HOW MATT DRUDGE RULES OUR WORLD

Sometimes the question arrives with squeals of gossipy delight. Other times it is accompanied by groans of resentment and fear. Have you seen Drudge?

In an instant these four words spread through newsrooms and campaign headquarters.

The case study of John Kerry was about hijacking—the way political adversaries can exploit the media to take over a candidate’s public image. The chapter that followed was about incentives—the ways that campaign and media cultures are influenced by Freak Show values that reward attacks and personality-based politics. These twin phenomena merge in the single person of Matt Drudge. No one has facilitated more political hijackings than he has. No one has a better grasp of the economic, ideological, and psychological incentives that power the Freak Show. Few journalists would count Drudge as a colleague. But in the past decade, he has contributed to the change in how American politics has been covered, and his impact will be a major factor in the 2008 presidential race. The root of his power lies in that four-word phrase. This chapter is about what happens after people ask, Have you seen Drudge?

Every day, many people indeed see Drudge. According to Nielsen Net Ratings, he receives between 180 and 200 million page views a month, along with around three million unique visitors. Some scrutinize his page religiously, others glance at it occasionally. Many use his site as their home page.

Such readers count on him to be a clearinghouse for the latest bizarre, or inflammatory, or salacious stories moving in the world of news or popular culture, and especially in politics. Among those who regularly click on the page is Karl Rove. Vice President Cheney does not commonly surf the Internet, but his wife, Lynne Cheney, frequently checks the Drudge Report. When some intriguing item appears, she or one of their two daughters is likely to tell him about it. Television news producers read Drudge. So do newspaper editors. So do publishing executives, Hollywood hotshots, and public relations agents. Members of the Gang of 500—which according to the New Yorker includes "the campaign consultants, strategists, pollsters, pundits, and journalists who make up the modern-day political establishment"—all read the Drudge Report. Gang members have the site bookmarked.

Drudge may be omnipresent, but his power is oddly obscure. It often goes unacknowledged even by his most influential readers. Many members of the press regard the Drudge Report as nothing serious—a good source of gossip and a mildly guilty pleasure, the professional equivalent of a cigarette break or an afternoon trip to Starbucks. Yet Drudge’s decisions (or carefree hunches) affect whether millions of people will know of one story or another.

Drudge’s chief influence derives from the links he chooses to highlight on his site, although his own exclusives (however inaccurate they may be at times) certainly stir up conversation. If a political item is prominently displayed on the Drudge Report, it is guaranteed that the topic will be talked about by people who matter in modern campaigns. It will color the perceptions of journalists, and campaign strategists and even candidates. It will prompt questions at news conferences and White House briefings. All of this trickles down to the voters, many of whom habitually read the Drudge Report themselves. If the greatest challenge of any person seeking the presidency is keeping control of his or her public image, and the great obstacle to this control is the Freak Show, then Matt Drudge is the gatekeeper. In this sense, he is the Walter Cronkite of his era.

This is not to say that Drudge has anything like Cronkite’s audience. Drudge, to put it mildly, will never be known as “the most trusted man in America.” But over the past two presidential elections, no single organization or individual has exercised as much influence in shaping what Americans learn about their presidential candidates. In the fragmented, remote-control, click-on-this, did-you-see? politico-media world in which we live, revered Uncle Walter has been replaced by odd Nephew Matt.

A few points must be clarified. Describing Drudge’s power is not the equivalent of celebrating it. What’s more, when we speak of Drudge, we are not referring to him as a symbol for the New Media generally. We do not invoke him as a universal metaphor for the way politics is now defined by sen-
sation and scandal. We are talking about Drudge specifically—a clever and erratic man who made his fortune working from his computer in apartments in Los Angeles and Miami, a self-described "loner" and former slacker whose keen grasp of politics, pop culture, and media, and of how to exploit the vulnerabilities of all three, mark him as one of the biggest success stories of his generation.

Drudge's power derives only in part from the colossal number of people who visit his site. Even the most devoted of his fans, hunching over basement computers or killing time at company expense, are sensible enough not to put full faith in his punchy communiqués. Drudge himself estimates that only 80 percent of the original material he posts is fully accurate, and he is being generous to himself. His power comes from his ability to shape the perception of other news media—Old and New alike.

With the exception of the Associated Press, there is no outlet other than the Drudge Report whose dispatches instantly can command the attention and energies of the most established newspapers and television newscasts. The AP, of course, is a sober, decades-old news enterprise that employs thousands of reporters and editors. Drudge is more or less what he was when he started: one oddball collecting provocative tips and posting weird, catchy news links from his personal computer.

One place in Washington where no one doubts Drudge's clout is at 310 First Street SE, the headquarters of the Republican National Committee. Peddling items to the Drudge Report, according to several current and former RNC staff members, is an essential part of the party's communications strategy.

