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'We Need Some Limits': A Very Brief Q&A With Gawker Founder Nick Denton

BY ZACH SCHONFELD 7/23/15 AT 2:43 PM

For nearly a week, Gawker has been in crisis mode.

A widely reviled story about a Condé Nast executive's private life—which was published July 16 and pulled by founder Nick Denton the following day—set the spark. Two top editors have resigned. The rest of the staff is seething. And the timing couldn't be worse: Gawker is in the middle of a \$100 million lawsuit over a Hulk Hogan sex tape and also rather busy moving offices.

Denton, the British entrepreneur who founded his flagship gossip blog out of a SoHo apartment in 2003, seems to acknowledge Gawker's identity crisis. Once, the philosophy was to publish anything, however lowbrow or scathing. Now, he tells Newsweek, "we need some limits." Gawker once preached the gospel of total editorial freedom. In this case, Denton didn't hesitate to interfere with his staff's editorial judgment—or to remind them of business concerns.

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We spoke with the Gawker founder by phone on Wednesday afternoon. He talked about Gawker's present state, the meaning of editorial freedom and the radioactive blog post that sparked this mess in the first place.

How are things at Gawker right now?

I think they're settling down. This is day seven since the story was published. I think yesterday [Tuesday] was the day of maximum drama.

In light of what has happened over the past several days, do you regret interfering with the post on Friday?

You know, I've heard so much about this. I'm not going to get into it.

You don't want to talk about that?

I'm not going to give anything, I'm not going to add anything more. You can find plenty of stuff that I've written where I say, this is the right decision. It was a difficult decision, but it was the right decision.

It looks like there's a bit of a revolt happening at Gawker right now, and a lot of the writers don't have much faith in you. What is your response to that?

We're meeting with the writers tomorrow. I'm not going to add any fuel to those flames. They're obviously understandably angry. They published a story that met with universal condemnation. The site lost its editor-in-chief, who resigned over the story. The writers have been used to... They had the license to publish absolutely anything under the guise of editorial freedom. And we need some limits.

That's very different from how you've spoken in the past.

In the more distant past, maybe.

You no longer believe in full editorial freedom for your staff?

I'm really not sure about the direction of your questions. I absolutely believe in editorial freedom for the staff to pursue worthwhile stories. This is not a worthwhile story. The editorial freedom is a privilege, and it's a privilege that is supported by the business. And it's protected by the First Amendment. And it is too important to waste on outing a private individual and taking relish in the story and the blow-by-blow of his exchanges with an escort.

You think the condemnation over that story was justified?

I shared their distaste for the story. The story itself was not... A lot of writers on Gawker and on the other sites are embarrassed about it. And they're angry that the post was taken down. Both of those emotions at the same time.

I actually have to get going. If you email me, if you have anything else, just email me, and I'll try to give you a response in writing, if that's OK.

[Note: At this point, Denton abruptly ended the interview but offered to answer additional questions via email. We've sent over questions and will update if we hear back.]

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MEDIA

2 Gawker Editors Resign Over Article's Removal

By RAVI SOMAIYA JULY 20, 2015

The executive editor of Gawker Media and the editor of its flagship site Gawker resigned on Monday after last week's removal of a controversial article about a media executive.

The article, which was widely condemned after it was posted Thursday night, had accused the married male executive of seeking, via text message, to pay for sex with a gay escort. It was removed on Friday and Gawker's founder, Nick Denton, said in a statement posted on the site that he regretted publishing the article.

In an email posted on Gawker on Monday, Tommy Craggs, the executive editor, said that companies had threatened to withdraw advertising from the site because of the article. He also said he had told other senior executives, known as the managing partners, that he would be forced to resign if they voted to remove the post.

It sent a message, he said, that his responsibility as executive editor was meaningless, and that "true power over editorial resides in the whims of the four cringing members of the managing partnership's Fear and Money Caucus."

As for the merits of the removed article, Mr. Craggs wrote, "This isn't the place to debate the merits of that story, other than to say that I stand by the post."

In his own email, also posted on Gawker, Max Read, the site's editor, described the article's deletion as an "unacceptable and unprecedented breach of the editorial firewall" which "turns Gawker's claim to be the world's largest independent media company into, essentially, a joke."

Mr. Denton, in response to the resignations, said in a statement to the editorial staff:

“This is the company I built. I was ashamed to have my name and Gawker’s associated with a story on the private life of a closeted gay man who some felt had done nothing to warrant the attention.”

The reaction to the resignations on social media ranged from current and former Gawker staff members lamenting that Mr. Craggs and Mr. Read would no longer be with the company to puzzlement that the two would resign over a story many found to be misguided. Greg Howard, a staff writer for the Gawker Media sports site Deadspin, which Mr. Craggs edited before becoming executive editor, said on Twitter: “Craggs is the best editor and ally I’ve ever known or seen or heard of, and losing him when we need him most is the worst possible thing.”

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The New York Times <http://nyti.ms/1kCU0w2>

MEDIA

Gawker to Retool as Politics Site

By **RAVI SOMAIYA** NOV. 17, 2015

Gawker.com, a site that pioneered the knowing, irreverent tone that has come to define web journalism, will switch from covering New York and the media world, as it has done since its founding in 2003, to focus on politics.

The change, which is part of a broad reorganization of the site's parent company, Gawker Media, was announced in a memo to the staff on Tuesday.

The site, wrote Gawker's founder, Nick Denton, "will ride the circus of the 2016 campaign cycle, seizing the opportunity to reorient its editorial scope on political news, commentary and satire."

Politics, writ large, "has provided the scene for some of Gawker's most recognized editorial scoops," he said, citing reporting on Mayor Rob Ford of Toronto smoking crack cocaine, and the power of Fox News.

"Is there any doubt," he wrote, "that the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, a contest between reality-defying fabulists and the last representatives of two exhausted political dynasties will provide rich new opportunities for sensation and satire?"

In an interview, Alex Pareene, Gawker.com's editor, said that he wanted to define politics broadly, and that it would include coverage of big business, the media and culture when appropriate.

“There is going to be a lot of campaign coverage, because this campaign is great and a dream for any writer. But we’re not going to become Real Clear Politics,” he said, referring to a political news site.

