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Interview with Andy Sorcini - Mr Babyman from Digg



Adrian Bye: Today, I'm here with Andy Sorcini who is Mr Baby Man from Digg. I'm real excited to have this interview. This is a very different interview. Normally, we're talking to CEOs and guys that are running big companies. Andy is a guy that works in a start-up in Los Angeles he was just explaining. I'm sure he'll tell us a little bit more about that. He is someone that can drive a large amount of traffic, probably more traffic than a lot of people on the entire internet because of the influence that he has on the website Digg. I am fascinated by Digg and Andy is sort of, one of the leaders in that community. He's here today to tell us a little bit more about who he is and what he does. Does that sound reasonable, Andy? Is it a reasonable summary?

Andy Sorcini: I would say so, yes. How are you today?

Adrian Bye: I'm doing good. Yourself?

Andy Sorcini: I'm doing good.

Adrian Bye: Do you want to just tell us a little bit about who you are, where you come from and what you've been up to?

Andy Sorcini: By trade, I'm a film editor and I currently work for a small, independent production company. I worked 15 years for the Disney Company and the company I work for right now is affiliated with Disney but not really a part of the Disney empire as such. Beyond that, I can't really say too much about it but I'm still doing the same type of thing that I've been doing for it which is film editing. I discovered Digg in kind of a roundabout...

Adrian Bye: Before we go onto Digg, what does film editing mean? You're the other guy that comes in and edits a movie before it gets published or before it's released?

Andy Sorcini: Yes, we work on both ends of the spectrum. When I was working for Disney, I was working in animation and in animation there are two phases of editing. There's preproduction and postproduction. Preproduction is when an episode of an animated TV show or a movie is put together, they put it together on what is called a story reel which is basically like a comic book. It's still pictures of the way the action is going to

proceed in the film. In order to determine the pacing of the film, those still pictures have to be videotaped, scanned or in some fashion or another ingested into a computer and then we as film editors will put those still pictures together and time them out in the way that we feel the flow is going to be for the final picture. That gets by the approval of the director, the producer and so on and so forth. That's preproduction editing. Postproduction editing is when the story reel which is now what the storyboard panel is called, is sent out to an animation house or if the animation is done in-house, the film is animated and you get back the individual scene then those scenes are cut together by the editor...

Adrian Bye: You do both sides of that, do you?

Andy Sorcini: Yes, I do both sides.

Adrian Bye: Right. You never talk about your company. Do they know who you are at work?

Andy Sorcini: Other than the fact that I'm an editor, no. I find generally that a lot of people – the cache that I hold doesn't really translate outside of Web 2.0 and for that I'm actually grateful.

Adrian Bye: That's nice.

Andy Sorcini: Yes. No, believe it or not, outside of the internet, I'm just a regular Joe and I'm perfectly alright with that.

Adrian Bye: You're a married guy with, what, two kids, living with your family...

Andy Sorcini: One kid.

Adrian Bye: One kid in Los Angeles, right?

Andy Sorcini: That's correct.

Adrian Bye: Tell us about Digg. How did you get started and how did you find them?

Andy Sorcini: I came about Digg in a roundabout way. I was a huge fan of TechTV and before that ZDTV – Ziff Davis TV, and a huge fan of the show *The Screen Savers* which there had been nothing like that on television before which was a television show that was specifically geared towards the technology enthusiast and didn't dumb itself down. Essentially, they assume that the people watching the show had already had full knowledge of the technology that they were talking about because they did not feel that they had to dumb themselves down or talk down to their audience. They were custom-g geared towards their audience and that was me, the technology enthusiast, somebody who loves tech. To make a long story short, on *The Screen Savers*, there were several hosts, Leo Laporte and a couple of other hosts. Kevin Rose was one of the hosts. TechTV essentially broke up and became G4. They dropped *The Screen Savers* as a show and when they did that, all of the principals went off to do other things. Leo Laporte, Patrick Norton, Kevin Rose – they all went to do things outside of broadcast television. What they essentially settled on was podcasts. So I have followed their podcasts. I listen to Leo's podcast. Patrick Norton had DL.TV until he finally settled in with Revision3. Kevin Rose...



Adrian Bye: You followed those guys for years and so then when Kevin Rose came out with Digg, you just jumped straight on it. Is that basically what happened?

Andy Sorcini: Kevin Rose came out with the Diggation podcast and I followed that. It was through Diggation that I discovered Digg. I had never heard of Digg before the Diggation podcast. So I joined Digg and would just read the stories on the site. I wouldn't participate at first but after awhile, I noticed that it was user-generated content and that anyone could participate. So I started looking around the internet for stories that I thought would be interesting to the Digg audience and started submitting those. I may be wrong about this but I think it was my third submission that hit the front page.

Adrian Bye: That was like a gambler thing like you hit the jackpot that one time that high and you're like, "My gosh, I've got to come back for more," right?

Andy Sorcini: It's exciting to know that something that you like is appealing to a broader range of people, to know that something that you find appealing is also appealing to this vast majority of the Digg audience. So yes, it was a little bit of...

Adrian Bye: What happened there? As of right now, are you still the number one Digger?

Andy Sorcini: Yes. I avoid using hierarchal terms like that because Digg itself has removed their list of Top Diggers, is what it used to be called.

Adrian Bye: Right, though they still have the data.

Andy Sorcini: Yes, the data is still there. Yes, technically according to that data, I still have more front-page stories than any other user but things shift around. It's a moving target. There are different people who have more stories per month or per week. I think I hold the record for the most of all time but I'm certainly not the number one user on a weekly or monthly...

Adrian Bye: Yes, I'm digging now and I see you there. Yes, you're still well and truly number one – 3,000 stories popular and the next is probably 1,000.

Andy Sorcini: Yes, over 3,000. I'm grateful for the most part that the stuff that I'd liked has also appealed to the majority of the Digg audience. But if you go strictly on a ratio basis, they have what's known as a popularity percentage and that is essentially the ratio of the number of stories you've submitted to the number of stories that have actually hit the front page. By that ratio, I have a 27% popularity which means that less than $\frac{1}{3}$ of the stories that I've submitted have actually made the front page.

Adrian Bye: That's an interesting point then. If $\frac{1}{3}$ of the stuff that you submit goes to the front page or just under, how on Earth do you manage to predict that with so much accuracy?

