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06:50 AM - July 6, 2012

Gawker's new comment system

Will it help or hurt the site's young writers?

By Peter Sterne



Gawker Media publisher Nick Denton recently introduced a new commenting system, called Kinja, on his network of websites. Rather than showing all comments on a given article, Kinja shows only the most interesting thread of comments and replies. Denton hopes this will finally make reporters and sources pay attention to the comments instead of dismissing them; to help ensure that, he's ordered his staff writers to [reply to](#)

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hopes this will finally make reporters and sources pay attention to the comments instead of dismissing them; to help ensure that, he's ordered his staff writers to reply to interesting comments on their articles.

"The goal is to erase the traditional distinctions between writers, editors, readers, subject, and sources," Denton told CJR in a Gchat. At the same time, he insisted, "our goal is to help our writers each achieve greater influence and reach with the same amount of work." So which is it—does Denton want to empower writers or replace them? It seems unlikely that Gawker will go the way of *GOOD* magazine, which eliminated the distinction between writers and readers by **firing its editorial staff and replacing them** with a discussion system for unpaid contributors. (When asked about *GOOD*, Denton replied that it "sounds like they were trying to put a high-tech complexion on an old-fashioned bankruptcy," which suggests he doesn't intend to mimic *GOOD*'s decisions.)

But it's not clear whether the interaction with commenters that Kinja demands will benefit or hurt Gawker staffers.

What seems clear is that Gawker staffers will have to embrace Kinja if they want to keep their jobs. Gawker staffers who spoke to Kat Stoeffel, the *New York Observer* media reporter who published an **article about Kinja last week**, strongly suggested as much, and the pressure on writers seems likely to increase given Gawker's lower-than-expected traffic numbers, obtained by CJR.

For the last few months, according to internal traffic stats from a former Gawker staffer, the Gawker network has missed its internal traffic goals for visitors from the US. In April, its traffic goal was 20.8 million unique visitors, but it received only 20.3 million visitors; in May, it expected 20.9 and received only 19.9 million visitors; and in June, it again aimed for 20.9 and received only 19 million visitors. (To be fair to Gawker, growth has

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At Gawker, numbers like these can often mean someone's job is in trouble. Not that fear for their livelihoods and constantly changing job descriptions are new for Denton's employees, who are treated differently from most professional writers and reporters. "Gawker writers are hardly professional," said former Gawker editor Choire Sicha, who now runs the website the Awl. "The guiding principles at Gawker are: People are pretty scared of Nick, people always feel they are about to be fired, and the job is shifting beneath their feet." Still, these less-than-stellar stats will increase pressure on writers to adapt to Kinja. Responding to the low traffic numbers, Denton explained that "making the best sites we can should increase uniques." For Denton, of course, a centerpiece of "the best sites" is Kinja.

So Gawker writers will embrace the new commenting platform. Whether this will help or hurt them depends to some degree on whether other, more prestigious news outlets—the

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So Gawker writers will embrace the new commenting platform. Whether this will help or hurt them depends to some degree on whether other, more prestigious news outlets—the kind of places that Gawker’s young writers aim to end up—follow Denton’s lead. If these sites try to maintain a sharp distinction between writers and commenters, then time spent replying to comments could be wasted time for Gawker’s young and ambitious writers.

Over the last decade, many Gawker staffers have gone on to choice jobs. Gabriel Snyder, a former editor, was scooped up by The Atlantic Wire, and he later hired away Gawker’s TV reviewer, Richard Lawson. Maureen O’Connor was recently picked up by *New York Magazine* to edit features for its fashion blog, The Cut. Alex Pareene, Gawker’s erstwhile politics editor, got a staff writing job at Salon, and his successor, Jim Newell, now contributes to Salon, Wonkette, and the *Guardian*. Elizabeth Spiers, Gawker’s first editor, is now editor-in-chief of the *New York Observer*.

If anyone were worried about the effects that Kinja could have on journalism, it would be these Gawker alums, who got hired by more established journalistic outlets on the strength of their writing. But most aren’t concerned. They’re apathetic.

“If editors are looking there for talent,” Pareene explained in an email, “I think they’ll continue to read the site the same way I still do, which is by reading the posts and ignoring everything beneath them.” He does not think editors at more established outlets—say, Salon—will look negatively on Gawker writers’ interactions with commenters. “I don’t really think mixing it up in the comments reflect poorly on a writer unless their comments are themselves poor. It shouldn’t be much more damaging than engaging with people on Twitter.” Newell agreed, writing in an email, “I don’t see any new commenting scheme changing the fact that a staff writing job at Gawker is a great

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