

Geek Squad

In the fight for gear review supremacy, rival Web sites Engadget and Gizmodo have turned the competition up to 11.

BY CARLYE ADLER

It was nearly 2 am in Las Vegas, and Brian Lam, editor of Gizmodo, was feeling triumphant. Morning would mark the opening of the 41st annual Consumer Electronics Show, the most important event of the year for Lam's gadget blog, and he and his staff of 11 had spent most of the January day preparing for the event. Then, in one hour, they knocked out 20 posts reviewing the coolest gear at a pre-CES press event (the winner: a beer-dispensing robot). That was followed by a steak dinner, where the Gizmodo guys (they're almost all guys), who had flown in from across the world, enjoyed a rare chance to hang out together. ¶ And now Lam was about to cap off the day with another coup. After dinner, on his way back to his room at the dingy Imperial Palace hotel, he had sneaked onto the trade show floor of the Las Vegas Convention Center to snap an early shot of Panasonic's 150-inch plasma television. The flatscreen monster was expected to

be the centerpiece of CES, and Lam had photos of it. Now he was going to show it to his readers a full 34 hours before its official unveiling. Sure, the TV was covered with a plastic tarp and it was difficult to capture its scale in a single shot, but Lam knew his readers would love the pictures. What's more, they would give his site an early advantage over Engadget, Gizmodo's main competitor.

Lam threw open the door to his room and plugged his Canon EOS 40D SLR into his MacBook Pro. While he waited for the photos to download, he logged on to Engadget to keep tabs on his nemesis. He normally avoided looking at the rival site so late in the evening—it tended to give him insomnia—but tonight Lam

Chris Mascari, Adrian Covert, and Brian Lam (from left) at Gizmodo's San Francisco HQ.





Engadget editor in chief Ryan Block once started an interview with Bill Gates by offering to give the retiring Microsoft cofounder a job.

couldn't help himself. And that's when he saw them, in a post by Engadget editor in chief Ryan Block.

Photos.

Of the same 150-inch television.

Posted 15 minutes earlier.

Distraught, Lam whipped off an emotional email to his bloggers. He told them the bad news and accepted full responsibility. He shouldn't have let everyone indulge in that

steak dinner, which made them logy and gave Engadget time to beat them to the convention center. "I've been planning a ninja attack of CES for a long time, and tonight I got scooped very, very hard," Lam wrote. "I don't know if I can explain how painful this is. How personally I take this ... And in case any of you forgot, like I did, this is a business where every minute counts."

Finally, at 3 am, a tormented Lam went

to bed, where he slept fitfully for five hours. He needed his rest. After all, CES hadn't even begun.

This is what defeat looks like in the world of gadget blogs, where the stakes are as high as the readership figures. Engadget and Gizmodo are two of the most popular blogs in the world, pulling in an average 4.1 million and 3.4 million unique visitors a month, respectively, according to comScore. The sites routinely break news: Engadget scored the first photos of the Xbox 360, while Gizmodo gave its readers the first shots of Microsoft's second-generation Zune. And in less than six years, they have become two of the most authoritative voices in the gadget world. A Google search for "iPhone review" returns a three-part series by Engadget as the leading result, one link ahead of CNET and eleven ahead of Macworld.

And like a couple of rival hometown newspapers, Engadget and Gizmodo have seen their collegial competition develop into a full-blown feud, complete with charges of malfeasance and sabotage. Engadget almost never links to Gizmodo, unless it's to call out the site on faulty predictions; Gizmodo's publisher, blogging impresario Nick Denton, has accused Engadget of being "amateurish," and "gullible." "I don't think we are nice or decent to each other," Lam says. "There is so much animosity, so much pettiness." Block, for his part, offered only minimal comment to WIRED for this story: Lam has been a WIRED contributor and assistant editor, and Block said he

was concerned that Lam's relationship with the magazine would prevent Engadget from getting a "fair shake." He forbade Engadget employees from talking to me at CES. (Wired.com itself covers consumer electronics in its Gadget Lab blog and so also competes with both Engadget and Gizmodo.)

But the in-fighting hasn't hurt either blog. Today, Lam, 30, and Block, 25, are influential forces in the \$161 billion consumer electron-

ics industry, more powerful than most of the mainstream media outlets they compete against. After both blogs mentioned Thirsty Light, an LED device that indicates when plants need watering, the manufacturer sold out within five days. Last August, after Engadget ran an open letter to Palm expressing biting concern about the troubled company (“Frankly, you’ve taken a turn from being the respected underdog and innovator to repeat offender in stale gear”) and suggesting steps for a turnaround, CEO Ed Colligan posted a response on the Palm blog, thanking them for the advice and announcing that he would forward their ideas to his entire executive staff. Lam says that Steve Jobs once told him that he checks Gizmodo daily, and Bill Gates is on record as an Engadget fan.