Andy Sorcini: I don't try to predict it. I just submit the best stuff that I can find. That's basically the bottom-line.

Adrian Bye: It's the stuff that you think is the best. Are you kind of the Digg version of Joe the Plumber like you represent for every man that follows Digg stuff and so therefore attempts to be what is liked by other people?

Andy Sorcini: Yes, I would say so. I submit the stuff that I feel is the best content and the content that will most appeal to the majority of the Digg audience. In that respect, it turns out to be ⅓ of the stuff that I submit. People also share that sentiment that they like it as well.

Adrian Bye: I've got to ask, there're a couple of questions here but firstly, what's your motivation? You obviously spend a lot of time on this.

Andy Sorcini: Yes.

Adrian Bye: Why do you do it? Why do so much? I assume you're not getting paid or are you and how does that work?



Andy Sorcini: No, I'm not getting paid. It's a hobby for me but no other hobby that I know of has the fringe benefit of keeping you so well-informed in current events. That's the one thing about Digg and other social news and networking groups that I know of. It's amazing how quickly the people who use those sites are informed about current events outside of the general populous. I will know of something that I won't hear in mainstream media for literally two or

three days, sometimes two or three days to a week out. Then I'll hear something that I first saw on Digg or first saw on other social news sites. It just fascinates me, the turnaround time between the time that I'm informed of something through my using social news sites and how late mainstream media picks it up.

Adrian Bye: You're using other sites other than Digg or are you mainly focused on Digg?

Andy Sorcini: Yes, I also use mixx.com and reddit although on reddit, I don't go by Mr Baby Man.

Adrian Bye: Are you a top user on reddit as well?

Andy Sorcini: No, but I'm doing okay actually. I'm doing okay and this is the interesting thing. I started using reddit because I wanted to know from my own sense of satisfaction if it was just the Mr Baby Man name that was driving stories.

Adrian Bye: Alright, right.

Andy Sorcini: It's liking it to when Stephen King decided that he was going to ghost-write under the pen name Richard Bachman. He did that because he wanted to know if it was just the Stephen King name that was selling books and if he had lost his focus that he could not make it happen if he went by a different name entirely.

Adrian Bye: I'm on the edge of my seat. What was the answer?

Andy Sorcini: I'm doing very well. I'm doing quite well. I've only been at it for less than a year on reddit and I'm not doing too bad actually.

Adrian Bye: Interesting. Fair enough.

Andy Sorcini: I think it proves the point that it's all about finding the content and not necessarily the name. I mean I can start from scratch at any site and still have the ability to find content that I feel would be appealing to other users of the networks.

Adrian Bye: Okay. I want to ask the big question. You briefly answered it but I want to ask about it a little bit more in-depth and that's obviously, there's a traffic that gets sent through Digg you guys could be potentially sending around. In fact, I'm sure you are sending around hundreds of millions of dollars worth of traffic per year. I mean there is value to it although people complain that Digg traffic is low-quality traffic so that people just come and leave. But besides doing CPN advertising and that kind of stuff, it is very, very high-value. So there obviously is a big opportunity for financial payback on this sort of stuff. Now you said point-blank you don't. I mean have you ever accepted any kind of money at all?

Andy Sorcini: No, not for submitting a story to Digg. First of all, it's against the terms of service at Digg in particular so I wouldn't feel right about doing that. I personally wouldn't feel right about doing it either because it just feels a little slimy to me. I'm not in it to make money off of people for them giving me their story and submitting it. The bottom-line is that it really wouldn't work out that way anyway because what people are attracted to is the content so if you're trying to promote content that is not worthy and you're doing it by paying a submitter to submit it for you, you're wasting your money. You're wasting your money because no matter how good the submitter is, if the content isn't worth it, people aren't going to go for it. People aren't going to promote it to the front page.

Adrian Bye: If you take content that's on the edge a little bit, you or one of the others in your position could be the ones that tip it over the edge and instead of it getting a few diggs and a little bit of traffic, it becomes a snowball or a snowstorm.

Andy Sorcini: I suppose but content that's usually on the edge a little bit is promotable without any sort of artificial means, without being paid for it.

Adrian Bye: But there are other top Digg users that have accepted money and do accept money, is that not correct?

Andy Sorcini: I have read about that, yes. I mean I don't know anybody personally but I have read stories. In fact, there was one story. I can't remember whose blog it was but somebody had conducted an interview that ironically enough the interviewer had paid that person to conduct and how the interviewee was actually being

paid by sites to submit content. For awhile there, I was trying to figure out who it was but I could never figure out. I think I narrowed it down to a couple of people but I could never figure out quite who it was.

Adrian Bye: I guess that sort of stuff would be kept very on the DL so that...

Andy Sorcini: Yes and there's another site that I ran across recently called SocialElves. I'm almost sorry that I mentioned their name out loud because I think what they're doing is not very scrupulous. But they guarantee a front page for like \$300. Once again, I know that those people that are working there at SocialElves, they have to have come from within the Digg community and people within the Digg community know everybody else. We all know everybody else so that's the thing. Whoever runs SocialElves has got to be somebody that I know or have known at one time but I don't know who it is and I don't pin down what they're doing.



Adrian Bye: If you did find out who it was or who is being paid for at Digg for submitting stories, would that effectively lock them out of your circle?

Andy Sorcini: I wouldn't rat them out because it's not my business to poke into their business but I would personally disassociate myself with them.

Adrian Bye: Right. Have you been offered money to submit a story?

Andy Sorcini: I'm offered money all the time.

Adrian Bye: How often?

Andy Sorcini: A couple of times a week at least. But if somebody approaches me like that, I tell them right off the bat, "I don't accept money for this," and I tell them, "I will be happy to take a look at your stories. I'll be more than happy to take a look at what you have to share with me and if I feel that it's something that is appealing to the Digg community, I'll be happy to submit it free of charge." But nine times out of ten, it's stuff that it's some sort of form of marketing, it's just stuff that the Digg community will see through right away and I don't even bother.

Adrian Bye: What's the biggest offer you've had so far?

Andy Sorcini: I have heard of people offering like the person who conducted this interview claimed that he had been offered upwards of \$100,000 per submission or something like that. That's crazy money. I've never been offered anywhere close to that but I think that is because people already are aware of my reputation and how I feel about it.

