

Everybody Su

Gawker and the rage of the creative underclass.

BY VANESSA GRIGORIADIS



AT THE RISK OF SOUNDING like a wounded old-media journalist, let me share a story about my experience with the media-gossip blog Gawker.com, which I, like most journalists who cover stylish topics in New York, have read almost every day for five years. In addition to recently finding attacks on some of my female journalist friends—one of whom was described as slutty and “increasingly sundamaged”; another variously called a “tardblogger,” “specialblogger,” and “developmentallydisabledblogger”—as well as a friend’s peppy little sister, who was put down for wanting to write a “self-actualizing screenplay or book proposal or whatever,” I woke up the day after my wedding to find that Gawker had written about me. “The prize,” said the Website, “for the most annoying romance in this week’s [New York Times] ‘Vows’ [column] goes to the following couple,” and I’ll bet you can guess which newly merged partnership that was. It seems that our last names, composed of too many syllables, as well as my alma mater, Wesleyan; the place we fell in love, Burning Man; our mothers’ occupations as artists; and my husband’s employer, David LaChapelle—in short, the quirky graphed points of my life—added up to an unredeemably idiotic persona (the lesson here, at the least, is that talking to the *Times*’ “Vows” column is a dangerous act of amour propre). Gawker’s commenters, the unpaid vigilantes who are taking an increasingly prominent role in the site, heaved insults my way:

“Grigoriadis writes for *New York Magazine*. Her last article was entitled, ‘You Too Can Be a Celebrity Journalist!’ With that kind of work and the newfound fame that comes with a *Times* wedding announcement, she’s on the fast track to teaching a class at The Learning Annex.”

“Sorry, but I’m obsessed with these two. The last names alone?”

PYGMY

TRANNNY

RETARD

LOSER

BATTY

FUGLY

DIPSHITTERY

INEP

cks

NUTJOB

SKANK

ASSHAT

HARPY

DORK

TWIT

JUNKIE

CRAZY

DOUCHEY

OLD

FAT

SADULT

PATHETIC

LONELY

WHORE

ASSWIPE

PT

BITCH

FATASS

SCARY

FREAK

HO

HELLHOUND

They have nine vowels between them. And can't you see it when they have their painful hyphenated named children? Does anyone out there know them? Please offer up some stories. Perhaps their trip to Nepal, or her internship with Cindy Sherman. I need more ..."

"Those two are such easy targets they have to be made up. C'mon, Wesleyan? LaChapelle? The immigrant artist parents? No two people could be that painful."

"Immigrant artist parents=house painters."

Are we ridiculous? Perhaps a little, and I was contemplating this, nervously, when I got a call from my new mother-in-law, who had received the news by way of a Google alert on her son's name. She was mortified, and I=pissed: High-minded citizen journalism, it seems, can also involve insulting people's ethnic backgrounds. I felt terrible about dragging my family into the foul, bloggy sewer of Gawker, one I have increasingly accepted as a normal part of participating in city media. A blog that is read by the vast majority of your colleagues, particularly younger ones, is as powerful a weapon as exists in the working world; that most of the blog is unintelligible except to a certain media class and other types of New York bitches does not diminish its impact on that group.

Like most journalists, I tend to have a defeatist attitude about Gawker, dismissing it as the *Mystery Science Theater 3000* of journalism, or accepting its vague put-downs under the principle that any press is good press. After all, there aren't lots of other news outlets that cover the minutiae of our lives, and we're all happy for any smidge of attention and desperate for its pickups of our stories, which are increasingly essential to getting our work read. The prospect and high probability of revenge makes one think twice about retaliation. Plus, only pansies get upset about Gawker, and no real journalist considers himself a pansy. But there is a cost to this way of thinking, a cost that can be as high as getting mocked on your wedding day.



