Boob job: how The Chive built an empire out of bro-bait

Boobs are back. They probably never left. At The Chive, a website dedicated to “humor, hotness, and humanity,” they are everywhere: bouncing in slideshows on the company’s homepage, spilling out of models’ push-up bras. The Chive asks you to reconsider what you know about cultural progress. Here, racy photos are always empowering. Lewd comments are downright chivalrous.

Chivers (men who read The Chive) are quick to emphasize that the website is about more than hot women. It’s a community of people who prioritize friendship and charity above all else — except, perhaps, having a good time. Chivers are veterans, first responders, Midwesterners. They might be Republicans, but you can’t say for sure because The Chive never talks about politics.

The apolitical, tit-centric aesthetic makes looking at The Chive feel like time-traveling to the early 2000s: pre-cancel culture, pre-#MeToo, pre-President Trump. Women (called “Chivettes”) submit seductive photos of themselves in the hopes of being featured in a reoccurring slideshow titled “FLBP” for “future lower back problems.” The Chive says this is “an outlet for attractive ladies from around the world to strut their stuff.” It’s a mission that sounds almost humanitarian.

In its prime, circa 2015, The Chive was the go-to destination for college-age men who wanted to look at something awesome on the internet. The content was too raunchy for a mainstream audience but not raunchy enough to be porn. It looked like Tucker Max’s brain on steroids. *Bloomberg* called it a “crowdsourced, Internet version of a lad magazine—the *Maxim* of the 21st century.” And according to the founders, it got about

1 million unique page views a day. Today, the company is focused on maintaining its core audience and betting on new business ventures like a streaming TV service for bars and restaurants. Boobs are the business model, and they scale.

copper bar, bearskin rug, decorative AK-47s

When I visit The Chive's headquarters in Austin, Texas, it's the week of South by Southwest — or it *would* have been the week of South by Southwest had the novel coronavirus not ripped across the globe, shuttering businesses and canceling conferences. While other companies banned in-person interviews and told employees to bump elbows, Chive executives shook hands and encouraged people to try to stay positive. "The greatest disease ever spread is fear," I hear John Resig, The Chive's co-founder and president, tell his staff.

The receptionist, who helps run the company's TikTok account, is young and bubbly, one of the few people of color present in the office. I realize I've seen a photo of her in a bikini. It was posted on one of the editors' Instagram accounts. A comment read "John's angels?"

John walks over to collect me but is interrupted by an enthusiastic Chiver. "Are you John?" the portly middle-aged man asks. He is wearing an "original chronic" T-shirt, with a photo of George Washington on the front. "Yeah, man," John says, sticking out his hand. The visitor is also named John. "I drove all the way from San Antonio to meet you." He seems nervous, even giddy. "Can you take a photo of us?" he asks the receptionist.

John Resig is unfazed, but I'm having roughly the same reaction as John 2. It crosses my mind that he might be a paid actor, but when I ask John 1, he just laughs. It's the first of many times throughout my week when I can't tell if I'm being paranoid or if I'm being lied to. John says readers show up regularly. "It happens all the time," he adds, while giving me a tour of the office. "It's like mecca to them."

Brothers John (left) and Leo (right) Resig founded humor website TheChive.com in 2008. This room was re-created from a Chive marketing image, complete with a bearskin made just for them. "We accidentally ordered a hit on the bear, but hand on heart we didn't know," said John.

The Chive headquarters in Austin has a decorating scheme somewhere between "Playboy Mansion" and "Southern frat house" — copper bar, bearskin rug, decorative AK-47s. Nearly 100 young workers busily type at computers. It looks like a typical tech company, save for the images of lube and semi-naked women on peoples' screens.

The office is most well-known for having a wooden slide that looks like it could break a tailbone, sloping from the second floor to the first. A camera positioned at the bottom is ready to capture any major wipeouts. (When I mention that this seems dangerous, John happily slides down.)

I ask John if I can attend an editorial meeting. "Sure," he says. "We can do one on what we're going to do for April Fools'." I say that I don't want them to do a meeting *for me;*

I just want to go to one if it happens to be scheduled. He assures me that it is. Once again, I don't feel that reassured.

"Hey, editors," John calls out when it's time. "April Fools' Day meeting. Should only take 15 or 20 minutes." The editors — 12 people in total, three of them women — shuffle into a glass conference room.