“There will be a sort of satirical tone and satirical approach to reporting real news,” he said, citing John Oliver, whose HBO show combines aggregation, reporting and humor.

Gawker, Mr. Pareene said, will be hiring editors, and at least one political reporter. In an email to the company’s staff, John Cook, the executive editor of Gawker Media, said that two reporters, Allie Jones and Sam Biddle, would head out on the campaign trail, while Ashley Feinberg will “obsessively monitor the dark and hilarious lunatic fringes on the right and left.” Tom Scocca, currently executive features editor, will begin writing a column, as will Mr. Pareene.

Gawker, Mr. Cook wrote, “will take a ‘Daily Show’ approach to covering the ever-intensifying culture wars, documenting, satirizing and reporting on the ways that political disputes are refracted in every aspect of our popular culture.”

The broader changes to Gawker Media follow a controversy over the summer after Gawker.com published an article about a married male executive who was apparently seeking a liaison with a male escort.

Faced with widespread criticism, including threats to withdraw advertising, the site removed the article. Two of the company’s senior editors — Tommy Craggs, the executive editor of Gawker Media, and Max Read, the editor of Gawker.com — resigned in protest. They were succeeded by Mr. Cook and Mr. Pareene. Mr. Denton said publicly that the site would be “nicer” in the future and less tabloid in its sensibilities.

The company will now focus on its seven core sites, which include the technology site Gizmodo and the sports site Deadspin. About a dozen smaller

sites will be shuttered, Mr. Cook said in his memo, including Valleywag, which covered Silicon Valley.

Some of the areas of coverage that those sites focused on will now be addressed by the remaining seven sites. Jezebel, he said, will now “become the primary voice for celebrity and pop culture coverage in the network.” Gizmodo, which recently hired a new editor, Katie Drummond, from Bloomberg, will take over the coverage of science fiction, fantasy and futurism that was previously handled by the site io9.

Seven people will lose their jobs in the revamping, although six jobs will be created. Plans to license Gawker’s content management system, Kinja, will be shelved.

Gawker.com, the first site founded by Mr. Denton, had been seen as the quintessential Manhattan media and gossip publication of the Internet age — a destination for ambitious, young writers eager to cover the industry and the powerful figures who populate it.

It has been no stranger to turmoil itself, with frequent changes among its top newsroom leadership, scandals over subjects it has covered or materials it has published. Disagreements in its staff have often broken into public view. But the announcement on Tuesday represents a more fundamental change of direction for the site and the company.

The shift in focus is an acknowledgment, Mr. Denton wrote, that the quality and engagement of an audience were more important than its sheer size. “In today’s crowded and confusing digital media world, you should focus on your strengths and have a clear message for your audience,” he wrote.

Heading into 2016, he said, the company will seek to extend the lifestyle sections on each of its sites, promote product recommendations — a growing source of revenue for Gawker Media, which takes a percentage of sales that

come through its sites — and expand its video offerings and live events.

It will, like many other media organizations, be happy to reach readers wherever they are, Mr. Denton said, including “Apple News, YouTube and Facebook Instant Articles.”

“The first blogs were a reaction against the idiocy and pomposity of mass media,” Mr. Denton said in an interview by Instant Messenger on Tuesday. “Now social media is dominated by the same stories that would have made the local television news. We’re in an era of mass social media. I think smarter readers are seeking refuge in subcultures.”

Gawker Media attracted more than 50 million unique users in the United States in September, according to comScore, and more than 100 million globally in October, according to Quantcast.

Though Gawker.com is the company’s flagship site, its most popular are the technology-focused Gizmodo and Lifehacker, which provides productivity tips.

A version of this article appears in print on November 18, 2015, on page B1 of the New York edition with the headline: Gawker.com Will Switch Its Focus to Political News .

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Gawker Editor-In-Chief Resigns After Controversial Post Gets Take Down



Gawker founder Nick Denton

Photo: Justin...



by Erik Hayden

Founder Nick Denton called the item "pure poison" to the site's reputation.

Gawker editor-in-chief **Max Read** has resigned in protest of a decision to take down a controversial post that founder **Nick Denton** called "pure poison to our reputation"



"This was not an easy decision. I hope the partnership group recognizes the degree to which it has betrayed the trust of editorial, and takes steps to materially reinforce its independence," Read wrote in a memo on Gawker's website on Monday.

Gawker Media executive editor **Tommy Craggs** resigned from his position as well.

The resignations follow a tumultuous weekend for Gawker Media. Last Thursday evening, the website published a story by staff writer **Jordan Sargent** that claimed that a Conde Nast executive attempted to solicit a gay escort.

A day later, after a firestorm of criticism, Denton issued a notice saying that the post would be taken down. Denton said that the decision included a vote by the managing partners of the company, which includes business side employees.

"It is the first time we have removed a significant news story for any reason other than factual error or legal settlement," Denton wrote on Friday about the take down.

In a Monday note to edit employees, Denton said that he "was ashamed to have my name and Gawker's associated with a story on the private life of a closeted gay man who some felt had done nothing to warrant the attention." He also apologized to Sargent, whom he said was "exposed to such traumatizing hatred online, just for doing his job."

Denton also referenced the upcoming **Hulk Hogan** sex tape case against Gawker and its potential legal implications for the company.

He also said that editorial needs a "calibration more than a radical shift. ... close to the edge, but not over it" and mentioned that the site could now exist in between the sensibilities of more mainstream Vox Media sites and new tabloid web start-up Ratter.

In the resignation note on Monday, Read stated "Ultimately my decision is about the process by which this happened. If the partnership had not conducted some kind of utterly opaque backroom vote to delete it—if we had simply posted Nick's note, as much I disagreed with and disliked it—I think this Monday would be very different."

