

BUSINESS INSIDER

SAI

LEAKED: AOL's Master Plan

Nicholas Carlson | Feb. 1, 2011, 12:08 PM | 325,776 | 62

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Two years into his tenure as AOL CEO, Tim Armstrong is stepping on the gas.

By April, he wants AOL editorial to increase its stories per month from 33,000 to 55,000.

He wants pageviews per story to jump from 1,500 to 7,000.

He wants video stories to go from being 4% of all stories produced to 70%.

He wants the percentage of stories optimized for search engines to reach 95%.

We know all this, because right now, Armstrong's lieutenants are making their way through the company's many editorial divisions, training them on "The AOL Way."



Tim, possibly working on "The AOL Way"

Some of AOL's journalists, editors, content creators aren't all happy with the training.

"AOL is the most f-----up, bull---t company on earth," says one, who joined AOL in what he calls, "the worst career move I've ever made."

Others are more positive, but asked not to be quoted.

We have a copy of "The AOL Way."

It is an illuminating look into how AOL, a company with hundreds of millions in dollars in annual funding, is trying to turn itself into a 21st century media giant on the fly.

Some tidbits:

AOL tells its editors to decide what topics to cover based on four considerations: [traffic potential](#), [revenue potential](#), [edit quality](#) and [turn-around time](#).

AOL asks its editors to decide whether to produce content based on ["the profitability consideration."](#)

The documents reveal that AOL is, when the story calls for it, [willing to boost traffic by 5 to 10% with search ads and other "paid media."](#)

AOL site leaders are expected to have eight ideas for packages that could generate [at least \\$1 million in revenue on hand at all times](#).

In-house AOL staffers are expected to write [five to 10 stories per day](#).

AOL knows its sites are [too dependent on traffic from AOL.com](#), and it wants its editors to fix the problem by posting more frequently, with more emphasis on getting pageviews.

The entire document is newsworthy, but here are some pages you must make sure to see:

[AOL's goals.](#)

[How AOL Media is structured and responsibilities are divided](#)

- The daily, weekly, and monthly schedule for AOL sites.
- AOL's traffic sources by type.
- A chart showing how AOL sites depend too much on the homepage
- The four types of "content generation processes."
- The "content generation process."
- AOL's tools for editors for "identifying high demand topics."
- AOL's content distribution channels, by type.
- What kind of content AOL wants on its homepage and how to get it there.
- A screenshot of AOL's metrics page for editors.
- How AOL builds cheap, Demand Media-like pages around search-friendly topics.
- AOL's requirements for third-party traffic exchange partners

[Click here to see "The AOL Way" →](#)




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<p>AOL Edit »</p>  <p>Summary AOL is an American global Internet services and media company. The Web company was started in 1985 as Quantum Computer Services (from the formerly defunct startup Control Video Corporation), offering an online service called... More »</p>	<p>David Eun Edit »</p>  <p>Summary David Eun is the President of AOL Media and Studios. He oversees AOL's network of content sites, as well as the SEED.com publishing platform, the StudioNow video platform and AOL's New York City and Los Angeles studios. Eun... More »</p>	<p>Tim Armstrong Edit »</p>  <p>Summary Tim Armstrong is the CEO and Chairman of AOL. Armstrong joined the company in April 2009 (replacing the outgoing CEO Randy Falco) from Google, where he served as President of The Americas Operation, supervising North and Latin... More »</p>
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Business Plan For BI on Feb 1, 12:21 PM said:

32 1
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Well, at least Business Insider doesn't have to write a business plan from scratch. Just search and replace "AOL" with "Business Insider" Save. Print. Done. Raise another \$10 million.

[Reply](#)

cc1@aol.com on Feb 1, 1:42 PM said:

10 0
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@Business Plan For BI: OMG!! What a convoluted plan. No wonder nothing gets done at AOL. Ever heard of Agile/Scrum!? WTF is a "Swarm Engineer"!?!?!?

ROFL!

Unbelievable! Tim should just give up and quit.

[Reply](#)

Eliot Spitzer on Feb 1, 3:19 PM said:

11 2
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@Business Plan For BI: Fascinating! I have a few suggestions and observations:

Change the name from AOL.com to MeetingsRUS.com

Now we know why AOL is still unable to get any traction. Armstrong and his crew have been spending all their time on the process and not results.