April Fools' Day is a big deal for The Chive. Last year, it pretended to launch Fyre Fest 2. The year before, it became a North Korean news station. ("People were pissed," John says.) This year, it's either going to pretend that it's been bought out by *BuzzFeed,* say that rogue AI has taken over the site and is trying to masquerade as a human, or go with a medieval theme.

John's cousin, Bob, (whose nickname on the website is "The Bitch") instantly vetoes the *BuzzFeed* idea. "I don't know if we want to pick a fight with them," he says. "I mean, fuck them, but…"

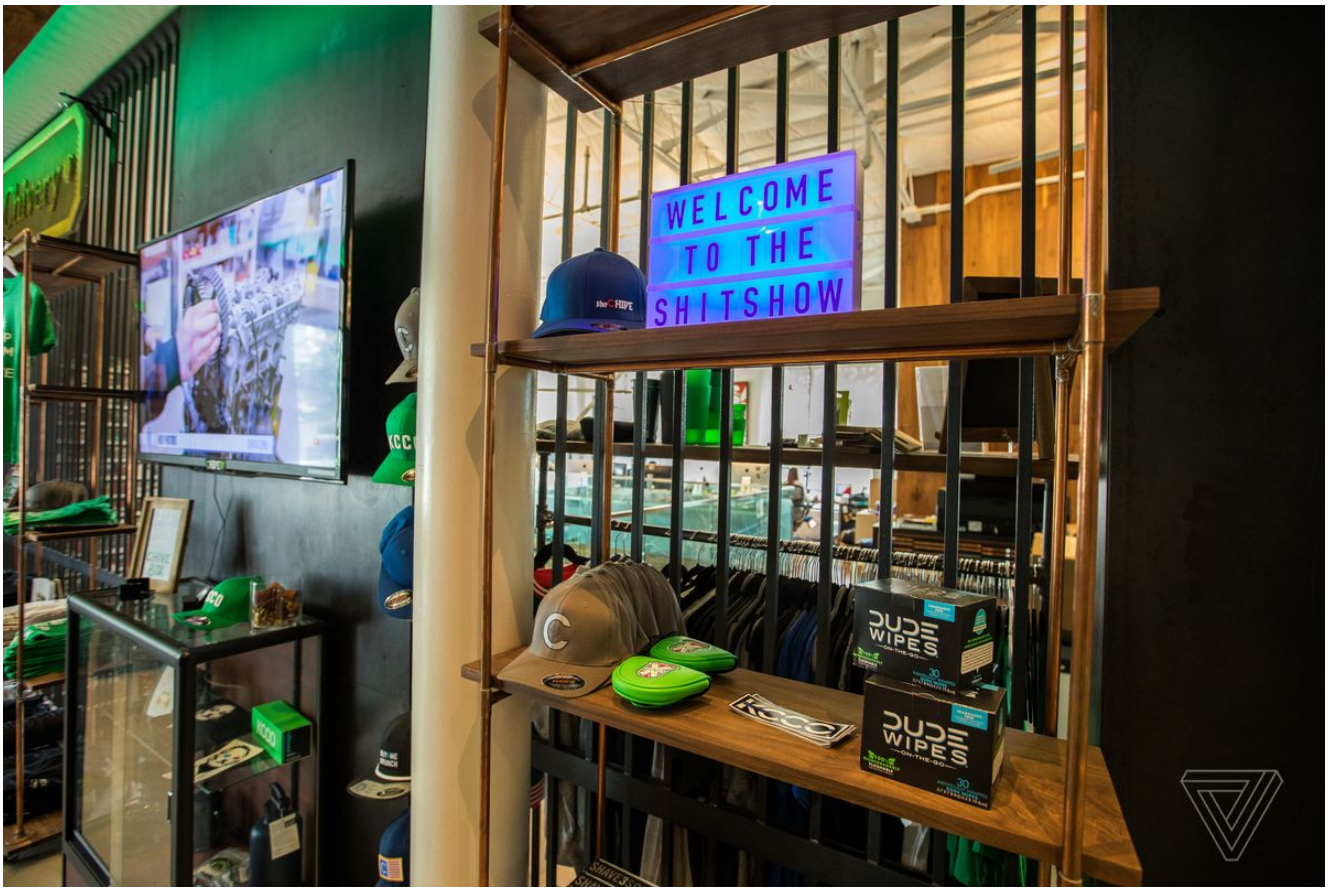
"body positivity win: maiden barely shows off tan, fit body"
The team discusses various column ideas that a rogue AI might generate — pickup lines in binary, a slideshow of dogs titled "We don't deserve dogs! But please enjoy these photos of biological canines" — but they decide people probably won't get the joke. "Reddit would love this, but our audience isn't a techie crowd," John says.