Drudge, in fact, is important enough that senior operatives devote time and expense to ensure that their avenue to his website remains open. In early 2005, when RNC research director Tim Griffin left his job, he traveled to Florida with his replacement, Matt Rhodes, for a meeting with Drudge that marked an official handover passing. Griffin flew in from Arkansas, Rhodes from Washington, and Jim Dyke, the former Republican National Committee communications director, from Charleston, South Carolina.

They dined at the Forge, one of Miami Beach's top steakhouses, described by one travel website as a "coconut Miami institution [that] celebrates the joys of living (and dining) large." Drudge was a longtime fan of the place. Griffin had known Matt Drudge for years and considered him one of the most valuable "journalists" of his acquaintance. Drudge might have been a shadowy, distant presence for many of his readers and even for most of his tipsters, but not for Griffin, who had dealt with him face-to-face before. Both Griffin's predecessor Barbara Comstock and Griffin himself believed that the RNC research department should not be staffed by a bunch of kids who just put newspaper clips together, but should employ sophisticated operatives with significant professional relationships in the real world and an understanding of how the press operated. The RNC thought there was no more significant relationship to have than the one with Drudge.

The point of the meeting was for Rhodes, who did not really know Drudge, to establish a personal tie with him, just the way an operative would court key Old Media journalists. It was a night of fun, a two-hour social dinner with little or no formal business discussed. Over steaks, seafood, salad, and wine, the four men reminisced about the 2004 campaign, talked about Miami culture, and chatted about life in general. When the shrimp arrived at the table, they were so gigantic that the men posed for photographs with the crustaceans.

This pleasant Florida tableau vividly captured how an ostensibly anti-Establishment figure like Drudge, a man disparaged in polite journalistic and political circles, was in fact central to how principal Establishment operatives such as Dyke, Griffin, and Rhodes do their jobs and communicate in the modern media marketplace. In the Freak Show, old lines between reputable and disreputable are obsolete.

The Miami courtship has paid off, by all evidence. Throughout 2005 and 2006, a steady flow of negative items about people such as Democratic National Committee chairman Howard Dean and Democratic Senate leader Harry Reid of Nevada have been highlighted on the Drudge Report. Many of the postings were direct products of RNC opposition research. Others, while originating from different sources, were brought to Drudge's attention by RNC staff members.

Ken Mehlman, the RNC chairman, said he values his party's pipeline to the Drudge Report and the website's ability to drive the editorial decisions of more conventional news organizations. "He puts something up and they have to cover it."

There are three Trade Secrets suggested here. From a campaign's perspective, there is a basic rule of twenty-first-century political communication: The conflicts between the Old Media and the New Media are less important than the linkages.
Some may find it comforting to imagine that the New Media is reckless and will run with anything, while the Old Media is respectable and restrained. The New Media, however, does its part to directly influence the Old Media.

Although he leans right, Drudge is not averse to linking to negative items about George W. Bush and other Republicans. A few savvy Democrats have established their own pipeline to Drudge to place research on his site. But they are exceptions. Drudge’s greatest impact occurs with his more frequent and more biting attacks on the politicians of the Left. When it comes to Drudge, the table is not level, which leads to two more Trade Secrets:

* A Republican politician will thrive in the 2008 presidential campaign by understanding the singular power of Drudge, and crafting a strategy to take advantage of this power.

* No Democratic politician will survive in the 2008 presidential campaign without understanding the singular power of Drudge, and crafting a strategy to defend against this power.

Drudge also posts items about shark attacks, celebrity feuds, six-headed snakes, and gruesome small-town crimes that are interesting but generally don’t create buzz in newsrooms the way his political items do. Here is what happens when people start asking, Have you seen Drudge?

His scoop will be electronically copied off the Web, pasted into an e-mail, and sent to news organizations’ full internal distribution lists. Television producers and even anchors will call political journalists and ask, Do you know anything about this? Editors will wander across the newsroom to reporters and ask, perhaps sheepishly, What do you think we should do?

The overwhelming first impulse of Old Media agents is to respond defensively, Why should we take our cues from Drudge? The overwhelming second impulse, however, is to say, Maybe we ought to make a few calls. Such conversations occur simultaneously all over Washington and New York whenever Drudge posts a provocative item, especially if it is accompanied by his trademark red stenographic graphic, and most of all when it asserts that one news organization or another is hot on the trail of the story.

A dramatic Drudge posting sets off a competitive pulse because all journalists who see it know that they are not alone. So many media elites check the Drudge Report consistently that a reporter is aware his bosses, his competitors, his sources, his friends on Wall Street, lobbyists, White House officials, congressional aides, cousins, and everyone who is anyone have seen it, too.

So those “few calls” get made. Within minutes, press secretaries and political operatives will feel their cell phones vibrating. The calls will almost never be answered right away, because these people are all on the phone with their superiors asking, How the hell should we deal with this? Voice mail messages try to convey the right tone of nonchalance (You know I don’t actually take Drudge seriously) and urgency (I really, really need to hear back from you).

