

How Fake News Turned a Small Town Upside Down

On a Tuesday morning in June 2016, Nathan Brown, a reporter for The Times-News, the local paper in Twin Falls, Idaho, strolled into the office and cleared off a spot for his coffee cup amid the documents and notebooks piled on his desk. Brown, 32, started his career at a paper in upstate New York, where he grew up, and looks the part of a local reporter, clad in a fresh oxford and khakis that tend to become disheveled over the course of his long days. His first order of business was an article about a City Council meeting from the night before, which he hadn't attended. Brown pulled up a recording of the proceedings and began punching out notes for his weekly article. Because most governing in Twin Falls is done by a city manager, these meetings tend to deal with trivial subjects like lawn-watering and potholes, but Brown could tell immediately that this one was different.

"We have been made aware of a situation," said the first speaker, an older man with a scraggly white beard who had hobbled up to the lectern. "An alleged assault of a minor child and we can't get any information on it. Apparently, it's been indicated that the perpetrators were foreign Muslim youth that conducted this — I guess it was a rape." Brown recognized the man as Terry Edwards. About a year earlier, after The Times-News reported that Syrian refugees would very likely be resettled in Twin Falls, Edwards joined a movement to shut the resettlement program down. The group circulated a petition to put the proposal before voters. They failed to get enough signatures to force a referendum, but Brown was struck by how much support around town the movement attracted. In bars after work, he began to overhear conversations about the dangers of Islam. One night, he heard a man joke about dousing the entrance to the local mosque with pig's blood.

After he finished watching the video, Brown called the police chief, Craig Kingsbury, to get more information about the case. Kingsbury said that he couldn't discuss it and that the police reports were sealed because minors were involved. Brown made a couple phone calls: to the mayor and to his colleague at the paper who covers crime. He pieced together that 12 days earlier, three children had been discovered partly clothed inside a shared laundry room at the apartment complex where they lived. There were two boys, a 7-year-old and a 10-year-old, and a 5-year-old girl. The 7-year-old boy was accused of attempting some kind of sex act with the 5-year-old, and the 10-year-old had used a cellphone borrowed from his older brother to record it. The girl was American and, like most people in Twin Falls, white. The boys were refugees; Brown wasn't sure from where. In his article about the meeting, Brown seems to anticipate that the police chief's inability to elaborate was not going to sit well with the people whose testimony he had just watched.

Image



Nathan Brown, who covers politics for the local newspaper, the Times-News. Credit Harris Mizrahi for The New York Times

That weekend, Brown was on his way to see a movie when he received a Facebook message from Jim Dalos Jr., a 52-year-old known to Twin Falls journalists and police as Scanner Man. Dalos is disabled; he works six hours a week as a dishwasher at a pizzeria but spends most of his time in his apartment, sitting in a reclining chair and drinking Diet Pepsi out of a 52-ounce plastic mug, voraciously consuming news. He reads the local paper, old issues of which litter his living-room floor, and keeps the television blaring — usually Fox News. He got his nickname because he constantly monitors an old police scanner, a gift he received as a teenager from his father, and often calls in tips to the media based on what he hears. He also happens to live at the apartment complex, Fawnbrook, where the laundry-room incident occurred.

Dalos told Brown that he had seen the police around Fawnbrook and that the victim's mother told him that the boys had been arrested. He also pointed Brown to a couple of Facebook groups that were created in response to the crime. Brown scrolled through them on his cellphone and saw links flying back and forth with articles that said that the little girl had been gang raped at knife point, that the perpetrators were Syrian refugees and

that their fathers had celebrated with them afterward by giving them high fives. The stories also claimed that the City Council and the police department were conspiring to bury the crime.

Over the weekend, Brown plowed through his daily packs of cigarettes as he watched hundreds, then thousands, of people joining the groups. Their panic appeared to be piqued by a mass shooting, the deadliest in American history, that had just occurred at Pulse nightclub in Orlando. The perpetrator had declared allegiance to ISIS. The commenters also posted stories that claimed refugees were responsible for a rash of rapes in Europe and that a similar phenomenon in the United States was imminent. “My girl is blond and blue-eyed,” one woman wrote. “I am extremely worried about her safety.”

The details of the Fawnbrook case, as it became known, were still unclear to Brown, but he was skeptical of what he was reading. For one thing, he knew from his own previous reporting that no Syrians had been resettled in Twin Falls after all. He woke up early on Monday to get a head start on clarifying things as much as possible in order to write a follow-up article. Before he got into the office, a friend texted him, telling him to check the Drudge Report. At the top, a headline screamed: “REPORT: Syrian ‘Refugees’ Rape Little Girl at Knifepoint in Idaho.”