EARLY FIVE years ago, in December 2002, Gawker made its debut under the leadership of Nick Denton, the complicated owner of the blog network Gawker Media, and Elizabeth Spi-

ers, a 25-year-old banker turned blogger who was fragile in person but displayed a streak of dark cunning on the page. They didn't exactly invent the blog, but the tone they used for Gawker became the most important stylistic influence on the emerging field of blogging and has turned into the de facto voice of blogs

today. Under Spiers's aegis, Gawker was a fun inside look at the media fishbowl by a woman who was, indeed, "snarky" but also seemed to genuinely enjoy both journalism and journalists—Spiers was a gawker at them—and took delight in putting out a sort of industry fanzine or yearbook, for which she was rewarded with fawning newspaper articles casting her as the new Dorothy Parker. Ironically enough, Spiers craved a job at a magazine. She soon left for a position here, at *New York Magazine*; two subsequent Gawker editors, Jesse Oxfeld and Jessica Coen, have followed in the past year.

To be enticed, as these writers were, by the credentials extended by an old-media publication is a source of hilarity at the Gawker offices, where, beneath a veneer of self-deprecation, the core belief is that bloggers are cutting-edge journalists—the new "anti-media." No other form has lent itself so perfectly to capturing the current ethos of young New York, which is overwhelmingly tipped toward anger, envy, and resentment at those who control the culture and apartments. "New York is a city for the rich by the rich, and all of us work at the mercy of rich people and their projects," says Choire Sicha, Gawker's top editor (he currently employs a staff of five full-time writers). "If you work at any publication in this town, you work for a millionaire or billionaire. In some ways, that's functional, and it works as a feudal society. But what's happened now, related to that, is that culture has dried up and blown away: The Weimar-resurgence baloney is hideous; the rock-band scene is completely unexciting; the young artists have a little more juice, but they're just bleak intellectual kids; and I am really dissatisfied with young fiction writers." Sicha, a handsome ex-gallerist who spends his downtime gardening on Fire Island, is generally warm and even-tempered, but on this last point, he looks truly disgusted. "Not a week goes by I don't want to quit this job," he says, "because staring at New York this way makes me sick."

It's long been known to magazine journalists that there's an audience out there that's hungry to see the grasping and vainglorious and undeservedly successful ("douchebags" or "asshats," in Gawker parlance) put in the tumbrel and taken to their doom. It's not necessarily a pleasant job, but someone's got to do it. Young writers have always had the option of making their name by meting out character assassinations—I have been guilty of taking this path myself—but Gawker's ad hominem attacks and piss-on-a-baby humor far outstrip even *Spy* magazine's. It's an inevitable consequence of living in today's New York: Youthful anxiety and generational angst about having been completely cheated out of ownership of Manhattan, and only sporadically gaining it in Brooklyn and Queens, has fostered a bloodlust for the heads of the douchebags who stole the city. It's that old story of haves and have-nots, rewritten once again.

Gawker is the finest mechanism to date for satisfying this craving. Two weeks ago, Gawker writer Josh Stein jumped on

the 4-year-old son of satirist Neal Pollack, calling him a "horror" and "the worst" for providing his father with some cute quips about expensive cheese at a gourmet store; Pollack responded by sending an e-mail blast about his feelings to his friends, but Gawker got hold of the e-mail and relentlessly dug into him again and again. When Pollock first saw the post, "my heart sank to my

Possibly, Denton is holding onto Gawker as a kind of hobby, partly for the fun of having a catalogue of the decline of print, a history of the fall.

knees,” he says. “Instinctively, and stupidly, I sent out that e-mail, which I should never have done, because it just gave them the satisfaction of knowing that they’d gotten to me. That’s all bullies want, really.”

Someone Pollack knows later sent him a link to a blog written by a woman who’d dated Stein, which he passed along to me: “It’s nice to know that my antagonist is an emotionally manipulative premature ejaculator with a Serge Gainsbourg tattoo on his back,” explains Pollack, who’d realized a truth of the bile culture—shame is a weapon.

“Only two of those things are true,” jokes Stein. “Look, if I was Neal Pollack, I would be mad too. But when you create a character out of your son, and you develop that character in your prose, that character is open to criticism. I’m actually looking forward to the moment when Neal Pollack is an old person and Elijah Pollack is writing stories about him in a nursing home.”