“They have audience, and they have influence,” says Chris Kooluris, a media specialist at Ketchum, a public relations agency that represents Nokia and IBM. “They are right up there with Walter Mossberg.” As a Samsung spokesperson puts it: “Gadget blogs are the future of the world for us.”

But it took a while for the consumer electronics industry to accept the rowdy new power brokers. The practices of the blogosphere led many tech companies to take an arm’s-length approach. In 2004, Microsoft pulled its advertising from Gizmodo after the site profiled a bicycle with a dildo in place of the traditional seat. Gizmodo hasn’t cleaned up its act in the intervening years—a recent post compared signing up for an iPhone service plan to “being tossed into a ménage à trois with Angelina and a She-Yeti”—but Microsoft appears to have overcome its objections. One year after it stopped advertising on Gizmodo, the software company granted the site a one-on-one interview with Gates, the first ever for a blog. (Microsoft returned as an advertiser, too.) This year, both Gizmodo and Engadget secured on-record interviews with Gates at CES. Block started his conversation by offering Gates a job at Engadget.

Maybe Gates should have accepted. Within the context of the blogosphere, Engadget and Gizmodo have emerged as money machines, the best argument yet that with the right ingredients—comprehensive coverage, irreverent writing, well-stocked

Rolodexes, and quick-and-dirty analyses—blogs can become lucrative enterprises. Gizmodo is by far the most popular site in Denton’s Gawker Media empire, which includes Fleshbot, Valleywag, and Defamer; it pulls in more revenue and readers than any of his 15 other sites. Similarly, Engadget is the most profitable and best-read blog in AOL’s Weblogs network. (Neither site will disclose its annual revenue.)

The key to maintaining this dominance is speed, and that represents the main criterion by which the competing sites judge their performance. Victories and bragging rights are measured in seconds. Lam even talks about moving so he can be on a FedEx route that receives deliveries before Block. And yet Engadget’s Thirsty Light post got 10 times the traffic that Gizmodo’s did, even though it was posted five days later. Such are the paradoxes of living at the forefront of a new form of business media, the rules and ethics of which remain unclear. “I never know what works,” Lam says, “but I love trying.”

Engadget and Gizmodo have nearly identical missions—serve up news and nuggets to a huge audience of shiny-object devotees—but they take pointedly different approaches. Engadget is cool and professional. (One typically straightforward headline: “Sprint Announces Massive Layoffs, Store Closings Amid Subscriber Defection.”) Gizmodo revels in cheap jokes and hedonism. Its writers regularly proclaim their love of alcohol, marijuana, and Jessica Alba. Las Vegas would seem to be a very dangerous place for them.

But here, at Gizmodo’s CES headquarters, Lam is urging his charges to focus. With 2,700 companies introducing 20,000 products in four days, CES is Normandy in the war of the gadget blogs. Over the course of the event, Gizmodo will produce 60 to 100 posts every day, while Engadget will top out at 189—double or triple their typical daily average—and both sites will draw some of their biggest traffic of the year. That’s why Lam has been devising his strategy for the past 12 months. As soon as CES 2007 ended, he made a 2008 reservation at the Hilton, the hotel closest to the convention center, to serve as Gizmodo’s

war room and “infirmary” for bloggers needing a midday break. He also reserved a block of rooms at the Imperial Palace, because it was close to the Las Vegas monorail. That meant his writers could avoid the hour-long taxi lines that have come to define CES. And, of course, Lam expects his staff to sacrifice for their art. “In Thai boxing, the trainers don’t allow their fighters to have sex for two weeks before a match,” whispers Lam, a one-time kickboxer, “and the trainers can tell if they have, because it makes them lazy.” He shakes his head and pokes an accusing finger at one of his bloggers.

Lam’s job for the next week is to act as a combination field marshal and traffic cop. Although many of his writers have lower-tier blogger press passes, Lam has set up Gizmodo headquarters in the regular press room, where he spreads his MacBook Pros and video gear across two tables. Throughout the day, his bloggers scurry into the room, feverishly tap out 200-word entries, and run out again. Features editor Wilson Rothman spends a few frenzied minutes hunting the Internet for an ideal posterior to illustrate a story headlined “FCC Chairman Kicking Cable and Wireless Ass in 2008.” Lam spends most of his time checking competing sites, lining up the day’s publication schedule, and doling out editorial advice. (He cautions Rothman not to be “derogatory” in his bottom-hunting; ultimately, the photo doesn’t run.)

