

Geek Brawl

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. There was just one more day until 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 the afternoon preparing for the trade show. Then, in one hour, they knocked out 20 posts reviewing the coolest gear at a pre-CES press event (the favorite: 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 around the world, enjoyed a rare chance to hang out together. *1 And now Lam was about to cap off the day with a 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. Now he was going to show them to his readers a full 34 hours before the 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, the gambit would give his site an early advantage over Engadget, Gizmodo's main competitor.

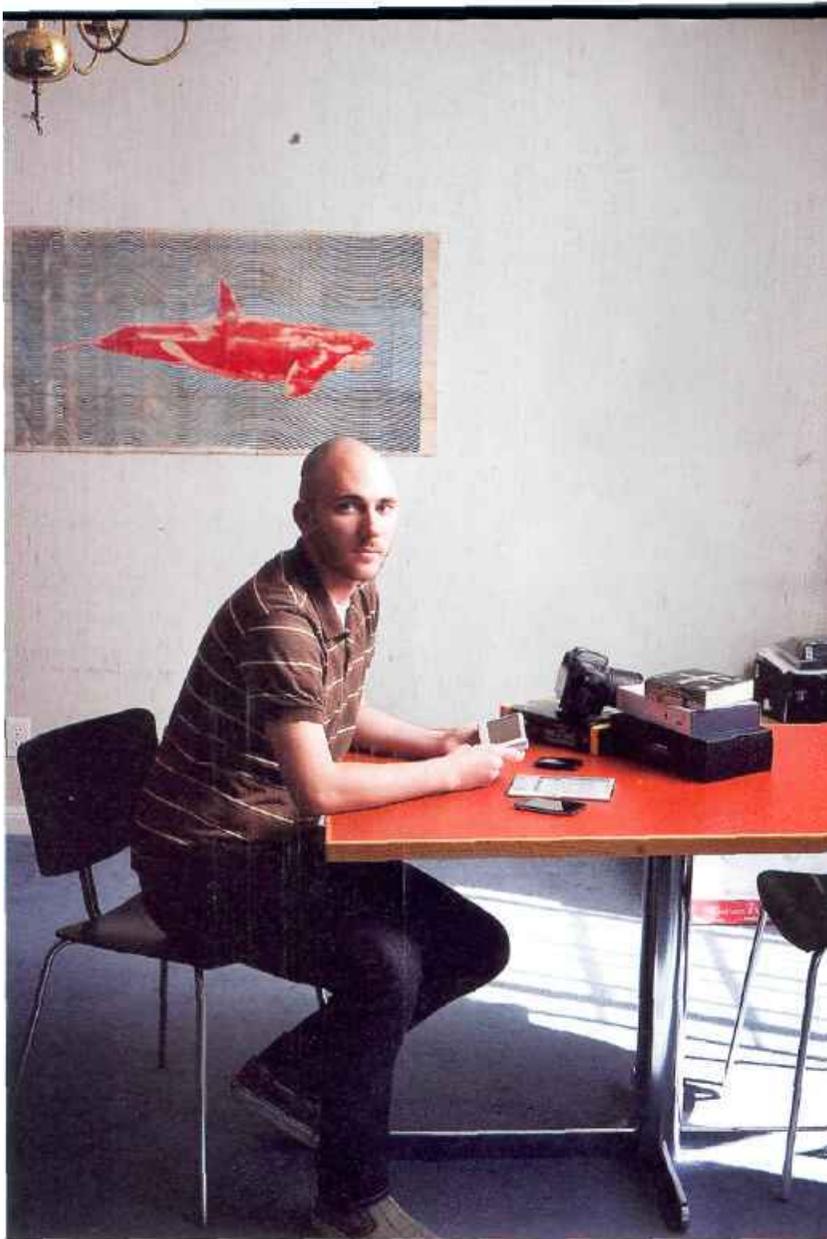
Lam threw open the door to his room and plugged his Canon EOS 40D SLR into his MacBook Pro. While he waited for the photos to upload, he logged on to Engadget to keep tabs on his nemesis. He normally avoided looking at the rival site so late in

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



16.04

RIVALRIES



Engadget, led by Ryan Block, is one of the most popular blogs in the world.

the evening—it tended to give him insomnia—but tonight Lam 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 on 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 top result, two links ahead of CNET and eight ahead of *The New York Times*,

And like a couple of rival hometown newspapers, Engadget and Gizmodo have seen their competition develop into a full-blown feud, complete with charges of malfeasance and sabotage. Engadget rarely links to Gizmodo, and often it's to ridicule the site for 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 for this story: Lam is a former 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 even 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.)

The sniping hasn't hurt either blog. Today, Lam, 30, and Block, 25, are influential forces in the \$161 billion consumer electronics industry, more powerful than most of the mainstream media outlets they compete against. After both blogs mentioned ThirstyLight, an LED device that indicates when plants need watering, the manufacturer sold out within five days. Last August, Engadget ran an open letter to Palm trashing 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 Engadget for the advice and announcing that he would forward the 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

empire, which includes Fleshbot, Valleywag, and Defamer; it pulls in more revenue and readers than any of the publisher's 15 sites. Similarly, Engadget brings in more revenue and readers than any other blog in AOL's Weblogs network. (Neither site will disclose actual figures.)