They're left with the medieval theme. A young editor suggests they do a post titled "body positivity win: maiden barely shows off tan, fit body," which gets appreciative chuckles all around. Taylor Wood — a marketing manager who has been with the company for six years — reminds them that they did chair jousting a couple of years back, and someone got "really hurt." "We need to be careful," she says.

"This might be too dark, but could we have someone salting

outside with like a bird beak mask, like the plague, asking people to bring out their dead?" a male editor suggests. "Or selling leeches to prevent coronavirus?" John shakes his head. "We're drawing a hard line at 'bring out your dead.' The plague is fair game, but not coronavirus."

The editors don't seem to be listening. "Should we throw salt at random drunk girls and scream PLAGUE?" one asks. Others laugh. "Okay," John says. "All in favor of medieval times of The Chive?" Everyone raises their hand. "Huzzah!" he shouts, and the editors chime in.

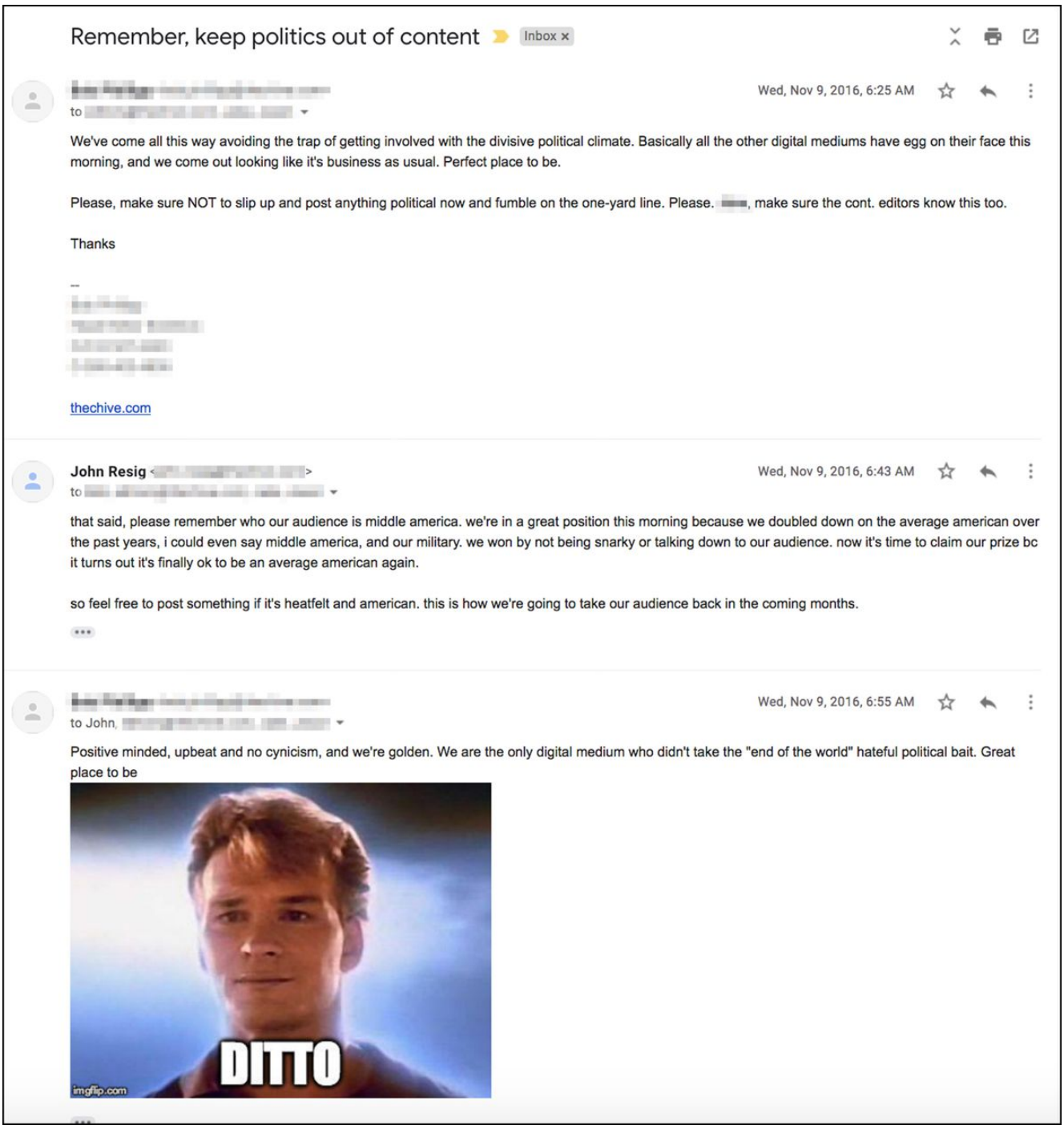


The Chive Media Group offers office tours at its headquarters in Austin, Texas. After the tours became distractingly popular with Chive fans, the founders limited who could attend to veterans, first responders, and people with rare medical conditions. The Austin Business Journal crowned Chive as the coolest office in Austin in 2018.

The Chive prides itself on staying out of politics. It won't comment on Trump's response to the coronavirus or weigh in on the presidential election. John and his brother Leo don't even

collect political data on their audience, and they bristle at the suggestion that their readers might lean Republican. “We’ve never posted a Pelosi Parody or a Trump Joke… and our audience wouldn’t want to see either,” John says. “However, they don’t mind being reminded that it’s okay to be an American. I understand that can be a bit of a tightrope walk between being pro-military and apolitical, but it works for us.”

In 2016, when Trump got elected, cousin Bob sent out an email to the editorial staff reminding them to “keep politics out of content.” John responded with his own rallying cry. “We’re in a great position this morning because we doubled down on the average american over the past years, I could even say middle america, and our military,” he wrote. “We won by not being snarky or talking down to our audience. Now it’s time to claim our price bc it turns out it’s finally ok to be an average american again. So feel free to post something if it’s heartfelt and american. This is how we’re going to take our audience back in the coming months.” It sounded like it was ripped from Trump’s playbook.