The messages are not returned. New messages are left, no pretense of nonchalance this time. Where are you? We’ve got to decide soon what we are doing with this. Call me right away.

More often than not, at Establishment institutions, the result of these conversations and phone calls and voice mails is nothing. Or a trifling item might appear in a gossip column. Perhaps something like this: “Trouble in paradise? Political circles are buzzing about Internet reports that John Kerry and wife Teresa Heinz Kerry are squabbling . . .”

But even if national Old Media outlets do nothing, the Drudge Report’s imprint will echo far and wide. Drudge’s choices inform the rip-and-read planning at local TV and radio news stations for all of their newscasts throughout the day. The ladies of The View; with their millions of daily viewers, rely on Drudge’s picks for their political story topics, though they almost never acknowledge his role. And should Old Media outlets ignore Drudge, his fellow travelers in the rightward organs of the New Media invariably do.

Drudge’s standards for sourcing and checking are dangerously low, but the standards of the talk radio show hosts and bloggers who parrot his message are lower still, because they have no idea how credible the original source of his information is, and do not care.

Most of all, Drudge molds the mind-set throughout the national and local media—Old as well as New. Once a Drudge entry has burned some narrative thread or character trait into the brains of his readers, it can have a lingering effect on coverage. That item Drudge first reported in the summer of 2004 about the bickering Democratic presidential candidate and his spouse was not widely reported at the time, but it was widely remembered by every journalist on the Kerry press plane and their editors back home. In this case, many reporters believed that there was probably something to it. Not long after the election, Newsweek made clear that it thought there definitely was something to it. The story of an irritable row between the Heinz-Kerrys was the most talked-about plum in its special election issue.
Drudge has built up such a loyal following that he no longer needs to obsessively update the site. Sometimes, he appears to take weekends off, or sleep in. But he understands his audience well enough to know how often he has to refresh the content to maintain his page hits. (Additionally, he is aware that the site’s unusual practice of automatically self-refreshing the page every few minutes allows him to record more hits and increase his Internet status.) Drudge also knows his economics. He did not get into the Internet gossip business to get rich, but that has been the result. His site produces considerable income with virtually no expenses. He remains, relatively speaking, a one-man operation.

The site draws plenty of advertising, including from large corporations and leading conservative politicians and causes, alongside more typical Internet patrons such as online mortgage brokerages and obscure universities. Drudge has hosted a Fox News cable television program and published a book, and has had a weekly nationally syndicated radio show since 1999. The Miami Herald quoted him in 2003 as saying he earned about $1.2 million a year, from the site and his radio program. Whatever the current figure, it is enough to afford frequent trips to Europe and a really nice car. But he reportedly has turned down many offers for partnership, marketing, and other deals that would have made him richer still. Drudge appears more inspired by noneconomic incentives.

The growing synergy between Old and New has been the most significant trend in the decade since Matt Drudge burst onto the public stage and computer screen. At the beginning, the commentary about his emergence put the emphasis on his anti-Establishment mission and values, and the Establishment’s dismissiveness of him. This emphasis was always a bit misleading. From the start, much of the Drudge Report was devoted to electronic links to material published in the Old Media. Even his original reporting frequently consisted then, as now, of leaks about projects on which Old Media news outlets were working, or disputes and embarrassments within those organizations. Sometimes, journalists have found themselves wondering: Does Drudge know something about our workplace that we don’t?

What has changed in recent years is the Old Media’s move away from its posture of proud disdain for Drudge. While some in the Old Media now decry Drudge’s influence, in the months following his role in the revelation of the Monica Lewinsky affair, his authority was feted, with major print pro-
gets, communications, what reporters are working on." This preening struck even Drudge as absurd. "Access to all their internals—what an arrogant statement. Hee, hee, hee."

Responsible Timesmen were not amused. "I understand and appreciate that there's an extraordinary interest in what The New York Times is doing, thinking and working on, and I appreciate that we operate in an extremely competitive environment," said veteran reporter John M. Broder. "That said, The Drudge Report is so flawed, so fantasy-ridden and, at times, so destructive to our efforts at fairness that it's disturbing. It's infuriating at times, not to mention annoying in the extreme."

In recent years, however, some Times executives have risen above their annoyance to recognize the marketing power Drudge possesses. Major Times stories are not flagged on Drudge in advance of their posting on the paper's website. These promos do not look or feel like the work of enterprising Drudge reporting or disgruntled Times employees leaking material without authorization. Times executives have stopped complaining publicly.

Meanwhile, although there is no system for authorized leaks to the Drudge Report at the Washington Post, editors at the website and main newspaper are delighted when Drudge does link to stories at washingtonpost.com. Inevitably, traffic to the site soars. And there is evident frustration when the Drudge Report does not acknowledge significant Washington Post pieces. Speaking of the Washington Post, one of its reporters had direct experience with Drudge's astonishing power—both intoxicating and dangerous for those who come into contact with it. We will call this reporter "John Harris."

