

THE STEALING WARS: WHAT'S GOOD FOR GAWKER IS GOOD FOR WAP0'S SLATE

While a number of bloggers think Ian Shapira is a big baby, I think he's got a point. He shows how Gawker took a story he worked eight hours on and—with 30 to 60 minutes of work—used much of his story for a post.

Shapira's got a point for two reasons. First, the Gawker post in question practiced god-awful linking etiquette—taking big chunks of Shapira's story and only at the end posting a link to the WaPo. And it didn't add much to the story. Gawker did do what it does best—wrapping the appropriate layer of snark around the absurdities or the world otherwise presented as serious. But it did use a whole lot of Shapira's interview in the process.

But what Shapira is complaining—rightly—about is that Gawker, a creature of the internet world, did not use good etiquette according to the internet world's rules. Curiously, though, while he did note that bloggers, too, make news,

And that wild world is killing real reporting — the kind of work practiced not just by newspapers but by nonprofits, some blogs and other news outlets.

... He didn't acknowledge that the WaPo at times does not itself always credit those it steals stories from (not even after Nick Denton pointed out that even when newspapers lift Gawker's stories and credit them, they never give hot links). In other words, this bad etiquette thing is a two-way street, and newspapers have their own share of bad etiquette. (Incidentally, Eric Lieberman, WaPo's General Counsel quoted in the story, admitted to me several years ago that his

office followed FDL's liveblog religiously during the Scooter Libby trial, and not the work of the three WaPo reporters also reporting full time from the court house. We didn't get paid for prepping WaPo to represent its five reporters testifying at the trial. But that's because FDL hadn't figured out how to monetize the best coverage from the trial. But that's sort of the point, isn't it—what comes around goes around?)

But Shapira absolutely does not make the case when he glibly says Gawker is hurting the WaPo, when his evidence actually shows it is possible to make money online, but that for some reason WaPo can't monetize the links others give it.

Even if I owe Nolan for a significant uptick in traffic, are those extra eyeballs helping The Post's bottom line?

More readers are better than fewer, of course. But those referring links – while essential to our current business model – aren't doing much, ultimately, to stop our potential slide into layoffs and further contraction. Worse, some media experts believe that Gawker and its ilk, with their relatively low overhead, might be depressing online ad revenue across the board. That makes it harder for news-gathering operations to recoup their expenses.

The Post just completed its fourth round of buyouts since 2003; and although the company reported on Friday that it had returned to profitability in the second quarter, the newspaper division, which is pretty much us, continues losing money. Standard & Poor's expects that the company's gross earnings will drop by 30 percent this year. Gawker Media, on the other hand, reported last week that its revenues in the first two quarters of 2009 were up 45 percent from the first two quarters of last year.

There are a number of things that contribute to the difference: As I said, Gawker treats things that should be treated with snark with snark, whereas WaPo all too often refuses to piss in the Village. WaPo has five levels of so-called fact checkers and editors who—often as not—contribute nothing to the quality of the work. WaPo is apt to send three reporters out on a story that might merit one. WaPo wastes money producing videos no one finds funny so it can extend the focus on trivia rather than news (note to WaPo: this is not what I meant by pissing in the Village!). WaPo has a nice big building in downtown DC.

There are a lot of reasons why WaPo's newspaper is losing revenue while Gawker is increasing revenue, and Gawker's use of others' content is just one factor in it. The other factors sure would make an interesting discussion, but Shapira doesn't seem interested in having it.

But the most amusing part of Shapira's column is this part:

Gawker was the second-biggest referrer of visitors to my story online. (No. 1 was the "Today's Papers" feature on Slate, which is owned by The Post.)

Here's the original work Slate wrapped around its limited quote from Shapira's story:

Feel like getting mad this morning? Then head on over to the *WP's* Style page to once again see how there's never a shortage of people finding, um, creative ways to make money. And people gullible enough to hand over their hard-earned cash.

Totally fair use, good etiquette—proof the WaPo Corporation can exercise good internet etiquette when it puts its mind to it. What's amusing, though, is that (by my count) 756 words out of 1136 in that column derive from other newspapers: NYT, LAT, WSJ, and USA Today.

Surely, Daniel Politi, who wrote the column, spent only 30 minutes or so per source appropriating the work of each of the other reporters, just as Gawker's Hamilton Nolan did. And yet there Slate-owned-by-the-WaPo is, doing precisely what Shapira complains Gawker is doing, placing ads right next to content it appropriated from other reporters: A ginormous Economist ad and what appears to be an ad for an ABC station.

Shapira has a point about this particular instance of Gawker's abuse of etiquette. But he misses all the ways that this information economy is a multiple-directional exchange, one the WaPo is as happy to engage in as Gawker.

Update: Gender corrected! Thanks to Civilibertarian for setting me straight. And apologies to Shapira.