Before starting The Chive in 2008, Leo and John Resig – brothers from Fort Wayne, Indiana – were famous for pioneering misinformation. In 2007, the pair published a hoax of Donald Trump leaving a $10,000 tip for a waiter at The Buffalo Club in Santa Monica. It went viral, getting picked up by mainstream press. “How ironic is that,” muses Leo. “We created fake news.”

John wasn’t a tech guy, but he understood what made the internet tick. After his first brush with viral fame, he paid an engineer to reverse-engineer the algorithm of Digg, a

wildly popular news aggregator. Rather than directing traffic for his own content, he sent viewers to bigger magazines. “I’d show up at *The Hollywood Reporter* and be like ‘I spiked your traffic, that was me. I can do it again.’ It was a handshake deal and a lot of cash being bandied around,” he says.

When John and Leo started The Chive, their goal was to create a curated website for viral content that they could eventually sell to The Onion. (They tried, too, offering themselves up for $300,000. The Onion flatly refused.)

This origin story differs from the one that’s in the employee handbook and the one they told *Bloomberg* in 2013. There, they said that The Chive came from combining the letters of the city where they each lived: Chicago and Venice Beach. When I ask them about this version of the story, they laugh. “This is a lie,” Leo says. “It was just about getting The Onion’s attention.”

“Girls like to share gossip more … guys are like, ‘Dude, grab your beer. Check this out.’”

From the beginning, the brothers understood that surviving in the media industry meant getting lots of traffic. More posts meant more eyeballs; more eyeballs meant more money. They went from publishing 10 slideshows a day to posting upwards of 40, with a special eye toward funny home videos, epic fails, cool tricks, and, of course, hot women. “What guys think is entertaining is the lowest common denominator,” Leo explains. “Girls like to share gossip more … guys are like, ‘Dude, grab your beer. Check this out.’” The phrase “grab your beer, and check this out” became an early company mantra.