In 2005, like Ed Klein, Harris was promoting a book on the Clintons. Harris's volume, a history of the Clinton presidency, was by a wide margin less noxious than Klein's. On the other hand, Harris knew particular sections had the potential to draw publicity-driving buzz in the news media. He wanted that publicity.

Two weeks before the official publication, he gave a series of talking points, along with an advance copy of the book itself, to a producer for a morning news program. The producer thanked him and wished him good luck, but told him that the book was not really up their alley. Later, the day before the book's publication, a friend with Harris's permission gave a set of the talking points to Drudge. A total of perhaps twenty minutes elapsed between his e-mail to the friend, the friend's e-mail to Drudge, and Drudge regurgitating the material into a banner headline and a dispatch in his own distinctive style. "Summer starts with a bang!" Drudge's "exclusive" read.

"Swearing, Screaming, Steaming—White House as Hot House." Within five minutes of that posting, another producer from the same morning show called: Was Harris free to come on the next morning? As it happened, he was committed elsewhere. But Drudge was no small part of the book's jump from 9,527 to 9 the next day on Amazon.com's sales ranking.

Matt Drudge is salacious, reckless, superficial, and unfair—an eccentric man perfectly in tune with the eccentricity that now pervades politics and journalism. "I go where the stink is," he was fond of saying when he first shot to fame during Bill Clinton's presidency. Skeptics would add that where he has gone the stink has followed.

But Drudge is more than the impresario of the Freak Show. He is also a visionary, and deserves full credit for his perceptions. He arrived on the scene at the moment the Old Media was enjoying increasingly robust mass audiences. Well before it became obvious to everyone, Drudge understood the fragility that lay just beneath the Old Media's ostensible power.

Drudge exploits the universal human hunger for private gossip about public people. He knows the appeal of gazzing unfiltered behind the scenes of movie studios, newsrooms, and political campaigns, as well as the thrill of being the secret source of such information. Drudge's insight was that this combination of institutional vulnerabilities and human appetites presented an enormous opportunity. Perhaps this does not seem like such an ingenious insight now, with a thousand websites offering daily photographic updates of Angelina Jolie or transcribed text messages from Bono. A decade ago, one strain to recall, e-mail and the Internet were still exotic technologies. Drudge was the first to recognize that someone sitting in his underwear at his living room computer could take control of the national news agenda. Across the spectrum of American life, this is a phase of history when the institution has yielded position to the entrepreneur. Matt Drudge counts as one of the most important entrepreneurs of his era.

Drudge did not set out to be an entrepreneur. His attraction to the business of news and celebrity was more visceral, but for a while this interest was harnessed to no clear life purpose.

He was raised in Takoma Park, Maryland, the most liberal suburb of Washington, D.C. By his own recollection, he was a weak student and a social misfit in high school. Like many misfits, however, he seemed to grow up with an acute awareness of status as it matters to a young person—the rigid
divide between cool and uncool. And, like many ultimately successful people who start out on the losing side of this divide, he brooded on and nurtured his resentments until they flourished. When his 1984 graduating class prepared a mock last will and testament, Drudge’s entry was puckering: “I leave a penny for each day I’ve been here and cried here. A penny rich in worthless memories. For worthless memories is what I have endured.”

More than a decade later, after Drudge hit it big, and had the Establishment news media rolling over the implications of his skewed brand of online journalism, he was invited to discuss the topic in Washington at the National Press Club. He gave a speech at once coldly penetrating about the vulnerabilities of the modern news business and mawkishly self-revealing about his own ambitions and neuroses. As an “aimless teen,” he recalled, he used to walk the streets of Washington and gaze at doors he believed were closed to him. Those doors were not to Congress or the White House, but to the capital’s dominant news organizations.

Journalism might fancy itself an egalitarian craft, but Drudge imagined its main institutions to be elitist redounds. So he would “walk by ABC News over on DeSales, daydream; stare up at the Washington Post newsroom over on 15th Street, look up longingly, knowing I’d never get in,” he recalled. “Didn’t go to the right schools, never enjoyed any school, as a matter of fact, didn’t come from a well-known family.”

With these sullen words, Drudge revealed a powerful psychic connection with one of the lodestars of modern conservatism: resentment against the power and cultural values of so-called mainstream media. At the press club, Drudge even sounded a bit like Richard Nixon—another kid who grew up uncool and whose sense of outsidership fueled a powerful drive to infiltrate and triumph over worlds that seemed closed to him.

Drudge drifted into his twenties with no higher education and no life plan. With his interest in media and celebrity, he migrated to Hollywood, taking an apartment in a seedy section of town. One of his jobs was as a runner on the game show The Price Is Right. Eventually he landed as manager of the gift shop at CBS Studios. In such a setting he could at least feign intimacy with an industry that fascinated him, as he traded gossip with other people trying to eke out a living in the ambient light of Hollywood. Back in Washington, his parents were understandably worried about their intelligent but directionless son. During one visit, Bob Drudge, a social worker, presented his son with a computer, hoping it would stir something more constructive.

