

Nick Denton is the world's most diseased sociopath

Nick and I are often mistaken for one another. One is a tall, narcissistic, America-obsessed British media titan with a history of high-profile celebrity dust-ups, lavish personal tastes, a penchant for black boyfriends, a cruel sense of humour and a reckless, sociopathic and prurient approach to other people's private lives. The other is the founder of Gawker Media.

But even my most humiliating professional failures barely scratch the surface of what Denton is currently enduring. His empire is dissolving after it outed a finance director at a rival media group as gay, [knowingly co-operating with an extortion attempt by a gay prostitute in the process](#). Gawker editors [took just 24 hours to decide to publish the story](#).

In perhaps the most abject humiliation a self-regarding homosexual entrepreneur can experience, there's even [talk of a rebrand to shore up Gawker's crumbling reputation](#) with readers and advertisers.

Denton initially said that the new version of the site should be "20 percent nicer" than the old one. Perhaps finding this too ambitious, he later downgraded his expectations, telling the staff that the new version of the site should be "10 to 15 percent" nicer than the old one.

Denton's panicked reforms are too little, too late. And they run contrary to the DNA of the organisation he has created. The truth is, [Denton has always been obsessed with outing gay people, from Peter Thiel to Shep Smith](#), so he can't credibly distance himself from [his company's latest offence](#). In 2013 he was giving interviews in which he claimed that [privacy violations were good for society](#), bragging about Gawker's role in revealing CNN anchor Anderson Cooper's sexuality.

Like many conservative media figures, I'm an occasional target of Gawker's invective. But I've got off lightly so far, with a few barbs and the odd tweet embedded out of context. (They are masters of put-down: I didn't mind when they called me a "[D-list right-winger](#)," but "[Some guy](#)" really stung.) Yet consider the woman Gawker [went after during her ordeal with stage-4 cancer](#):

I've been at this a very long time and been called worse by better, so it wasn't the piece itself that really got to me. It was the picture. It was an image of me, pale and freckled, that [had run in Salon](#) seven months before, when I shared that I had just been diagnosed with malignant melanoma. A photo that had been taken just a few days prior, one of my last remaining images of myself before I learned I was sick. It never appeared anywhere else. And now it was being used to make fun of me.

That level of cruelty is typical of Gawker. Indeed, you might say it's the site's defining characteristic. The irony of a site whose feminist vertical finger-wags and pontificates about transgender pronouns while its parent blog colludes with porn-star hookers to out private individuals for no good reason is a function of where Gawker came from: it was a low-rent gossip sheet for years before blossoming into the hysterical liberal institution it is today.

It's easy to forget just how bad Gawker's behaviour has been over the years, but consider [creepy and intrusive initiatives like Gawker Stalker](#), launched in 2006, "in which we try [to] visually pinpoint the location of every stalkworthy celebrity as soon as they're spotted." This, from a site with the audacity to opine on women's safety.

In the age of social media outrage, Gawker knew it couldn't continue its "stalking" ways for long – at least not without some clever PR. So it decided to harness the outrage, by embracing the social justice mob rather than fighting it. It wasn't an entirely bad fit: the mob's hunger for public shaming fitted in well with Gawker's bullying instincts.

That's how a site which once released a stalking app came to feature a feminist blog. If you're reading this, thinking to yourself: the hypocrisy is breathtaking, yes. You're right. As Gawker pivoted from paparazzi to inquisitor, [Justine Sacco would become its most famous victim](#), her life destroyed for tweeting a single joke about AIDS. There would be many, many more. But despite its new veneer of moral righteousness, Gawker can't cover up its past, nor its true nature.

While its feminist writers complained about the "misogynistic" leaking of Jennifer Lawrence's nude photographs, Deadspin was busy sharing pictures of male athlete's penises, and Defamer was offering money for stolen sex tapes.

Despite ballooning in size to a 250-person company, Gawker's attitude has not improved. Today, Gawker preaches social justice while maintaining its tradition of invasive, barely-legal reporting. The double standard is stunningly brazen. It has, in its 13 years, graduated from ankle-biter to swaggering playground bully.