A pivotal moment arrived in 2009 when Leo decided to pour all of their money into creating a mobile app. John didn’t like the idea — he told me, half-joking, that he wanted to spend the money on a truck — but Leo insisted. It would turn out to be a fortuitous moment for the company.

This was before the App Store was flooded with applications — the Golden Age when people posted earnest statuses on Facebook and believed Twitter could spark a revolution. When The Chive's app launched, it immediately became one of the first things people saw when they went to the entertainment section of the App Store. It got 16 million downloads in the first year.

John Resig, co-owner and president of Chive, shops for new Pura Vida bracelets in his office at Chive Media Group headquarters in Austin, Texas. "This coral seahorse charm got me good," he said.

In 2010, John and Leo realized they needed The Chive to make more money. Advertisers weren't always comfortable putting ads next to risqué content, and college students weren't going to pay subscription fees. So the brothers started selling T-shirts.

The early designs were a black shirt that simply said "The Chive," and a green shirt that said "Keep Calm and Chive On." John tells me they were one of the first companies to bring

this motto to the United States, which seems dubious, but I decide to go with it.

The shirt strategy was an immediate success. Each new design sold out within a few hours, and because The Chive hadn't taken on outside funding, John and Leo were able to pocket all the funds. Since 2008, Leo claims they've made over $350 million in sales of T-shirts and other Chive-branded objects.

When I asked why Chivers were so ready to decorate themselves in Chive apparel, Leo says it's because they treat the audience like real people, responding to their comments and inviting them to come to live events. "We've always let people behind the wall," he says. "They're more connected with the brand because they've experienced it with us." For a while, so many Chivers were coming to the office to see Chive HQ that they had to limit office tours to veterans and first responders. John 2 only got to see the lobby.

"We're like the Oprah Winfrey of ADA accessible vehicles."
The limited supply of T-shirts also made having one a status symbol. "As a Chiver, if you walked down the street and you saw a bright green T-shirt, you'd speed up and see if it had a KCCO on it because you knew the hustle it took to get that shirt," says Jen Holub, a founding member of The Chive's Chicago chapter.

As the shirts sold, Chivers began forming Facebook groups to meet other fans in their area. Holub was part of the group that formed in Chicago, and she helped throw the very first event. "That was the first opportunity for people to come together with likely nothing much in common except you were there to have a good time," she says. "It was a room full of 600 strangers who left friends."

This momentum might have eventually fizzled had The Chive not launched a charity arm in 2012 with a focus on veterans, first responders, and people with rare medical conditions. If The

Chive heard about a family who needed an accessible vehicle to transport their kid with special needs, Chive Charities fundraised to get the car. “We’re like the Oprah Winfrey of ADA accessible vehicles,” says John. (Holub now works with Chive Charities.)

Philanthropy took off within the local Chive communities, as it has in fraternities across the United States. It gave the groups a shared sense of purpose and provided a smokescreen for their less noble activities, like binge drinking. The meetups still mostly took place at bars, but now all of the money went to charity. Chivers call this “partying with a purpose.”

Chivers also started leaving notes and money on random cars if they noticed a Chive sticker on the bumper. “Next round’s on me,” they would say, in a bro-y form of pay-it-forward. “You have members who are strippers and surgeons and everybody in between,” explains Holub. “We’re all here for the same purpose: to have a great time and have a positive impact on the world.”

Leo Resig, CEO and co-founder, takes calls in his corner office at Chive Media Group headquarters in Austin, Texas. The brothers say they did a coin toss to decide who would be president and who would be CEO.