In 1995, the notion of an online community, where individuals could traf-
dard raised a vexing question: Where was he getting this stuff? Drudge's work reflected a basic insight. For all their exterior power, the institutions and people who fascinated him and provided his copy had two abiding weaknesses. First, people at the top of these businesses cared desperately about what was written about them. Once people learned that Drudge's small audience included relatively large numbers of people who counted as cultural and journalistic tastemakers, Drudge had all the leverage he needed. The second great weakness is that people are malicious. They want to destroy someone's reputation, settle a score against a grumpy boss, or just stir some chaos for sheer enjoyment.

Drudge claimed he even had some gold-plated sources, such as studio chiefs. But much of what he did was report on reporters. Cannily, he tried to find out early what traditional news organizations were about to report—or were debating whether to report.

He elevated his newsroom snooping to a matter of high principle. He was knocking down editorial filters, which in his mind were instruments of elitism and even oppression. If journalists knew tantalizing things about celebrities and public officials—even if the items were not yet fully checked out—who were they to keep that information to themselves?

Thanks to his delving inside news organizations, he said, "We get to see the kinds of cuts that are made for all kinds of reasons; endless layers of editors with endless agendas changing bits and pieces; so by the time the newspaper hits your welcome mat, it has no meaning."

What the prissy inhabitants of the Old Media regarded as anarchy looked to Drudge like freedom: "Now, with a modern, anyone can follow the world and report on the world—no middle man, no Big Brother."

It would be these kinds of revelations—scooping reporters on their own scoops—that would first rocket Drudge to fame during the Clinton presidency. The impresario of the Freak Show had found the ideal content-provider.
again how much I respect Senator Dole and his record of public service," Clinton said at the first presidential debate.

Dole was driven to distraction. "Where’s the outrage?" he harangued on the campaign trail. "I can’t believe any thinking American except the real partisans want four more years of this." But they did.


The next morning, Morris resigned from the campaign, on the day Clinton accepted his party’s nomination for a second term.

Clinton and Morris stayed in regular contact for more than a year. The president even reached out to him for informal consultations when the Monica Lewinsky controversy erupted in January 1998. But that month, when Morris offered lurid speculation about the state of the Clinton marriage during a radio interview, he was banished for good from the Clinton fold.

No other person has as varied a perspective on contemporary politics. Morris has been a master of the Freak Show, helping Clinton rise above its attacks. He has been a victim of the Freak Show, with his own excursion into tabloid scandal. He is now an enthusiastic participant in the Freak Show, profiting from the personal attacks he aims at the Clintons. He has been supported by Rupert Murdoch, whose News Corp. empire is the most potent corporate promoter of the conservative Freak Show: In addition to his role on Fox News, Morris also writes an acidic, and occasionally brilliant, column for the New York Post.

For all the ill will that exists between them, Morris will be monitoring Hillary Clinton’s possible 2008 presidential campaign as one of its original authors. The strategic assumptions behind her politics—on the primacy of values, the need to transcend partisanship, and the effectiveness of issue polling—all have their origins in his season of influence in 1995 and 1996. And no one should be surprised if sometime in 2008 or before, should Hillary Clinton hit a rough patch politically, her husband decides to place a surreptitious call to someone who has helped them out of jams in the past . . . Say, Dick, you probably saw in the papers. Hillary is in a world of hurt. What do you think we should do?
was just a matter of time before some thread got pulled. But Drudge's role in the unraveling of Clinton's personal and political life in 1997 and 1998 was central—so much so that it is hard to imagine the strange drama unfolding without him as a player.

Monica, Linda, Lucianne, lawyer William Ginsburg, the secret tapes, the wagging finger, the blue dress, the grand jury testimony, the impeachment vote, the acquittal—they are all distant and even hallucinatory memories now. In these graver times, the temptation is to dismiss the episode as gaudy burlesque, the kind of thing that could have happened only during the holiday from history America experienced after the Cold War and before 9/11. But the significance of Clinton's encounter with the world of Matt Drudge should not be discounted. The standards and methods of the news media were forever altered. A sitting president was nearly evicted from office, and only a politician of Clinton's gifts could have survived. The scandal transformed politics in ways that will still be echoing in 2008.

BILL CLINTON in the summer of 1997 had never heard of the Drudge Report. But as political hipsters, his young staffers delighted in being wise to the still obscure site and recommended it to their friends. Most Democrats at the time regarded the Drudge Report as gossipy and cool. They did not appreciate how closely its creator was aligned with the conservative forces arrayed against Clinton. This would soon become evident. And the opening shot was about not Monica Lewinsky but a woman named Kathleen Willey.

On the Fourth of July the Drudge Report's biggest scoop to date came when it detailed internal deliberations at Newsweek magazine, where reporter Michael Isikoff was pursuing a tale about Willey, once a Clinton White House aide. An ambivalent source, Willey had told Isikoff the record that in 1993 the president had made a sexual advance on her in his private study off the Oval Office. Isikoff—a man his colleague Bob Woodward enthused as a "junkyard dog" of a reporter—scrambled to find corroborating sources. And his Newsweek editors brooded over what information would be sufficiently reliable and relevant to merit publication in the country's second-largest newsmagazine, where it would undoubtedly cause a national sensation.

