

January 30, 2005

NEW YORK BLOGS

The Duel for the Dirt

By JAY DIXIT

TO media voyeurs, the name Elizabeth Spiers inspires awe. Ms. Spiers is the original "Gawker" - the founding editor of New York's most popular gossip blog, the pioneer of the site's dark obsession with New York media, and the exemplar of the snarky tone that bloggers the world over try to imitate.

Now, after a foray into the print world at New York magazine, Ms. Spiers, a wry Alabamian, is returning to online gossip. In October she took a job at Mediabistro.com where, among other things, she will start up a media gossip blog called FishBowlNY and serve as its co-author. Among her chief rivals is Gawker.com itself, which is now edited by a cheerful 24-year-old named Jessica Coen and is still a daily addiction for the gossip hungry and media elite.

The face-off begins tomorrow when Mediabistro, largely a journalist networking site, unveils FishBowlNY and several other new blogs. The rivalry falls squarely into the grand New York tradition of competing for the juiciest bits of gossip. This being the new millennium, the battle is being waged not in screaming tabloids but in cyberspace.

But Ms. Spiers's nemesis at Gawker is not without resources. Ms. Coen earned her gossip wings just weeks after being snatched out of Columbia Journalism School's class of 2005, scooping other blogs and traditional media alike. And Gawker's readership, which has been steadily growing, now numbers a million a month.

Though Ms. Coen is not personally obsessed with gossip, she knows its power. "When Tara Reid's breasts fall down, I'm not like, 'Oh, thank God!'" she said. "But it's the kind of thing that once it goes up on Gawker, it's a record-setting day of traffic."

As the two blogs prepare to compete, they clearly mean business.

"I hope we do it better, we scoop them, and we post first," Ms. Spiers said.

Nick Denton, the entrepreneur behind Gawker and its sister sites, dismissed the competition. "I'd be more worried if a no-name site run by a no-name journalist suddenly emerged," he said, "much in the way that Gawker did two years ago."

As in many such rivalries, the barbs can get personal. Laurel Touby, Mediabistro's founder, has been a frequent target of Gawker's slings and arrows. When a departing Mediabistro editor neglected to invite Ms. Touby to his farewell party, Ms. Coen reprinted an e-mail message to the staff from Ms. Touby in which the snubbed cyberhostess fumed, "I have to insist that you not attend this farce of a party."

And two months before Ms. Touby's wedding, Gawker noticed that she had forgotten to deactivate her personal profile on JDate, the Jewish singles site, and linked to it, snarking, "Now we know how to snare a new media goddess."

Such comments come with the territory, of course. It was none other than Ms. Spiers who said that "class warfare as recreational sport" was one of Gawker's main topics of interest, and she had a willing audience in the many young members of the media who felt they were slaving away to enrich the upper echelons at Condé Nast and other companies. Thanks to Gawker, Condé Nasties finally fight back, sending anonymous tips about what Anna Wintour said in the elevator or whether Graydon Carter was or wasn't on the list at a nightclub. Never mind accountability; it was the Web.

In this kind of sparring, turnabout is fair play. Just weeks after Ms. Spiers's hiring at Mediabistro, Gawker poked fun at the tone she took in another clash of the classes. Responding to complaints that Mediabistro publishes freelancers' essays without paying them, Ms. Spiers wrote: "These things are pretty straightforward economic issues. If what we're supplying isn't sufficient to meet what you're demanding, then obviously, you're not buying. ... I don't walk by a Mercedes dealership and complain that the prices are exploitative; I just don't buy it."

A bulletproof point, but to some freelancers her market-forces rationale made her sound like one of the media overlords she'd once zealously skewered. One freelancer responded: "Let me explain in simpler terms what Elizabeth is saying. ... Newbie writers are essentially like illegal immigrants, or mine workers in pre-union times, or underage children in third world sweatshops. It's fair to exploit them because they are willing to be exploited." Gawker quickly reprinted excerpts and awarded Ms. Spiers an ironic "gold medal for bravery."

But if verbal jousting plays a role in the rivalry that starts tomorrow, at least the two companies will not compete on every front. While Ms. Spiers's blog is focused solely on New York media, Gawker offers celebrity sightings, entertainment tips and gleeful dispatches about the likes of Paris Hilton and the Olsen twins. "We're not going to be covering Brad and Jen," Ms. Touby said. "Though we may cover the coverage."

And in Ms. Spiers's eyes, it is not just a two-blog fight. "Our competition for this New York media blog is partially Gawker, but it's also hugely the trades, Romenesko, and anybody who does media reporting."

Moreover, data from other blog rivalries suggest that both combatants may win. "One of the few infinitely renewable resources seems to be Americans' attraction to gossip," said Dan Gillmor, a columnist who specializes in the media. "And media people can't get enough of gossip about ourselves."

But even if her new blog doesn't make money, Ms. Touby sees another possible benefit. "They pick on me all the time," she said of Gawker. "After this, they won't want to give us any more press at all."