Timmy apparently thinks the solution to everything is to hire an army of MBA's from Google to put together PowerPoints like this 58 page flow-chart extravaganza.

Pity the poor bastards that had to sit thru the meetings where this was presented. MEGO = My Eyes Glaze Over

Will there be a quiz for AOL employees on this deck? How the hell is someone supposed to remember all of this crap?

Fire the people who are paid to create the cutesy little mascot-like icons with AOL stamped on them. Page 14

Fire Timmy and his minions and hire people who can execute strategy and not meeting makers and flow-chart dweebs.

WAFJ!

Are we to assume there has been yet another re-org of the sales staff so there are now a bunch of town Revenue Managers and yet another new sales strategy? Page 5 So we can assume they new direction is just another ad network that packages up the good high-traffic stuff with the crap?

[Reply](#)

Eliot Spitzer on Feb 1, 3:22 PM said:

3 2
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@Eliot Spitzer: One last thought:

Have the "V's" from Google figure out a way to automate the entire process' from these 58 pages and then everyone can go home or be fired!

[Reply](#)

Adios on Feb 1, 5:37 PM said:

4 0
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@Eliot Spitzer: There is, in fact, a test.

[Reply](#)

donbronson on Feb 1, 12:29 PM said:

21 5
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Thank you, AOL |> for laying me off last year - it was the best thing ever for my career (esp. the payout!), and it saved me from working in one of your labor camps, er, "Towns".

[Reply](#)

John Conen (URL) on Feb 1, 12:30 PM said:

6 2
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Wonder if this is Nicholas' first story today, or 5th.

[Reply](#)

wtfinator on Feb 1, 12:42 PM said:

5 0

@John Conen: Bloggers can't have a three martini lunch after one story a day. What do you think this is, a newspaper?

Flag as Offensive

[Reply](#)

wtfinator on Feb 1, 12:37 PM said:

9 0

It's nice to see Aol focusing more on near-term and longer tail SEO implications, since that was likely Asylum's downfall (besides market saturation in the Men's space). However, 7,000 page views minimum to break even is likely to be a deal-breaker.

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[Reply](#)

jdawg on Feb 1, 12:45 PM said:

12 6

After Tim uses this plan to "beat the internet" perhaps he can send it to Obama to help him "win the future."

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[Reply](#)

Caroline on Feb 2, 6:12 AM said:

0 0

@jdawg: Ha ha ha ha!!! good one!

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[Reply](#)

podboy on Feb 1, 12:46 PM said:

11 2

Welcome to the age of content farming.

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Call me crazy, but that's at least well laid out plan at least.

[Reply](#)

Bob The Thinker on Feb 1, 12:52 PM said:

10 2

Hello Blekko. Please add AOL sites and derivatives to your banned list. Content Farm + SEO Manipulation + Get it Out Now - Value to End Users = Zero Strategy. Have we not progressed since 1998?

Flag as Offensive

Please ban. You will make a huge statement about your place in the market and you inability to put up with this shi*t. Google of course would never do this

[Reply](#)

chrisp on Feb 1, 12:58 PM said:

5 2

It is a well laid out plan, yet I am not sure how writing a ton of bad content is way to build a lasting company. This seems like a short term fix to get revenue moving in the right direction and get the hell out. A model that plays upon the whims of what is hot now is likely to have some very good days and then just fade out as consumers will eventually get smart to it. AOL is hoping to out execute people and it may work in the short term, but very questionable as a long term strategy.

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[Reply](#)

Denis on Feb 2, 5:00 AM said:

0 0

@chrisp: The facts seem to contradict you. Just look at Business Insider or TV shows for counter examples. People love garbage. :-)

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[Reply](#)

Huntley Brinkley on Feb 1, 12:58 PM said:

16 0

I can't wait to see the headlines on TechCrunch: "Justin Bieber and Snooki test drive XOOM!"

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[Reply](#)





Rurik Bradbury on Feb 1, 3:31 PM said:

6 0
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@Huntley Brinkley: You forgot the last bit:

"Justin Bieber and Snooki test drive XOOM -- Steve Jobs responds"

[Reply](#)

Huntley Brinkley on Feb 1, 4:10 PM said:

0 0
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@Rurik Bradbury: LOL!