Adrian Bye: What have you been offered?

Andy Sorcini: I would say maybe \$5,000.

Adrian Bye: Is that a guarantee that it hits the front page, gets to the top 24 hours or is that just to submit?

Andy Sorcini: I think that was just to submit. The conversation really didn't get much further than that. A lot of times, the conversation will start with, "Do you accept money for Digg submissions?" or "Can I pay you for Digg submissions?" and I don't even get into it past that point. I just outright tell them I don't do that.

Adrian Bye: Those people specifically that are offering you, are they like MLM-type companies? What kind of guys are typically coming to you?

Andy Sorcini: A lot of them are social marketing. There are people that have some sort of marketing that they want to promote. I would say 90%.

Adrian Bye: I mean are they Viagra-type guys?

Andy Sorcini: I don't really know because a lot of times, the conversation as I said doesn't get much further. Once they learn that I don't accept money for that, the conversation doesn't go much further than that although I do tell them straight-out, "Hey, I'll be happy to take a look at what you've got if it's something," because you never know. You might find a diamond in the rough. I also get approached by a lot of online content producers and those online content producers will say, "Hey, I've got this story coming up." I'll give you some examples like Car and Driver or Popular Mechanics – content producers like that. They will tip me off to stories that they are going to be promoting and I say the same thing to them, "I don't accept any money but I'll be happy to take a look at the content and if I think that it would appeal to the rest of the Digg community, I'll be happy to share it." A lot of times, that content is really good content if it's content that I feel the Digg community would enjoy and I do share that content. I'm happy to share whatever content somebody feels is going to be of value to the Digg community. But the actual content that is valuable to the Digg community is few and the margin of success for that is very slim.

Adrian Bye: Don't you ever think about you're an employee – you could be working from home. You could be submitting your stuff on Digg all day long, getting paid for it and that could be your income. I mean that thought has got to cross your mind. Buy some nice stuff for your kid and take your wife out more – all those sorts of things you could do with more money. It's got to be tempting or is it just not even something that crosses your mind?

Andy Sorcini: First of all, if my hobby which I'm enjoying and having a lot of fun with were to become an occupation, it would take all the fun out of it and put all the stress into it. Then I would have to be concerned about did I make certain quota, did I fulfil certain obligations in order to earn my keep. My skill set in my regular occupation is valuable enough that I don't have to worry about how well I do on Digg or any other

social news networks. This is completely off of what I do for a living. I can keep my hobby and keep it as a fun thing for me to do. I don't have to worry about it being a job requirement. The second thing I wanted to mention is even if that were the case, even if I were to decide to monetise this in some way, I would not do it by accepting money of submissions. I think that the optimum way to do that is because that is getting fish for people and instead of getting fish for people, I would rather teach someone how to fish. I would rather teach content producers how to create content that would be appealing to that demographic as opposed to being responsible...

Adrian Bye: I think the other issues as well would be if you were well-known to be taking money then like you said probably other guys would say the same. They'd be like, "Baby Man's taking cash now. I'm not going to work with him on this stuff so much," so that would probably reduce your influence as well, wouldn't it?

Andy Sorcini: Right. Exactly. Yes, people would always be wondering if the content that he's promoting is something that he's been paid for. Is it legitimate or is it something that he really feels is interesting to the rest of the Digg community? I think a lot of my reputation relies on the fact that this is something that I came across one way or another and I found to be appealing to the rest of the Digg community. If people had it in the back of their minds that this is something that I was being paid for, the value of the stuff that I would submit, it would have less of a value overall.

Adrian Bye: Yes, fair enough. You talked a bit about your relationships with others. What does that mean? I mean do you actually know the other top thousand diggers? Do you know all those guys and what does the relationship mean? Do you go out to bars with them? Do you talk with them on instant messenger? How do you actually know these guys?

Andy Sorcini: Yes, I would say in the top 100, I know quite a few of those people and I talk with them over e-mail, over IM. I've gone to bars with a couple of them and met a few of them in real life. We all have the same hobby. For a lot of us, it's not a hobby. A lot of people that I know that are in the top 100 are actually in the social marketing field and that's not to say that they're necessarily submitting Digg stories for pay but they're in the field of helping other people create content that is appealing to that demographic – what some would call Digg bait, link bait.

Adrian Bye: Right.

Andy Sorcini: No, I know a lot of these people. We hang out and we talk. We have a shared background so we can all relate.

Adrian Bye: But what do you talk about? It's like, "Hey, dude, go digg my thing," or are you guys like, "Hey, that was a cool picture of a car"?

Andy Sorcini: A lot of times when it gets down to talking about submitting for a social news sites, we talk about strategies. We talk about particular submission that somebody made a submission that we found was particularly interesting or in the way other submitters are binding their content perhaps. We talk about sites that might be interesting to other Digg users. It's basically water cooler discussion.

Adrian Bye: You guys are talking about the... You'd normally say the business but not the business behind Digg. But the strategy behind keeping stuff up and driving traffic. I mean is that what you're talking with some of them, chatting about things.

Andy Sorcini: Yes, we're like a team but when it comes down to it, it's all on us. We're all trying to excel individually. Having said that, there's a sense of competition in that each of us want to do as well as we individually can but at the same time, it's a zero-sum game. We all try to help each other as well.

Adrian Bye: You're competing against each other to get to the top but at the same time, you're helping each other to get there.

Andy Sorcini: Yes, that's correct.

Adrian Bye: How does that work? I mean surely, do you not help the guys that are coming close to you? Actually to that point, how on Earth or why are you better than the others? I guess that's subjective but on these rankings, you're far and away more popular than the other guys.

Andy Sorcini: Believe it or not, I think it does come down to it is subjective and it's basically about I think the stuff that appeals to me is I think the stuff that appeals to more other people in general. Also, you have to take it into account that I work on a volume basis as well.

Adrian Bye: Yes, you're doing volume but you're doing quality because 1/3 of your submissions get to the front page, right?

Andy Sorcini: Yes, but I do know other submitters for whom half or almost half of their submissions get to the front page – 40%, 45%. I really respect those people because those people don't have to work quite as hard to get more of their stories on the front page than I do.

Adrian Bye: How much time do you spend in each day on Digg?

