It got worse for Abramson. On February 6, *Vice* correspondent Michael Moynihan said on Twitter that the chapters of the book on his company

were clogged with mistakes. Lots of them. The truth promised in *Merchants of Truth* was often not true. While trying to corroborate certain claims, I noticed that it also contained...plagiarized passages.

Moynihan found that Abramson had without attribution used work from the *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Time Out Chicago*, the *New Yorker*, and a master's thesis.

She reacted clumsily, saying she had been "sloppy." Later, in a statement, she admitted,

The notes don't match up with the right pages in a few cases and this was unintentional and will be promptly corrected. The language is too close in some cases and should have been cited as quotations in the text. This, too, will be fixed.

An admission of guilt.

Clumsy, sloppy, scandal-prone, reflexively liberal, and unable to live up to her own standards, Jill Abramson is the perfect representative of an industry in terminal decline.

Matthew Continetti is editor-in-chief of the Washington Free Beacon.

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