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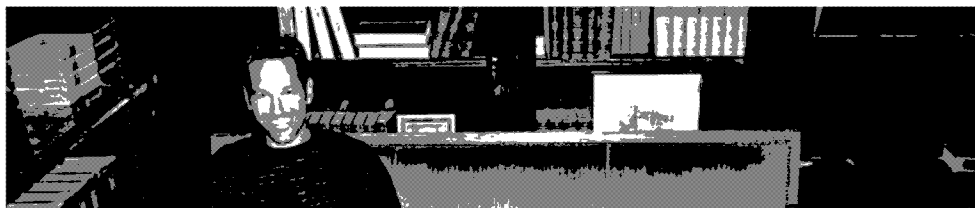
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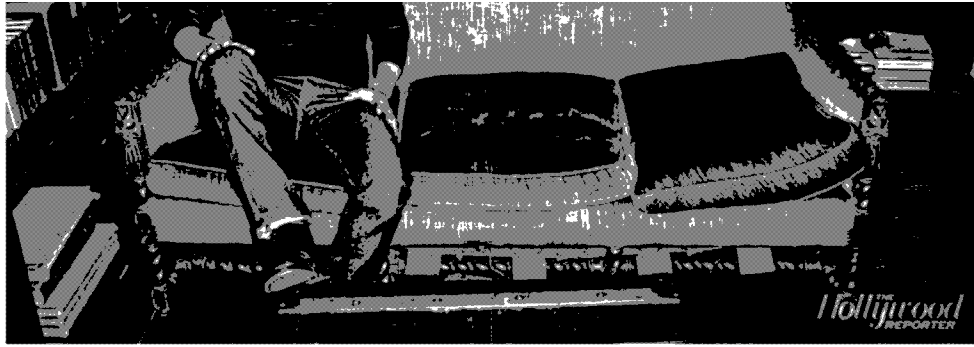


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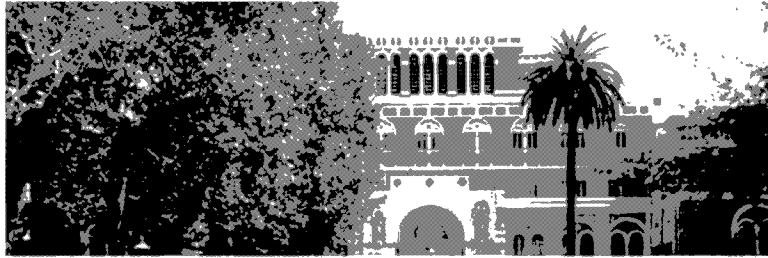


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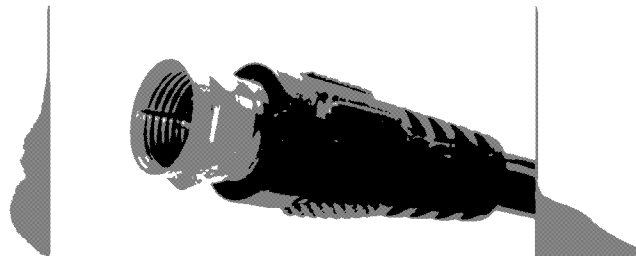




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Mark

Gawker is a sewer, the people who work there, little better than pornographers



Kat A.C. Milanista

I'm glad to see anyone leave Gawker but his reason is backwards!



guest

Good for this resigning editor. It was a corrupt double standard to delete that story. News sites should not be subject to crowd influence.



Michael Anthony

Perhaps, but then again the subject was a person no one even knew about or cared about, until the article. It's like publishing the list of average citizens arrested for solicitation. While celebs don't deserve it either, they are at least public people. And for them, not all press is good. Never has been. You're delusional, as others are too, if they think Gawker is any different than gossip rags of the past. The star tabloids going back many decades had their "game on" when attacking a celeb.



Nope

Regardless of your feeling that Gerthner is someone people shouldn't care about, the fact is the CFO of a powerful media company, and brother of former Treasury secretary, being involved in an extortion plot is inarguably newsworthy. He is far from the "average citizen." You're not really arguing newsworthiness. What your comment is really about is you want a double standard because the news subject is gay. You wouldn't say a peep if the man were heterosexual. So stick your personal insult.



WildBill0283

Reputation

HAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!



ksimms

This is like a South Carolina state senator resigning because the Confederate flag was taken down.



Two Piece and Biscuit

the day I removed gawker from my bookmarks was a day I have never regretted



phillysportsfan

the advertising/editorial "firewall" isn't a suicide pact



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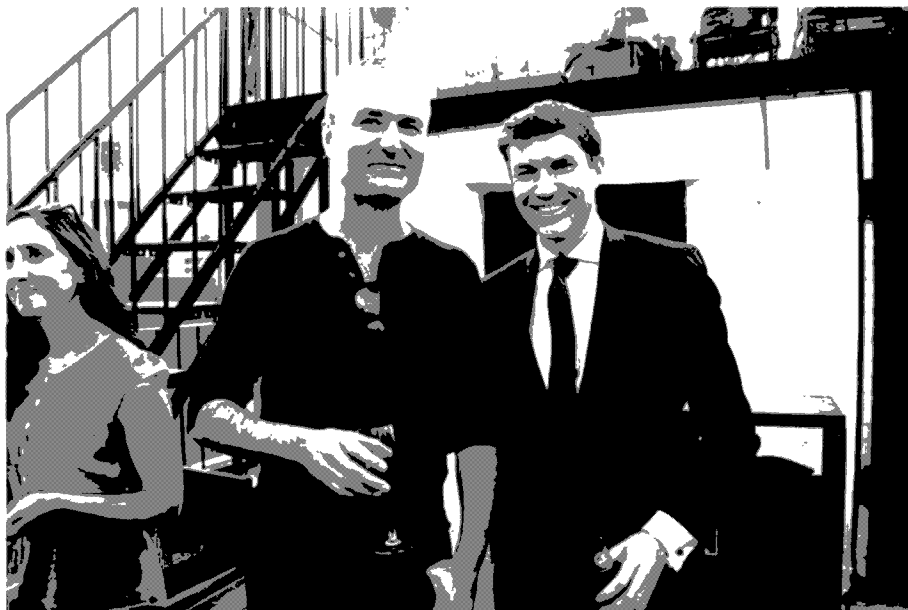
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Civil War At Gawker Media: Nick Denton Has 'No Chance' Of Winning Back Trust