Andy Sorcini: I would say on average an hour in the morning and the majority of it is at night after my wife and my daughter have gone to bed then occasionally during the day if I have a break. Anyone who's in the film industry will tell you that it's what's known as a hurry-up-and-wait business which means that when we are doing something, we are doing something fast and furious at our job but a lot of it involves waiting for the next rush to happen. So there is a little bit of downtime – not so much downtime but time when we're waiting for the machine to do something. Like in my industry when we're ingesting content into the machine, we call it digitising and a lot of times, the computer has to basically do that work. We get it started but it has to do that work and we're basically babysitters. During that time, there is some free time to check your e-mail – whatever. A lot of times, I'll log on to Digg, check my RSS feed and see if there's anything interesting there to submit.

Adrian Bye: You do a lot of gaps in during the day where you're doing it late at night after your family's gone to bed and then a little bit in the morning.

Andy Sorcini: Yes, that's correct.

Adrian Bye: I mean we're talking like five hours a day you're on it?

Andy Sorcini: I would say between four and five, yes.

Adrian Bye: Right. So you're pretty serious about it.

Andy Sorcini: Yes, I guess so. It's my primary hobby. I love to play videogames too when I'm not social news submitting and I'm a huge videogame fan. I always have been from the early days – Atari days.

Adrian Bye: Atari – I didn't know. I'm an Omega guy. I had the Omega and the Commodore 64 because I'm Australian.

Andy Sorcini: There was nothing for the Omega at that time. Everything was on the Atari.

Adrian Bye: Back in our time when the Omega was worth, we kind of looked down on the Atari.

Andy Sorcini: Oh really

Adrian Bye: How old are you? I'm 36. How old are you?

Andy Sorcini: I'm 40.

Adrian Bye: Okay.

Andy Sorcini: I went straight from Atari to Nintendo.

Adrian Bye: Alright. Yes, I stopped after the Omega. What does your wife think about all of this? I mean obviously she's the one that came up with your nickname, right?

Andy Sorcini: That's correct.

Adrian Bye: Mr Baby Man – could you pick a more embarrassing nickname?

Andy Sorcini: Yes. Well, it was a pet name for me and I've explained this before on other interviews but essentially, it's an homage to my arrested development. It's the fact that I'm such a kid at heart even though I'm as old as I am and have a kid myself.

Adrian Bye: I think even though you're the guy with the Mr Baby Man name, that probably well describes a lot of us.

Andy Sorcini: Yes, it probably does. There's a lot of arrested development out there.

Adrian Bye: Yes, that's very much so. What did your wife think about all? Is she cool with it? Does she think you're crazy? I mean where does she come from?

Andy Sorcini: She's both cool with it and she thinks I'm crazy. Occasionally, she finds herself having to be extremely tolerant with what is essentially a hobby that doesn't pay any money. I test her patience often with that but I try to keep it during hours when either she's not up or my daughter's not up so it doesn't take away from our family time.

Adrian Bye: Right, fair enough. I've got so many things I want to ask you about. How do you actually digg? I've seen a lot of comments on there saying like, "Mr Baby Man's using automated tools." There was a story posted where they were looking at the timings of some of the Digg things done and they were being done too fast for a human to have done them.

Andy Sorcini: Digg has governors in place to prevent that from happening anymore but if you try and do that now, you'll get a popup that says, "You're digging too fast. Slow down there." I've never seen that popup since they've enacted those governors so I think I'm probably doing it at the right pace. But you used to be able to...and I still do...open up stories in different tabs or Firefox which is my preferred browser and just click through the stories on each of the tabs but I do it a little bit slower now or sometimes I'll count to three before I click the next story in a tab.

Adrian Bye: You're saying you're manually doing all the voting by hand.

Andy Sorcini: Yes.

Adrian Bye: Have you ever used tools?

Andy Sorcini: No. Every single story that I've ever done has been me sitting down at the computer, clicking the button.

Adrian Bye: Right. How does this sort of stuff work? I mean you know the other guys in the community. How does it actually work like why are you voting for their stuff? Is there trading behind the scenes going on like, "Okay, I've got your back. I'll vote your next hundred stories up"? How does that actually work?

Andy Sorcini: I'm sorry – one more time.

Adrian Bye: How does it actually work in terms of voting for stories? Why do you vote for guys' stories? I mean you're wheeling and dealing with guys behind the scenes, right, to vote for each other's stories? How does that actually happen?

Andy Sorcini: No, nothing really happens behind the scenes. I have a list of friends that I have added to my friends list. I will go through my friends' stories and select the ones that appeal to me or that I think would also appeal to the Digg audience but there's no behind the scenes, no backchannel sort of arrangements. It's just basically if I'm looking at my friends list, and I see a story that I like and I think would appeal to everybody, I'll click it as well or the other thing that'll happen is if I am looking at the Digg front page and I notice that I'm seeing a lot of really good stories from a particular submitter, I will add that submitter to my friends list so that I will now be watching their stories as well and then it's just basically going through my friends list. Having said that, now there's the recommendation engine which I really like because it gives me the opportunity to see a lot of other submitters that I normally would never have noticed. I'll find a lot of great stories through those submitters too and added friends from within that process as well. I have gone through the recommendation engine and have found guys who are great submitters. I'll add them as my friends as well.

Adrian Bye: What you're saying is it's not so much based on relationships with guys. It's more around the content. So you're actually checking every single thing out.

Andy Sorcini: Yes. Well, I'll be honest with you. I don't often have the time to check them out in depth but the same things that appeal to a lot of the Digg users appeal to me which a lot of times is a very enticing title or description.

Adrian Bye: If you're not actually checking something out in depth, there is kind of an informal thing where you're voting for another guy's stuff and he's voting for yours, right?

Andy Sorcini: There's no sort of secret arrangement for that. I mean I don't tell anyone to vote for my stuff. Anyone is free to vote for any of my stuff if they want to, not vote for it, bury it or do anything with it. It's all basically what goes through. My process is I go through my friends list then I'll go through the recommendation engine and then eventually through the front page. I feel that my votes on stuff that are for the front page are less crucial to the submitters because it's already on the front page and it's not going to make it anymore on the front page by my digging it so for me to help out my fellow submitters, it's of more value to go through stuff that is not yet on the front page. Does that make sense?