[Reply](#)

jamesxxx on Feb 1, 6:00 PM said:

0 0
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@Huntley Brinkley: BEST POST OF THE MONTH!

[Reply](#)

***HomePageCrack** on Feb 1, 1:02 PM said:

2 0
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LOL; could have just reduced the "two not to miss" as:

"Our sites need to work harder and generate more PVs/story without HP promo" with

"Distribute and engage: HP Promo"

... says it all.

(*aka: "still a complete and transparent dependency on the DIAL-UP TRAFFIC)

[Reply](#)

Mike23042 on Feb 1, 1:08 PM said:

6 2
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Ummmm, this looks like the same business model and content development as Demand Media.

AOL has a small advantage of having legacy dial customers getting them more pageviews.

I smell doom.

[Reply](#)



LOHADdotcom on Feb 1, 1:10 PM said:

3 0
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@chrisp notes: "I am not sure how writing a ton of bad content is way to build a lasting company"

Tru dat -- slide 33 refers to an SEO-optimized article from a "credible, named source" costing \$15 ... really? Well, I suppose -- but that "credible, named source" is no professional writer, and will probably be cutting and pasting from Wikipedia and About.com and eHow and such.

The Web in general is facilitating a weird commoditization of content and knowledge and, as this deck shows, AOL is clearly in the forefront. The result is that the lowest common denominator for any given "article" might be raised a bit -- but ultimately I believe the need for QUALITY content (as opposed to quantity content) will become that much greater.

It was so much easier or content providers back in the day when AOL was charging by the hour ;-)

[Reply](#)



Rurik Bradbury on Feb 1, 5:43 PM said:

3 0
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@LOHADdotcom: Henry Kissinger is now writing articles for AOL's 'Politics Town'. He only charges \$15 because in his day, that was a handsome sum.

[Reply](#)

schveenietodd on Feb 1, 1:15 PM said:

0 3
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If it bleeds, it leads...right? Blondes over brunette chippies in the missing/kidnapped news category, too.

[Reply](#)

duckyinfo (URL) on Feb 1, 1:17 PM said:

3 3
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Ugh. Not a new model AOL. There's already hordes of cheaply paid grunts who're producing reams of horrid articles in order to draw eye -balls. Nothing new there. Save yourself some time and just produce page aggregators because that's the direction it looks like you're heading anyway. (Disclaimer: never visited an AOL site since around 2000.)

[Reply](#)

wtfinator on Feb 1, 1:27 PM said:

1 0
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@duckyinfo: It's not just about producing content- it's about producing content strategically, based on what people are looking for and optimized for the great Google Gods.

[Reply](#)

Julian Assange on Feb 1, 1:27 PM said:

0 2
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Thanks for trying to steal my business model AND my thunder. Who do you think you are?
www.Wiki_BUSINESSINSIDER_Leaks.com ???

I'll see you in court somewhere in Europe. Maybe. If I'm out in time.

[Reply](#)

Jason on Feb 1, 1:28 PM said:

4 10
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I'm so happy to see that 85% of this is centered around what Brian Alvey, Peter Rojas and I did at Weblogs Inc/Blogsmith in 2005! :-)

Go AOL!

(It's a decent plan actually... I know since I developed about 40% of it)

[Reply](#)

JumbAol on Feb 1, 1:48 PM said:

2 0
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@Jason: yeah but the same plan has been tried by Wilson....what's new here? nothing! Its a step back in its complexity if nothing else. just look at how many lead roles a town has! sheesh

[Reply](#)

Jason's Ball Sweat on Feb 2, 6:30 AM said:

0 0
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@Jason: For real, Jaybo? You're the guy who couldn't figure out how to get the power turned on over the weekends while you were at Aol. And you're claiming authorship of this brilliant, err..... maybe this POS WAS your idea after all. But you gotta admit Timbo's MBA wonders put together nicer PowerPoint slides!

[Reply](#)

cc1@aol.com (URL) on Feb 1, 1:41 PM said:

4 2
[Flag as Offensive](#)

OMG!! What a convoluted plan. No wonder nothing gets done at AOL. Ever heard of Agile/Scrum!? WTF is a "Swarm Engineer"!?!?!?

ROFL!

Unbelievable!