Image

Jim Dalos Jr., the “scanner man” who calls in tips to local media. Credit Harris Mizrahi for The New York Times

As the only city of any size for 100 miles in any direction, Twin Falls serves as a modest hub within southern Idaho’s vast agricultural sprawl. Its population of about 45,000 nearly doubles each day as people travel there to work, primarily in the thriving agribusinesses. But its bucolic rhythms still allow for children to play outside unattended and make driving a meditative experience. Surrounding the city and sprinkled among its tidy tract neighborhoods, potatoes, alfalfa, sugar beets and corn grow in fields. Half a million dairy cows in the area produce three-quarters of the state’s milk supply. Because of its location, Twin Falls is home to major food processors like Chobani Yogurt, Clif Bar and Glanbia Nutritionals, a dairy company. All have large facilities in town and have helped to push down the unemployment rate to just under 3 percent, below the national average. The wealth of easy-to-find low-skilled jobs made Twin Falls attractive as a place for resettling refugees, and they began arriving in the 1980s, at that time mostly from Cambodia and the former Yugoslavia. Nearly 2,500 refugees have moved to the town over the years.

Most Twin Falls residents are churchgoing, and about half of those are Mormons. Locally owned stores and restaurants are generally closed on Sundays, and the city has not voted for a Democratic presidential candidate since Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1936. Liberals often register as Republicans just to have an opportunity to participate in the electoral process, by voting in the primaries. If a Republican is going to win regardless, the thinking goes, they would at least like to play a role in deciding which one prevails.

The same qualities that bind the townspeople together can, in turn, be alienating to newcomers. The refugee community has begun to experience this effect as its demographic makeup has changed. Over the past decade and a half, as conflict spread across North Africa and the Middle East, Twin Falls started to resettle larger numbers of refugees with darker skin who follow an unfamiliar religion — two things that make it difficult to blend into a town that is 80 percent white.

On a national scale, an ascendant network of anti-Muslim activists and provocateurs has exploited the fears brought on by these changes, finding a platform and a receptive audience online. The narrative they espouse — on blogs with names like Jihad Watch — is that America, currently 1 percent Muslim, is in the midst of an Islamic invasion. Central to the worldview of these bloggers, some of whom have celebrity-size social-media followings, is that Muslims have a propensity toward sexual violence. They seize on any news item that bolsters this notion. Perhaps their biggest touchstone is an incident that took place in Cologne, Germany, on New Year’s Eve in 2015. Mobs of men, many of them asylum seekers from the Middle East, pick-pocketed and groped more than a thousand women in and around a train station. The German police acknowledged the incident had taken place only under pressure, as the women’s stories began to leak out through the media. This established, for these activists, the contours of a narrative that they believe has been repeating itself. The Fawnbrook incident quickly drew their interest.

What happened in Twin Falls was sadly somewhat commonplace but not in the way the activists believed. The local Police Department investigates sex crimes on a weekly basis, and in about half a dozen of those that proceed to court each year, the victims and the accused are both minors. “If it’s younger kids, it’s them being curious,” J.R. Paredez, the lead investigator on the case, explained to me. Some children who act out sexually have been victimized themselves, he said, while others have been exposed to explicit material at home or at school or, as is more common recently, on their cellphones. “As they start to get older, there’s more of the actual sexual component to it.”

Two weeks after the incident, the boys were charged with lewd and lascivious behavior against a minor. (The 14-year-old who lent his cellphone to the boys was initially charged with the same crime. He was not present in the laundry room, and his charge was eventually reduced to make him an accessory.) In Idaho, this statute applies to physical contact “done with the intent of arousing, appealing to, or gratifying the lust or passions or sexual desires of such person, such minor child, or third party.” Paredes said that the cellphone video made clear what specifically had happened between the children, but that he couldn’t show it to the reporters who asked him about it, because doing so would have constituted criminal distribution of child pornography. He called most of the details that he read about the case on the internet “100 percent false, like not even close to being accurate.” (The family of the accused declined to comment.)

As more time passed without a solid account of what happened inside the laundry room, lurid rumors continued to surface online and came to dominate conversations in grocery stores and at school events. And while the City Council members did not have control over the case, the bloggers who wrote about it placed much of the blame on them.