CES also presents a great opportunity for Gizmodo to cultivate sources. When Pioneer was ready to launch an ultrathin plasma TV, for example, Gizmodo’s writers were some of the first to know, primarily, Rothman says, because of the relationships that he and Lam had built with the company. “It’s all about diplomacy,” says Rothman, a recent hire from Time. (Full disclosure: I worked briefly with Rothman several years ago.) But schmoozing isn’t just for uncovering scoops; Rothman circles the press room like a shark, approaching smaller blogs and urging them to link to the hottest Gizmodo stories.

But the bonhomie goes only so far. Around 5 pm, Jason Calacanis, cofounder of Weblogs, Inc., Engadget’s parent, which he sold to AOL in October 2005—inadvertently wanders into Gizmodo territory. Calacanis immedi-



Brian Lam says his writers should avoid sex before a big event. "It makes them lazy."

ately spouts off: "Fuck Gizmodo. Engadget rules." Then he twists three fingers into the shape of an *E*, the Engadget gang sign, and holds them over his heart.

Calacanis' outburst is a reminder of what really motivates both sites—more than money or prestige, it comes down to a frat-like rivalry, driven by boyish egos and measured in pageviews. The feud dates back to 2004, when Denton reportedly denied Gizmodo's founding editor, Peter Rojas, an equity stake in the site. Rojas allegedly retaliated by posting less frequently. Before long, he quit Gawker Media, a notorious blogger sweat shop, and joined Calacanis' Weblogs, where he launched Engadget with the sworn aim of

besting his former employer. (Rojas, who became Block's boss, also refused to comment for this article.) Engadget brought on a stable of reporters—Gizmodo had operated with a staff of one—began posting more stories than Gizmodo, and within a year was reeling in four times the traffic. When Rojas left the post in 2007 to pursue other interests (including a digital music company called RCRD LBL), Block, who had been writing for the site, took over.

Lam was tapped in 2006 to reawaken Gizmodo's sleepy site. Although he insists that he and Block are friends, with a long-standing relationship, the bad blood between the two blogs has not ebbed. Each editor accuses

the other of ripping off his work. Lam says Engadget's "Debunk," a snarky fact-check of other blogs' posts, mimics his own "Rumor Smashed," which debuted a month earlier. Block has called out Lam for similar transgressions—for instance, using an Engadget image, unattributed, to illustrate Gizmodo's 2006 Macworld coverage.

Meanwhile, in their rush to beat each other to scoops—time-stamped trophies to lord over their opponent—both sites have occasionally tarnished their own reputations. Last May, Engadget published news that the release of Apple's iPhone and Leopard operating system would be delayed. Apple stock plunged, causing a \$4 billion drop in the company's market cap. But Engadget's only source, an email purportedly sent to Apple employees, turned out to be a fraud. (Block immediately published a retraction, and the stock bounced back.) And Gizmodo has suffered its own share of Apple-related gaffes. It fell for phony iMac upgrade details, fed by an Australian teenager posing as an insider.

Gizmodo and Engadget's editors readily admit to, and apologize for, such obvious mistakes. But in the still-emerging world of blogger ethics, even their standard practices can raise eyebrows. In December 2006, one month before the iPhone was unveiled, Gizmodo published a misleading teaser headline—"Gizmodo Knows: iPhone Will Be Announced on Monday"—forcing readers to wait a weekend before discovering that the story referred to a Linksys VoIP phone with the same name. (Several readers called for a boycott.) Engadget, for its part, has been accused of maintaining a blacklist of competing sites it refuses to acknowledge, even when it uses their photos or scoops. "They have to figure out what they want to be when they grow up," says David Pogue, who reviews technology for *The New York Times* and reads both blogs regularly. "And they are going to continue to stub their toes along the way."