[Reply](#)

schveenietodd on Feb 1, 3:04 PM said:

1 0
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@cc1@aol.com: Swarm engineer (and QA) = offshore Bangalorian coder (or tester), led by fly-by-wire "follow the sun" Dulles-based *pukka sahib* coordinator/controller...QED.

[Reply](#)

podboy in the know on Feb 1, 1:42 PM said:

Tim wanted this plan to be leaked with earnings tomorrow. Nick you just got punked.

7 0
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Reply



Henry Blodget on Feb 1, 3:23 PM said:

@podboy in the know: It's interesting either way.

0 0
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Reply

AnneHolland55 on Feb 1, 1:51 PM said:

A quick summary of my SubscriptionSiteInsider.com blog post analyzing their audience development (traffic) plans -- sadly anemic on the email and paid ad fronts. Reveals a possibly worryingly core incompetence at email, and a profound lack of aggression on the paid ad front, which in turn makes me wonder how much they truly believe in their ability to monetize the traffic they receive.

0 1
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Reply

michaelasdfasdh on Feb 1, 2:30 PM said:

"AOL is the most f-----up, b-----t company on earth,"

I get "f-----up", but what is "b-----t"? Can we just be grown-ups and spell shit out?

3 1
Flag as Offensive

Reply

Don Golden on Feb 1, 2:52 PM said:

AOL - you mean Almost OnLine?

Quantity goes up, quality comes down. Simple really.

BTW, I giggle everytime I see e-mail address with an AOL domain.

2 5
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Reply

Epic on Feb 1, 11:48 PM said:

@Don Golden: In the age of Farmville and Facebook controlling the universe, you're still a tech elitist? How's that working out for you?

0 0
Flag as Offensive

Reply

foljs on Feb 2, 3:29 AM said:

@Epic: It works great.

While you're ploughing away in your Farm(ville) and exchanging trivialities with "friends" on Facebook, I get to work with REAL technology, get work done, and make a sweet profit out of it.

0 0
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Reply



JHaghwout on Feb 1, 3:00 PM said:

It sounds very 'algorithmic.' It may be good for SEO, however it may not be as inspiring as the old mission Mr. Case set in the 90s, "To build a global medium as central to people's lives as the telephone or television -- and even more valuable." It will be interesting to watch what happens.

2 1
Flag as Offensive

Reply



Rurik Bradbury on Feb 1, 3:33 PM said:

The new motto is:

"To build a huge content crapfest for idiots"

11 1
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Reply

Cowboy on Feb 1, 3:39 PM said:

With everything that's supposedly going on with Google to "combat" demand content, this strategy seems...behind the curve?

1 0
Flag as Offensive

Reply



Rurik Bradbury on Feb 1, 4:06 PM said:

I made a small infographic to show the new AOL strategy:

<http://bit.ly/dXs5MA>

3 4
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Reply



Pete Roland on Feb 1, 4:15 PM said:

Put this strategy in the context of most publishing/ newspaper companies today and it starts to look pretty innovative actually. At least they are experimenting with changing how content is produced, consumed and ultimately monetized. Although their are some demand media elements to this strategy it is in no ways incumbent on only SEO friendly content. I like this aggressive, proactive and measurable approach. The portals could learn something from what AOL is doing as well rather than relying on commoditized news feeds.

5 2
Flag as Offensive

Reply

Rattling The Cage on Feb 1, 4:38 PM said:

Where did I hear that BS before? Ah, the Long Tail - rings any bells? "User generated content"? How many times do they have to try the same failure strategy?

0 2
Flag as Offensive

Reply



Chris Selland on Feb 1, 5:31 PM said:

Do they teach SEO in Journalism school these days? If they don't, they need to start.

3 0
Flag as Offensive

Reply

Bob R on Feb 1, 5:48 PM said:

It just makes me glad to be a refugee from the corporate world. I'm much happier working in a small business where people actually talk to each other and use words that have meaning. This strikes me as the kind of document that makes investors comfortable; they figure, anything this dense HAS to be brilliant. Just wait until they find out that the people who have to do the work don't get it either.

7 0
Flag as Offensive

Reply

lol aol on Feb 1, 6:08 PM said:

@Bob R: well aren't you just special

0 5
Flag as Offensive

Reply

foljs on Feb 2, 3:31 AM said:

@lol aol: Everyone is special (and on a short term stay on this world), but most people seem to forget about it.