By Brendan James on July 20 2015 5:26 PM EDT

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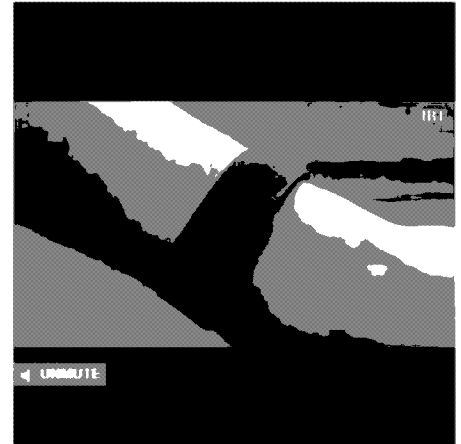
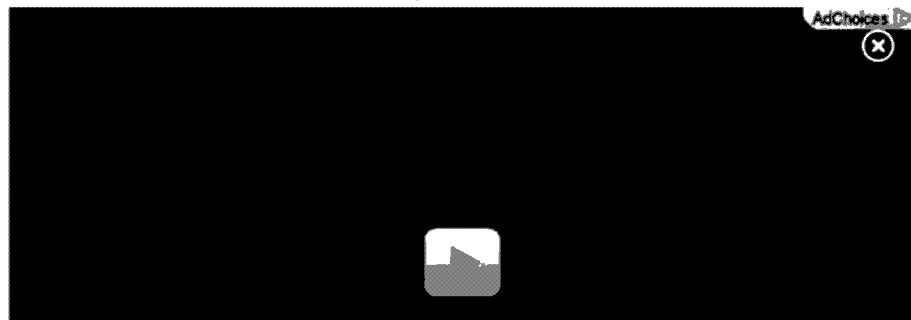
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Nick Denton, center, the founder of Gawker Media.

Gawker founder and CEO Nick Denton told International Business Times on Monday that the decision to take down a widely-criticized post on Friday was "extraordinary" and readers should not view the move as anything other than a last resort.

"The piece was extraordinary. I don't think one should read in too much of a precedent," Denton told IBT in an email.



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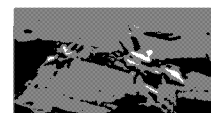
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The piece, published Thursday, was an [anonymously-sourced report](#) alleging that the CFO of Conde Nast had unsuccessfully solicited a gay escort. On Friday, after massive blowback over the article from readers, fellow journalists, and the company's business side, Gawker's management partnership voted 4-2 to take the post down, with only Executive Editor Tommy Craggs and President Heather Dietrich dissenting.

But anyone who read Gawker would know that the story wouldn't end there. The site has a long history of taking its feuds public, comments sections and all.

Shortly after the post went down, Gawker staff released a statement condemning the removal as a breach of the firewall between editorial and business. By Monday, [Craggs and Editor in Chief Max Read had resigned](#).

"It was, by definition, setting a precedent," Gawker editor Alex Pareene told IBT.

At a meeting held Monday, staffers wailed on Denton for taking down the article. Alongside several other writers, Pareene himself told Denton that "journalists don't disappear things when they make mistakes."

One Jezebel staffer told IBT that Denton "kept losing his train of thought in the meeting, rambling incoherently."

Several Gawker staffers said Denton was "rewriting history" in justifying the vote to remove the post.

"People immediately started questioning why ad sales was exerting editorial control," one writer said. "So Nick decided the vote was actually just a fun approval vote and that he was the sole decider."

"Why take the vote if Nick was acting unilaterally?" the writer said, calling the explanation "ridiculous."

The complaints echoed Read's and Cragg's [letters of resignation](#), which on Monday aimed particular vitriol at President of Advertising Andrew Gorenstein.

Pareene came away thinking the same thing.

"He wanted to shield himself from responsibility but also didn't want people blaming Gorenstein," he said.

As for how to prevent anything like this from happening again, Pareene says all hope lies in Gawker's recently-stamped union cards, which the editorial side won in another very public showdown back in June.

"Nick has no chance of winning back the trust of senior editorial staff," he told IBT.

"Next step is the union giving the right to remove editorial decisions from him and

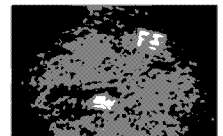
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best case is the union wins the right to exempt editorial decisions (not hiring and firing but publication and unpublication) from being voted on by business and tech."

Amid the showdown between Denton and his staff, Read's deputy Leah Beckmann has taken over the duties of editor-in-chief. When asked about how Gawker will permanently fill the positions left behind by Read and Craggs, Denton demurred.

"We'll talk about that tomorrow," he said. "First we need to recognize we just lost two talented people."

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Max Read's Moralizing Justification for Gawker's Vile Article

Glenn Greenwald

July 17 2015, 9:29 a.m.



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(updated below)

Last night, Gawker published one of the sleaziest and most repugnant articles seen in quite some time from an outlet of its size and stature. The story had no purpose other than to reveal that the male, married-to-a-woman Chief Financial Officer of a magazine company – basically an executive accountant – hired a male escort. When the escort discovered the real-life identity of his prospective client – he's the brother of a former top Obama official – he began blackmailing the CFO by threatening to expose him unless he used his political connections to help the escort in a housing discrimination case he had against a former landlord. Gawker completed the final step of the

blackmail plot by publishing the text messages between the two and investigating and confirming the identity of the client, all while protecting the identity of the blackmailing escort. I don't want to reward them or contribute in any way to this disgrace by linking to it: Google it if you must.

Gawker's story, written by Jordan Sargent, instantly and almost universally provoked unbridled scorn, and rightfully so. The article's 1,000+ comments from Gawker's own readers overwhelmingly expressed disgust, and as *The New Republic's* Jeet Heer observed, the "debacle" is "uniting people from all across the political & cultural spectrum . . . in shared revulsion." One Gawker writer, Adam Weinstein, publicly distanced himself from the sleaze.

The reasons for regarding the story as deeply repugnant are self-evident. The CFO they outed is not a public figure. Even if he were, the revelation has zero public interest: it's not as though he's preached against gay rights or any form of sexual behavior. It's just humiliating someone and trying to destroy his life for fun, for its own sake. By publishing the article, Gawker aided the escort's blackmail plot, arguably even becoming a partner in it. Even worse, the story (probably unwittingly) reeks of all-too-familiar homophobic shaming: it's supposed to be humiliating at least in part because he's a man hiring a "gay porn star," as Gawker editor-in-chief Max Read put it as he promoted the "scoop." The escort's identity has been confirmed by others and he seems to have a history of serious mental distress, which Gawker is clearly exploiting. Beyond all that, Gawker has an ongoing war with Reddit, owned by the magazine company for which the CFO works, which suggests this is part of some petty, vindictive drive for vengeance, with the CFO as collateral damage.