Thanks to Drudge, the sensation preceded Newsweek's eventual publication by a month. His website revealed that Isikoff was "hot on the trail" of an unnamed woman claiming harassment by Clinton. Neither Isikoff nor his editors then had any idea how Drudge could know such a thing. But

Newsweek was receiving an early lesson in how the New Media was changing the rules for the Old Media. The Clinton White House was learning the same lesson.

Among the first people in Clinton's circle to hear of the breaking news was White House deputy counsel Cheryl Mills. Few people in the administration harbored such bittersweet feelings about the Old Media's political coverage as she. A dazzlingly intelligent, aggressive young lawyer, Mills had seethed as she watched reporters pursue a series of what she regarded as ever more trivial and sometimes downright fictitious scandals about the Clintons. Even so, Mills was an avid consumer of political gossip and pop culture news. When she noticed Drudge's item about a story in the works by Newsweek, she asked Lanny Davis, a White House spokesman, to call Isikoff and find out what was going on.

"What's this all about?" Davis demanded of the reporter.

Maintaining his poise and his discretion, Isikoff scoffed, "Come on, Lanny, you're asking me about something in an Internet gossip report?"

The very same Independence Day when Drudge posted his report, Clinton greeted Monica Lewinsky in the Oval Office. Their sexual affair was now over, but the president was desperately trying to keep the former intern in his orbit so that she would not share details of their relationship. Clinton soon would find out that it was a little late for that. Ten days later, after a European trip, Clinton again met Lewinsky in the Oval Office. She gave halting answers to a series of questions that signaled to Clinton that there was a circle of people who knew about his private life. In ways that were not yet fully clear to him, there was somehow a web of connections among Lewinsky, Willey, Isikoff, and Lewinsky's friend and eventual betrayer Linda Tripp. Clinton mentioned to Lewinsky that the Willey allegations were showing up on some website called "The Sludge Report."

Throughout that month, Isikoff kept digging—and so did Drudge. On July 29, Drudge posted his signature siren and trumpeted news of his "WORLD EXCLUSIVE." He was the first to mention Kathleen Willey by name, and he claimed—with enough corroborating detail to back it up—to know all about the details of the presidential "sex pass" Willey had described to Isikoff.

At Newsweek, and other news organizations, the anguished deliberations that ordinarily would precede a decision about whether to publicize such a salacious allegation were over. News of Willey's accusation drew widespread coverage in the days that followed, combined with word that she had re-
ceived a subpoena to testify in a sexual harassment suit that was then pending against Clinton on behalf of a former Arkansas state employee named Paula Corbin Jones.

Drudge delighted in the distress he had caused Isikoff by forcing Newsweek's hand. "I outing the story," he chortled to the Washington Post, "I was totally driving him crazy. There was nothing he could do."

When Isikoff was quoted by a reporter criticizing Drudge as "totally reckless," the Drudge Report gave it a blaring headline, with a link to the article. Isikoff sent his tormentor an e-mail calling him "insane." There was a kind of madcap quality to his site, Drudge admitted. One moment he was posting items on a penis-shrinking scare in Senegal or the location of Barbra Streisand's wedding, and the next he was breaking news about the president of the United States.

"It's a freak show," he explained, "but then we're in freaky times, on the edge of insanity."

To any reporter who listened, he boasted of his computer records showing that thousands of hits received by the Drudge Report came from White House computers.

Trade Secret from the story so far: Old Media restraint will not save you from an embarrassing story, which can show up on the Internet at any time.

Within days of his Kathleen Willey triumph, Drudge broke another exclusive that drew notice at the White House. "CHARGE: NEW WHITE HOUSE RECRUIT SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL HAS SPOUSAL ABUSE PAST."

Drudge claimed that sources told him Blumenthal, the journalist and longtime Clinton supporter, had a violent past as a wife-abuser. Supposedly, there were court records to document the allegations. Drudge's story was posted the evening before Blumenthal was to begin his first day of work at the White House as a communications aide, a job for which he temporarily had left his journalism career.

The accusation was plainly false. By the next day, Blumenthal was threatening suit, and his lawyer had faxed Drudge a letter demanding a retraction. Drudge complied, though in decidedly smaller type than his original charge: "I am issuing a retraction of my information regarding Sidney Blumenthal that appeared in the Drudge Report on August 11, 1997."

Drudge's response to the resulting furor was wan: "I apologize if any harm has been done," he said. "The story was issued in good faith. It was based on two sources who clearly were operating from a political motivation. . . . Someone was trying to get me to go after [the story] and I probably fell for it a little too hard. This is a case of using me to broadcast dirty laundry. I think I've been had."