On the Monday when Twin Falls was the top story on Drudge, the City Council held another weekly meeting. Normally only a handful of people attend, and Brown is one of the few reporters among them. But that night, the auditorium filled until there was standing room only, and television news crews appeared from Boise and other nearby cities. When it came time for public comments, one man got up and praised the city’s handling of the case, followed by more than a dozen others who laid into the council members. Terry Edwards handed each of them a small copy of the Constitution and told them to do their jobs. A woman named Vicky Davis, her hair in a satiny white bob, stood up and proclaimed that Islam had declared jihad on America.

“They are not compatible with our culture,” she said. “They hate us. They don’t want to be Americans. They don’t want to assimilate. What do you need to see? What more proof do you need?”

This was a highly unusual meeting, but Brown wasn’t exactly surprised. Several months earlier, when the anti-refugee activists began to organize, he started reading up to try to better understand their views. He picked up a book by Ann Coulter and began to follow the anti-refugee blogs. At the meeting, he felt as if he were hearing all that he had read being repeated aloud by his neighbors.

Kingsbury, the police chief, read from a statement while fumbling with a thicket of microphones piled onto the lectern by visiting reporters. In between exasperated breaths, he explained why he could not disclose the details of the incident but said that he could address some of the misinformation that was spreading online. There was no evidence of a knife, he said, or of any celebration afterward or of a cover-up, and no Syrians were involved: The boys were from Sudan and Iraq. “I’m a kid who grew up in Idaho,” he said. “Law enforcement takes these types of allegations very seriously. However, we can’t act on them within an hour. It’s not like a crime show.” He told the audience that the boys had been arrested, to applause.

But online, Kingsbury’s words only inflamed the activists more. Just after midnight, someone posted his work email address on Jihad Watch, along with those of the council members and the mayor. A commenter on another website called The Muslim Issue posted the phone numbers and email addresses for the town’s government officials, the head of the refugee-resettlement center and some administrators at the college, which runs the refugee resettlement program. From there, the information spread to more blogs and to the comments sections of far-right news outlets with massive audiences.

Image

Shawn Barigar, the mayor of Twin Falls. Credit: Harris Mizrahi for The New York Times

By 9 the next morning, messages were pouring into the inbox of the mayor of Twin Falls, Shawn Barigar, nearly every minute. Barigar grew up in a neighboring town and went to work in Boise as a television news anchor before moving back to start a family. His even keel and the air of sophistication he picked up while living in a comparatively big city have made him popular politically. He is left of the town on many social issues, which has made some of his constituents suspicious of him. But most of the people who contacted him that summer were from other states and even other countries. Some people demanded that the city pay for a new car and apartment for the victim and her family. Others said that local officials’ attempts to correct inaccurate details about the incident were veiled efforts to suggest that no crime had occurred at all, in order to protect the refugees. Others accused him of being a “globalist,” a word that has taken on many definitions but in this case meant he was part of a vast, arcane conspiracy. They believed that establishment politicians wanted to turn red states like Idaho blue by starting wars and then importing refugees from those war zones as cheap labor who would not only displace American workers but also reliably vote Democratic.

Many of the people who wrote to the mayor had a much simpler goal: to unleash their hatred of Islam. One message, with the subject line “Muslims,” said that refugees were committing rapes and hit-and-runs and urinating on women and that the mayor was guilty of treason. “It’s out of the bag, [expletive],” it read. “We will

and are holding you responsible for any and all crimes committed by these quote refugees. No courts. No police. Just us. You will answer to us in the darkness of night.”

The next day, Camille Barigar, the mayor’s wife, arrived in her office at the college, where she ran the performing-arts center, and started listening to her voice mail. In a calm, measured voice, a man who sounded as if he was reading from a script went on for nearly four minutes. “I wonder, Miss Barigar, if your residence was posted online and your whereabouts identified, how you would feel if half a dozen Muslim men raped and sodomized you, Miss Barigar, and when you tried to scream, broke every tooth in your mouth,” he said. “And then I wonder how you’d feel if, when you went to the Twin Falls Police Department, they told you to run along, that this is simply cultural diversity.”

The caller said that life was “becoming difficult” in the United States, just as it had in England. He referenced Jo Cox, a British member of Parliament who spoke out in support of refugees and later “met with opposition in the form of a bullet to the head.”

“She’s dead now,” he said. “They’ve buried her.”