But despite the heated competition, nei-

ther site appears to be damaging the other's popularity. Most business battles revolve around a scarce resource—audience or customers or money. But in this case, the battle for readers is not a zero-sum game. “Nothing stops people from going to both,” says Jeff Jarvis, media blogger and director of the interactive journalism program at the City University of New York’s Graduate School of Journalism. “This is a natural state of media. It’s good for everyone.”

adult video convention, complete with a paid “butt rub” and vibrating fake breasts. And they ran a snarky list of reasons that CES—a “vile clusterfuck of nerds, sluts, and suits”—foretold the end of civilization. Walt Mossberg—whom Gizmodo writers refer to as “Grandpa”—would never write stuff like this. But according to Lam, it’s “an important part of the tech culture that isn’t sold in a can.” And together, those three posts pulled in more than 439,000 pageviews.


ter who you are—you should always treat that with some level of respect and gravitas.” For his part, Calacanis accused Lam and his posse of pandering, packing its site with lowest-common-denominator stunts and T&A in an attempt to goose pageviews. (Gawker Media pays writers based on the number of pageviews their posts receive. Lam is exempt from the arrangement.)

Motorola has apparently decided that Gizmodo’s influence and reach are large enough to forgive the occasional prank. “We’re cool,” a company spokesperson says. But the Consumer Electronics Association has banned Blakeley from all future CES events and tossed out Lam as well after he refused to remove the video from his site.

Lam remains unrepentant. Four days after he uploaded the TV-B-Gone video, he posted a response to his many critics:

“Bloggers and trade journalists, so desperate for a seat at the table with big mainstream publications, have it completely backward: You don’t get more access by selling out for press credentials first chance you get, kowtowing to corporations and trade shows and playing nice; you earn your respect by fact-finding, reporting, having untouchable integrity, provocative coverage, and gaining readers through your reputation for those things. Our prank pays homage to the notion of independence and independent reporting. And no matter how much access the companies give us, we won’t ever stop being irreverent.”

And as long as Gizmodo continues to win readers, the businesses it covers may have no choice but to put up with it. Even Gizmodo’s biggest scandal proved to be a boon for the site. The TV-B-Gone video had received some 673,000 views at press time, making it Gizmodo’s most popular CES story.

And not all businesses were put off by the prank. In the 48 hours after Gizmodo posted the video, Mitch Altman, the inventor of TV-B-Gone, sold almost 800 units, more than he usually sells in a month. And Altman wasn’t even at CES. 

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CARLYE ADLER (carlye.adler@gmail.com) wrote about the secretive founder of *TheFunded.com* in issue 15.12.

Some felt that Gizmodo’s CES prank crossed the line. “It’s safe to say that all professionalism has gone FLYING out the window,” one commenter wrote.

Gizmodo’s most notorious CES moment occurred the day before the event officially opened. Jeremy Dale, Motorola’s vice president of global marketing, was demonstrating two new mobile phones to a preshow crowd when his teleprompter suddenly snapped off. Seconds later, the display screen behind him went black. When he moved to another screen, it snapped off as well. Throughout the course of the week, similar things kept happening. TVs went dark at Intel, more went out at Dish Network, and a whole wall of monitors popped off, one by one, at Panasonic. (The 150-incher stayed on.)

At the time, no one knew that Richard Blakeley, a cameraman for Gawker Media and Gizmodo, armed with a little device called TV-B-Gone, was the puppeteer behind the prank. Four days later, however, Lam posted a story titled “Confessions: The Meanest Thing Gizmodo Did at CES,” which included a video documenting the escapade.

The prank was hardly Gizmodo’s only instance of puerile behavior at the conference. Gizmodo bloggers conducted a survey of womanhood at the event, asking readers to vote on which category of female was hotter: “booth babes” or “regular babes.” (The winner, with 65 percent of the vote: regular babes.) They put together an NSFW video of their adventures at an adjoining

But some felt that with TV-B-Gone, the Gizmodo gang had crossed the line from irreverence to hostility. A “Concerned Exhibitor” under the email account Save.ces@gmail.com, sent a note to fellow company representatives, protesting that he had paid a large sum to exhibit at CES, “just to be spitefully exploited by mocking and disruptive juvenile delinquents masquerading as reporters.” There was talk of potential legal action. Even some Gizmodo readers responded with irritation. “I guess it’s safe to say that all professionalism has gone FLYING out the window,” wrote one commenter.

Other bloggers were similarly unamused. For years, they had struggled to earn the respect accorded to members of the traditional media. Now, one of the most prominent bloggers—one of the few to win a broadcast media pass!—was squandering that hard-earned credibility. “The stunt is sort of funny, but for a journalist to do that, it’s horrendous,” says Robert Scoble, author of the blog Scobleizer and coauthor of the book *Naked Conversations: How Blogs Are Changing the Way Businesses Talk With Customers*. “They are supposed to report news, not make news.” Block, as a guest on the podcast *This Week in Tech*, decried Gizmodo’s actions: “Anybody who is there is a guest of the show. I feel that’s a privilege, not a right ... it doesn’t mat-