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By: _____

Deputy Clerk

The Washington Post

Gawker Widens Its Withering Gaze

By Howard Kurtz
Washington Post Staff Writer
Monday, June 22, 2009

NEW YORK -- Nick Denton is sitting amid the rows of screen-staring digital workers in the fourth-floor walkup that serves as Gawker headquarters, having neglected to build himself a private office.

"I would do it, but I don't want to be mocked by the blogs," says the company's founder, retreating to the loff's only semiprivate space -- a pair of old couches next to a table with boxes of canned soda piled underneath.

This is rather amusing: Gawker became a strangely addictive force on the Internet by ridiculing all manner of media people, often in biting harsh terms. But the site has evolved into a broader, less Manhattan-obsessed gossip emporium that now includes original reporting -- prompting a quick disclaimer from the sharp-tongued Brit.

"We don't seek to do good," says Denton, wearing a purplish shirt, jeans and a beard that resembles a three-day growth. "We may inadvertently do good. We may inadvertently commit journalism. That is not the institutional intention."

Gawker hasn't exactly mellowed, not with such headlines as "Bill Gates in Cambridge Slob Shocker" and "Moronic Conservative Visits Williamsburg, Loses His Mind." New York magazine's Vanessa Grigoriadis began a 2007 story by recalling how the Web site mocked her wedding announcement and made her look "idiotic." But the site is increasingly strafing bigger national targets, rather than slining minor functionaries in the Apple's incestuous media industry.

"It seemed really mean when you wrote about an assistant editor at a publishing company," says Choire Sicha, a former top Gawker editor. "They're not accustomed to being on Page Six," the New York Post gossip page. "When you write about someone on a reality show, everyone's mean to them."

The culture has also shifted. When Denton, a former Financial Times reporter, launched Gawker.com in 2002, there was no other outfit quite like it. But such Gawker spinoffs as Wonkette (sold last year) and Jezebel, along with TMZ, Perez Hilton, the Huffington Post and countless other sites, have made sneering criticism a defining feature of the blogosphere. "Even the mainstream media now knows that if it allows pompous or meaningless or bogus pronouncements, it will be ridiculed by us or 'The Daily Show,'" Denton says.

The 42-year-old publisher goes so far as to declare himself bored with snark and appreciative of, yes, positive items. He has even created a new Gawker category, Things We Actually Like.

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Gawker recently hired former Chicago Tribune reporter John Cook, who has scored several scoops through old-fashioned legwork. Cook unearthed an embarrassing memo from a publicist for radio host Erich "Mancow" Muller, saying that his plan to undergo an on-air waterboarding was a "hoax." (Mancow insisted the stunt was real and amounted to torture.)

After Freddie Mac's acting chief financial officer committed suicide in April, Cook obtained evidence through the Freedom of Information Act that investigators were looking into whether agency officials had concealed or misrepresented information related to the banking bailout. (The probe apparently went nowhere.)

Cook says he is still feeling his way: "In my previous life, I could spend a week doing nothing but putting out calls and e-mails and tracking the right people down. . . . But Gawker's just not set up to work that way," he says, because of "the velocity and pressures to keep posting" and the "need to feed the beast. . . . There's much less of a filter imposed on you, but it's easy to get carried away, just run and gun, and write something you might regret later."

Denton's greatest innovation, in his view, is publicly posting the page views alongside each item. This serves as a neon popularity meter, reminding writers what sells and what, uh, doesn't.

"It can be brilliant, groundbreaking journalism, but if no one's reading it, it's irrelevant," Cook says.

Denton reinforced the message by paying fat bonuses for items that drew far more than the usual 4,000 hits -- an incentive that allowed some writers to double their base pay. "A lot of journalism-school purists were horrified by the notion," he boasts. Denton suspended the payments this year for financial reasons but plans to restore them.

The cutback amounted to a big pay cut for some writers. Sicha calls Gawker "an unhappy group of media people writing about the unhappy media. It's gotten a little weird."

Denton delights in needling the mainstream media, which, of course, brings him more media attention. He says Gawker filled a vacuum left by "lazy" newspapers whose monopoly status gave them "the luxury of competing for Pulitzer Prizes instead of readers." At the same time, Denton says: "I don't want to fall into the trap that Arianna Huffington has fallen into, which is to proclaim oneself the savior of journalism. Then people are going to judge you by an impossible standard."

Denton used his personal Web site to sneer at the New York magazine piece for its supposed revelations -- "Nick Denton is gay! Some of the writers have sex, occasionally with each other, and do drugs!" he wrote -- and defended his "nasty, brutish and short" brand of journalism. Gawker, he said, "covers the death agonies of Manhattan's old-line media industry, without much respect for the club's cozy rules."

While Gawker.com may be Denton's most buzzworthy site, it accounts for just 7 percent of the traffic in his online empire. The most popular is Gizmodo, which deals with gadgets, followed by Lifehacker (software) and Kotaku (video games). Not every outpost is thriving; Valleywag, which serves up Silicon Valley gossip, laid off 19 of its 133-person staff last fall.

The flagship Gawker site, by contrast, has exploded from 8 million page views in December 2007 to 22 million last month, according to the online measurement service Quantcast. It's hard to argue with that kind of success, especially in an era of newspaper shutdowns and bankruptcies. But some of Gawker's early fans say the site, which caters to a younger, Net-savvy crowd, has lost its original flavor.

Rachel Sklar, a blogger who will be editor at large of the forthcoming site Mediaite.com, says Gawker now lacks a female voice and has become something of a factory. "They're pumping out 50 posts a day," she says. "It feels slightly less personal."

But Gawker can still draw blood, and even the boss is not immune to its sting. Consider [this headline](#) on the site: "The Writer Nick Denton Couldn't Let Go (And Then Secretly Smearred)."

The item, picking up on a Vanity Fair story, involved former Gawker editor Emily Gould. She famously wrote about her breakup with a boyfriend while at the site and then reprised the experience for the New York Times Magazine, proving again that Manhattan is a small, backbiting town. Gawker trumpeted the news that Denton last spring leaked "an embarrassing video of Gould that was shot at a Gawker Media event while she worked at the company," in which the blogger performed a mock sex act with a plastic tube. Gould was quoted as saying of Denton, "This was him having an agenda, and to watch people fall in line with it, it's very creepy."

Offered a chance to deny the particulars, Denton claims not to have read the item.

Oh, come on. Really?




"If I read it, I'd get annoyed," he says. "How could I do what I do if I squash stories about myself and my friends?"

Holding forth on the couch, Denton sounds tired of the whole enterprise. "It's an exhausting business, running a blog," he admits.

Perhaps Gawker the successful company is less challenging than Gawker the bawdy upstart. "He's insanely bored right now," Sicha says. "He wants to know who's sleeping with whom. He doesn't care about any of the stuff they write now."

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