Image

Camille Barigar, the mayor’s wife, who works at the local college. Credit Harris Mizrahi for The New York Times

The Twin Falls story aligned perfectly with the ideology that Stephen Bannon, then the head of Breitbart News, had been developing for years, about the havoc brought on by unchecked immigration and Islamism, all of it backed by big-business interests and establishment politicians. Bannon latched onto the Fawnbrook case and used his influence to expand its reach. During the weeks leading up to his appointment in August 2016 to lead Donald J. Trump’s campaign for president, Twin Falls was a daily topic of discussion on Bannon’s national radio show, where he called it “the beating heart” of all that the coming presidential election was about. He sent his lead investigative reporter, Lee Stranahan, to the town to investigate the case, boasting to his audience that Stranahan was a “pit bull” of a reporter. “We’re going to let him off the chain,” he said.

Then 50, Stranahan was relatively new to journalism. He had spent a few decades as a television producer and a graphic illustrator in Los Angeles, and on the side he shot erotic photography, which is how he met his wife. Stranahan’s transition into journalism began during the television writers’ strike of 2007 and 2008. To keep himself entertained, he created parody political advertisements and posted them on YouTube. One of the first was a satirical Rudy Giuliani ad, asking Republican primary voters to support him because he had taken good care of his mistress, offering her private security courtesy of the N.Y.P.D., whereas Mitt Romney “didn’t even bother” to take on a paramour. Stranahan says that within weeks, the videos led to invitations to appear on CNN and to meet with a vice president at NBC and to a job offer, which he accepted, writing political comedy for The Huffington Post.

In college, Stranahan was a libertarian and even attended Ayn Rand’s funeral. But when he moved to California, he became a liberal, vehemently opposing the Iraq war and the presidency of George W. Bush. He voted for Barack Obama in 2008. Two years later, Stranahan interviewed Andrew Breitbart, a fellow Huffington Post alumnus, for an article he was writing about Jon Stewart’s Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear. They spoke for more than three hours, bonding over their shared love of Depeche Mode. Eventually, Breitbart became Stranahan’s mentor, converted him to conservatism and offered him a job. In 2011, Breitbart took Stranahan to the Conservative Political Action Conference and introduced him to Michele Bachmann, who, in Stranahan’s recollection, convinced him that she had uncovered disturbing details about Islam that no one in the establishment was willing to talk about. Stranahan says this conversation was the genesis of his concerns about the religion.

Stranahan arrived in Idaho in August, after covering the national party conventions. The sealed nature of the case prevented any journalist from an exhaustive examination, and the accused and the victim’s families refused to speak to the mainstream media. But Stranahan thrived in the void of facts. He was granted one of the few interviews with the victim’s family, but his account of the crime offered little more information than others’ had — and far more inaccuracies, according to the police and the county prosecutor. He described what took place as a “horrific gang rape” and wrote graphic details about the incident, which the Twin Falls Police say are untrue. On Breitbart radio, Stranahan openly wondered whether Barigar, the mayor, was “a big, you know, Shariah supporter.” And he suggested repeatedly that mass rapes by refugees had occurred in Europe and were inevitably coming to the United States. “If you want to wait until your country turns into France or Cologne, Germany. If you want to wait, you can wait,” he warned the audience. “But if you want to watch it and stop it now, you’ve got a chance to do it in November.”

Image

Lee Stranahan, a former Investigative reporter for Breitbart News. Credit Harris Mizrahi for The

New York Times

Stranahan says his Breitbart editors sent him to Twin Falls to report on the “Muslim takeover” of the town. (Breitbart denies this and says it’s “absurd.”) But he soon became enamored of a grander theory about what was happening in southern Idaho: globalism. He wrote that local businesses received government kickbacks for employing foreigners instead of Americans. (Stranahan did not cite any evidence of this, and it is untrue, according to the state Department of Labor.) And he often referred to a Syrian refugee crisis, though no Syrians were ever resettled there. Then, to bring the story full circle, he claimed these Muslim refugees were being used to replace American workers and that the government, big business and law enforcement were either conspiring to conceal the sexual-assault case or intentionally looking the other way, in order to keep the machine turning.

“Bottom line, this is bad for business,” he told me in an interview last winter, explaining his interpretation of the city officials’ rationale: “I’m not really going to look into this too deeply because if I find out the truth, if I discover what actually happened, if I figure out the truth, it’s not really good for business.” Stranahan believed that Chobani, a Greek-yogurt company, was at the center of the scheme. Breitbart had been covering the company for months, ever since the owner, Hamdi Ulukaya, a Turkish-born businessman, made a speech at the World Economic Forum at Davos encouraging other chief executives to pledge financial and political support to refugees.