JOURNALISTS ARE BOTH haves and have-nots. They’re at the feast, but know they don’t really belong—they’re fighting for table scraps, essentially—and it could all fall apart at any moment. Success is not solid. That’s part of the weird fascination with Gawker, part of why it still works, five years on—it’s about the anxiety and class rage of New York’s creative underclass. Gawker’s social policing and snipe-trading sideshow has been impossible to resist as a kind of moral drama about who deserves success and who doesn’t. It supplies a Manhattan version of social justice. In the past couple of years, Gawker has expanded its mission to include celebrity gossip, sacrificing some of its insider voice in the process, but on a most basic level, it remains a blog about being a writer in New York, with all the competition, envy, and self-hate that goes along with the insecurity of that position.

It’s not a secret that these are hard times for journalists. In fact, the rise of Gawker over the past half-decade has dovetailed with the general decline of newspaper and magazine publishing, which, like the rest of the publishing industry, has seen revenues stagnate as advertisers are increasingly drawn



Nick Denton

“I’m just the guy behind the curtain. The stars of Gawker, and our other sites, are our writers.”

to the Web. This has made for wholesale changes within magazines, including our own, with Web departments, a few years ago considered a convenient place to dump unimpressive employees, now led by the favored (our own Website now counts over 40 employees). At the same time, the \$200,000-a-year print-publishing job, once an attainable goal for those who had climbed near the top of the ladder in editorial departments, has all but disappeared.

Consider the Gawker mind-fuck at a time of rapid deterioration of our industry: Young print journalists are depressed over the state of the industry and their inability to locate challeng-

Gawker's sideshow is a kind of moral drama — a Manhattan version of

ing work or a job with health insurance. Although the situation may not be as dire as they might imagine—a healthy magazine is constantly on the hunt for young writers, because it wants the fresh take on the world found only in the young, and because young writers tend to be cheap—they need a release, the daily dose of Schadenfreude offered by Gawker's gallows humor, its ritualistic flogging of working journalists and relentless cataloguing of the industry's fall (e.g., items like "New Republic Page Count Watch"). Though reading Gawker subtly reinforces their misery, they generate an emotional bond and soon begin to tip it with their own inside information (and misinformation, as reserved for their enemies). The system keeps getting stronger, a KGB of media gossip, a complex network of journalist spies and enforcers communicating via e-mail and IM, until Gawker knocks print out of the box. With Gawker, there is now little need for the usual gossip players like the New York Observer, vastly diminished in its news-breaking capacity and influence, or even the New York Post's "Page Six," emasculated by the Murdoch hierarchy after the Jared Paul Stern scandal. The panopticon is complete. "Peering into my in-box in the morning is like looking at the id of every journalist in the city," says Gawker writer Emily Gould.

It's almost part of Gawker's business plan to ensure that its young writers, by attracting the attention of those they are sniping at, are able to leap into the waiting arms of the mainstream media before they become too expensive to employ. One afternoon, I meet Gould for tea before her early-evening meeting with an agent for appetizers at Serafina. She has the look of a studious but sexy punk rocker: 26, dirty-blond hair caught in a high ponytail that shakes back and forth like a wagging tail as she speaks, tattoos crawling over a shoulder and back exposed today by a purple-plaid jumper. "I don't even really want to be a writer, but I feel like I don't have a choice," she says quietly. "It's all I've ever known how to do."

Ten or twenty years ago, Gould would have likely emulated Joan Didion, but she is trying to play the blog game now. She means to win, and to grab some attention for herself in the process. This summer, she took some time off in Maine, and before she went posted a picture of herself on Gawker in a bathing suit flipping the bird—"At least I didn't put up the ones of myself in a silver-lamé bikini. That would have been a little much," she says, laughing. She even used to do a lot of TV spots for Gawker, but then got badly beat up by Jimmy Kimmel, who told her on-air (he was subbing for Larry King), "I just want you to think about your life... because I would hate to see you arriving in hell and somebody sending a text message saying, 'Guess who's here?'" She was panicked about this at the time, but she's moved past it now. "It's funny," she drawls. "People in publishing treat you like a celebrity when you do this job, but you live in Brooklyn, make \$55,000 a year, and don't feel like a celebrity until someone comes up to you on the street and says, 'Buck up, kid. Jimmy Kimmel's an asshole.'"