My friend and former colleague Natasha Vargas-Cooper, now at Gawker's Jezebel, justified the story by arguing that "stories don't need an upside. Not everyone has to feel good about the truth. If it's true, you publish." But if "truth" is the only journalistic metric, that would mean nobody has any personal privacy of any kind, and that journalists should publish everything they learn about everyone, no matter how scurrilous or personal, without regard to whether it has any public interest or without regard to the privacy rights of the subject. She also invoked the ethos of adversarial journalism by arguing that journalists should "have an antagonistic relationship to people in power." But even if you want to regard an accountant for a magazine company as "powerful" (I personally think every Gawker writer who can publish things of this sort has more power than this glorified corporate bean-counter), not every revelation about a person's private life is justified simply because they're influential. There has to be some public interest to the disclosure, otherwise it's just sleazy tabloid gossip for prurient enjoyment, not adversarial journalism.

I'm not writing in order to pile on to the mob of outrage that has assembled

against Gawker, even though I fully agree with its premises. Nobody needs me to repeat what is already clearly recognized about what they did here. Beyond that, I've long thought that Gawker – in addition to some click-bait garbage and malicious gossip – does a lot of really good, innovative journalism, and I'm a fan of several of its writers. No media outlet should be judged by its worst moment. I'm certain Gawker will do great journalism in the future and I'll cite and praise it when they do.

I'm writing because the justification for this story offered by Gawker editor-in-chief Max Read is utterly laughable, and it's grounded in a premise that is very common when people want to wallow in others' private lives, yet incredibly toxic. To me, it's Read's justification that is worth discussing:



max read
@max_read

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given the chance gawker will always report on married c-suite executives of major media companies fucking around on their wives

6:33 PM · 16 Jul 2015

👍 75 🌟 100

Let's leave to the side the obvious farce of Read's sanctimonious posturing as the morality police: oh, yes, Gawker is simply on the prowl to locate and punish adulterers who are vandalizing the sanctity of their marital vows. It's just about solemn retribution for sinners. At least have the decency to admit that you did this because you're hungry for clicks, or because you get voyeuristic pleasure by scrounging around in other people's sex lives, or because vicariously living through other people's private sexual experiences lets you alleviate your own personal boredom and frustration, or because you have some twisted notion that your jihad against Reddit is advanced by sexually humiliating its publisher's accountant. Ditch the moralizing pretexts: nobody is going to buy that.

What's significant to me is the unstated premise of Read's claim: that the wife of this CFO is a victim. Read is posing as her chivalrous defender: he only published this article to avenge the wrong done to her. There's even the strangely sexist formulation to his vow: Gawker, he declares, will always "report on married [] executives of major media companies fucking around on their wives." What about when the cheating executives are women and the spouse is a man? He doesn't say. His self-proclaimed mission is to protect this little lady from the harm that has been inflicted on her. This is far and away the most common justification cited for sniffing around in the private, sexual lives of people: we're just upset for the victim-spouse.

But even if one wants to pretend that the sentiment is genuine, the logical

flaw is glaring and obvious. Max Read has absolutely no idea what this CFO's wife knows about what her husband does, nor does he have any idea what agreement or arrangement they have governing their marriage. Nor should he know, because it's none of his business.

Long-term marriage between two complex adults is a very complicated dynamic to navigate. People invent all sorts of ways to manage that. It's of course possible that the CFO's wife thought she was in a rigid, life-long monogamous relationship with a purely heterosexual male and is shocked and betrayed to learn otherwise, but it's also very possible that she was well-aware that he isn't any of those things, and the spousal agreement between them permits this flexibility on one or both of their parts. It's possible the wife is a victim of his private behavior, but it's also very possible there are no victims and he did absolutely nothing wrong.

In order to know any of that, one has to delve into the most intimate and private aspects of their marriage, mucking around in the deepest crevices of their personal lives. That's something no decent human being should have a desire to do when they haven't been invited to do it. But that's exactly what Read is doing here, although to justify it, he's feigning knowledge that he in fact completely lacks: the private, intimate understanding between the CFO whose life he tried to destroy and the wife whom he has deluded himself into believing he's protecting.

A good rule of decency is to stay out of the private, personal, and sexual lives of consenting adults, absent some very compelling reason to involve yourself (such as damaging hypocrisy on the part of a political figure). The temptations to intrude into and sit in judgment of those aspects of other people's lives are powerful, but they're almost always lowly, self-degrading and scummy. If you have any doubts about that, reading that vile Gawker post will permanently dispel them.

UPDATE: According to Gawker, "the managing partnership of Gawker Media voted, 5-1, to remove" the article. Gawker Media founder and publisher Nick Denton wrote a long post explaining why he supports that decision.

Photo: 1926 movie The Scarlet Letter

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Plaintiff's Trial Exhibit 479

Limits at Gawker? Rules at Reddit? Wild West Web Turns a Page

By JONATHAN MAHLER JULY 21, 2015

Facing the abrupt resignations of two of his top editors on Monday and a potential revolt inside his newsroom, Gawker Media's founder and chief executive, Nick Denton, tapped out a long memo to his editorial staff.

Mr. Denton wanted to explain his decision to delete a radioactive post about a married male media executive's unsuccessful attempt to hire a gay escort and to contain the fallout from that decision inside his company.

But the memo also included a startling admission: "The Gawker brand," Mr. Denton wrote, "is both confusing and damaging."

In other words, Mr. Denton was repudiating the identity of the website he had spent 12 years building. And he was doing so just days after Steve Huffman, the chief executive of Reddit, had taken a strikingly similar step to distance his company from its own anything-goes past.

There has been no shortage of discussion about how legacy media companies will find their way forward in the digital age. But in trying to recalibrate their identities, Gawker and Reddit are demonstrating that digital media companies are struggling to manage a difficult transition of their own — from financially underachieving, if popular, start-ups to thriving, mature businesses.