While he was in town, Stranahan embedded with critics of the refugee program. They drove him to some of his interviews and to the yogurt factory to shoot drone footage. Stranahan doesn’t get around well on his own in part because he has been mostly blind in one eye since grade school, when a neighborhood kid threw a rock at him, shattering his right optic nerve. Rather than a round pupil, his is jagged-edged, and so large that it nearly covers his iris. He shuffles when he walks because of neuropathic foot pain from diabetes, which he regulates by eating a ketogenic diet, usually one meal a day, consisting entirely of protein and fat. In Twin Falls, he subsisted most days on blackened chicken from Popeyes.

During the three months he was in Twin Falls, City Council members refused his interview requests, leaving him stuck inside an echo chamber with the activists, which he amplified online. When I was in Twin Falls, I found myself empathizing: These same activists refused to speak with me. One of the most outspoken among them is a woman named Julie DeWolfe, who lives atop a grassy hill 20 minutes outside town and who spent significant time with Stranahan. When I went there to ask for an interview, she came outside with several barking dogs and told me to leave. “The company you work for is not trustworthy,” she said.

As the summer came to a close, The Times-News was bombarded with threatening phone calls and email from all over. After it received a threat that was deemed credible enough to engage the F.B.I., the editor of the paper told Brown and the other reporters to conduct their interviews outside the office and ordered the entire staff to walk in pairs when going out to their cars. For months, the reporters covered protests around town, which were widely hyped on social media but, for the most part, sparsely attended. At least once the Police Department deployed plainclothes officers into the crowds, with instructions to look after the journalists. Later, it turned out that fake Facebook accounts linked to the Russian government helped to spread stories about Twin Falls and even organized one of the rallies there. The event was also poorly attended but is the first known Russian attempt to spark a demonstration on American soil.

The phone and email attacks continued through the fall and spiked each time a new conspiracy theory was posted online. One council member told me that she gained 15 pounds from the stress. At night, Shawn Barigar would lie down with his iPad and spend hours reading stories that called him a crook, a liar or an ISIS sympathizer. He had to shut down his Twitter account after someone accused him of having been convicted of sexual assault. Before he could debunk the myth, the post had spread, leaving untold numbers of constituents under the impression that he was a rapist. He stopped sleeping and struggled to focus at work or to be present with his family. He and his wife say they bickered all summer.

“It was like being in a hole,” he told me, his eyes welling up with tears. “It was all-consuming.”

Stranahan now works out of a trendy shared workspace in Washington, across the street from the White House. He quit his job at Breitbart, which he said was being mismanaged in Bannon’s absence, to host a drive-time FM radio show with Sputnik, a state-run Russian news outlet. He told me that he jumped at the chance to transition to a Kremlin-funded outfit and, knowing that it would be controversial, spoke to every media outlet that inquired about it, in order to draw even more people to his work.

He expressed no contrition about the reporting he did in Twin Falls, though many of the conclusions that he drew on the radio and online have been debunked. Still, many of the outlets that covered Twin Falls made only minor tweaks to their stories or did nothing at all. Many of the falsehoods that were written about the Fawnbrook case still appear at the top of a Google search of the city.

The most transparent course-correction resulted from a lawsuit against Alex Jones, the publisher of InfoWars, for its misleading stories about Chobani. After initially vowing to fight the yogurt company in court, Jones retracted several stories and issued an apology in order to make a lawsuit go away. Stranahan said that his editors forced him off the Twin Falls story during the fall and suggested that they had done so under threat from Chobani. (Breitbart denies this.)

Stranahan and I spoke a handful of times over the course of the last year, each time for several hours. Talking with him feels like being inside one of his conspiracy theories. When you ask him a question, he begins to answer and then immediately swerves in a different direction, bouncing like a pinball between topics that barely connect to one another — from the Fawnbrook case to clitorectomies and stoning, then Syrian refugees, then a prominent Wahhabi cleric — and seems to increase in velocity as he ricochets off them. It's an exhausting exercise, but also a fascinating one. He seems perpetually on the precipice of pulling the argument together, sparking just enough curiosity that you let him keep going. Stranahan uses this talent most effectively in his work, painting himself as a champion of people who are understandably uninformed about other cultures and religions based on their own experiences. "It's just easy to brand these people as a bunch of Islamophobic, racist yokels," he told me, with a hint of disgust in his voice. "I just don't like it."

