



News or Rumor? *Politico* and the Edwards Affair

Michael Calderone was the media correspondent for political news website *Politico*, and in July 2008 he had the makings of a good story. In fact, it seemed tailor-made for a media column. But Calderone wasn't sure he should write it.

It had begun almost a year earlier, in October 2007, when the tabloid *National Enquirer* published a story claiming that US presidential candidate John Edwards had had an affair with a former employee whom it did not name. At the time, Edwards was running a national campaign based in large part on family values and combating poverty. Not only that, but his wife had publicly revealed she had cancer for the second time, and had announced her determination to keep campaigning by her husband's side.

For nearly a year, the evolving story of Edwards' affair was confined to the *Enquirer* and weblogs (known as "blogs"). In December 2007, the *Enquirer* identified Edwards' alleged mistress as Rielle Hunter, claiming that she was pregnant with the candidate's child. Again, the story got no mainstream press coverage. In January 2008, Edwards dropped out of the race. But on July 22, 2008, there was a new development in the story of his affair. The *Enquirer* claimed to have caught Edwards leaving a late-night meeting with Hunter at a Beverly Hills hotel. The tabloid even claimed to have pictures, but did not publish them. Among major newspapers and networks, only Fox News covered the incident. Many online writers voiced sentiments from puzzlement to outrage over the rest of the mainstream media's silence on the Edwards story.

Calderone thought the online protests could be good fodder for his column on the media. They offered a specific example of the much-discussed rift between old and new media, perhaps with broader implications. Why, he wondered, did the mainstream media seem allergic to a story which bloggers and the *Enquirer* had pursued for nearly a year? True, the *Enquirer* was best known for titillating celebrity gossip stories. On the other hand, it also had some solid journalism to its credit. Calderone tried to confirm the *Enquirer* report, but could not; meanwhile, Edwards at a press conference dismissed the story.

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As he considered how to write a column, Calderone found himself torn. There was still no evidence that the charges against Edwards were true; in fact, Edwards had denied them. If Calderone wrote about the *Enquirer* stories and blogs' discussion of them, would that reinforce or even seem to substantiate what to date had been treated as a rumor by the mainstream press? Furthermore, Edwards was now a *former* presidential candidate—so were his alleged dalliances any longer a matter of public interest? Or did rumors of his affair more properly belong to the realm of celebrity—rather than political—journalism? What about the effect on his family, especially his ill wife, of publishing the Edwards-Hunter story?

At the same time, *Politico* was new to the journalism scene and eager to establish its reputation—and the story of Edwards' affair was clearly generating interest. Moreover, Edwards was talked about for a cabinet post in a new administration, pushing him back into the public sphere. Finally, Calderone was a media columnist, and this was a vivid media issue. Calderone debated what to do.

The Edwards Campaign

John Edwards—a Democratic former senator from South Carolina—announced his candidacy for the 2008 presidential race in December 2006. The same week, *Newsweek* reported that he had commissioned a series of mini-documentaries for his website—dubbed “webisodes”—documenting his travels. An aspiring actress and filmmaker named Rielle Hunter had suggested the webisode idea to Edwards, *Newsweek* wrote, when she met him in a bar in New York City. Edwards retained her to produce the webisodes, and Hunter later filmed him on an airplane, touring Uganda, and preparing for an appearance on the comedy news program “The Daily Show.”¹

Edwards was soon locked in a competitive race for the Democratic presidential nomination, as Senators Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and Barack Obama (D-IL) both announced their candidacies in January 2007. The same month, Robert Allbritton, a former bank CEO, founded a political website and occasional print newspaper called *Politico*. The hybrid publication would cover Congress, lobbyists, and the 2008 presidential election. To staff it, Allbritton recruited top talent from major publications, including *Time* magazine and the *Washington Post*.²

Politico had an exciting—and at times heartbreaking—campaign to cover. In March 2007, Edwards and his wife Elizabeth announced at a press conference that she again had cancer. She had been first diagnosed while Edwards was the vice-presidential running mate of Senator John Kerry (D-MA) in 2004. She had been treated successfully, but the cancer had now returned and

¹ Jonathan Darman, “Politics 2008: John Edwards, Untucked,” *Newsweek*, December 25, 2006.
<http://www.newsweek.com/id/44245>

² Kathy Kiely, “Politico Mojo,” *American Journalism Review*, February/March 2007.
Available: <http://www.ajr.org/Article.asp?id=4265>

spread to her bones. The couple vowed that they would continue the race for the nomination. Elizabeth Edwards was upbeat and energetic at the press conference. John Edwards maintained: "The campaign goes on. The campaign goes on strongly."³

A Mystery

In September 2007, Sam Stein, a reporter for the left-leaning political and celebrity news blog *Huffington Post*, was trying to track down Edwards' webisodes for a story on technology and politics. But he discovered that the videos were nowhere to be found. Online links to them no longer worked, and the Edwards campaign would not provide copies, nor would Hunter's production company, Midline Groove. Stein found the videos' absence suspicious. He wrote:

No longer am I working on a piece about new media and politics—boring!
Now, I just want to know why these webisodes are shrouded in such
mystery.⁴

At the end of September, Stein reported that the videos had resurfaced—posted to the Web video hosting service YouTube by an anonymous user hours after Stein had first raised questions about them. Stein also found out more about Rielle Hunter, the videos' creator and director. Hunter, he discovered, had had little experience in filmmaking when she began her production venture Midline Groove with a friend in 2006. Furthermore, Hunter's personal website had been deleted shortly after her company had received its final payment from Edwards' Political Action Committee. On October 10, 2007, Stein revealed these discoveries on *Huffington Post*, remarking:

A set of short documentary film "webisodes" made for former Sen. John
Edwards prior to his presidential candidacy continues to weave a curious
web, this time involving the filmmaker.⁵

That day was also the first time the *National Enquirer* went public with a tip about an affair between Edwards and an unnamed former campaign employee. The story cited an anonymous friend of Edwards' alleged girlfriend, who claimed that the affair had begun 18 months earlier after Edwards had met the woman in a bar. The *Enquirer* wrote that attempts to reach the woman

³ Transcript: "Former Sen. Edwards Holds a News Conference on Wife's Health," March 22, 2007. Available: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/22/AR2007032201422.html>

⁴ Sam Stein, "Edwards Mystery: Innocuous Videos Suddenly Shrouded in Secrecy," *Huffington Post*, September 26, 2007. Available: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2007/09/26/edwards-mystery-innocuous_n_66070.html?page=2&show_comment_id=10803126#comment_10803126

⁵ Sam Stein, "Scrubbed: Edwards Filmmaker's Deleted Website Raises Questions," *Huffington Post*, October 10, 2007. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2007/10/10/scrubbed-edwards-filmmake_n_67868.html

had been unsuccessful, and cited an Edwards spokesman calling the rumor “false, absolute nonsense.”⁶

The next day, conservative commentator Ann Coulter mentioned the story on a cable news talk show. Political gossip blog Wonkette and literary blog Jezebel referred to it as well. Blogs connected to mainstream news outlets, including the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Magazine*, also discussed the story, though it did not appear in the paper pages of the publications themselves. Mickey Kaus, a blogger with the online news magazine *Slate*, wrote about why the mainstream media seemed to be avoiding the story, and speculated that filmmaker Rielle Hunter might be the unnamed girlfriend. Meanwhile, the Associated Press wrote that Edwards had told reporters that the story was “completely untrue, ridiculous.”⁷

Politico, too, commented on the story. Ben Smith, one of the site’s writers, noted a curious connection between the *National Enquirer* and Hillary Clinton, an Edwards rival for the Democratic nomination. The *Enquirer*’s owner, American Media Inc., counted among its investors a New York investment banker who backed Clinton and was rumored to be under consideration for the post of Treasury secretary should Clinton become president. But Smith also noted on *Politico* that “American Media has published lurid and negative stories about the Clintons.” Smith mused:

It's unclear whether [the mainstream media's] reluctance [to report the story] is the result of Clinton-era neurosis about the topic of sex, or a less fraught sense that there simply isn't much to report here, particularly in the case of a candidate who lacks the media wattage and poll numbers of his rivals.⁸

On December 19, 2007, the *Enquirer* went after Edwards again, this time with an exclusive photo of a visibly pregnant Rielle Hunter—whom the paper now identified as Edwards’ mistress—leaving an obstetrician/gynecologist’s office. “JOHN EDWARDS LOVE-CHILD SCANDAL!” shouted the headline, claiming Hunter had confessed to an anonymous friend that Edwards was her unborn child’s father. The *Enquirer* noted that both Edwards and Hunter had publicly denied having had an affair. The article added that former Edwards campaign aide Andrew Young, himself married with children, claimed to have fathered Hunter’s child; Hunter corroborated his assertion.⁹ *Huffington Post* described the story in a brief item the same day.¹⁰

⁶ “Presidential Cheating Scandal! Alleged Affair Could Wreck John Edwards’ Campaign Bid,” *National Enquirer*, October 10, 2007.

Available: http://www.nationalenquirer.com/john_edwards_cheating_scandal/celebrity/64271

⁷ “USNews.com Political Bulletin,” *US News & World Report*, October 12, 2007.

http://www.usnews.com/usnews/politics/bulletin/bulletin_071012.htm

⁸ Ben Smith, “The Clintonite who owns National Enquirer,” *Politico*, October 11, 2007, http://www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/1007/The_Clintonite_who_owns_National_Enquirer.html

⁹ “Update: John Edwards Love-Child Scandal!,” *National Enquirer*, December 19, 2007. http://www.nationalenquirer.com/john_edwards_love_child/celebrity/64426

