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As Gawker traffic stalls, writers told to work faster



Nick Denton (CNBC)



By PETER STERNE 5:46 a.m. Oct. 9, 2015

"Traffic is flat," Gawker Media's acting executive editor John Cook wrote in a memo to staff on Wednesday. "In prior iterations of this organization, that fact would have served as evidence of an abject editorial failure."

But web traffic is no longer Gawker's primary metric for judging editorial success. In January, CEO Nick Denton announced that the site would prioritize high-quality editorial content over viral posts that drew large amounts of traffic. Gawker's bonus system also shifted; writers received bonuses for writing stories that editors judged to be high-quality, rather than for stories that drew the most unique visitors.

Though Gawker stopped chasing clicks, it did not immediately see a major traffic decline. "So far, traffic is holding up nicely," Denton wrote at the time. "That's the theory: do good stories and the traffic will come anyway. Unique growth is a by-product of good journalism, but a dangerous target to follow blindly."

Nine months later, though, Gawker's traffic growth has stalled. According to Quantcast, Gawker Media Group sites — which include Gawker.com along with sister sites like Deadspin and Jezebel — received 101.2 million global unique visits in September (i.e. the 30 days ending Sep. 30), compared to 117.6 million in September 2014 and 129 million in January (i.e. the 30 days ending Jan. 30).

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Traffic may no longer be Gawker's top priority, but it still matters to the company. For Cook, it

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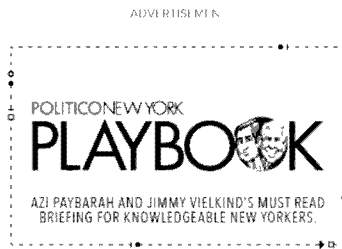
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also serves as a useful proxy for how hard his staffers are working.

"I don't want to see Facebook viral garbage, but I do want more speed, more strength, and more desire on our sites. ... And right now I'm seeing too many first posts of the day going up at 9:40 a.m., too many posts with takes on stories that other sites addressed the day before, too many two-hour posts taking six-hours to write, too many posts that betray no attempt to add new information, research, reporting, or ideas to the topics they address," he wrote. "And too many people showing up in Slack at 11:00 a.m."

Read Cook's full post below:

Traffic is flat.

In prior iterations of this organization, that fact would have served as evidence of an abject editorial failure. But as you know, we've shifted

our mission to accommodate and emphasize the fact that, in Nick's words, "Gawker is always first about the story." And so we have been rewarding and promoting work that unearths or explains fascinating, enraging, and meaningful truths about the world.

Recent examples of those sorts of stories include Ashley Feinberg on the Duggar family's lies and hypocrisy, Dave McKenna on Kevin Johnson's past and contemporary crimes, Annalee Newitz on the vast sham that was Ashley Madison, Joanna Rothkopf on the real story behind celebrated fashion outfit ShopJeen. They bring us audience, credibility, impact, and the power to actually engage the world around us rather than just comment on it as it passes us by.

And yet.

You can see this company's is a long and steady march toward an ever-larger audience. You are all aware of the feeling of confidence—of winning—that an inexorable traffic climb instills. Even if that soaring line is no longer the crux of our editorial strategy, it is a mark of success. And its softening, as you can see on the right side of the graph, is a signal that, despite all those hits that I trumpet with pride, something has slipped. To quote from a memo that Tim Marchman sent to Deadspin's staff Monday (and which inspired this note), "the facts are that we do numbers when we're right."

And we are doing numbers: Gawker.com saw its best traffic day in history in August on the back of our scoop about Josh Duggar's Ashley Madison account. But the fact remains that our network traffic is more wobbly than I would like. Yes there are other factors. All of our competitors are facing the same traffic headwinds. Facebook hiccups, shifts in audience behavior, what have you.

But I don't really care about the other factors. What I care about is ensuring that this organization wakes up every morning with the intention of doing

some fucking damage on the internet. That you continue to move faster than your competitors. That you think more clearly and ambitiously. And that you fill the spaces between those setpiece posts with live, crackling, blogging.

I don't want to see Facebook viral garbage, but I do want more speed, more strength, and more desire on our sites. I want to read people who wake up and attack. People who cherish the power we have to start and influence conversations. And right now I'm seeing too many first posts of the day going up at 9:40 a.m., too many posts with takes on stories that other sites addressed the day before, too many two-hour posts taking six-hours to write, too many posts that betray no attempt to add new information, research, reporting, or ideas to the topics they address. And too many people showing up in Slack at 11:00 a.m.

So look at that traffic chart and take pride in the trend. But you should also see a blinking yellow light, an indicator that we all need to work harder. To quote Marchman again: The numbers "are not bad, but they're not where they could and should be. That's not a reason to rush out and cynically hustle for uniques; it is a reason to get to work."

So let's.

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