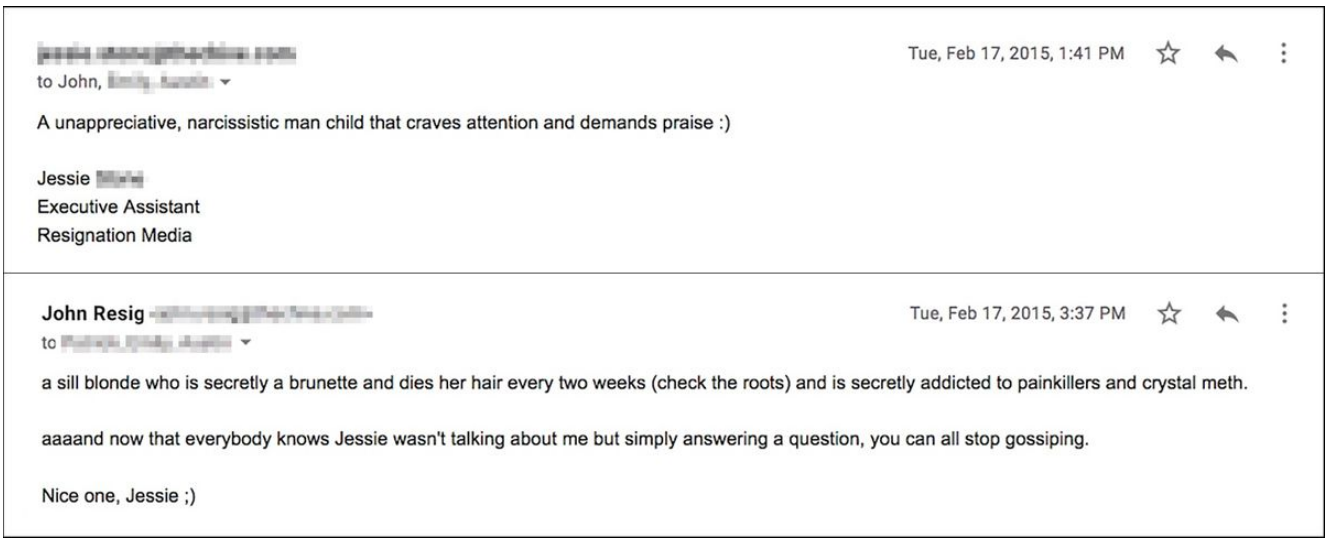
For early Chive staff, the mission wasn't always so noble. Many of them were just out of college and liked that the office felt like a party. If they also happened to raise money for charity, that was nice, but it wasn't exactly the point.

Two former employees say John would often get on the loudspeaker in the late afternoon and announce it was time to start drinking. They also say he had a policy that if an employee got laid by telling someone they worked at The Chive, they owed him a bottle of whiskey. A table in John's office is covered in bottles of whiskey. (In response to the loudspeaker anecdote, John has a confused response: "Yes, but I will add to that is completely inaccurate, actually. It was time to start drinking, but I've never announced it without saying that 'do not feel any pressure to drink whatsoever.'" When asked about the whiskey policy, he calls it an "urban legend.")

Most of the time, the alleged antics were fun. But occasionally, they crossed a line. In 2015, John called an all-hands meeting to announce he was dating his assistant. When the pair broke up, the tension spilled over into the workplace. (Leo denied that a meeting was called, but John admitted it, saying: “I called an all-hands meeting to announce I was dating my assistant because that’s the right thing to do, hiding an office relationship from employees would have been poor form.”)

“There were no boundaries between work and life,” a former male employee explains. “It was all just one big party all the time. For me personally, I was single and 25 and I didn’t know any better. I thought it was a great place to work. I slowly realized how toxic it was.”

Once, on an email chain asking employees to “define douchebag” (presumably for editorial purposes), the assistant sent a reply-all that read “an unappreciative, narcissistic man child that craves attention and demands praise :)”. John then responded with his own definition. “A sill blond who is secretly a brunette and dies her hair every two weeks (check the roots) and is secretly addicted to painkillers and crystal meth.” In case there were any doubts about who he was talking about, he added “aaaand now that everybody knows Jessie wasn’t talking about me but simply answering a question, you can all stop gossiping. Nice one, Jessie :)”



Tue, Feb 17, 2015, 1:41 PM

to John,

A unappreciative, narcissistic man child that craves attention and demands praise :)

Jessie
Executive Assistant
Resignation Media

John Resig

Tue, Feb 17, 2015, 3:37 PM

to

a sill blonde who is secretly a brunette and dies her hair every two weeks (check the roots) and is secretly addicted to painkillers and crystal meth.

aaaand now that everybody knows Jessie wasn't talking about me but simply answering a question, you can all stop gossiping.

