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Shell has taken

some big knocks
in the attack by a
father and son in

Essex, reports
Danny Fortson

SERGEI KARPUKHIN / PHOTOSHOT

R y his own admission,

I John Donovan is "truly
obsessed". Standing in
| his kitchen, the 62-year-
old proudly opens the
cabinets to reveal shelves stacked
not with food but piles of papers and
ring binders.
"We don't cook much," he said
with a chuckle. "Every cupboard in
this house has papers in it. It's the
same in my bedroom; the garage is
full as well. I have built up so much
information so when we put some-
thing into print, we can back it up."
A man obsessed indeed. His mod-
est three-bedroom house in Colches-
ter, Essex, is home to what is proba-
bly the world's largest dossier on
Royal Dutch Shell. It also serves as
the headquarters for royaldutchshell-
plc.com, the website where Dono-
van and his father Alfred — frail but
lucid at 92 — pursue a surprisingly
effective crusade against the world's
biggest oil company.
So called "gripe sites" are com-
mon, especially for companies in
highly-emotive areas such as oil,
tobacco and banking. Last week
Goldman Sachs decided to settle a
suit filed against the man who runs
a site called goldmansachs666.com
after the case garnered celebrity and
boosted traffic to the site. The
Donovans, though, are more adept
than most at inflicting damage on
their target.
Their site has become a major
thorn in the side of Shell, publishing
a relentless stream of insider leaks
and negative commentary. It is a
remarkable study in the power the
internet can have when it is coupled
with a couple of industrious individ-
uals with a vendetta.
John estimates that he has pub-
lished more than 24,000 articles
about Shell in the decade and a half
since he and his father took their
cause online. The website regularly
publishes stories, fed to it by a hand-
ful of disgruntled executives, which
are then picked up by the main-
stream press. It has become a hub of
activity for anti-Shell former employ-
ees and environmental activists.
Last month it had 1.7m hits.
A few weeks ago, for example, it

Two men and a website mount

vendetta against an oil giant

They just go on digging: the Donovans' campaign has caused Shell expense and embarrassment at its operations in Russia, which include the Sakhalin gas project and drilling in the Sea of Okhotsk

published a plan by new chief execu-
tive Peter Voser to slash thousands
of jobs before the company was
ready to make an announcement. In
2005, when the Kremlin was build-
ing a case against Shell over the
Sakhalin gas project, the Donovans
provided confidential documents
regarding alleged environmental
infractions directly to Oleg Mitvol,
the minister who led the case.
Shell was ultimately forced to sell
a stake to the Russians, leading to bil-
lions in lost revenue. Mitvol publicly
acknowledged the help provided by
the Donovans in building his case.
If only Shell knew 20 years ago
what it knows now. Back in the
1980s the Donovans had a good rela-
tionship with the oil giant. They ran
a marketing company that created
petrol station promotions for Shell
and both sides did well out of the
partnership. When a new executive
took over marketing, he used several
of their schemes but refused to pay
for them. So in 1992 they sued. After
three legal actions, a fourth ended
up in the High Court. In the mean-
time, Alfred paid people to leaflet
Shell's headquarters on the Thames

in central London and they started a
pair of anti-Shell websites.
With legal bills mounting they
agreed a "peace treaty under duress"
in 1999. It was not the end of the
story. Sitting in the cramped study
that is the operations centre for the
website, John pulls a framed,
A4-size oil painting from the wall. It

is of Alfred's former country home
that he had to sell in 2000 to pay
legal bills. "We had a good life and
we had to give our mortgage to our
barristers," he said.
"Perhaps it was a mistake to pur-
sue a case against a big corporation.
Maybe it's my Irish blood but I
couldn't accept it. It changed our

John and Alfred Donovan: It's grown way beyond what we thought'

lives." Shell has been paying for it
ever since.
In 2007, after the Donovans began
airing concerns about safety in the
North Sea, internal Shell e-mails
admitted that the company was "on
the back foot" and needed to "devel-
op a strategy (or options) that puts
us in a more positive and secure posi-
tion" in dealing with the Donovans.
Neither man appears particularly
embittered. If anything, they seem
quite tickled to be able to give Shell a
good kicking. Alfred, a second world
war veteran who fought the Japa-
nese in Burma, said: "It's a laugh."
Yet what they choose to print
doesn't always fit with their affable
demeanour. Last year they pub-
lished comments by one of their reg-
ular contributors who compared a
Shell executive to Joseph Fritzl, the
Austrian convicted of imprisoning
and raping his daughter in a dun-
geon for nearly two decades. Shell is
thought to have considered legal
action but decided that publicity
would only inflame the situation.
A Shell spokesman said: "The site
has a well-known and long-stand-
ing agenda. Healthy debate is wel-

come and encouraged but we choose
not to take part if it sinks to the level
of personal attacks and innuendo."
Despite their shoestring budget
and minimalist operation, the Dono-
vans are canny operators. When
they started up royaldutchshellplc.
com in 2005, they incorporated it as
a non-profit site in America, where
domain name law is strong. This
move served them well. Shell tried
to strip them of the site soon after it
was opened, labelling them "cyber-
squatters", but the World Intellectu-
al Property Organisation ruled in
their favour. The Donovans have
since rebooted their two predecessor
websites so that the public can
access all the information housed
there as well.

It is an awkward position for
Shell, which was this month
crowned by Fortune magazine as the
world's largest company. Trying to
shut the website down would draw
even more attention to it but letting
it continue subjects the company to
a constant barrage of negative news,
allegations and insults, some of
which is picked up by the main-
stream media.

In view of Alfred's advanced age,
John does most of the donkey work.
He has the time. Unmarried and
with no children, the only thing
that occupies his time other than
the website is his yellow labrador,
which he takes for an hour's walk
every morning. He spends six hours
a day, seven days a week on the site,
fielding e-mails, publishing articles
and corresponding with contribu-
tors. "It keeps my mind active and I
get a kick out of it because we are
able to help people," he said. A neph-
ew helps with the technical aspects
of the site. They do not make any
money from it and pay just $125 (£77)
a month to maintain it.
John doubts that he will ever shut
up shop. "There is no ultimate goal,"
he said. "We started something and
it has grown way beyond what we
thought it would. It's something
where people can get revenge on the
company or point out things that
are wrong. If we can prove it, that's a
real problem for a company like
Shell." In a parting shot he said: "I
will continue as long as my health
holds up. Since my dad is 92, things
don't look good for Shell."