Though Gould is ruthless in pointing out other writers' shortcomings on

Gawker, she is sensitive about her line of work. "In Maine, I was telling the guys I met that I was a yoga teacher," she says. "What am I supposed to say, 'I work for a media-gossip Website in New York?'" She shakes her head, and the ponytail bops around. "Who knows how this will all play out for me?" she says. "I could be ruining my life."

IF THERE'S ONE person who is most certainly a "have," it's Nick Denton, 41, the attractive, upper-class gay Jewish Briton who owns almost all of Gawker Media. He seems to control an entire Soho street, presiding over his empire from his apartment, which is around the corner from the Gawker offices and across the street from his unofficial office, Balthazar (hence his faux IM name on Gawker.com, DarkLordBalthazar). Occasional unpleasantness with employees, who describe him as "less passive-aggressive and more aggressive-aggressive," and rampant speculation as to his skyrocketing net worth fuel his image, and in fact he has a Machiavellian bent. Denton likes to say that his celebrity look-alike is Morrissey, and he does have the same enormous head, but his hair is worn short, at almost the same length as his graying stubble. The pumpkin head bobs over his uniform of hip business casual—collarless navy T-shirt, iPhone in palm, clean dark jeans tapering off to thin-soled shiny black sneakers. He's polite, quiet, and relentlessly confident, an effective, poised leader whose true nature is amoral recklessness, an unflappable libertarian and libertine. Like Tina Brown, with whom he was intrigued in the past, he's always loved using his position to play-cast a social network with himself at the center.

Denton is fond of denying interview requests while secretly

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Gawker Stalker



Emily Gould
Editor

"Who knows how this could play out for me? I could be ruining my life."



Choire Sicha
Writer,
Managing Editor

"Not a week goes by when I don't want to quit this job, because staring at New York in this way makes me sick."



Julia Allison
Subject

"I'm just a small yappy dog Nick [Denton] finds amusing... He's a godlike figure at the center of his universe. A godfather!"

social-policing and snipe-trading about who deserves success and who doesn't social justice.

helping writers formulate stories about him via off-the-record conversations, then slagging their work later on his blog, calling one journalist who profiled him “about as reliable as a journalist who turns to an Iraqi exile for intelligence on Saddam’s hidden nukes.” The moment that he told me that he would not conduct an official interview with me, and I said I’d continue reporting without him, was perhaps the only one where I’ve seen him express emotion. For a split second, he was furious. His eyes flicked back and forth over mine like a metronome, searching for some clue to what I was planning, what angle I might be playing, and he spat out his denial with the intensity of a losing tennis player. “Nick loves press, but only press he can control,” says a colleague.

A successful former journalist for the *Financial Times* who never quite became an opinion leader, and the co-founder of two Web 1.0 Internet companies that didn’t exactly set Silicon Valley on fire, though one of them was nevertheless reported to have been sold for \$50 million to Israeli venture capitalists, Denton has been jubilant over the success of Gawker, taking on the self-image of a maverick who has thumbed his nose at both of his former industries. Like most journalists trained in the British system, Denton does not believe in privacy for public figures, nor really for anyone else (except himself, apparently). “Everyone suspects Nick’s motives, and he has defiantly lower print standards than any of us,” says Sicha. “I’ll tell him, ‘That guy’s gay,’ or ‘That guy’s having an affair,’ and he’ll say, ‘Then write that.’ Well, I haven’t slept with the guy, so I don’t want to go to court over that. Nick communicates such things intentionally to us, to continually erode our standards.” According to a post by another Gawker writer, one day Denton harangued Gawker’s editors about being too mean on the site; a few minutes later, he began suggesting ideas for posts, like “Who’s shorter in real life than you’d think they’d be? Who has dandruff?” “Does Nick believe in quality, or does Nick believe in respecting other people’s idea of quality he doesn’t believe in?” Sicha muses. “He has to believe not just in page views. But I don’t know how exactly.”

