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Style

MEDIA NOTES

A Reporter's Net Loss; Details of **Newsweek** Story Appear Prematurely on the Web
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Washington Post Staff Writer

An investigative reporter is trying to nail down a sensitive story. Suddenly someone splashes the key details all over the Internet, even though the reporter doesn't have enough evidence to publish. Now half of official Washington is talking about the story he sn't finished writing.

That was the situation faced by **Newsweek's** Michael Isikoff as he pursued the question of whether former White House aide Kathleen Willey had ever accused President Clinton of making an improper sexual advance.

On July 4, word of the Isikoff inquiry turned up on the World Wide Web's **Drudge** Report, the one-man gossip operation run by Matt **Drudge**. By month's end, **Drudge** had put out more details of the work-in-progress, including Willey's name. What's more, **Drudge** says he was tipped off by one of Isikoff's **Newsweek** colleagues.

"I outed the story," boasts **Drudge**. "I was totally driving him crazy. There was nothing he could do." He says Isikoff sent him an e-mail calling him "insane."

Isikoff, a former Washington Post reporter, takes the matter seriously, saying **Drudge** was reporting things -- such as what Willey supposedly told **Newsweek** -- that he could not possibly know. That, in turn, greatly complicated Isikoff's dealings with potential sources.

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"He's rifling through raw reporting, like raw FBI files, and disseminating it," Isikoff says. "He doesn't conform to any journalistic standard. This is not harmless fun; it's reckless and ought to be condemned. He ought not be treated as an impish character. It's hard to do real reporting in an atmosphere that's been polluted like this."

Newsweek described its story as "complicated and murky," and media critic Terry Eastland called it "carefully executed investigative reporting." Indeed, contrary to **Drudge's** advance billing, Isikoff's piece last Monday raised questions about whether any sexual harassment took place. He quoted another former White House aide, Linda Tripp, as saying that Willey emerged looking "happy" from the Oval Office on the day in question in 1993 and did not appear harassed.

What pushed the Willey story into the mainstream press (the story was first broken by CBS's Bill Plante) was the decision by Paula Jones's attorneys to subpoena Willey in Jones's sexual harassment suit against Clinton. Willey's lawyer said she was "outraged" to be drawn into the case and has "a good relationship" with the president.

Clinton's lawyer, Robert Bennett, said the president "adamantly denies" doing anything improper.

Bennett said in an interview that the media are "hypocritical" because they ignore "stories that don't meet their journalistic standards" until "some event, like the issuance of a subpoena or the appearance of something in another publication." Then, he says, "the press uses that as an excuse" to run with the flimsy story.

Clearly, Drudgelike leaks on investigative stories boost the chances for misleading and sensational headlines. **Drudge** freely admits his gossip is sometimes wrong; he predicted that Hillary Rodham Clinton would be indicted last summer.

Isikoff "has a right to be furious," **Drudge** says, "but life's not fair. The new technology lets someone interrupt the flow." Besides, says **Drudge**, "I seemed to have about 80 percent of the facts."

Tabloid Goose Chase

Top editors at the New York Post and Daily News are crying foul

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the charge that their owners spiked stories questioning whether Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was having an affair with his communications director.

The editors say they were simply unable to confirm that Giuliani's marriage to Donna Hanover was falling apart before Vanity Fair published the charge last week.

"Once a week there'd be a new Donna rumor that would explode like crazy," says Arthur Browne, the Daily News managing editor. "It kind of took on a life of its own.

"We checked on every apartment we were told she was moving into. A huge amount of man-hours was devoted to this. But no source had firsthand knowledge. It was always, 'I was told.' We came up dry. . . . What's going on in their household is in some respects beyond the reach of journalism, and should be."

"We weren't able to develop enough information that we would have felt comfortable going with it," says Post Editor Ken Chandler. "When you write about problems in someone's marriage, usually it's cause one of the principals has decided to talk about it, or filed a suit, or has been seen in public dating someone they're not married to. In this case there was no supportive evidence. It wasn't for lack of trying."

The editors say they never discussed the story with their bosses, Post owner Rupert Murdoch and News mogul Mort Zuckerman, both of whom have business dealings with New York City. Giuliani and press aide Cristyne Lategano have denied the reports of an affair, while Hanover has sidestepped the charge and pointedly not defended her husband.

Daily News sources say the editors killed one story that raised questions about the alleged affair after Hanover, at a party for a movie she appeared in, thanked people for helping her through "difficult" times and did not mention her husband. Browne says he recalls vetoing only "shaky gossip items."

Once the Vanity Fair piece surfaced, the News ran a banner headline, infuriating staffers who felt the tabloid should have broken the story. Browne says the paper had no choice after "a national publication of some repute" reported that the alleged affair "had a

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gnificant impact on city government." The Post ran nothing in its first edition, then caught up after the mayor's office issued a statement.

"I'm still not convinced the Vanity Fair piece was accurate," Chandler says.

Petering Out?

Charlie Peters, the irascible founder of the Washington Monthly, is ready to pass the baton. Sort of. One day. When he gets around to it.

Peters hopes to sell the neoliberal magazine to one of his earliest editors, Nicholas Lemann, now the Atlantic Monthly's national correspondent. The deal, first reported by National Journal, could happen in a year or two.

"I could just not face selling now," Peters says. "I still want to grab the world by the lapels and tell it what to do next. But I also realize I'm 70 years old. I want to provide for the Monthly to continue in the right hands, and Nick Lemann is the right hands."

But Lemann says he hasn't tackled the hard work of lining up investors or sizing up the business challenges. "There's no urgency because Charlie is happily running the magazine and I'm finishing a book," he says.

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CAPTION: On his online **Drudge** Report, Matt **Drudge** "outed" an unfinished story by a **Newsweek** reporter.

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