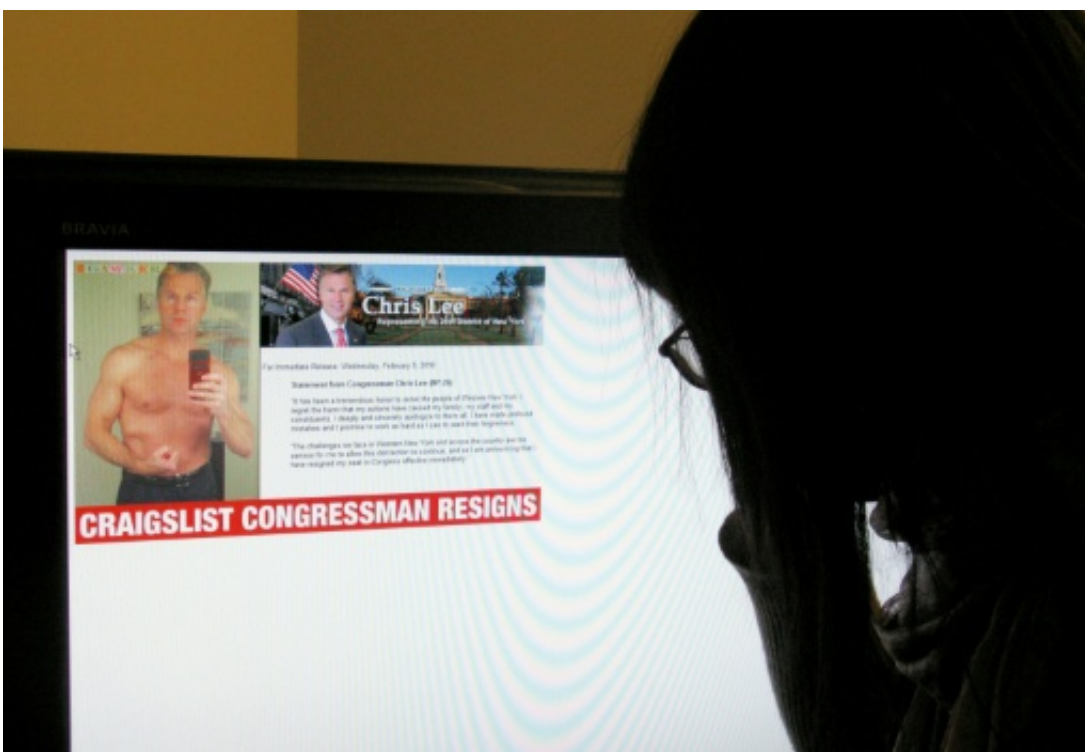


Gossip site Gawker looks to turn over a new leaf

July 28 2015, by Rob Lever



File photo of a journalist looking at the Gawker.com website in Washington, DC

Gawker says it will rethink its ethics policies following turmoil over an article about an executive's private life, in what could be a turning point for the popular news and gossip website.

Gawker Media founder and chief executive Nick Denton said a "dialogue about the editorial code" would begin in August.

"After the passionate public argument of the last week, calm is restored enough to begin a real, civil dialogue," Denton said in a recent memo to staff titled "Gawker's growing up."

Some immediate reactions were skeptical, amid questions on whether the site known for brash and unabashed reporting can be journalistically ethical.

"Their mission is to be as mean-spirited as they possibly can. That's been the Gawker brand from the beginning," said Dan Kennedy, a journalism professor at Northeastern University.

Last week, Tommy Craggs, the executive editor of Gawker Media, and Max Read, editor-in-chief of Gawker.com, quit because of the site's managing partners' decision to delete the controversial post.

The decision to delete the article, which purportedly exposed a senior media executive's efforts to contact a high-priced escort, had divided the Gawker staff.

Denton said he was "ashamed that we would ruin the home life of a largely private individual with such a flimsy rationale" and that the crisis has forced a re-evaluation of the group's editorial mission.

"The company expects high journalistic standards to be maintained by our writers and even more so our editors," Denton said in the memo.

"We do not seek to expose every personal secret—only those that reveal something interesting enough to warrant publication."

Aly Colon, chair of [journalism ethics](#) at Washington and Lee University, said it may be difficult for Gawker to chart a new course.

"It will be challenging because gossip by its nature is often unverified and is often about information that may or may not be confirmed," Colon told AFP.

"You are often putting yourself in an ethical dilemma."

According to the news blog Capital New York, Denton told staff that he wants the new Gawker to be "20 percent nicer" than the old one, but then downgraded that to say it should be "10 to 15 percent" nicer.

Ken Paulson, a former USA Today editor who is now dean of the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University, said Gawker's ethics policies may not necessarily be the same as other [news organizations](#).

"If the New York Times did this, we'd all be shocked and appalled, but after all, the site is called Gawker," Paulson said.

"We've seen a sea change in what Americans view as news," he said, because of "an endless appetite for celebrity gossip."

A long history

Gawker Media, which is believed to be one of the larger online news organizations, also publishes Deadspin, Gizmodo and other niche news sites.

The incident with the media executive is not the first time Gawker has run into controversy.

It faces a lawsuit for releasing sex footage of pro wrestler Hulk Hogan. Gawker also published an anonymous account of a one-night stand involving a female candidate for US Senate, and nude pictures of a gay

American football player.

The New York Observer called Gawker "a site that regularly says horrible things about people for no reason but the fun of it."

But Gawker went too far in its latest expose, even for Denton and other media watchers.

"It's one thing to mock celebrities and people in power but it's another to throw somebody's private life in the public eye when they did nothing to ask for that," Paulson said.

Robert Drechsel, director of the Center for Journalism Ethics at the University of Wisconsin, said the article had "no broader significance" and was "an unjustifiable invasion of privacy."

Gawker needs to take a hard look at its mission, according to Drechsel.

"The first step is the folks at Gawker need to think through what they mean by gossip and once they can come up with an ethically sensible and principled definition of the term they can have a broad ethics policy," he said.

"The silver lining in this is that it truly has stimulated an important discussion by the people who are creating this material."

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