Thus, Nick Denton is on a mission to fix Gawker's moral compass just as his business faces an existential threat in the form of [a \\$100 million lawsuit from Hulk Hogan after the site published a leaked sex tape featuring the wrestler](#). In case you're *still* wondering how divorced from ordinary morality Gawker's most senior journalists are, [two of them resigned this week rather than accept that they should never have outed a private individual](#) without any public interest justification.

Gawker would like to claim that this is its first "rebranding," but the site has revived itself more times than Dracula. While it currently presents itself as a weird mix of righteous progressiveness and celebrity clickbait, Denton can't rid himself of the principles his site

was founded on — [slavish indulgence of rumour and ceaseless violations of privacy](#). That's all Gawker was, originally. A vehicle for Denton and his acolytes to pry into the lives of richer, prettier people.

Gawker's eponymous lead blog and feminist vertical Jezebel are seen as the worst ethical offenders, with other, smaller verticals such as gaming site Kotaku merely incompetent, sloppy and saturated with kooky left-wing politics rather than actively evil. Perhaps it's time for a new Gawker property, The Apologist, which acts as a readers' editor, calling out the bad behaviour of the rest of Denton's empire. Are there enough journalists in New York to staff it, though?

Denton apparently believes that giving Gawker a high colonic after a night of heavy boozing and curry will cleanse his spirit and [help to reduce "the Gawker tax,"](#) his name for the penalty advertisers build into their rates because they are so reluctant to spend money with the company, preferring competitors such as Vox and BuzzFeed, which do not mercilessly pursue innocent people for fun.

Perhaps the only Gawker blog entirely free from poison is Lifehacker. Other verticals such as iO9 and Deadspin are, for the most part, unobjectionable. But there's an argument that even these, less toxic, assets function as cover for the main site. They're Denton's beard, if you like: a distraction from the sins and sadism committed daily by his flagship outlet.

What Denton could do is fire every journalist in his New York office and start again. But I doubt he has the stomach for that, which probably means the site will give in to its baser nature after a brief, well-publicised flirtation with self-examination. All of which makes the "rebrand" seem a bit pointless.

Before the internet era there was a phenomenon [known as "doing a geographic,"](#) where fraudsters and screw-ups would move to a new city or country, often changing their name, for a "fresh start." Doing a geographic rarely works out: either past mistakes catch up with you, or the bad habits you had before reassert themselves and throw your new life into turmoil just as before.

Internationally recognised media companies can't pull off the trick either. Renaming either Gawker's parent company or the Gawker blog, which has [a long and deeply ugly history](#), isn't going to fool anyone. It's asinine, and it does nothing to solve the problem that [some of the most despicably irresponsible and sociopathic people on the planet](#) use Gawker as their platform from which to bully and abuse undeserving private citizens.

The implied admission of failure in this name change is not lost on Denton. There's something inescapably sketchy about it, and it puts Gawker Media in the same category as Academi, formerly known as Blackwater, or Altria, formerly known as Philip Morris. Media brands, alas, don't function like mercenaries or tobacco conglomerates: the equity in the brand is an essential component in the company's valuation. If Denton changes Gawker's name, the company's sale price will nosedive.

Had Gawker stayed true to the age-old journalistic principles of speaking truth to power, no one would be gunning for it now, except those who despise its bizarro-world intersectional politics and the lax journalistic standards of its various properties, Kotaku in particular. But that was never what Gawker was about. The site has always been about leveraging the politics of envy as an excuse to hurt other people.

And it has become a victim of precisely the excessively censorious, victim-driven, touchy-feely progressive culture it helped to spread throughout the last half-decade: even loyal Gawker readers were horrified by the recklessness and homophobia of its most recent outing. Gawker's gossipy stalkerishness is now totally out of step with its feminist pearl-clutching.

Progressive politics and free speech aren't natural bedfellows; had any other blog run the gay extortion story Gawker did, the latter's writers would have brutally savaged the offending journalist.

Mercifully, in late 2015, far-Left social justice extremism is falling out of fashion. [Denton even argued earlier this year](#) that Gawker should try to reach more conservatives. But its history of hectoring, insulting and muck-racking about figures public and private,

especially anyone with the temerity to admit to conservative politics,
will not be forgotten in a hurry. Name change or no name change.