The key to maintaining this dominance is speed, the measure by which the gadget blogs judge their performance. Victories

double or triple their typical outputs—and both sites will draw some of their biggest traffic of the year.

No wonder Lam has been devising his CES strategy for the past 12 months. As soon as the 2007 show 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 onetime 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 laptops 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 item runs without a butt shot.)

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. And 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.

On the CES floor, TVs went dark and a wall of monitors died. The displays quit during a Motorola demo. Four days later, Lam confessed to the prank.

up there with Walt Mossberg." As a Samsung spokesperson puts it: "Gadget blogs are the future of the world for us."

It took a while for the consumer electronics industry to accept the rowdy new power brokers. In 2004, Microsoft pulled its advertising from Gizmodo after the site profiled a bicycle outfitted with a dildo where the seat should be. Gizmodo hasn't cleaned up its act since then—a recent post compared signing up for an iPhone service plan to "being tossed into a menage a 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 January, both Gizmodo and Engadget secured on-record interviews with the Microsoft cofounder at CES. Block started his conversation by offering Gates, set to retire from the company this summer, a job at Engadget.

Maybe Gates should have accepted. Engadget and Gizmodo have emerged as two of the blogosphere's biggest 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 Penton's Gawker Media

and bragging rights are won in seconds. Lam talks about renting a different apartment so he can be on a FedEx route that receives deliveries before Block. But for all the focus on speed, the pageviews don't always go to the swiftest. Engadget's Thirsty Light post brought 10 times more traffic to the company's site than 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 straitlaced. (One typically direct 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 more than 400 posts, and Engadget will top out at nearly 750—

But the bonhomie goes only so far. Around 5 pm, Jason Calacanis—who cofounded Engadget's parent, Weblogs, Inc., and sold it to AOL in October 2005—inadvertently wanders into Gizmodo territory. Calacanis immediately spouts off: "Fuck Gizmodo. Engadget rules." Then he throws up three fingers twisted into the shape of an E, the Engadget gang sign.

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. Before long, Rojas quit Gawker Media, a notorious blogger sweat shop, and joined 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 in a stable of reporters—Gizmodo was operating with a staff of one—and began posting more stories than Gizmodo. Within a year, it was reeling in more traffic than its rival. 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 energize the lagging Gizmodo. Although he and Block insist they're friends with a long-standing relationship, the bad blood between the two blogs is obvious. 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 the rush to beat one another to scoops—time-stamped trophies to lord over their opponent—each site has occasion-



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

ally tarnished its own reputation. 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." Readers had to wait a weekend to discover 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 list of competing sites it refuses to acknowledge, even when it uses their photos or scoops. (Engadget denies there's a blacklist.) "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, neither site appears to be damaging the other's popularity. Most business battles revolve around ascarceresource—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."

category of female they thought was hotter: "booth babes" or "regular babes." (The winner, with 65 percent of the vote: regular babes.) They put together an NSFW montage of their adventures at an adjoining adult video convention, complete with a paid "butt rub" and vibrating fake breasts. And they ran a snarky list of reasons why 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." Not to mention, those three posts

make news." Calacam's accuses 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.) Block, interviewed 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 matter who you are—you should always treat that with some level of respect and gravitas."

Motorola has apparently decided that Gizmodo's influence and reach are wide 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 TV-B-Gone video from his site.

Lam remains unrepentant. Four days after he uploaded the clip, 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."

Not as long as it pays off. The TV-B-Gone video received some 679,000 views by February 22, making it Gizmodo's most popular CES story.

At least one technology executive was thrilled with Gizmodo's stunt. In the first 48 hours the video was online, Mitch Altman, inventor of TV-B-Gone, sold almost 800 units, more than he usually sells in a month. And Altman wasn't even at CES. 

CARLYE ABLER (carlye.adler@gmail.com) wrote about the secretive founder of *The Funded.com* in issue 15.12.

An Engadget insider wanders by the Gizmodo war room. He flashes the blog's gang sign: three fingers twisted in the shape of an E.

Jeremy Dale, Motorola's vice president of global marketing, was demonstrating two new mobile phones to a preshow crowd at CES when his teleprompter suddenly clicked off. Seconds later, the display screen behind him went black. When he moved to another screen, it clicked off as well. Throughout the course of the week, similar things kept happening to other companies. TVs went dark at Intel, more went out at Dish Network, and a whole wall of monitors went dead, 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, was the puppeteer behind the prank. Armed with a little device called TV-B-Gone, he prowled the floor, extinguishing the demos and displays that are CES' lifeblood. 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 stunt was hardly Gizmodo's only instance of puerile behavior at the conference. Gizmodo bloggers posted photos of various examples of womanhood at the event and asked readers to vote on which

pulled in more than 453,000 pageviews.

But some argued 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," one commenter wrote.

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