Adrian Bye: If you were to stop voting for other people's submissions, do you think you would lose the ability to get front-page submissions like you have?

Andy Sorcini: Honestly, I don't know but I think that people still respond to good content and I still provide the best content that I can. There have been days where I haven't dugg other people's stories as much as I've submitted my own and I don't see any negative impact from doing that. I've had essentially the same amount of stories dugg on there as I normally have. I've seen the same amount of stories promoted on those days than I have on any other day. Basically, it's good content. The content is king on Digg or any other social news site.

Adrian Bye: I guess what I don't understand is you're saying that you're not looking at the content that much. I mean you do take a quick look at it.

Andy Sorcini: Yes.

Adrian Bye: But you're going in and voting for it which, okay, you're following terms of service and all that sort of stuff. But I don't understand what your motivation would be to go and do that if it wasn't for some sort of reciprocity with other guys to vote for your stuff.

Andy Sorcini: There is a level of reciprocity but it's also I want to see good content on the front page of Digg. I want to see the content on and occasionally there are plenty of stories everyday that I look at, that I haven't submitted, that are like, "Damn, that's a really good story. I want to get that to the front page of Digg."

Adrian Bye: Right.

Andy Sorcini: I'll vote on it to promote it. I'm as much of a reader on Digg as I am a submitter so I want to see good content on there myself irregardless of the fact that it's not stuff that I've submitted. I'm as much of a big fan of seeing good content on Digg from other people as I am from myself.

Adrian Bye: Yes, obviously you know about all this stuff. You have your own podcast and you're out there on Twitter as well. I guess there is this reciprocity. Why would that be an issue if that's not out in the open? It is social networking, right? These are your friends and you're helping each other out. Why would there be...

Andy Sorcini: Absolutely, absolutely. I completely agree with that and I don't understand necessarily why some people have a qualm with it. I mean the whole idea behind social networking and social news in particular is that it's social. I mean you develop relationships around friends and you help each other out.

Adrian Bye: Right.

Andy Sorcini: Otherwise, I can't even think of the process or any other site. Maybe Yahoo! Buzz – I don't know how clicks form on Yahoo! Buzz but it doesn't seem to me at least initially that there's as much social networking through Yahoo! Buzz as there is on sites like Digg, reddit and mixx.com.

Adrian Bye: Right. Yes, I mean to me, I don't have a problem with it. They're using collaborative filtering like this for a reason because it's working. I mean we've known about just simple click-voting for a long time but clearly there's something more powerful when you have a group or a team that are going in and doing this stuff. I guess I'm just acknowledging, to me, it is a team and you guys are all actively helping each other out to go and digg stuff up. I mean that's as I understand it.

Andy Sorcini: Right.

Adrian Bye: I guess I don't understand why that would be an issue. For me, it doesn't make sense because that's just how it works and if you don't like that particular methodology, there's other sites with other ways of doing it.

Andy Sorcini: Right and people have had qualms. Then the other thing that you brought up was the fact that I'm not looking at everything in depth and to that point, I would have to say that this is true but it's hard for me to explain but having done this as long as I've done it which you know I've been an active member on Digg at least since either late 2005 or late 2006... I can't remember which but I can do the research on that. But having done that, I recognise good content immediately. I mean I can look at an RSS feed, and look at the title and the summary in an RSS feed, and I will know immediately whether that story is front-page worthy or not. That just simply boils down to experience. Having done it as often as I have, I know immediately just by looking at the summary that, that story is worthy of the front page.

Adrian Bye: There's your consulting business right there.

Andy Sorcini: There you go. It's an experiential thing. It comes from experience and having seen enough of what constitutes good content on the front page of Digg and other social networking sites. I know what that front-page content should look like and I know how to guide people to get that to happen. I have actually helped other people out with crafting content specifically for social networks.

Adrian Bye: Yes, I know. I mean obviously you can do that well. My thing is anyway if you weren't providing value to this team of guys that is going out there and voting for stuff then your influence would diminish and you wouldn't be able to achieve what you got done. I don't know. I see it as just how it works. I don't understand. So, let's talk about the controversy. There was a period a couple of months ago where everyone is calling you Mr Baby Spam and all of this anti-Mr Baby Man posts are all getting voted up. You're getting really ripped on a lot. I mean some of them I thought were pretty nasty.

Andy Sorcini: Yes.

Adrian Bye: What's that all about? Why do you think that so much of the community has turned against you but yet, you still remain a top user? I find that extremely fascinating.

Andy Sorcini: The majority of the accusation of the controversy boils down to accusations that I am accepting money for content submitted and I never have. The crazy thing about this is for as many of those accusations that have been railed against me, no one has ever brought up any evidence to prove it.

Adrian Bye: For any case like that, you've got to give evidence.

Andy Sorcini: Right and the evidence doesn't exist because it just does not happen. I don't accept money for submissions.

Adrian Bye: Right.

Andy Sorcini: I mean that's where the nickname Mr Baby Spam comes from is people who think that I'm accepting money. Like I said before, I'll be happy to look at anybody's content and submit it if it's good enough but I don't do it for money. I think a lot of it boils down to a lot of people are surprised at how one, two or a handful of submitters can be so popular on a regular basis.

Adrian Bye: Right.

Andy Sorcini: I don't know. I think they have a hard time figuring out why that's possible without any sort of artificial influence.

Adrian Bye: Effectively, you're where there with the top 100 or so guys. You guys are digging stuff up and you're there. It's almost like your clique and then the rest of the community doesn't really understand how they're just reading stuff and occasionally posting so they're the ones seeing this stuff and getting annoyed.

Andy Sorcini: Yes.

Adrian Bye: But your power is still there because you're still tied in with your group of guys that are doing all the work. Would that be an accurate summary?

Andy Sorcini: Yes, we're still providing great content and I think that wins out overall. Over all of the criticism, if somebody is still providing great content, providing value to the community, the proof of the pudding is right there.

Adrian Bye: Right.

Andy Sorcini: I mean that's the winning argument. I see the same kinds of criticisms and the same things railed against other users as well but I think it's because I'm perceived as being the top user that I bear the brunt of it.

Adrian Bye: I mean it has gotten really nasty. I mean is there a group that's actively working against you? I mean you're attracting all the trolls. Do you think that's where it's coming from?