Unappeased, Blumenthal filed suit anyway, against Drudge and against America Online, the Internet provider that had signed a special promotional agreement to carry the Drudge Report to its customers.

Trade Secret: Beware the Internet's low bar for scandalous news. Anyone on your staff who makes a mistake (and even some who do not) can become embroiled in controversies for which you will have to answer.

Both Drudge's success on the Kathleen Willey story and his rare renunciation of the bogus Blumenthal story illustrated how modern technology was dethroning editors and their historic role in American journalism.

One could lament this change, as all manner of chin-pulling commentators of the journalistic old guard did that summer of 1997. Or one could revel in it as a historic shift that was dragging democracy into a wondrous new age, which is how Drudge himself saw it. "I have no editor, I can say whatever I want," he noted contemptently. He saw this not as a perversion of traditional standards but a restoration of ancestral ideals: "You don't get a license to report in America," he said. "We have a great tradition of freedom of the press in this country... time was only newsmen had access to the full pictures of the day's events, but now any citizen does."

In his crowing, Drudge put the emphasis on technology, as did many like-minded analysts. Yet the significance of Drudge was not the medium he used—the novelty and the notability of hyper-transmitted insta-scoop would wear off in due course—but the way he altered the psychology of news. The essential relationship between how people distilled and reacted to the information they learned had changed.

In the old regime of news organizations, a mistake of the sort Drudge had made about Blumenthal would have dealt a grievous blow to an institution's credibility. But Drudge was not interested in defending his reliability or precision, and the public did not respond to Drudge's Blumenthal error with a backlash. To the contrary, the episode supplied him with a bonanza of publicity. His personal celebrity and the audience for his website grew exponentially almost overnight.
Sure, some of what he published might be unverified bull, the public seemed to conclude, but let's see it anyway. By the end of 1997, his audience was larger than ever. Of Sidney Blumenthal, Drudge later chortled, "He made me."

Trade Secret: When Drudge comes after you with a false report, take no solace from the fact that it is inaccurate. Being wrong does not matter to Drudge or his readers.

More than Blumenthal, needless to say, it was Bill Clinton who made Matt Drudge.

What the Kennedy assassination of 1963 was for television news, the writer Michael Kinsley observed, the opening weeks of 1998 were for the Internet: "Its coming of age as a media force. Or some might say media farce."

The pattern of the previous summer was repeated almost exactly, this time with far larger stakes. Once again, Isikoff was hot on a lead about a sexual scandal involving Clinton. And again there were intense internal debates within Newsweek about whether the story was solid enough to report, an argument preempted by Drudge. He broke his exposé about Newsweek sitting on the story of a still unnamed intern on a Saturday night. Earlier that day, Clinton had given his deposition in the Paula Jones sexual harassment case. Under oath, he repeatedly denied having a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky. But the questions were so insistent and so detailed—referring to gifts that Clinton had given Lewinsky—that it was evident the Jones lawyers were on to something. Clinton returned to the Oval Office in a panicked mood, even before the inevitable Drudge Report item. Scattered events in diverse legal and personal arenas were starting to merge. Clinton's vulnerability was the common theme.

Drudge's scoop arrived in time for the Sunday talk shows. Conservative commentator William Kristol brought up the gestating Newsweek investigation, and the likelihood that there was something to it, on the roundtable discussion of ABC News's This Week program. Fellow panelist George Stephanopoulos tried to interject: "And, Bill, where did it come from? The Drudge Report. You know, we've all seen how discredited . . . ."

"No, no, no," Kristol replied. "They had screaming arguments in Newsweek magazine yesterday. They finally didn't go with the story. It's going to be a question of whether the media is now going to report what are pretty well-validated charges of presidential behavior in the White House."

A week later, it was apparent that Kristol had been right. The panel on This Week speculated openly about a possible Clinton impeachment. The scandal had exploded into the Old Media a few days after Drudge's initial posting, when the Washington Post and ABC News followed up with their own reporting that identified Lewinsky by name. They also shared the startling news that Clinton's extramarital relationship—and his alleged efforts to suppress testimony and his apparent willingness to lie about it—were under investigation by Kenneth Starr, who had pivoted from business affairs to sexual affairs. Conservative commentator George Will opined to laughter on the This Week telecast that Clinton's presidency in January 1998 "is as dead—deader really—than Woodrow Wilson's was after he had a stroke."

Trade Secret: People in the Old Media with millions of readers or listeners closely monitor the Internet, and they are prone to be influenced by or cite, Frank Show postings that would otherwise be seen only by a limited audience.

Shortly after the story broke, one of the mysteries about the Drudge Report was solved: Where was he getting this stuff? It turned out he was receiving his exclusives thanks to his membership in a loose but well-informed network of fellow conservatives whose lines reached into every aspect of this growing story—from Linda Tripp, to Paula Jones's attorneys, to Ken Starr's stable of prosecutors.