Of all the ways in which Gawker is antithetical to journalistic ethics—it’s self-referential, judgmental, ad hominem, and resolutely against effecting change in the world—it pushes its writers to be honest in a way that’s not always found in print publications. Little is repressed; the id, and everything else, is part of the discourse (including exhibition and narcissism). Even the Gawker office, a kind of journalistic boiler room, can serve as a metaphor for transparency, open for anyone to see, operating behind a plate-glass window in a Crosby Street storefront. Some of Denton’s bloggers are onboard with this mission: “Quite frankly, fuck discretion,” writes Moe Tkacik, a former newspaper reporter, on Denton’s newest site, Jezebel. “Discretion is how I didn’t figure out how to come until I was 24 years old; discretion is why women’s magazine editors persist in treating their fellow humans like total shit; and when you’ve spent a career trying to catch others in their own indiscretions, discretion just feels a little dishonest and superior.”

It’s a good trick, taking the one thing that journalists have in the world—honesty—from them, and setting up Gawker.com to instill fear of being caught in their foibles. It’s what someone would

do if they were trying to usurp an industry, which is exactly what Denton has always wanted (do not, however, buy Gawker’s tepid new book, *The Gawker Guide to Conquering All Media*, and think you will find genuine tips on how to do this yourself, as none are forthcoming). These days,

Gawker is merely the flagship property of a Gawker Media empire, one Denton likes to compare to Condé Nast. Employees have started talking about his blogs as “magazines,” and the company as a “stable of magazines.” All fourteen Gawker blogs maintain standards of stratospherically higher writing quality than other Websites in this LOLcat era, displaying their wares on sites with hilarious, deadpan names: Fleshbot (porn), Jalopnik (cars), Gizmodo (gadgets), and Kotaku (games); an early name for Gawker was “YouNork.” Half of Denton’s sites are modeled on Gawker’s model of pairing a mannered gossip column with the industry of a given city, including Wonkette (D.C. politics), Defamer (Hollywood), Valleywag (Silicon Valley), and the new, excellent Jezebel (women’s magazines and fashion). Denton is only intermittently involved in content and gives free rein to his editors to attack anyone they’d like (only ex-employees get a pass).

Denton’s most successful blogs are, unsurprisingly, Gizmodo and Kotaku, at about 11 and 4 million visits per week. Or, to use the preferred Web 2.0 metric, which has the benefit of being a higher number, the two blogs receive about 12 and 5 million “page views” per week, which is the number of times each visitor clicks on any blog page. Page views are very important: Advertisers usually pay for online ads in a unit of 1,000 page views, and the number of page views a Website receives have become like points for content-driven Internet properties, a way to keep score on competitors. Gawker nearly doubled in size last year, but the rate slowed to perhaps 30 percent last year, and the site now does about 2.5 million page views per week. For years, Denton told colleagues that there was no money to be made in blogs, even providing such a quotation to the *New York Times*. He didn’t see the advantage in talking it up. Today, Gawker Media has approximately 100 employees and contractors. “Nick made us all join Facebook,” says Sicha. “I think he came to the office one day and couldn’t recognize anybody—‘Which one are you?’” Very few Websites provide their traffic information, but Denton has chosen to do so with a link on his home page: no one can accuse him of not keeping his business transparent, at least superficially. Brightly colored traffic graphs provide the curious the illusion of being able to figure out his earnings, but without knowing the percentage of ad inventory sold across all blogs, it’s impossible to generate more than a back-of-the-envelope guess of \$10 to \$12

million in profit annually if most of his blogs sell ads at the industry standard.

“How many page views are you getting?” That’s Denton’s favorite question to ask fellow Internet entrepreneurs at a party.



ENTON’S PLACE is one of the great Manhattan apartments for a party, a cavernous loft that seems

to be decorated only in titanium and suede in a Soho building whose other tenants include Kelly (Continued on page 134)

Ripa and Harvey Weinstein. Sometimes he throws open his doors to everyone in town, on Halloween and during the holiday season, but more often he plays host to a select group of entrepreneurs and writers.

