

## COVER STORY

### Los Angeles Times Magazine

*What Hath the Web Wrought?*

*Matt Drudge Has Been Accused of Recklessness and Libel. He Has Also Been Hailed as a Hero. Will He Step Toward the Journalistic Mainstream as He Latches Onto Celebrity?*

**By Janet Wiscombe**

Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat! It's the speed of Matt Drudge's mind. It's the fingers pelting a plastic keyboard at <http://www.drudgereport.com>. It's the velocity of the verbal volleys he lobs into the Oval Office from his cheap ninth-floor apartment near Hollywood and Vine.

Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat! "I like things big and loud," he trills, fiendishly clapping his hands together like a child in a highchair. "Speed is my weapon!" The naughty boy of the Internet, the 31-year-old cyber muckraker who used a prehistoric 486 computer plugged into the wall of his \$600-a-month home/newsroom to introduce the world to Monica Lewinsky, is having the time of his life. In an accelerated Info Age blur of months, he has catapulted himself from Web page to front page like a clown out of a cannon. He's on a first-name basis with senators and stars, fawned over by the rich, instantly recognized by Washington cabbies: "Hey Drudge Man!" Now he's even got his own TV talk show, proof positive of his total crash through the cyber barrier.

Way, way back in January, after lifting the Lewinsky scandal from Newsweek magazine and launching it into the electronic ether, Drudge appeared on "Meet the Press." He casually pontificated about sex and the White House as though he were Walter Cronkite. The mainstream media treated him like a cockroach that had skittered out from under a sink. And in that perceptual chasm was born a question that continues to rankle traditional reporters: Who is this guy and why can't we just squish him flat and get back to business?

Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat! "Hi," says the figure in the fedora, staring into the camera and into the American home. "I'm Matt Drudge, one of the first guys to make a name for himself on the Internet, showing my face."

Even if the Fox TV studio weren't intentionally draped in shadows, it would be difficult not to squint at this man with the ever-arching eyebrows and asymmetrical face. He is dark, odd, off-kilter. As he spews political intrigue for the camera, there's a sense that his full picture has yet to materialize. Lambasted by old-school journalists for trading in rumors and falsehoods and coddled by a far-flung conservative cadre whose causes he has furthered, it appears that young Drudge is caught in a tug-of-war for his soul. Now that he has rocketed into the rarefied heights of name recognition, will he seek respectability? Does he have regrets? Or--and this may be the question that really holds our fascination--could it be that traditional ethics are already obsolete and that Drudge merely reflects a new, speed-warped journalistic norm?

In June, the National Press Club invited him to be its featured speaker. The last question he fielded was the kind that makes media stalwarts squirm. "What is the biggest mistake you have made so far?"

The Drudge response came fast and firm: "Ever doubting my ability."

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XXX DRUDGE REPORT XXXXX STARR HAS MORE THAN 75 PIX THAT SHOW LEWINSKY/CLINTON TOGETHER! \*\*Investigation Exclusive\*\* \*\* Must Credit DRUDGE REPORT\*\*

The Drudge Report is a breathless, often juvenile collection of tabloid teasers and news briefs concentrating on the White House sex scandal, the media buzz and preferably both. ("FLASH REPORT: MALIBU MONICA POSES FOR VANITY FAIR PHOTO . . ." "LEWINSKY THREATENED SUICIDE OVER

CLINTON") Pet subjects range from movies to Microsoft, who's in and who's out. Drudge loves weather reports and lists: newspaper circulations, box-office sales, Nielsen ratings. He offers links to national and international news services and all the major syndicated columnists--from William Safire to Molly Ivins. By his own account he "breaks the coverage of the coverage of the coverage." He relies on information he strings together from wire service copy, chat rooms and e-mail tips, unnamed sources, GOP operatives and "big-time" journalists, who, he preens, are among his most loyal readers.