Drudge's main source was a conservative literary agent and public relations provocateur in New York named Lucianne Goldberg—the same woman who earlier had brokered an introduction between Isikoff and Linda Tripp. Drudge's social circle included the conservative writers and television pundits Laura Ingraham and Ann Coulter, and the author David Brock, who was then beginning his initial steps on an ideological journey from right to left. These writers had knowledge of—indeed, had played a part in facilitating—one of the most arresting facts to emerge in the case. There had been close cooperation between Paula Jones's legal team and Starr's prosecutors in their respective cases against Clinton; this collaboration had begun in the days before the president gave his deposition in the Jones case. In essence, Starr and the Jones attorneys jointly had set a trap for Clinton in that deposition, a trap Clinton walked into when he gave his false testimony about Lewinsky.

It was this alliance that First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton was referring to when, soon after the scandal erupted, she went on the Today show to denounce the allegations as the product of a "vast, right-wing conspiracy." Those words sounded more paranoid when wrested from context than they did in the full interview. In any event, the first lady obviously was wrong about the Lewinsky claims—they were true enough—but she was right about
the secret coordination among Clinton's enemies. She knew all about it from an unusual source. David Brock had struck up a surprising, covert friendship with Sidney Blumenthal. Brock gave Blumenthal regular reports about Drudge's activities, and passed on what he knew about the behind-the-scenes maneuvering of the Jones and Starr teams. Blumenthal in turn expeditiously communicated this information to Hillary Clinton.

Previously, the ideological tilt of Drudge had not been apparent. But his role in the Lewinsky drama made starkly clear that his conservative affiliations were central to the work of the Drudge Report. Drudge did not pretend to be a deep philosophical thinker or zealot. He was happy to report sensational news whatever its political implications. But he recognized that a big reason for the Drudge Report's rocketing influence was its use as an ideological weapon of the Right.

Clinton survived the Lewinsky scandal at the cost of a year of his presidency, and by some measures much more than that. As the uproar receded, there was a widespread expectation that Matt Drudge's moment on the public stage was over. The Fox News Channel had set him up with his own talk show in 1998, but then canceled it a year later. Traffic on the Drudge Report reportedly was trailing off. New York Times columnist Frank Rich in 1999 devoted a column to Drudge's "brief reign as the national press masco," Rich argued that Drudge was consumed by the same voracious forces that he once represented: the explosion of new sources for news and commentary, the public's vagrant attention span, the relentless search for the latest cutting edge.

Rich and others who reasonably expected Drudge to fade into irrelevance watched as he grew more influential than ever. In the next six years, dozens of references to Matt Drudge would appear under Rich's own byline. The young man with the porkpie hat who leap to the national stage at age thirty was still there as he approached his forties.

This is a curiosity. There is nothing that Matt Drudge did that could not be done—indeed is done on a daily basis—by multitudes of other people. There is no longer a technological freshness in running a website or hosting a bunch of links. The thrill is gone, but Drudge's influence remains pervasive, thanks to one of the most basic Trade Secrets of modern politics: The Internet did not make editors obsolete, it just disempowered one set in favor of another.

For all of Drudge's exclamations about how the Internet had made editors
How to Run for President
and Let the Freak Show Destroy You

- Have little or no sense of how others perceive you.
- Be arrogant without being truly confident.
- Display a sense of entitlement tinged with bitterness and belligerence.
- Be fuzzy about your past controversial statements and actions.
- Be prone to dissemble about those statements and actions, and attempt to conceal the truth even from your staff by indignantly refusing to divulge facts.
- Fail to formulate an explanation for changes or discrepancies in your public policy positions.
- Treat your campaign advisors badly, thereby encouraging them to reward disrespect with disloyalty (through leaks, hostility, laxity, and shoddy work).
- Surround yourself with advisors who coddle you and reinforce your worst instincts.
- Allow your spouse and/or children to spook, intimidate, and meddle with the campaign staff.
- Refuse to make any decisions about how to respond to attacks on your character or on shifting events until you have seen polling data.
- Refuse to respond to character attacks you personally deem unworthy, inaccurate, or unfair.

How to Run for President and Let the Freak Show Destroy You

- When you do respond to character attacks, do it in a manner that exhibits the very personality traits that were the basis of the original attack.
- Care more about the whims of the New York Times editorial board than about the views of middle-class families in the suburbs of Ohio.
- Treat the presidential debates as an opportunity to prove how clever you are, as if you are competing in an Ivy League forensic society event, and ignore the fact that you are addressing viewers who watch debates with the same degree of gravity and scrutiny with which they watch America’s Next Top Model.
- Bask in the presumption that the “smarter” candidate will win.
- Speak and act as if you work in Washington, D.C., and as if everyone else works there, too, or at least would like to.
- Ignore the fact that the media is an active player (not a referee) in the contest and neglect to use its obsession with process stories to your advantage.
- Be convinced that the truth about your shining superiority ultimately will come through to the voters, that the Freak Show is just a sideshow and not the main event, and that you are owed a happy ending.