Over the summer, at the tail end of a cocktail hour, he's cleaning up the wrappers of White Castle hamburgers he provided as hors d'oeuvre. "I had a book party for Rebecca Mead at the New York Public Library last week, and they gouged me on the catering," he says, pursing his lips slightly. "These were so cheap!" Denton's boyfriend, a lovely African-American artist, begins to get ready for their next stop of the evening, a going-away party for Gawker Media managing editor Lockhart Steele, leaving to build his own blog network with Denton joining an angel investment round. "Are there going to be a lot of bloggers there?" his boyfriend asks, and Denton nods. He sighs.

At Steele's party, at a dirty bar on Clinton Street, a white limousine with the license plate FILTHYNY rolls by as dozens of bloggers spill onto the sidewalk, surreptitiously drinking beers until a couple of cops begin handing out tickets. Everyone has a slightly hunted look, born of spending all day at a computer with a gun to their heads: Most bloggers in Denton's network work under the most severe deadlines imaginable, with many contracted to write twelve posts per day. At the same time, they are unbelievably fulfilled: Bloggers get to experience the fantastic feeling of looking at everything in the world and then having everyone look at them through their blog, of being both subject and object, voyeur and voyeurant. To get more of that feeling, some bloggers—if we were a blog, we'd tell you who—are in the bathroom snorting cocaine, or Adderall, the ADHD drug popular among college kids on finals week, the constant use of which is one of the only ways a blogger can write that much ("We're a drug ring, not a bunch of bloggers," one Gawker Media employee tells me cheerily). Pinched nerves, carpal tunnel, swollen feet—it's all part of the dastardly job, which at the top level can involve editing one post every fifteen minutes for nine hours a day, scanning 500 Websites via RSS for news every half-hour, and on "off-hours" keeping up with the news to prepare for tomorrow.

The Gawker.com editors stand mostly to the side, in a cool-kid clique. Although they may in some sense be outsiders with their noses pressed to the glass, horrified by a world of New York that doesn't quite want to have them as members, in the bubble of blogs, they're the elite,

especially because lots of smaller bloggers' traffic relies on "link-whoring" (i.e., Gawker editors being solicited for links by smaller sites). Sicha leans against the back of a parked car, tanned and lean, his jeans slung low enough to reveal the waistband of his underwear, talking to Alex Balk, a former copywriter who tweaks Denton's desire for lowbrow posts that generate page views by dialoguing with a character known as "My Cock" (his bitterness conceals an emo side: Balk's previous blog was named after a line from a Leonard Cohen song). One Gawker Media videographer, widely known in the office as the guy who had sex after-hours on the office couch, lurches around in tight white jeans. "I was talking to this writer from *Elle Girl*, and then she said, 'I heard you're a crack whore but really good in bed,'" he tells a Gawker ad-sales guy, who snickers.

A Town Car pulls to the curb: It's the most famous young journalist in the city, Julia Allison.

"Don't write about her, don't feed into it," two female bloggers beg me, stepping out of Allison's way as she approaches.

Allison is what Denton likes to call a "Gawker celebrity": Like all editors of gossip publications, he enjoys thinking of himself as a star-maker and lays claim to creating the personalities that he promotes, much in the way that the *New York Post's* "Page Six" has always said it made Paris Hilton. But, like Paris, Allison is quite complicit in her star-making process—although she would never admit it, because that would ruin her image. She is pretty, though she looks even better on your computer screen because she chooses her outfits explicitly for the cameras: Her look is southern deb or, more precisely, an actress playing a southern deb—a polka-dot Nanette Lepore suit with no blouse underneath, a string of her grandmother's pearls, thickly applied lavender lipstick, and five-inch white platform shoes. "I'm just a small yappy dog Nick finds amusing," says Allison later, in a deep voice that projects across the room. "He's a god-like figure at the center of his universe," she says on another occasion. "The godfather! First he started a company, and now it's a culture."

