Influential publication The Awl shuts down amid a downturn in web publishing

After a nine-year run, the small but influential website The Awl is shutting down, along with its sister publication The Hairpin. The sites are the latest in a string of small publications to struggle amidst a changing digital-media landscape.

“It is with a mixture of disappointment and relief that we are announcing the cessation of editorial operations on The Awl at the end of this month,” co-founder Alex Balk wrote in a post. “For nearly a decade we followed a dream of building a better Internet, and though we did not manage to do that every day we tried very hard and we hope you don’t blame us for how things ultimately turned out.”

Balk, Choire Sicha, and David Cho founded The Awl in 2009 as a barebones WordPress blog featuring an eclectic mix of writing — darkly funny commentary, media gossip, essays, and asides hidden in alt-text. A significant portion of its readership worked in media, and it became known as a place for writers to experiment and get noticed, with contributors going on to write at *The New Yorker*, *New York Magazine*, *BuzzFeed,* and here at *Vox.*

“The thing I’m saddest about is that The Awl has been breeding ground for a lot of talented writers,” said Silvia Killingsworth, the editor of The Awl and The Hairpin. “We don’t have many places like that anymore.”

> *For many years when promising young writers asked me for career advice I told them to apply for jobs at alt-weeklies. For years after those jobs disappeared I told them to pitch the Awl. No idea what to tell them these days.*

— max linsky (@maxlinsky) January 16, 2018

The internet has changed significantly since the Awl was founded, and in ways that make business precarious for small publishers. Web advertising revenues have been declining, with an increasing share going to Facebook and Google, and far larger publications have struggled to stay afloat. Winning Facebook's algorithmic lottery can result in a surge of traffic, but the effort can leave sites exposed when the algorithm suddenly changes. (These were trends The Awl itself was quite prescient about.) In 2016, The Awl moved to Medium, but last January, Ev Williams declared that ad-driven media is a "broken system" and The Awl went back to WordPress. Medium has since instituted a system of "claps."

"We've always been somewhat intentionally small, and scale has become increasingly important for securing large ad deals," said Awl publisher Michael Macher. " It's a structural shift with the way media buyers and agencies relate to publishers — and for better or worse less of those dollars are falling to indie publishers."

"Everything dies! Choose life!"
Three months ago, it became apparent the business was no longer viable, Killingsworth said. Today, they announced the decision to close The Awl and the Hairpin at the end of the month. The finance site Billfold and the comedy-focused site Splitsider will continue, Macher said.

"It's a bad time for independent publishers," said Killingsworth, pointing to the recent closures of DNAInfo and Gothamist. "In a way, it's kind of a miracle The Awl lasted as long as it did. It's impossible to be a tiny pirate ship out there when all there are are big cruisers."

"There's nothing more disgusting than a publication entering senescence," said Sicha over email. "Everything dies! Choose life!"

https://www.theverge.com/2018/1/16/16899140/the-awl-hairpin-shuts-down-amid-downturn-web-publishing