Andy Sorcini: I totally am attracting trolls. Here's the other thing too is a lot of the people who hold that kind of criticism against me, they don't share the same experience that I do and what I mean by that is that I will

look at the profiles, I will go to the profiles of the people who say nasty things against me or other users. I notice a lot of similarities in the profiles and that being that they have almost no friends. We're talking people who have maybe five friends at most and they've submitted virtually nothing if anything to the community. So these are people who do not submit, do not have a network of friends, and are wondering why people who submit frequently and have a network of friends get to the front page.

Adrian Bye: But it's not just individuals because their comments are getting voted up so it is other people in the community that feel the same way, right?

Andy Sorcini: Yes, but the criticism on the internet is because the internet is essentially anonymous, one person can say something and then you have a lot of faceless voices behind them who are like, "Alright, I have nothing to be afraid of for joining in with the criticism because there are no consequences, there's no..."

Adrian Bye: Right – the internet lynch mob.

Andy Sorcini: Exactly and that's why a lot of times, individual negative comments will get voted down but if you see like a couple of times there have been whole stories that have been submitted about me – negative stories.

Adrian Bye: Right.

Andy Sorcini: Those stories, if they hit the front page, people will just dog pile on top of those stories because there's no consequence to it, there's no reciprocation on the internet for being negative.

Adrian Bye: Yes. I guess that a really interesting dynamic because the larger community doesn't have any power to also do anything. It's you and the guys who are submitting stuff so I guess that's where some of the frustration comes from.

Andy Sorcini: Yes, frustration I think is the keyword here. There's a lot of frustration and there's no accountability to negativity on the internet. I think that is a huge dynamic. That is a larger problem than any individual criticism that people have against me or any other submitter. It's the fact that there's no accountability for being as nasty as you want to on the internet.

Adrian Bye: How do you respond then to guys saying that they submitted something three days before you did, and you just go and pull all the stuff off reddit and post it straight onto Digg? I mean do you have routines where you are aggregating from five other key sites to get there? How are you finding all this stuff?

Andy Sorcini: Yes, I have a number of different sources. I've got RSS feeds. I do look at other social networking communities for my content but I feel there's nothing wrong with that. I feel that the content can come from anywhere on the internet. No social news site has the sole rights to the content that's submitted on it. There's nothing wrong with cross-posting between social news communities. If I find a story that is interesting on reddit for example and I submit it to Digg, if 10 people have seen that story already on reddit and complain about that, there are hundreds of people who haven't seen it, who don't visit reddit, who haven't seen it anywhere else that appreciate that content on Digg. So it's not about "stealing" content from other sites. It's about getting that content on Digg.

Adrian Bye: What is that point because there's a rule in Digg that says you're not supposed to submit something that's already submitted. So guys, they say they submit something and then Mr Baby Man comes along and submits it three days later and because it's Mr Baby Man, it goes to the top.

Andy Sorcini: Right. Well, they're talking about stuff that's been submitted to Digg already.

Adrian Bye: Right.

Andy Sorcini: Right? Here's the situation in a lot of those cases. It's that news comes from a number of different sources as well. For example, if somebody submits a story from UPI and that story for some reason or another didn't happen to make the front page, I should without ever having any contact with that person or their submission come across the same story on the AP wire and submit that story, essentially the same story about the same incident, then a lot of times people will say I stole that from somebody or such and such a person who submitted it three days ago, a year ago or six months ago. Stories come from different sources. I can't keep track of everything that's been submitted on Digg and a lot of times, Digg's own detectors don't work as well as they should. Sometimes, it's easier if you're doing a search for something that has been on Digg to go to Google and type in the title of the story and then type in Digg to see if it's been on Digg through Google than it is on Digg's own search filters.

Adrian Bye: I guess the point is that those guys don't have the contacts that you do to be able to drive a story to the top and those relationships. That's okay.

Andy Sorcini: Right.

Adrian Bye: "Dude, you submitted this story three days ago and it's still sitting there," or "you submitted it a year ago and it didn't get any visibility. I've done everybody a favour because I've come on and made it rise when you weren't able to because otherwise this wouldn't have gotten to the top."

Andy Sorcini: Right and there have been occasions where I will cease a story that somebody has submitted. This happened just a couple of weeks ago. I saw a story that a user submitted, I dug that story up and I shared it with a lot of people that I knew. I spread it around on Twitter, on Plurk and other social networking sites because I thought it was a great story. I wanted to see it on the front page of Digg and it didn't get on the front page of Digg. A week passed and nothing ever came of that so I ran across that same video again and yes, I resubmitted it. I put down right there in the comments, "This story was originally submitted by (such and such a submitter)...but it unfortunately didn't make the front page and I think that it's worthy of it so please give it a look and if you like it, vote it up." I think the distinction is for me, I don't care who submits it or who takes the credit for submitting it. It's not about increasing the glory of Mr Baby Man. It's about getting the content to the front page of the site. I want to see the content on the...

Adrian Bye: Why would that be a motive though? So you want to be the unpaid employee of Digg that's helping make their site better. What's the motivation for that?

Andy Sorcini: Here's the thing. Digg is just my preference but it doesn't matter to me that it's Digg, reddit, mixx.com, Propeller or any other site. Digg just happens to be my current preference for the site but I want the same thing from stories that I submit at reddit or mixx as well. I mean I want to see good content rise to

the top and get on the front pages of those sites as well whether it's me who submits it or not. If it's a story that I think is worth being on there and it gets ignored or doesn't make it...

Adrian Bye: This is what I don't understand. In the free software community like Richard Stallman and the stuff they're doing there, I don't know whether to agree or not agree but it's almost like a religious thing like we're going to do free software and this is the right way. It's the one true way and we're contributing towards this. But I can understand some of the motivations there like they really are doing some powerful stuff. I guess I don't understand in the same way why you'd have this motivational feeling of contributing by getting visibility on content.

Andy Sorcini: I'm not sure I understand the question. Basically, it springs from a desire to want to see good content or wanting to see good content reach as many eyeballs as possible whether it's me or somebody else. I prefer it to be me. I won't lie to you. I love the feeling of being the one that brought this great content to the largest number of eyeballs.

Adrian Bye: Right.