Drudge's first real nanosecond of fame came a year ago, when he began posting items about Kathleen Willey, the former White House staffer who'd been subpoenaed by Paula Jones' lawyers. One was a dispatch claiming he had inside information on an investigation into Willey's allegations that Clinton had made improper sexual advances. The investigation, as it happens, was the work of Newsweek reporter Michael Isikoff. Enraged at the rip-off, Isikoff blasted Drudge for "rifling through raw reporting, like raw FBI files, and disseminating it."

Then, on Jan. 17, the Drudge Report digitally disseminated some even hotter NEWS! or not-yet news, or gossip, or garbage or something. This time, Newsweek magazine had, but wouldn't publish, an Isikoff story alleging an affair between President Clinton and a young White House intern. The stinkbomb's aftermath was so scary, Drudge says that he nearly went ape. He was so petrified that he hid out in his boxer shorts with a chair against the door, furiously fielding phone calls and e-mails. He spent four days in exile with the story virtually to himself, snacking on chips and salsa and occasionally breaking for a round of pushups or hopping into the bathtub with a can of cleanser and a sponge. (Nothing like a furious tub scrub to steady the spirit and cleanse the soul.)

When he sashayed back into the mainstream media spotlight at week's end, he no longer merely repeated stories; he was the story. MATT DRUDGE: nervy little David to big media Goliaths; MATT DRUDGE: mastermind of one of the most competitive new media operations in America; MATT DRUDGE: celebrated star of the say-anything, point and click universe, a cyber cowboy who's been described by some of the most respected reporters in the country as a sleazy, reckless charlatan.

As the Internet's firstborn, Drudge is a symbol of a seismic shift in the way people receive and perceive information. He's triggering a national debate about the 21st century world of e-mails and e-businesses, e-journalists and e-values, a debate that raises these questions: What are the perils of Internet reporting when there often are no fact-checkers or editors, and false information spreads like brush fire? How does the velocity of the Internet and the 24-hour news cycle impact the reporting of the news?

Reflecting the view of many mainstream reporters, Isikoff has called Drudge "a menace to honest, responsible journalism." But even if his tactics were less controversial, it's unlikely Drudge would be readily embraced by journalists who've spent years or decades building reputations and careers.

Three years ago, Drudge was hawking T-shirts and dusting "60 Minutes" coffee mugs at the CBS Studio Center. Now he's got that Saturday night talk show on the Fox News channel. He's also facing a libel suit for spreading a lie. Last summer he posted an item on his Web site repeating rumors that Sidney Blumenthal, a longtime liberal journalist who was beginning a job on the White House staff, "has a spousal abuse past that has been effectively covered up." He also quoted a White House source who called the rumor fiction. It was. Drudge claimed the information came from unnamed "GOP operatives" and was based on court records. No such court records exist.

A fax from Blumenthal's lawyer decried his "outrageous falsehoods," and warned that legal action would be taken unless Drudge revealed his sources and removed his "contemptible drivel" from the Internet. Drudge posted a brief retraction the next day. He later told Howard Kurtz of the Washington Post that his report was based on two sources who were politically motivated. "This is a case of using me to broadcast dirty laundry," he said. "I think I've been had."

Blumenthal, a senior White House advisor, filed a \$30-million defamation suit against Drudge and America Online, Internet sponsors of the Drudge Report. The case is intriguing for its political implications but more important for the legal and ethical questions it raises about how we define news in the digital age.

In April, a Washington judge dismissed Blumenthal's suit against America Online but let stand a similar libel suit against Drudge, defining him as "a purveyor of gossip." A reporter from the New York Times contacted him for comment.

"I'm going on the record," Drudge said. "I'm not a journalist. I'm a kangaroo!" \*

apple may have hooked us on the mouse, but matt drudge is making it roar. "I'm a puny guy who can compete with Dan Rather or any of the media titans," he boasts. "Why should a few editors decide what the American people are going to know?"

At the National Press Club, he was asked if the right of every citizen to shout "Extra, extra, this just in . . . ." outweighs maintaining professional ethics. "I'm not a professional," he responded. "I can print something without an editor. This is where we are now. I don't know exactly why that's so scary." One answer, of course, is that a free society depends on accurate information and an educated electorate. But as the lines blur between amateurs and professionals, news and entertainment, and as media competition turns news events into freak shows, it becomes harder to distinguish fact from fiction, evidence from innuendo.

