

The New York Times and the strange case of Quinn Norton

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On February 13, the *New York Times* announced that it had hired technology blogger Quinn Norton as its “lead opinion writer on the power, culture and consequences of technology.”

But the *Times* was forced to fire Norton just hours later, after Twitter users began circulating a series of blog posts in which she called Andrew Auernheimer—a neo-Nazi and white supremacist now employed by the fascist publication *Daily Stormer*—a personal friend, and Twitter messages in which she used anti-gay slurs.

In October 2014, Norton had defended her friendship with Auernheimer after he published a fascist screed attacking immigrants, blacks and Jews. Norton admitted she had been “friends with various neo-Nazis in my time,” but always disagreed with their views. She said she thought “the same thing about eating meat that I think about white pride.”

A statement by editorial page editor James Bennet, who personally interviewed Norton for the position, claimed, “Despite our review of Quinn Norton’s work and our conversations with her previous employers, this was new information to us. Based on it, we’ve decided to go our separate ways.”

The episode raises a number of substantive questions. Technology journalism is one of the few fields in which journalists enjoy a wide popular following beyond the milieu of Washington insiders. Their recommendations can make or break products, start trends, and cause stock values to surge or plunge.

Given the very substantial business interests involved, one might assume that the choice of a lead technology columnist would be a highly contested, well considered move. And yet, Bennet chose a figure almost entirely unknown to the public.

Moreover, Bennet’s statement would imply that the *New York Times*—the spearhead of the #MeToo

“movement,” with its demand that careers be destroyed on the basis of public figures’ passing remarks—conducted no substantial vetting of their latest editorial board recruit.

Norton had no reputation as a significant or influential journalist comparable to other technology writers such as the *Wall Street Journal*’s principal technology writer Walt Mossberg and the former *Times* journalist David Pogue.

Certainly, if the *Times* was looking for a youthful and popular replacement for Pogue, who left the *Times* in 2013, they could have sought to recruit one of any number of highly influential YouTube technology journalists.

In announcing Norton’s appointment, the *Times* claimed that she was “probably best known for her work at *Wired*,” where she published a handful of first-hand reports on the Anonymous hacker collective and the Occupy protests. These articles were written in 2011 and 2012, more than five years ago. Since then, according to its own listings, *Wired* has published just one article by Norton, an April 2017 essay recounting a romance she developed over an encrypted chat messaging program.

Why, then, was Bennet so eager to bring Quinn Norton to the editorial board of arguably the most influential newspaper in the world, where she would wield substantial influence in the multi-trillion-dollar technology sector?

In a posting just before the *Times*’ reversal, Norton noted that the newspaper had specifically sought her out for the role and stated that Bennet had “made it clear they weren’t going to be put off by a little weird.”

Norton is the ex-girlfriend of Aaron Swartz, the open access activist who took his own life in 2013 as he was viciously pursued by the Obama administration’s

Justice Department for allegedly downloading over four million copyrighted files, in order to share them publicly. Norton held a meeting with federal prosecutors and pointed them—inadvertently, she claims—to a publicly-accessible post on Swartz’s blog which was crucial for their case against him.

Norton’s most well-known article is an October 19, 2017 blog post, “Robert Scoble and me,” in which she levelled unsubstantiated allegations of sexual harassment against influential technology blogger Robert Scoble.

Norton recounted an encounter with Scoble from “the early 2010s,” at a campfire during a “Foo Camp” technology conference, where Scoble allegedly touched her inappropriately. Three days after Norton’s post, Buzzfeed published another accusation by Michelle Greer, a former colleague of Scoble’s at Rackspace, claiming that he had inappropriately touched her leg at a work event. In response, the VR/AR association immediately issued a statement removing Scoble from its board of advisors, and Scoble was forced to resign from the augmented reality consulting firm, Transformation Group, which he co-founded in 2016.

Norton’s decision to publish her account came two weeks after the *Times* published sexual harassment allegations against Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein, initiating the #MeToo witch-hunt of artists, directors, and other figures in the media and entertainment industry. Bennet’s *New York Times* has been at the forefront of this campaign, which has already destroyed the careers and reputations of numerous artistic figures, on the basis of unsubstantiated accusations of sexual misconduct.

Norton’s hiring also came as the *New York Times* has ferociously pursued a campaign to paint social divisions within American society as the work of “Russian meddling,” with the aim of pressuring technology companies to implement mass censorship, sometimes to the detriment of their own revenues.

The true motivations of Bennet’s decision to fast-track Norton onto the *Times* Editorial Board may never be known. But it is clear that she fit the profile of the types of writers he cultivates: devoid of substantial knowledge, experience, and independence, boasting an “edgy” reputation, and few scruples against levelling personal accusations.



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