Andy Sorcini: But if the content is good, I don't care. If I see the content and somebody else has submitted it, that's why I digg other people's stuff. It's because it's great content and I'm like, "This is very cool. I want to see it get to the front page and I'm glad that this person has submitted it." If the content is good enough to justify resubmitting it later, I don't have a problem with that. I don't have a problem with submitting it again after it's been submitted three or four days out when after a point where it will never reach the front page from the previous submission, to take that content again and give it another go, and if it doesn't work for me then fine, I gave it my shot. But it's not about me getting it to the front page. It's a desire to get that content to the front page because I think the content is worth it.

Adrian Bye: Okay. Awhile ago, I guess it was maybe six or eight months ago, there was a group of top users who were going to leave Digg.

Andy Sorcini: Yes.

Adrian Bye: I read the chat. Kevin and Jay came on there, and talked with you guys. What was all that about? I mean what was actually going on there?

Andy Sorcini: Okay. There's a great misunderstanding in what happened during that incident and it seems to be a misunderstanding that has been the prevailing opinion of what happened. I'm going to tell you straight-out exactly from the horse's mouth itself what that was all about. That wasn't about leaving Digg. It was about getting the staff at Digg to be held accountable to certain guidelines. The primary thing that we were trying to get to happen was we wanted to establish a line of communication between Digg administration, Digg staff and its users. That sprung from there had been a lot of complaints from individual users and a lot of Digg users were coming to me because I guess they see me as representative of the Digg community and they feel like I have a certain amount of influence, being the top Digg user that I would have a stronger voice than anybody else. A lot of Digg users were coming to me saying, "I've been having these issues with Digg. I've been writing to Digg and they're not responding. They're not writing back. Some people will come to me and say, "Hey, I've been banned from Digg and I didn't feel like I did anything wrong. They're not writing back to

me, telling me what I did wrong. They're not communicating with me at all." So a lot of people were coming to me, saying, "Can you do anything about this? What can you do to establish a line of communication with Digg to get them to listen to us?" We outlined a series of points of things that we felt were wrong with Digg that we wanted to see corrected. Primarily, the chief number one thing about that and the point that I still feel the strongest about is opening a line of regular communication between Digg administration and its users.

There're other sites like reddit and mixx. Mixx in particular has an excellent line of communication between the mixx staff and the mixx users. There's a great sense of camaraderie, and mixx staff and mixx users both feel like they're on the same team.

It really hasn't felt that way on Digg. It feels like there is the Digg administration who essentially feel like they have to police the community and the community itself. Maybe that's because a lot of the community is spammers, marketers and people who are trying to exploit Digg. That might be the case but there should be some sort of regular communication between people who are using Digg in good faith and the Digg administration.

Adrian Bye: Do you have that line of communication now?

Andy Sorcini: No, not quite but what came out of that conversation with Jay and Kevin was what they call the Digg town hall which was a commitment to have this open forum where they would discuss concerns that the Digg community had on a semi-regular basis. What I was shooting for, what I really wanted was a regular forum like MIXX.COM has a forum and I can't remember what their forum is called. It's just like a regular forum where users can start threads about MIXX.COM and they get responded to by the MIXX.COM administration. I think Digg needs the same kind of thing – a regular forum where users can have threads open about certain issues that they have with Digg and expect a response from the Digg administration on a regular, daily basis. At one point, I'll tell you something. A couple of years ago, Digg had its celebration to commemorate its million registered users and I attended that party. I spoke with a couple of the developers who worked at Digg and that was one of the first times that I mentioned this desire for some sort of an open forum. At the time, one of the developers who I don't think is working there anymore said, "Yes, that was a great idea," they had been thinking about that too and even asked me if I'd be interested in heading up that community, being the liaison for that community. I said I would love to. I just want the communication to be established. But that was a couple of years ago and nothing has ever come of that. Every single big town hall that they have, the question comes up, "When is the forum going to be ready? When are we going to have an open forum?" The answer is always, "Soon."

Adrian Bye: Maybe they need someone to go and setup phpBB for them, phpBB in a...

Andy Sorcini: That's funny. Their stance in that regard is that phpBB is not robust enough for what they feel they need to do with the community. Their official word is that they're looking for a solution that's going to be extremely robust. But my opinion on that is it doesn't have to work perfectly right out the gate. It can be flawed as long as it's extent, as long as it's there to begin with.

Adrian Bye: Maybe they have some other reason why they haven't done it yet.

Andy Sorcini: That's the general consensus of a lot of the people who listen to the response from the Digg administration. It's that there must be some other...

Adrian Bye: I wouldn't understand why they wouldn't want to do that. Here's the other thing I want to ask about this.

We have gone over time. This is fascinating to me so I'm okay to keep going if you are but if you are busy...

Andy Sorcini: That's fine with me, yes.

Adrian Bye: Okay. You guys, because you made the threat that you were all going to leave the site, right? That's how it was portrayed.

Andy Sorcini: Okay, here's the other thing I want to clear up. There was what was called a manifesto. I'm going to try to make a long story short here. There was a series of complaints that we had drafted about what we felt was wrong with Digg and it was me and a group of four or five other people. We had all drafted essentially this letter of complaint with these bullet points and I saw a second to the last draft of that letter of complaint. Then that letter of complaint was published. A Digg submission was made of it and it was promoted. I never saw the published version until after it was published. That published version included the threat to leave Digg. It was essentially made like a manifesto and there was like an ultimatum given. So I was not personally part of the movement to leave Digg. That all happened outside of my knowledge and after the last draft of the letter that I had seen had been approved. There are two or three other people who co-drafted that letter with me that decided they were going to add on that ultimatum, and make it like a revolt and a manifesto.

Adrian Bye: Right, okay. I'm interested in this. This is I think an important question. Let's say that, that threat was real and you guys did leave, what happens in that scenario? Does nothing happen and the site goes on as normal or is there some impact on the quality of stories for awhile? What does that actually look like?

Andy Sorcini: I've seen something like that happen. When the Digg recommendation engine came through and after a couple of other tweaks of the algorithm... Let me take that back. It was after Digg had banned about 80+ users and these are users who had provided quality content to the site. When those users had been banned, that quality content was gone and for about a week after those users had been banned, the Digg front page looked pretty miserable. In fact, there were a number of stories that were clearly marketing and clearly spam on the front page, and that was because it was the best content to promote as all of the other sources of great content had been banned essentially. But I think the Digg process is so robust that it can survive losing a good number of top submitters. The problem is from Digg's standpoint, is that really how you want to treat your community?