The same week that Drudge fielded questions at the National Press Club, he posted a report that he was "monitoring information on what appears to be an 8.4 magnitude seismic event that occurred in the BALTICS-BELARUS region in NW RUSSIA." He cited his source as the International Data Centre, a Virginia-based government contractor, and provided the agency's Internet address. What he neglected to report was that the information was retrieved on the Net from IDC's automatic daily bulletin and that it carried a disclaimer urging that the data not be used.

Robert North, director of the IDC's Center for Monitoring Research, says Drudge's use of the information was irresponsible and could have caused unnecessary alarm. Naturally, North was surprised and infuriated a few days later when columnist James Glassman hailed the episode as a glowing example of Drudge's reportorial contributions. In a Washington Post op-ed piece, Glassman wrote that Drudge "may be the most powerful reporter in America and is certainly the most heroic." Drudge, he said, dispenses information, then "tells his readers they can check it out themselves . . . or swallow it whole. In other words, e-journalism demands judgment not just from writers but from readers."

Manuel Klausner, one of Drudge's attorneys who is best known as a supporter of California's anti-affirmative action initiative, has a similar take. He calls his client, "the prototypical reporter of the 21st century . . . the Thomas Paine of the Internet."

If all this laissez-faire sweet talk sounds similar, it's probably to be expected. Protecting civil rights--free speech or, for that matter, privacy--is easily entangled with ideological motivation. Glassman is a trustee of the libertarian Reason Foundation, which Klausner founded. And Klausner, who took Drudge's case pro bono, also serves as an advisor to the Individual Rights Foundation, a branch of the Center for the Study of Popular Culture in Santa Monica, which is funded in part by conservative Pittsburgh billionaire Richard Mellon Scaife. Author David Horowitz, founder of the center, began spearheading the Matt Drudge Defense Fund the moment he caught wind of Blumenthal's lawsuit. Years ago, after Horowitz severed his leftist roots and morphed into a conservative, Blumenthal wrote an article attacking him. Now Horowitz has tapped into the conservative-libertarian network to fight the lawsuit against Drudge. He says the case is about "the Internet versus the press; an upstart journalist versus the establishment."

The Internet itself, meanwhile, has buzzed not only with debate about Drudge's perceived conservative bias but whether his protectors' support stems from a desire to defend his right to free speech or to encourage the relentlessly anti-Clinton currents of what Drudge actually says.

One of Drudge's best friends, Andrew Breitbart, who works as a researcher for conservative commentator Arianna Huffington, says the establishment media hates Drudge because "he gets at the heart of what's going on. At what point did the journalism profession become so elitist they can tell people who can and cannot be members of the club?"

That's the kind of glib comment that strikes many journalists as a red herring. They say demanding accuracy is hardly elitist. For all the reflection about the nature of news on the Internet, absolutes do exist: There was

no 8.4 quake in Russia. Period. Sidney Blumenthal did not abuse his wife. Period. To say otherwise without evidence is wrong. Period.

Joan Konner, publisher of the Columbia Journalism Review, says Drudge is "by no reasonable measure working in the public interest." Marvin Kalb, director of the Shorenstein Center on Press at Harvard, dismisses him as "a conveyor of gossipy information." Veteran Washington reporter Jules Witcover, now of the Baltimore Sun, has called Drudge is "a reckless trader in rumor and gossip." Time magazine crowned him "the king of new junk media."

Yet Drudge does have defenders in the mainstream press and on the political left. In a column in the New York Times in February (well before CNN's apparently bogus story on nerve gas, the New Republic's firing of a journalistic impersonator and other recent media transgressions), Jack Shafer, deputy editor of Microsoft's on-line magazine, Slate, pointed out that the Internet is hardly the only news venue guilty of contributing to the shattering of ethics barriers in the media's "manic pursuit of the story." Instead of bemoaning Web characters such as Drudge, Shafer surmised, "we should welcome them for what they are--new voices that enliven journalism."