A recent Georgetown University grad who moved to New York to become Candace Bushnell, Allison had a little-read dating column in *AM New York*—and a list of paramours that included for-

mer Tennessee congressman Harold Ford Jr.—when she decided to change her focus. She grabbed Denton's eye by showing up at one of his Halloween parties in a bustier made entirely of Trojan Magnum XL condom wrappers and developed a sophisticated Website ("I dated a computer-science guy!"). She link-whored herself to Gawker on a daily basis, even if it meant sharing videos of herself in a white bikini riding a horse. "Freelancers are like the migrant workers of publishing—when I heard that Tom Wolfe makes \$6 a word, I was like, 'Whoa,'" says Allison. "I figure if you make yourself a marquee name, you can't be replaced."

Soon, Allison landed a column in *Time Out*, where she was popular for her ability to get her stories linked on Gawker. Gawker was free advertising, after all: "*Time Out New York* dating columnist Julia Allison tackles the age-old dilemma faced by men around the world: How do you trick a chick into bed? Jules' advice: Be cheesy, surround yourself with hot ass, and buy her greasy food. (Not recommended: Yelling, 'Now suck my cock.')" Next, she was hired

by *Star* magazine as an editor-at-large. She doesn't actually write anything, though. Her job is to go on TV and pretend that she works at *Star*.

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HE VALUE OF Allison to Denton is not only tits=page views: It's also her popularity with Gawker's commenters, the largely anonymous readers whose responses to

Gawker's posts are included on every item page. Commenters are the mob sneering at the tumbrels as they pass by—their comments are sometimes hilarious but always cruel and vicious, an echo chamber of Gawker's meanness. Gawker editors let them know their place by introducing "Commenter Executions," by which they banned a few of the lamest commenters each week (e.g., "Crime: on certain days, comments on every single post—yet says nothing"). But now Denton—impressed by the microblogging capabilities of current Silicon Valley darling Facebook and crushing on its founder, young Harvard dropout Mark Zuckerberg—wants to make more of them. He spent most of the summer working with developers on new software that tailors Gawker's page to the specific commenter who visits it. In fact, he'd love to see a site where half the page is taken up with comments.

"Gawker comments, long an embarrassment, frankly, now represent one of the strongest aspects of the site,"

he wrote recently (in Gawker's comments!). "They reintroduce an element of anarchy, which was in danger of otherwise being lost, as the site became more professional. I *want* secrets to be exposed, memos leaked, spy photos published, arguments to fly." Noah Robischon, Gawker's new managing editor, adds, "There are no immediate plans to reward commenters, but it is a natural way for us to scout for talent. I wouldn't be surprised if commenters who are promoted regularly end up as paid contributors." But are commenters even close to being in the loop? Last week, Denton tried to get them to step up: "Okay, how about a comment from someone who was actually at the Media-bistro party? Facts, please, people." But no one, of course, could answer such a thing—the best they could do is snipe: "Who would admit to this [being at the party], even under the cloak of i-anonymity?" sneered one.

The success of the comments has even made Denton rethink the compensation he pays his bloggers, the cows he has to pay for milk. Gawker as an automated message board, with commenters generating exponentially greater numbers of page views as they click all over the site to see reactions to their comments, could be the dream. There would then be no editors to pay, even at the rates he has to shell out. Until recently, most Gawker bloggers were paid a flat rate of \$12 per post for twelve posts a day, with quarterly bonuses adding to the bottom line; these bonuses could be used to buy equity in the company, which took two years to vest. Now, Denton is moving to a pay-for-performance system. He has always tracked the page views of each individual Gawker Media writer, thinking of them like stocks in a portfolio, with whoever generates the most page views as his favorite. If each writer was only as valuable as the page views he drew, then why shouldn't Denton pay him accordingly?

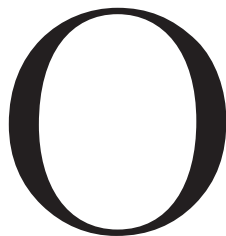
Balk, the site's primary troublemaker, quickly posted an item on Gawker about this change with the slug "Like Rain on Your Wedding Day, Except for Instead of Rain It's Knives." Denton wasn't amused. "Your item makes the argument for performance pay even stronger," he responded in the post's comments. "This awesomely self-indulgent post—of interest to you, me, and you, and me—will struggle to get 1,000 views. Which, un-

der the new and improved pay system, Balk, will not even buy you a minute on your bourbon drip." (Balk gave notice two weeks later.)