Adrian Bye: Let's say if you guys were hired away to go and all work for a competing site. Let's say you were all hired to work fulltime for reddit. Is that a strategy that can actually work?

Andy Sorcini: The problem is, is that you're implying that we will be paid for submissions once again and I think that's outside of my principles.

Adrian Bye: Not to be paid for submission. You'd be paid for doing the stuff that you're doing right now. The top hundred of you guys will all become fulltime employees of reddit, no doubt...

Andy Sorcini: I see what you're saying – like the way they do it on Propeller where you're actually paying an editor.

Adrian Bye: I wasn't aware that that site's already doing that.

Andy Sorcini: Yes.

Adrian Bye: So, there are sites that are doing that.

Andy Sorcini: Propeller does that. Propeller pays what they call their Propeller Anchors, I think they're called. They're essentially paid editors for the site and they will monitor submissions on the site as well as submit their own submissions.

Adrian Bye: Let's say Propeller then hired the top 100 of you away and the deal was no submitting to any other social news sites. It could only be Propeller and now you'll work here. Is that going to work? I guess you've got to get the eyeballs for the site. That's going to be the problem.

Andy Sorcini: I don't think it would be a problem to get the eyeballs to the site because I would still be submitting the same content and content is king. The issue is that Digg is the best vehicle for content delivery in this vertical, in this same space and I think a lot of it has to do with the reputation they've built over the years. Other sites like mixx.com and reddit are too young yet to drive that kind of traffic but I wouldn't count them out entirely. I would still say it's within their power to do so. But once again, being hired and being paid for me puts it at a position where unless I was being paid not to do it as a fulltime job but to essentially have the same hours that I normally have in contributing to the site and just getting paid per submission by the site itself, I wouldn't have a problem with that.

Adrian Bye: You could be doing that on Propeller today but there's not enough incentive for you to go over there and spend a lot of time doing that, is there?

Andy Sorcini: No, not really. Propeller – they just don't drive traffic. I don't even think Propeller drives traffic as well as mixx.com or reddit does. I think they're probably lower on the chain and on top of which, I've never been offered. Nobody's ever offered to do that for me on Propeller.

Adrian Bye: Okay. Something I noticed obviously for awhile during the elections – there was all this Ron Paul stuff. How does all that go?

Andy Sorcini: Yes.

Adrian Bye: Was that the top users were all pushing Ron Paul?

Andy Sorcini: Not me. I appreciate Ron Paul as much as the next person but I actually get turned off by when it looks like content is being promoted on Digg for an agenda and that's not just a political agenda. I mean there was awhile there it wasn't just Ron Paul but we're talking about the AACSS code key when that was being promoted on Digg – the code that basically unlocks copying on Blu-ray and HD-DVD devices.

Adrian Bye: Right.

Andy Sorcini: Remember that incident awhile back? When that code was being promoted on Digg, I stayed out of that completely. I didn't want to have anything to do with it because it's not the spirit of social news submitting.

Adrian Bye: I found the Ron Paul stuff really annoying. I blocked all the political stuff out.

Andy Sorcini: Yes, same here and I'm perfectly alright with promoting stories that are relevant and that have some sort of newsworthy basis about Ron Paul but if it's a story whose focus is just simply to promote Ron Paul himself in the mainstream and just say, "Hey, I'm Ron Paul. I'm great and my followers love me," and that is the sole purpose of this story – to exist – it turns me off. I won't participate in something like that.

Adrian Bye: Fair enough. Another topic I'm really interested in is 4chan which I don't really understand.

Andy Sorcini: Yes.

Adrian Bye: It comes up a lot on Digg. Do you go onto 4chan a lot? Do you have any ties with that site?

Andy Sorcini: No, I don't have any official ties with that site but I have visited 4chan. I have a love-hate relationship with 4chan in that 4chan is great when it is the wellspring for means and 4chan is by and large the biggest wellspring for the more popular internet means out there. 4chan came up with the rickroll, lolcats and demotivators. I can't even...

Adrian Bye: Head of hair.

Andy Sorcini: That's great, among others. The problem that I have not with 4chan but with 4chan stuff appearing on other sites is that it tends to dumb down the community in general. I have to think that 4chan has to be a real big problem internally within Digg because Digg is trying to promote itself to investors and in particular, mainstream media as a source of news, as basically a news source. So when the top stories on Digg are Kevin Rose's Pet O'Bear Jack-O-Lantern, that has to be a problem in how it promotes itself to its investors because then it decreases the value of how Digg is perceived in the marketplace. Not just Digg but any social news site that wants to take itself seriously as a social news site has to feel a bit of a pinch every time it sees lolcats and demotivators on their site.

Adrian Bye: I see that's just how the internet is.

Andy Sorcini: That's just how the internet is. There's really nothing you can do about it.

Adrian Bye: Look at Matt Cutts from Google. He just went for Halloween. I'm sure you saw him dressed up as Rick Astley.

Andy Sorcini: Yes, exactly. I mean the influence of 4chan is undeniable but what does it say for our culture as a whole I think is the question.

Adrian Bye: Fair enough. Kevin Rose – have you actually met him?

Andy Sorcini: A couple of times, yes.

Adrian Bye: You've been to some of their events?

Andy Sorcini: Yes, I've been to the event for the million user celebration and a live DiggNation so I've met him. I was also part of a focus group at one point for one of their new revisions. So three times I've met him.

Adrian Bye: Have you talked with him a lot or is it just like, "Hey, how's it going?"

Andy Sorcini: Not a lot, no, but he's a nice guy. I have met him on a couple of occasions and he's a decent chap.

Adrian Bye: No, he seems to be. I've asked you a lot of stuff. I've actually gone through all the things I can think of to ask you. Is there anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to talk about?

Andy Sorcini: Not that I can think of but I'm more than happy to do a follow-up or if you want, feel free to call me and ask me anything you want.

Adrian Bye: Okay, I may take you up on that. Alright. Well, Andy, thank you very much for the interview. Let's just say this was a great one – fascinating. Thanks for your time.

Andy Sorcini: You're very welcome.