Last fall, USC law professor Susan Estrich, former campaign manager for Michael S. Dukakis, wrote a column for USA Today defending Drudge in the Blumenthal matter. She was horrified to learn from an editor that Clinton's deputy press secretary, Joe Lockhart, had called USA Today to complain about the column. She uses the incident as evidence to support Drudge's vehement insistence that he's being sued by the White House--that the Blumenthal suit is, at heart, an effort to shut Drudge up about Clinton. There is, Estrich says, a legitimate debate about whether those who disseminate news should have higher standards for verifying information before releasing it. But, she adds, "I read Matt differently than I read the New York Times . . . I trust myself to separate the wheat from the chaff." She credits Drudge with democratizing access to information. That does not give him a license to lie, she says, "but is a reason for being worthy of First Amendment protection." She attributes his stunning celebrity to the lawsuit. "Sidney made him," she says.

For his part, Drudge defines himself as a populist and insists that while his passion is politics, he isn't political. Still, he never strays far from his contempt for Clinton and Blumenthal. He points at a picture of Blumenthal in a magazine at a black-tie affair and asks sarcastically, "Does this guy look like he's suffering?" It is as though he, Drudge, is the victim, the hapless prey of the White House "secret police."

"I'm scared," he says. "I'm the first reporter ever sued by the White House." Then he beams. "It makes me think that what I'm doing is really important."

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Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat!

Matt Drudge spits out the first six letters of the Hebrew alphabet: "Aleph! Beth! Veth! Gimel! Daleth! He!" That's all he learned in his seven-year "sentence" at Hebrew school. Later, at a public high school near Takoma Park in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., where he was raised, he learned nothing, he says. Zip. Zero. Zilch. "I stopped learning at school at age 12. Everything else I learned on my own." He graduated with a D average and awful SAT scores. "They were not able to stuff me like a sausage," he says. "Even then I didn't play by society's rules. I was a rebel all the way."

Drudge is an only child of parents whose politics took a right turn in recent years. "My dad is anti-big government, like me," he says. His mother's transformation came, he adds, after Lewinsky's allegations surfaced. His mother is an attorney, his father a government social worker. He says they left him alone a lot but have always been supportive. He's grateful that they allowed him to follow his own interests and make his own mistakes. "I was a stutterer. I had a twitch inside all the time--a lot of raw energy."

"I was lonely," he adds with a trace of sadness. "I still am."

Until his senior year, when he earned a modest degree of popularity as class curmudgeon, he was a loner who related more to Woodward and Bernstein than to the kids at school. He didn't just like news, he was

enraptured by the news, sniffing it out, climbing inside of it, falling asleep to it. His one claim to fame in high school was serving as morning announcer and Pledge of Allegiance guy. "I am a patriot," he says. "Ken Starr is a patriot."

Five years ago, Drudge's dad bought him a computer. It was as though surfing the Net was in his genetic code. He joined news groups. He made friends. He was hooked. He began e-mailing gossipy Hollywood, political and science tidbits to cyber chums with information harvested from cyberspace and weeded out of CBS trash bins. He developed a small following that grew from two to 12 to tens of thousands.

But it isn't only a modem that has given him access to the world. It is a quick mind and a magnanimous, slightly off-beat persona. On the one hand, he wants to be known as a proper, traditional, all-American guy who votes Republican, visits his grandmother and loves "Titanic." On the other, he cultivates an image of himself as an eccentric, an iconoclast who thrives on pop culture. He may have voted for George Bush, but he has also cast ballots for Ralph Nader and Jerry Brown. He's a born actor and gossip, a spectacularly self-assured gadfly who simply adores knowing everything and everybody. He's a world-class talker, a kid accustomed to performing for adults, a smart, quick-witted character who says that if people really knew him, they'd probably find him boring.

Drudge lives with Dexter, a beloved cat, and is a low-maintenance bachelor, a fanatic about keeping his life simple. He studies Krishnamurti. He meditates. He's revolted by sports utility vehicles, car phones and other yuppie indulgences. He drives a Geo Metro, shops for bargain air fares and buys clothes at Marshalls. More than anything, he's a voracious reader who prowls newsstands and libraries, reads several papers and magazines and all the tabloids every day and is tethered to the news cycle at all times.