Stranahan struck me as passionate about his stories; not about their veracity but about the freedom he and the critics of refugee resettlement should have to speculate as they wanted without being belittled by the fact-mongering mainstream. When I reached him by phone this June, he told me he was planning to travel back to Idaho for more reporting on Fawnbrook, now that he was no longer constrained by his editors at Breitbart. He told me that he believed that he had uncovered another dimension of his globalist theory related to Chobani's participation in the federal school-lunch program. He felt compelled to follow up on the earlier coverage, because he was frustrated that Alex Jones and others were forced to retract their stories and apologize under pressure. "I don't like people getting shut up like that," he said. "Even if their stories have problems, I don't like journalists getting shut down."

I started to ask why anyone should be allowed to publish false information for the express purpose of angering their audience and pushing them further away from those with whom they disagree, but Stranahan cut me off. "Hey, I'm walking into the White House right now," he said. He had just arrived for a press briefing with the president's spokesman. "Let me call you back."

This April, the boys accused in the Fawnbrook case admitted guilt — the juvenile court equivalent to pleading guilty — and were sentenced in June. The judge prohibited city officials from commenting on the outcome of the trial, but juvenile-justice experts told me that the boys would most likely be placed on probation and required to attend mandatory therapy to correct their behavior. Even in Idaho, a state with tough sentencing requirements, the law bars anyone under 10 from being jailed and only allows it in extreme cases for anyone under 12.

Late one Monday night in June I received a phone call from Dalos, the Scanner Man. He asked if I had heard about the "fireworks flying around Twin Falls." The news of the boys' fate had somehow reached the public. "The suspects didn't go to jail or nothing," he said, adding that people in town were "irate." Facebook posts about the story were again flooding his feed. "They're blaming it on Muslim law," he said. One of the articles circulating, from a site called Bare Naked Islam, included a photograph of the judge in the case with a large red arrow pointing toward his head, next to the caption "Corrupt Judge." Another article published the judge's home address and phone number, inciting another flood of harassment, a year after the initial onslaught.

Shawn and Camille Barigar's bickering has subsided, but they have discovered that they disagree over whether Islamic teachings conflict with American social norms. "I can't take the leap," Shawn told me, "that because you are Muslim therefore you are reading the Quran verbatim, and you're going to go out and do genital mutilation." Camille said she supported the local resettlement program but thought that her husband's unwillingness to even consider cultural differences or acknowledge any nuance was naïve. "I think we've got to be careful," she said. "And I don't want to be afraid to talk about it entirely or, like, sound racist." It is precisely this discomfort that provides an opening for people like Stranahan to dominate the conversation.

Part of the reason a fear of Islam has persisted in Twin Falls is because the local leadership refused to defuse it, according to Matt Christensen, 36, the editor of The Times-News. While Brown wrote articles that sorted out the truth about the Fawnbrook case, Christensen was publishing commentary that castigated the people who were spreading falsehoods. He told me that he had closed-door meetings with city officials, in which he asked them to write guest editorials doing the same, but none of them did. Christensen suspected that they were afraid of one of the most reliable political dangers in the region, the same force that leads would-be Democrats there to register as Republicans: being outflanked on the right is the quickest way to lose your job.

"Behind closed doors, they would all tell you they were pro-refugee, and we wanted them to step forward and make that declaration in a public arena, and it just never really happened," he told me. "That was frustrating

to us especially at the beginning because it really felt like the newspaper was out there all alone.” He continued: “There were days where we felt like, Godammit, what are we doing here? We write a story and it’s going to reach 50,000 people. Breitbart writes a story and it’s going to reach 2, 3, 4, 5, 10 million people. What kind of a voice do we have in this debate?”

The refugee resettlement center received a dramatic increase in donations from local residents during the last year. But those in the town who support the program have often been drowned out by the relatively smaller, but louder, group of activists who oppose it. Brown said he expected to see an anti-Shariah bill introduced in the State Legislature when the next session starts in 2018. Bills like this, which try to bar Islamic law from being used in American courts, have been introduced in the past two years in Boise but never passed. He speculated that the momentum of the past year could force a different outcome. “There are a lot of people who feel like society is changing too quickly, like the community is changing too quickly,” he told me. “And who view other people not like them or who don’t speak their language as a threat or a sign that their culture is going to be weakened. And they want to do what they can to stop that.”

Caitlin Dickerson is a national reporter for The Times. She has covered changes in immigration policy and often profiles the lives of immigrants, including those without legal status.

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