Nice one, Jessie ;)

In 2017, while much of the country was reckoning with the #MeToo movement, The Chive continued with business as usual. Women still sent in photos, and The Chive encouraged men to be respectful in the comments.

Taylor Wood, a marketing manager, says she stopped being suspicious of the images when she learned women were sending pictures themselves. “I was like, ‘If they’re submitting their own photos and they want to be on the site, who am I to judge?’”

Sitting in Leo’s office, under a painting of Snow White holding a handgun, I ask the brothers if the current cultural moment has made them rethink their past behavior. Former employees had told me rumors about John settling a sexual harassment lawsuit with a former female employee, which I had been able to verify, and I wanted to ask how they squared that with how they spoke about treating women with respect.

The conversation, which has been jovial up until this point, turns suddenly hostile. “Be very careful with that one,” Leo says, his face stern. “It’s not a pattern,” John adds. “We try to create a really safe environment here. I think most people would agree with that, but never once have we done anything that is sexual harassment at this office in any way, myself or my brother.”

“This is our website! We know if a line has been crossed or

not.”
The conversation moves on, and a few minutes later, Leo gets up to use the restroom. “By the way, I didn’t mean to get on you. And my brother is not a mean person,” John says. “Do you understand?” he looks at me pleadingly, and I nod. I understand. I’m just not sure he does.

Despite remaining largely untouched by the movement, John and Leo were disturbed at how Facebook and Twitter were dealing with content moderation. “They had this very warped mentality… like they’re always trying to maintain some kind of level of free speech,” John says. “Whereas we were like, ‘Man, this is our website! We know if a line has been crossed or not.’”

In typical Chive fashion, the website has a partly crowdsourced approach to content moderation. If a comment is flagged enough times, it’s automatically taken down. Chive editors also monitor the comments to make sure there’s nothing inappropriate, banning users who’ve transgressed too many times. A former editor told me anonymously that when they published images of women of color, the comments had to be monitored nearly around the clock to stop racist remarks from pouring in.

When I asked what types of comments get taken down on a typical post, John flips around his screen to show me. “Hey you have a great ass,” one reads. “Simply sexy as fuck,” says another. “Hey man, this isn’t the place for you,” John tells his screen. “Go experience 4chan.”

There was something refreshing about John’s hardline approach to the comments. In a way, it felt more honest than Facebook’s hands-off stance pre-coronavirus, which seemed to negate responsibility. When I check the comments on a recent post titled “Lovely Latina-lines ’n sexy hot Curves,” however, there are many that seem to break his purported rule. “Thankyou Latina. In these pandemonious time we are told to blow into our elbow. I blew all over my chest” one reads.

Another says: “I’ve never understood how they can tell if they’re Latina just from body pics. I can maybe understand if they zoomed in on their taco but……” When I check weeks later, the comments are still there.

Leo Resig, CEO and co-founder, takes the slide to the first floor of Chive Media Group headquarters in Austin, Texas.

Leo and John have no intention of selling The Chive. They tell me they turned down an offer from *Playboy* in 2015. They have a photo in the Playboy Mansion to prove it. Leo even pulls up a PDF of the mansion’s floor plan, which he has saved on his computer.

If their new venture succeeds — the TV streaming service called Atmosphere — they won’t have to sell. Atmosphere is their golden ticket. They’re betting on the fact that most businesses — restaurants, bars, and doctors’ offices — are playing filler content most of the time. Why not get a free Apple TV and try out Atmosphere’s channels? It’s not quarantine-proof, but so long as the pandemic ends, it makes sense.

Atmosphere has viral videos, cat videos, Red Bull videos, and drone videos. It’s designed to play without sound. And the best part — at least from John and Leo’s perspective — is that it’s often in front of people who are buying alcohol, which makes it an easy advertising platform for liquor companies.

This is The Chive growing up. In the old days, when it found a photo it liked, it just stole it. Now, it pays for licenses and asks influencers if they can use their content. Most of the time, they say yes. Who doesn’t want free publicity?

“We’ll never use the content we don’t own or have the rights to use,” says Leo. Perhaps he’s forgotten about the old days. Or maybe, once again, he’s rewriting unsavory moments from the past. A few iterations from now, all that will remain is The Chive’s devout, unwavering appreciation of boobs.

https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/28/21238529/the-chive-bro-frat-culture-founders-misogyny