"This feels like a moment of reckoning to me," said Vivian Schiller, the former head of news at Twitter who was previously an executive at The New York Times. "We're moving from the early days of 'We're free to write or post whatever we want,' to

the reality of building a business.”

In his memo, Mr. Denton sketched out what was essentially a new vision for Gawker, calling for the creation of more “humane guidelines.” As he put it: “We need a codification of editorial standards beyond putting truths on the Internet.”

For his part, Mr. Huffman, in the face of mounting evidence that Reddit’s theoretically self-governing community had descended into an often noxious form of anarchy, proposed a new content policy for users, or Redditors, as they’re known. It would ban, among other things, illegal activity, harassment and sexual content involving minors.

Neither Gawker nor Reddit is talking about imposing the sorts of rules and standards that have long governed the behavior of traditional media companies. But that they are talking about rules and standards at all represents a significant departure for both of them — one that reflects the practical limits of absolute freedom of expression, even for native Internet companies that have prided themselves on their opposition to what they see as self-censorship.

It was inevitable that these companies would eventually find themselves at this juncture. “There is an Internet strategy, which is audience and growth first, business model second,” said David Pakman, a partner at Venrock, a venture capital firm that invests in technology companies. “Because of that ordering, the challenges that the pursuit of a business model presents manifest themselves later in life.”

Gawker and Reddit are very different businesses, in terms of both mission and scale. One is a modest-size provider of editorial content, the other an online message board with 170 million regular monthly users. But the two companies were created within a few years of each other: Gawker in 2002, Reddit in 2005.

More to the point, both were products of the Internet’s freewheeling ethos. And both have amply shown what happens when this ethos is taken to its logical extreme, whether it is Redditors’ posting of revenge porn on the site’s message boards or Gawker’s humiliating a relatively unknown media executive.

It is one thing to engage in this sort of behavior when you are focused mainly on enlarging your audience or user base. But the calculus changes when you start

worrying about alienating advertisers, too.

Attracting traffic is a more straightforward proposition than increasing revenue, especially for companies like Gawker and Reddit, whose identities are bound up with pushing the boundaries of good taste.

Ellen Pao, who recently resigned as chief executive of Reddit after the community turned against her — she called it “one of the largest trolling attacks in history” — described the challenge in an op-ed article for *The Washington Post*.

“A large portion of the Internet audience enjoys edgy content and the behavior of the more extreme users; it wants to see the bad with the good, so it becomes harder to get rid of the ugly,” she wrote. “But to attract more mainstream audiences and bring in the big-budget advertisers, you must hide or remove the ugly.”

For Gawker, which claims to protect its editorial staff from its business concerns, removing the ugly may be no less difficult, even if it is the writers and editors who are likely to object. Mr. Denton acknowledged this reality in his memo, when he wrote that he respected the convictions of any employees who chose to resign because they found Gawker’s “gentler editorial mission too limiting.”

It is difficult to separate Mr. Denton’s desire to tame some of Gawker’s more hostile impulses from the evolving culture of the Internet. While he has been sharply critical of the power Facebook holds over publishers, he also knows that Gawker’s cynical tone and taste for takedowns is out of step with the prevailing spirit of positivity — of liking and sharing — on social media today.

What is more, these same social media sites allow people to band together to raise their collective voice in protest, whatever the cause of the day may be. Gawker has published plenty of distasteful articles in its history; it seems likely that if the post about the media executive had gone up in 2005 rather than 2015, it would have generated a great deal less controversy.

Gawker says this is the first time it has ever deleted a post for anything other than factual or legal reasons, but it is not the only digital media company to have done so. BuzzFeed has removed numerous posts from its early years, explaining that they no longer meet the site’s editorial standards. Whether this constitutes brand-shaping or

erasing history depends on your point of view.

A few months ago, BuzzFeed removed articles criticizing the cosmetics brand Dove and the board game Monopoly — which are made by companies that advertise on BuzzFeed. The site’s editor in chief, Ben Smith, later reinstated the posts with an apology.

It will not be easy to impose standards and guidelines on cultures that have grown up without them, particularly in an online setting that prizes unfiltered expression and where the boundary between viral and offensive can be hard to judge.

“When we’re talking about legacy media, there are clear rules about what you can do and what you can’t do,” said Gina Bianchini, chief executive of Mightybell, a social networking start-up. “I think we’re going to continue to see stories pop up and be taken down as we try to figure out where the line is.”

A version of this news analysis appears in print on July 22, 2015, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Limits at Gawker? Rules at Reddit? Wild West Web Turns a Page .

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2 Gawker Editors Resign Over Article's Removal



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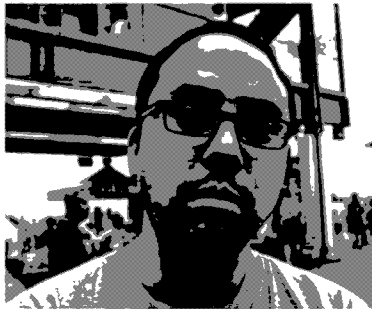
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MEDIA

? Gawker Editors Resign Over Article's Removal

JONATHAN MAHLER JULY 20 2015



Tommy Craggs, above, executive editor of Gawker Media, and Max Read, editor of Gawker, resigned.

When Gawker posted an article on Thursday night about a married male media executive's futile attempt to hire a gay escort, it was hoping to create a scandal.

But this was not the scandal it had in mind.

In the face of opprobrium across the Internet, Gawker's founder, Nick Denton, voluntarily took down the post on Friday, a highly unusual step for the 12-year-old company.

This may have helped quell one controversy, but it created another. Monday morning, the quit in protest. The inflammatory post was now at the center of a debate over journalistic integrity, with Mr. Craggs and Mr. Read saying that the decision to delete it, against their wishes, constituted an unforgivable violation of the site's editorial independence. It made for a strange spectacle — two editors standing on principle in defense of such an unsavory article.

Gawker, which is known for nothing if not flouting the conventions of good taste, has generated plenty of controversy in the past. But this scandal seems especially ill timed.



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Gawker's Moment of Truth



Nick Denton and Heather Dietrick, Gawker Media's managing partners

The company is about to move into much larger and more expensive offices in Manhattan. And Mr. Denton, who with his family owns about 68 percent of Gawker, has been hoping to sell a minority stake in the company.

