You know the background to this one. The Donovans come across well in the story.
Two men and a website mount vendetta against an oil giant

Shell has taken some big knocks in the attack by a father and son in Essex, reports Danny Fortson

By his own admission, 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 something into print, we can back it up."

A man obsessed indeed. His modest three-bedroom house in Colchester, Essex, is home to what is probably the world's largest dossier on Royal Dutch Shell. It also serves as the headquarters for royaldutchshell-plc.com, the website where Donovan 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 common, 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. Donovan, though, are more adept at inflicting damage on their targets.

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 individuals with a vendetta.

John estimates that he has published more than 24,000 articles about Shell in the decade and a half since he and his father took their case online. The website regularly publishes stories, fed to it by a handful of disgruntled executives, which are then picked up by the mainstream press. It has become a hub of activity for anti-Shell former employees and environmental activists. Last month it had 1.7m hits.

A few weeks ago, for example, it published a plan by new chief executive Peter Voser to slash thousands of jobs before the company was ready to make an announcement. In 2005, when the Kremlin was building 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 Kustians, leading to billions in lost revenue. Mitvol publicly acknowledged the help provided by the Donovans in building his case.

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Donovan in building his case.

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 meantime, Alfred paid people to leaflet Shell's headquarters on the Thames in central London and they started a pair of anti-Shell websites.

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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 Japanese in Burma, said: "It's a laugh."

Yet what they choose to print doesn't always fit with their affable demeanour. Last year they published comments by one of their regular contributors who compared a Shell executive to Joseph Fritzl, the Austrian convicted of imprisoning and raping his daughter in a dungeon 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-standing agenda. Healthy debate is welcome 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 Donovans are canny operators. When they started up royal-dutch-shell.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 Intellectual 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 mainstream 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 contributors. "It keeps my mind active and I get a kick out of it because we are able to help people," he said. A nephew 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."

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info@precise.co.uk
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They just go on digging: the Brownie 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.