From all that comes this: The first famous guy from cyberspace, a wonk in primary green Converse tennis shoes who now serves as general and jester in the War of the Eyeballs, his term for the media's competition for readers and viewers. War is hell. But, oh, the sweet smell of victory, the parties at Arianna's in Washington, the private movie screenings in Hollywood, the TV tapings in the Big Apple. "He's far more interested in politics than most people his age," says Estrich, who has hosted Drudge at a couple of parties in her Hancock Park home. "His enthusiasm is infectious."

Lucianne Goldberg, the former Nixon trickster and book agent, who prides herself for having encouraged aspiring author Linda Tripp to tape Lewinsky, says Drudge is the absolute star wherever he goes. (Goldberg and Drudge bonded, she says, after recognizing that they both "hated Clinton." When the talk show "Drudge" premiered in June, she was the first guest.) Last spring, Goldberg took him to a party "of Arianna's rich Republican friends" in Washington. When he walked in, everyone clapped. To see him at the computer, Goldberg gushes, "is like watching Chopin at the piano."

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Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat-tat!

"I did the Playboy interview at that table," Drudge offers, gesturing from his virtual dining room, a dark booth at Musso & Frank Grill, just steps from his apartment. "The British Sun was over there. Salon did a photo shoot of me in the back by the trash dumpsters."

As he jabbars and jaws about the presidential sex scandal and eats salad, soup and spumoni, he is at his playful, exuberant best. Asked if he's ever spoken to Lewinsky, the springboard to his current status and six-figure income, his tone becomes theatrically conspiratorial. "Just say, 'When asked about his sources, Drudge went blank.' "

It's the sort of coy comment that makes his critics crazy. But, as Brill's Content, the new journalism review, notes of Lewinsky: "To this day none of the journalists who've reported about her have spoken to her."

Despite the mainstream's moralizing, the fact is that Drudge's cyberleaks spurred a stampede, the most astounding media frenzy in modern history, and Drudge is the one who emerged from the choking dust. While the public and press stood in the wings watching media conglomerates grow vastly bigger, and profit margins fatter, he quietly stole the show. By sheer dint of timing, curiosity, a ferocious fascination with news-

-and a fedora--he's managed to give the amorphous Internet a human face. As a result, he stands poised to become an Infotainment icon. Enduring charges of reckless immaturity from denizens of a dying medium is but a small price to pay for such staggering attention.

And that's what it's all about.

Drudge is a self-described latchkey kid, a product of an attention-starved culture that emphasizes entitlement over accomplishment, a student of an era powered more by images than ideas, the who rather than the why. He may appear to be a star-struck computer geek, but he has been in training for stardom since his parents gave him a microphone at age 4. He is a showbiz whiz, the inevitable product of the age that spawned him.

Drudge says he's succeeded because he can "stay centered and absorb all the information without going schizo. Some people can get real strange about Internet stuff. There's an earthquake and instantly you're there. It's God stuff. You can be anywhere at anytime--like God. There is a God complex to the Internet that attracts a lot of obsessive personalities. They become all-knowing."

When he feels himself slipping into cyber overload, he turns his computer off. "You can become a sociopath if you're not aware. It's like taking and stuffing all this information up your nose all night and then blowing your brains out."

He's not about to let that happen. "I'm not going to fizzle out like a snowflake on a flame," he says.

Will our fickle culture prove him accurate? Who knows? Who cares? For now, these are the cold, hard facts: Whatever we call this guy--news gatherer, gossip, reporter, sleaze or kangaroo--he has taken raw information and turned it into the era's most coveted prize: Celebrity. And more! He's the only media figure to ride the tumultuous Monicagate mudslide and emerge with celebrity's sin qua non--a one-word name that stands alone. Type it out, and you have an unsettling summary of this strange premillennarian moment. Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat: Drudge.

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Credit: Janet Wiscombe's last article for the magazine was a profile of AIDS Ride founder and director Dan Pallotta