Maybe most significant, Gawker faces a \$100 million lawsuit brought by Hulk Hogan, claiming that the site violated his privacy by posting excerpts from a videotape of him having sex with a woman who was then the wife of a friend of Mr. Hogan's. The latest scandal may not have a material effect on the case, but from at least a public relations standpoint, it is not going to help Gawker advance its image as torchbearer for the values of the First Amendment. (In the midst of the controversy on Friday, Mr. Hogan sent a one-word Twitter post: "Gawker.")

Mr. Craggs first told Mr. Denton about the initial post concerning the media executive at a meeting Thursday afternoon, a few hours before it went up. Mr. Denton expressed qualms about the article at the time. "I couldn't imagine the headline and couldn't see the point," he said in an email. "What was revealed?"

Nevertheless, he did not interfere with the editorial process or ask to see a copy of the article before it was published that evening.

The next day, as criticism of the article intensified, Mr. Craggs proposed that he issue a statement. It was not exactly an apology. In the statement, which Mr. Craggs sent to Mr. Denton but which was never published, Mr. Craggs noted that Gawker was founded as a media gossip site and had always covered the lives — "unapologetically and often mercilessly" — of the people who work in and run the industry. "We stand by the story, which meets our simple, unwavering standard of being both true and interesting," he wrote. "But too many people whose opinions we trust were appalled by the post for us not to have a conversation about how we approach these kinds of stories going forward."

Mr. Denton never responded. Instead, he called a vote of the company's six managing partners about whether to retract the post. Mr. Craggs, the only strictly editorial employee in the group, learned about the vote while on a plane to California. He was one of two partners who opposed taking down the article. (The other was Heather Dietrick, Gawker's president and general counsel.)

"That this post was deleted at all is an absolute surrender of Gawker's claim to 'radical transparency,'" Mr. Read wrote in his letter of resignation. "That noneditorial business executives were given a vote in the decision to remove it is an unacceptable and unprecedented breach of the editorial firewall, and turns Gawker's claim to be the world's largest independent media company into, essentially, a joke."

It was the first time, Gawker said, it had ever deleted a post for anything other than factual or legal reasons.

The reversal speaks to how much both the company and the culture of the Internet have changed since Mr. Denton started Gawker from his living room in 2002. At the time, Gawker had two part-time employees and no advertisers; today, it has about 260 full-time staff members and some \$50 million in advertising revenue. What is more, the rise of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter has provided a platform for people to gather and express their outrage en masse.

On Friday, Mr. Denton issued a measured statement about the decision to take down the post, noting that he considered it true and

FROM THE ARCHIVE


MEN WALK ON MOON

well reported. (For his part, the subject of the article disputed its accuracy.) "In light of Gawker's past rhetoric about our fearlessness and independence, this can be seen as a capitulation," Mr. Denton wrote of removing the article. "And perhaps, to some extent, it is."

On Monday, however, he struck a different tone in a long note to Gawker's editorial staff. "I was ashamed to have my name and Gawker's associated with a story on the private life of a closeted gay man who some felt had done nothing to warrant the attention," he wrote.

Mr. Denton acknowledged that business concerns were a factor — "If the post had remained up, we probably would have triggered advertising losses this week into seven figures" — but he said that his view of the article was informed to a greater degree by his vision for the company's future.

"Some humane guidelines are needed — in writing — on the calculus of cruelty and benefit in running a story," he wrote. "We do not seem to expose every personal secret — only those that reveal something interesting."

These sentiments stand in stark contrast with many things Mr. Denton has said in the past about Gawker. He has boasted in interviews about the "shamelessness" of certain Gawker articles, and has long characterized the site's mission as one of "putting truths on the Internet" — whether or not these truths have any redeeming social value, and regardless of the damage they might cause.

"My view of the original post was that it fell solidly within the traditions and practices that Nick had established through the years at Gawker Media," said Tom Scocca, the executive features editor at Gawker.

In this sense, the decision to take down the post was less a capitulation than a repudiation of Gawker's identity.

"Nick saw this as a pretext for remaking Gawker in the way that he wanted to remake it," Mr. Craggs said in an interview. "If it cost him the core values of the company, then so be it."

For the moment, Gawker's editorial employees seem less interested in debating the merits of the initial post than in criticizing Mr. Denton's handling of it and in bemoaning the loss of two of the company's most admired editors.

"Nick has a long road ahead of him in terms of gaining back the trust of editorial employees," said Lacey Donohue, the executive managing editor of Gawker Media, "if he ever does."

Ravi Somaiya contributed reporting.




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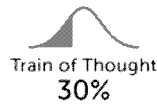
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Plaintiff's Trial Exhibit 486

The 'Gawker tax' is getting too high, Denton tells his staff



Nick Denton. (Huffington Post)



By Peter Sterne 9:49 a.m. | Jul. 22, 2015  3

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Gawker Media is a business.

That's the message that C.E.O. Nick Denton had for his editorial employees yesterday, and it's a message that he repeated many times over the course of a meeting that stretched for nearly two hours.

"Yes, it's a business. At some point, people have got to recognize that it's a business that supports editorial freedom and the mission of the editorial business, but it is a business and it needs to exist and it needs to survive in order for it to support that," he said.

Gawker is willing to sacrifice a lot of potential ad revenue to protect its editorial freedom, Denton said, but there's a limit.

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"There's a thing called the Gawker tax which represents the cost of selling these brands that any moment can blow up, they can blow up because of internal dissension, they can blow up because of a story that goes wrong, and they call it the Gawker tax. My estimate of the Gawker tax is the gap between the revenues of Gawker

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Media and the revenues of Vox Media, the gap is around \$20 million a year and the gap is increasing," he said.

The comparison to Vox is interesting because a number of Gawker staffers say that they fear Denton wants to "Vox-ify" the company, which Denton has denied.

"Now, I don't want to close that gap and I don't want to become Vox Media, but the fact of the

matter is that it is really hard to sell Gawker, Gawker.com in particular, because Gawker.com likes to pick fights with pretty much everybody. That's just the reality," he said.

Denton's point was that his editorial decisions must be informed by business and advertising concerns, in addition to his own editorial judgment.

