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By Timothy Karr

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She smiles from page one of Tuesday's New York Daily News. Her face is closely cropped, wrapped in 240-point Arial; "TM NO MONICA" the headline declares. The lead spills to page three, where the 27-year-old Columbia grad Alexandra Polier denies rumors linking her romantically to Senator John Kerry. The allegations of an affair, made public last Thursday by conservative rumormonger Matt Drudge, had ignited an online firestorm that, over time, spread from right-wing websites to foreign tabloids, and ultimately into U.S. mainstream press.

In the front-page Daily News story, Polier calls reports of an affair between her and the democratic frontrunner "completely false." Other leading American newspapers, including The New York Times, Washington Post and USA Today, trumpeted her denial, marking an unusual passage in journalism where mainstream news outlets report the negation of a story that they initially did not cover.

The Daily News's front-page billing of the denial would indicate that readers had gone elsewhere to read the rumor that sparked the scandal. This is likely given Drudge's claim that more than 15 million people visited his site after he released the report on Thursday. The fervid attention subsequently heaped upon the story by partisan media groups and British and Australian tabloids also filtered onto the screens and into the minds of many Americans.

These news sources, once inaccessible to average Americans, now appear alongside mainstream news stories in the results of a simple Google News search. According to a recent report from the Pew Research Center for People and the Press, more than 40 millions Americans go online for election news. Much of this comes via Google News and other news search engines that return news links based upon a quantitative — not qualitative — search process. As a result, major news organizations find their headlines intermingled with those of publications they might consider less scrupulous than their own.

How do mainstream American media outlets lift themselves above the fray? For the most part they don't, said Ken Auletta, media critic for The New Yorker and author of "Backstory: Inside the Business of News".

"In a cluttered information world, where you no longer are as dominant as you might have been, where people can chose from several sources, there's a tendency to excuse

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yourself from doing your own reporting when someone else breaks the story first,” Auletta said. “It doesn’t matter if that source is a Drudge or an Imus, there’s a tendency to look for an excuse to print rumors without having to go it alone.”

Auletta sees this as a dangerous byproduct of the accelerated news cycle. The machinations that transform un-sourced reports into legitimate subject matter for mainstream consumption exist within every news organization; a prominent smear that emerges from the fringes of the Internet will eventually make its way up the media food chain onto their front pages. “The Bush people or the Kerry people or the Edwards people don’t have to put out attacks on their opponents anymore. They just get someone like a Drudge to do it and it gets into the media bloodstream, turns virulent and travels fast,” Auletta said. “Speed is always the enemy of context and thought and fact-checking.”

While many journalists base the legitimacy of their reporting on the integrity of their sources, few are willing to follow a rulebook that doesn’t allow them to cover un-sourced rumors. After all, Drudge got it right in 1998. He was the first to report on allegations of an affair between then President Clinton and a White House intern. And while many believe mainstream media subsequently over-covered the Clinton peccadillo, none can deny the story’s veracity, in the strictest clinical sense.

Media that refrained from covering rumors of the Lewinsky affair in 1998 were beat by those who did. The Kerry-Polier rumor, on the other hand, is more revealing of the ways mainstream media now seem more willing to toy with unconfirmed political sleaze and rush unconfirmed rumors to press.

Within 24 hours of its release on Thursday, news organizations, including CNN, The Wall Street Journal Online, Fox News and MSNBC had already leapt onto the rumor mill by reporting Kerry’s on-air denial, made during an appearance Friday morning on Don Imus’s radio talk show. In their estimation, Kerry’s denial while not legitimizing the rumor, made the story newsworthy.

Forty-eight hours after Drudge, others, including The New York Times, USA Today, and The Washington Post, had still refrained from mentioning the scandal, Kerry’s on-air denial or Polier’s name. “Maybe this will be the first time that a true firewall is established between the web, the Brits and the rest of the media,” a hopeful Andrew Sullivan wrote on Saturday in his popular weblog. “That in itself would be a media milestone.”

Shortly thereafter, however, Sullivan’s “firewall” was breached. And by 5:30pm Tuesday, February 17, almost every mainstream news organization had reached out to touch the story. In defense of its editorial decision to lead page one with Polier’s denial, The Daily News suggests that the story passed muster only after she released her statement via the Associated Press.

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Kerry Burke, who coauthored the Daily News story, said that he had learned about the alleged affair from one of the Polier's Columbia classmates. Daily News began working on the story prior to Matt Drudge's release Burke said. "The Daily News doesn't consider Matt Drudge and the London Sun legitimate sources. We decided not to go with it until we got her version of events."

Burke, who went to school with Polier, said he tried repeatedly to reach his former classmate by phone and email. "We did our own reporting on this. We got our tip from another classmate and though it smelled like dirty tricks to many of us we held off on the story until we had her side," he said. When the AP ran Polier's denial on Monday, The Daily News opted to run with it.

Polier told the AP, "because these stories were false, I assumed the media would ignore them." She was referring to a circling British tabloid press, which had followed her to Kenya and staked out her Pennsylvania family home. The London Sun, owned by conservative media magnate Rupert Murdoch, claimed to have landed an interview with her parents, in which the her father called Kerry, among other things, a "sleazeball." In a later statement e-mailed to the AP in New York, the father said he was misquoted by the Sun and that his wife never talked to their reporter.

Though Drudge had not named the woman, London papers showed no inhibition. London's Daily Telegraph splashed Polier's name across its front page. The Times gave it two full pages inside. They both offered photos of her and of her parents' house.

Stateside, right-leaning news sites picked up on the story the moment it dropped onto Drudge's website. NewsMax.com, Weekly World News, Talon News, The Washington Times and Cybercast News Service all ran breathless headlines of a Clinton-esque "déjà vu," replete with intern and cover up.

"Mainstream news organizations now sneak stuff into being published because someone else has done it first," Ken Auletta said. "And it doesn't matter that the other source is a Drudge. This allows the extremes to set your agenda. If Drudge publishes it, it moves quickly into the bloodstream."

Now that Matt Drudge's apparent blunder has been revealed, editorial writers in mainstream press have wasted no time to skewer his reporting. But few have turned their critique inward on their own organizations' news processes that turn muck into journalism and allow political attack dogs to dictate what gets covered and what does not.

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