0 0
Flag as Offensive

Working through THIS kind of corporate bullshit is not how I want to spend my day --or Bob R his. What part of that don't you understand?

Reply

lol aol on Feb 1, 6:07 PM said:

aol is dildos

0 3
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Reply

Portal in the Valley on Feb 1, 6:54 PM said:

Was this released today at the 600-person sales meeting in New Orleans that most likely cost the company at least \$5MM for people to get drunk?

3 0
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[Reply](#)

@ Portal in the Valley on Feb 1, 7:27 PM said:

1 1
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@Portal in the Valley: Back when sales was generating 650 million in revenue they had a party in ...DC...now when they generate so much less they are whopping it up in New Orleans. But if you think about it, they have to rally the troops and get them drunk if this is the bullshit they expect them to sell!!!

[Reply](#)

foljs on Feb 2, 3:33 AM said:

0 0
[Flag as Offensive](#)

@@ Portal in the Valley: **Back when sales was generating 650 million in revenue they had a party in ...DC...now when they generate so much less they are whopping it up in New Orleans.**

And with this kind of guidelines, I see next years party to be in either Biloxi, MS, or the Mojave.

[Reply](#)

Look Closely on Feb 1, 7:30 PM said:

0 0
[Flag as Offensive](#)

Is this what Chuck Close did?

[Reply](#)

Brad (URL) on Feb 1, 7:35 PM said:

2 2
[Flag as Offensive](#)

I didn't realize AOL was still around.

[Reply](#)

Demand Koolaid on Feb 1, 8:12 PM said:

0 0
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No one wanna use demand robo editor. Granted they developed something but it aint rocket science. The funny thing is these demand developers think they are "V's" from Google and they will save this company and their boss vineet thinks hes gonna be larry page. btw what is new cto doing. Stop drinking the Demand Kool Aid guys.

[Reply](#)

vsper (URL) on Feb 1, 9:09 PM said:

0 1
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@Demand Koolaid: what r u smoking??? the demand team is one of best i worked in last 4 years. The algorithms and tools developed r awesome and am sure would help in executing the demand and aol strategy.

[Reply](#)

March Forward on Feb 1, 11:10 PM said:

0 1
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With the best of breed search tech development team and with the insight over years of analyzing search and user trends, the die is cast for the foundation to make the demand algorithms and content more closely aligned with what the user is looking for whether it is the long tail or bubbling topics of interest. It is good to see quantified metrics as targets though they may be quite aggressive.

[Reply](#)

JulesLt on Feb 2, 2:57 AM said:

1 0
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Doesn't sound so different from the business plan that has worker for CNet/ZDNet and Gawker Media, and equally a good illustration about the problems of the web business model - that it encourages link-bait journalism.

[Reply](#)



Ian Betteridge on Feb 2, 5:32 AM said:

2 0
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Utterly baffled at why this is bad, or even unusual. Just sounds like they're codifying what every site does - at least the ones that make money.

[Reply](#)

Jason's Ball Sweat on Feb 2, 6:36 AM said:

0 0
[Flag as Offensive](#)

The only slide that matters here is #25. It says that the town mayor has to bend over in front of the keepers of the home page to get their daily traffic that keeps em in their jobs. Without the homepage firehose of traffic from the blue hairs that still run the Client, no way you can make your numbers.

[Reply](#)



Eliot Bernstein on Feb 2, 6:57 AM said:

0 0
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<http://www.industrywhistleblower.com/2010/06/tim-armstrong-chairman-ceo-aol-inc.html>

Tuesday, June 1, 2010 Tim Armstrong, Chairman CEO ~ AOL Inc. Knows of Massive Shareholder Fraud and is NOT telling YOU.
Tim Armstrong, Chairman & CEO ~ AOL, Inc. has Failed to Disclose Massive Shareholder Fraud and the US Patent Office and SEC does NOTHING.

Tim Armstrong, Chairman CEO ~ AOL Inc. has known about a Trillion Dollar Shareholder Liability for quite some time and he does nothing to disclose this Fraud and Deception on YOUR MONEY, your Life and instead Tim Armstrong, Chairman CEO ~ AOL Inc. Just ignores this Dirty Little Secret that will Cost Warner Bros. - Time Warner Inc. and AOL Shareholders Billions, as this Secret has been known by Warner Bros. Executives for around a Decade.

[Reply](#)