On Friday, he decided to **remove a controversial Gawker post** about a married publishing executive who allegedly solicited a male escort, which Gawker had published on Thursday night. That decision, he said, was motivated both by editorial and business concerns.

Gawker's editorial staff have criticized the process by which the post was removed, arguing that it shows that the company's business and advertising executives are interfering with editorial decision-making.

On Friday, Denton discussed whether to remove the post with the company's managing partnership—which at the time included Denton, president and general counsel Heather Dietrick, C.O.O. Scott Kidder, advertising head Andrew Gorenstein, chief strategy officer Erin Pettigrew and executive editor Tommy Craggs. Four of the partners—Denton, Kidder, Gorenstein, and Pettigrew—voted to remove the post, while Craggs and Dietrick voted to keep it up.

Craggs and Gawker editor in chief Max Read **resigned in protest** of the vote. In his **resignation letter**, Craggs also said that Gorenstein, the head of advertising, had said in a previous meeting that Gawker senior writer Sam Biddle should be fired for writing posts, such as "**Brands are not your friend**," that cost the company advertisers.

The Tuesday meeting was a chance for editorial staffers, led by investigations editor John Cook, to get the message across that Gawker's business concerns were compromising its editorial mission and to grill the partners on their votes.

Cook asked the managing partners whether they believed they had the authority to make editorial decisions.

Gorenstein, Pettigrew and Kidder—who voted on Friday, with Denton, to take the post down—all said that they do not think they have that authority. Their votes on Friday, they said, were to support Denton.

"I think Nick has a unique vision, as founder of the company and as owner of the

company and as editorial ethos of the company, to make editorial decisions. My vote was supporting Nick in making a very difficult editorial decision," Kidder said.

"This was not Robert's Rules of Order, OK, I'm entering a motion to take down a post. Who in favor says aye? I actually don't really think I would ever make that motion to take down that post and I don't think Erin would and I don't think Andrew would either," he added.

Gorenstein said that the partners were not voting on whether to take down the post, but whether to support Denton.

"This was not a vote. This was support for a decision that Nick made that Nick has the absolutely right to do for the company, based on what he thought was in the best interests of the company, and I support that decision," Gorenstein said.

Cook then asked the obvious question: why even have the partners vote, if they were just going to rubber-stamp a decision that Denton had already made?

Denton said that he saw the vote as a kind of vote of confidence.

"If I had made a recommendation, a proposal, if I had made a decision, which I did, if I had made a decision that the partners did not by a majority support, I would have been forced to reconsider my position," he said. "I would have had to resign."

Denton said that the post threatened the site's very existence and asked his editors to consider what they would have done in the same situation.

"Let's say you are a member of the managing partnership. You are responsible not simply for your department, but you are responsible for the future of the company and here you have a story which is threatening to blow up the company, threatening its reputation, threatening its ability to actually fight its way through the Hogan trial and threatening its business," he said.

Denton kept returning to this theme that Gawker was a business and he had to do distasteful things—removing the post, for example—in order to protect all of the company's employees.

"I am the founder of the company and as someone who has helped build up the sites through editorial work, writing and editing, I have a view on the overall editorial ethos of the company, of the whole operation," he said later in the meeting. "I have above all a responsibility to the whole company to take into account all of the factors, whether it is the editorial principles at stake, the communication challenges, the legal challenges, the business challenges, and all the other challenges that we face."

Denton also defended Gorenstein's comment that maybe Biddle should be fired, saying that it was Gorenstein's job to let him know that Biddle's posts were costing the company a lot of ad revenue and it was his job to weigh that against the desire for editorial freedom and make a decision.

Cook objected to this calculus, asking whether *The New York Times* also weighed its reporters against its advertisers.

This sparked a shouting match between Denton and Gawker features editor Leah

Finnegan, who previously worked as a staff editor at the Times.

"It doesn't! I know that for a fact. It does not and it never will," Finnegan said.

"I think at some level, yes they do. I know enough *New York Times* people to know that," Denton said.

"Nick, I worked there for two and a half years. They canceled ads in favor of journalism."

"Do you know how much money we lose all the time, because of cancellations in ads? I cannot, I cannot believe that you are actually saying this!"

"Make this into an advertising company then! Say what it really is! It's not a place for journalism!"

Cook told everyone to calm down and the conversation moved on.

But the question of the *Times*' policies came up again an hour or so later, after Denton said that no media company gives its journalists greater protections from advertiser pressure than Gawker does.

What about the *Times*, Cook asked.

"*The New York Times* moves people around from beat to beat in order—and you know this because you heard the story—in order to satisfy advertisers sometimes. They won't actually remove a journalist, they won't fire a journalist; they'll actually just put a weak journalist on the beat so that the coverage isn't quite as toothy as it would otherwise be," Denton said.

This was just how the media industry worked, Denton said, and if Gawker writers did not realize that, it was only because he had gone out of his way to insulate them from advertiser pressure.

"There are dirty deals being done all over the place," he said. "Your attitude, your naïveté when it comes to that and then outrage when you discover that actually that's how the world works, it's sort of natural and it's sort of a function of where we are as a company."

Update: The *Times* told our colleague Hadas Gold that Denton's statement about moving journalists to other beats was not true.

This story has been updated to correct a quote from Nick Denton. Denton said John Cook "heard the story," not "wrote the story," Cook wrote on Twitter.

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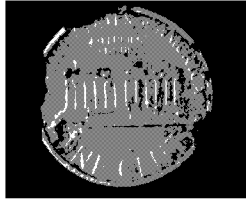
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Alam Kusif

Gawker editorian staff are completely delusional. Thankfully, most of them will probably have difficulty finding a new job in media after Gawker shuts its doors.



Ryan Arko

It's almost like Nick Denton is a bad father dealing with overly petulant children. Leah Finnegan can say she's about journalism all she wants but at the end of the day, she left a news organization to work for a tabloid. She's no journalist and hasn't been for a bit. None of those at Gawker's media family are journalists, something that can be identified with titles like "Penelope Cruz f***ed a steak," or tags like "athlete d**k pics."

Denton is an awful human being and it says a lot when Gawker is disgusting to even him.



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This article is riddled with typos.