Denton is a visionary tech geek, so it's not surprising that he would be fascinated by such new applications, but his relentless focus on page views may be evidence of restlessness, or even an existential crisis: Now that he's making money, really coining it, he knows he may have reached the top. There is a rush on advertising on the Web now, with TNS Media Intelligence reports showing that online advertising was up 17.7 percent for the first half of 2007, while print and TV were in decline. But in its current form, it's not going to solve the publishing crisis, online or off.

In fact, even Gawker.com has become boring to Denton, because it doesn't get the number of page views of his more popular sites. There were probably only going to be a few big Web companies anyway, as well as Google, and even though he still entertained the notion of holding onto his blogs for posterity, word had started to leak out of his talk about selling them down the road. Eventually, New York media would be like the New York film business—there would still be a lot of work, but except for some small independents, all the platforms would be owned elsewhere, operated out of office parks in San Jose, California. Possibly, Denton is holding onto Gawker.com as a kind of hobby, partly for the fun of having a catalogue of the decline of New York print publishing, an entire history of the fall. His roots are in journalism, and he undoubtedly enjoys the notoriety that Gawker brings—he's running one of the best circuses in the city. But a

business model is a business model, and increasingly, in the media business, it's hard to find one. Maybe New York was done as a media town.



IN A CHILLY EVENING in September, Gould and I went out for sushi. She traipsed down Prince Street in a tight electric-blue shirt, the same color as her fingernail polish, and white knee-high boots she had polished up for the fall season. She had just been at her shrink's, where she says she spends all her time talking about Gawker—"It's just such a weird cross between being an artist and working in a sweatshop," she'd said earlier. She tucked her hair behind her ears and sighed. "Plus I have gotten so much flak over the past year, from everyone

from random people who e-mail me that I'm a bitch and a cunt, to my family, to Jimmy Kimmel calling me the devil—to my boyfriend of six years, when we broke up and I was moving my dishes out of his apartment, asking, 'Why did you write that post about that Stevie Nicks song? Now it's obvious to everyone that you were having an affair with your co-worker.'" She shot me a lopsided smile.

I asked her how she felt about the upcoming changes in comments and pay at Gawker. "I can't have feelings about that kind of thing," she said. "It's kind of like you're in jail and you have feelings about the color they paint the walls." Gould published a book last spring, and wasn't sure if she should write another. "At the end of the day, your ideas in a book have less impact than if you had summed them up in two paragraphs on the most widely read blog at the most-read time of the day, so why'd you spend two years on it?" she said, delicately picking up a piece of toro. "But there's other ways to get noticed than the Internet, right?" She laughed bitterly. "There's always TV."

Recently, she'd bonded with Julia Allison—the two went to a psychic in Staten Island together, driving in a Mercedes convertible Allison had borrowed (though the guy who owned it didn't really know she had borrowed it), booming the stereo and singing along to the lyrics of Prince's "Pussy Control." The psychic told Allison that she had to be more "real" and Gould that she was on the road to love—but then she was not, so that was all a waste of time. But at least she decided Allison was cool. "It's not like Julia keeps her enemies close and her friends closer," said Gould. "She doesn't even make a distinction between the two."

In an insult culture, shamelessness is a crucial attribute, was part of the point. Last week at Gawker's book party, Allison appeared in a particularly revealing top and told me, "I figure if people look at my cleavage they won't listen to my words," then winked. She and Gould were both wearing polka-dots, not on purpose, and they cavorted in their outfits for a photographer, slinging their arms around Allison's boyfriend, even though Gould was sure to overdramatically grimace in some of the pictures.

By Gawker's rules, Allison seemed to be winning the game. Still, the question remained: Could you be successful in New York without becoming a—well, a douchebag? It was something that Gould would have to ponder. ■