That evening, the CBS “Evening News” featured a series of interviews in which anchor Katie Couric asked each of 10 leading presidential primary candidates whether he or she could understand why many voters would not support a candidate who had been unfaithful to his or her spouse. It was an uncomfortable question in a campaign in which it was well known that three of the candidates—Hillary Clinton, Rudy Giuliani, and Senator John McCain (R-AZ)—had experience with infidelity. In Clinton’s case, her husband had had an affair with a White House intern while he was president. Giuliani, a candidate for the Republican nomination for president and former mayor of New York City, had marched with his then-girlfriend in New York City’s St. Patrick’s Day Parade while still married to another woman. He later announced at a 2000 press conference that he intended to seek a separation from his wife, whom he had not informed of this decision beforehand. McCain, too, had acknowledged a 1979 affair with the woman who later became his second wife.¹¹ While infidelity had surfaced in the media in passing during the campaign, it had not been a major focus of coverage.

Edwards was among the most strident of the candidates in his response to Couric’s question about infidelity. He called the marriage vow an individual’s “ultimate word,” and implied that breaking it illustrated a penchant for dishonesty.¹²

Thereafter, the story of Edwards’ alleged affair lay dormant. The candidate struggled in vain to gain media attention and traction in the polls as the Democratic primaries approached in January 2008. Edwards withdrew from the race at the end of the month, ceding the contest to Senators Clinton and Obama. Election coverage focused even more fully on the two main contestants in the harshly-fought Democratic primary campaign that followed. Senator Barack Obama accepted the Democratic presidential nomination at the party’s convention in August 2008. As the general election campaign wore on, speculation increased that Edwards might have a role in a Democratic administration. His endorsement of Obama not long before the Democratic Convention had stoked speculation that he would be considered for the post of vice president, or perhaps attorney general.¹³

The Story Resurfaces

Meanwhile, the *Enquirer* continued to investigate. Its early articles on Edwards’ alleged affair—as well as its offer of cash for verifiable tips—attracted sources. In July, *Enquirer* reporters

¹⁰ “National Enquirer Enters the 2008 Presidential Race with Edwards Love-Child Story,” *Huffington Post*, December 19, 2007.

Available: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2007/12/19/national-enquirerem_n_77603.html

¹¹ Steve Benen, “High Infidelity,” *Washington Monthly*, July/August 2006.

Available: <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2006/0607.benen.html>

¹² Rachel Sklar, “Couric’s candidate questions: Infidelity,” *Huffington Post*, December 19, 2007. Available: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2007/12/19/courics-candidate-questi_n_77448.html

¹³ Jim Rutenberg, “Ex-Rival Throws his Support to Obama,” *New York Times*, May 15, 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/15/us/politics/15obama.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

received a tip that Edwards planned to meet Hunter on July 21 at the Hilton Hotel in Beverly Hills, CA. When Edwards arrived and entered the hotel through a side entrance, *Enquirer* reporter Alan Butterfield was watching. Butterfield later recalled:

Once inside [the hotel, Edwards] interestingly bypassed the lobby and ducked down a side stairs to go to the bottom floor to catch the elevator up—rather than taking the elevator in the main lobby. He went out of his way not to be seen.¹⁴

Butterfield and several other *Enquirer* reporters waited at the hotel until Edwards left through the basement at 2:40 a.m. When the reporters confronted him, shouting questions, Edwards dashed up stairs from the basement to the lobby, then spotted a photographer and retreated back down the steps, where he was greeted by another reporter. He ducked into a bathroom, where he hid for nearly 15 minutes until a security guard escorted him from the hotel. The *Enquirer* reported on its website that day:

The married ex-senator from North Carolina—whose wife **Elizabeth** continues to battle cancer—met with his mistress, blonde divorcée **Rielle Hunter**, at the Beverly Hilton on Monday night, July 21—and the NATIONAL ENQUIRER was there! He didn't leave until early the next morning.¹⁵

Again, however, major print publications, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *USA Today* were silent on the incident, as were most television news channels. Fox News was the exception, interviewing the security guard who had escorted Edwards from the hotel. The security guard confirmed having witnessed Edwards' altercation with the reporters.¹⁶

Personal Life in the Public Eye

Online critics pointed out that the mainstream media's silence on the Edwards affair was mysterious given its track record covering the sexual exploits of other public figures. On July 23, the day after the *Enquirer* stakeout became public, *Slate* Media Critic Jack Shafer recalled a recent example in his column. The previous August, DC newspaper *Roll Call* broke the news that Senator Larry Craig (R-ID) had been arrested two months earlier for soliciting sex from a male undercover police officer in an airport bathroom stall. Craig had been a champion of banning gay marriage,

¹⁴ "Sen. John Edwards Caught with Mistress and Love Child!", *National Enquirer*, July 22, 2008. http://www.nationalenquirer.com/sen_john_edwards_caught_with_mistress_and_love_child_in_la_hotel/celebrity/65193

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "Guard Confirms Late-Night Hotel Encounter with ex-Sen. John Edwards, Tabloid Reporters," Fox News, July 25, 2008. Available: <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,391426,00.html>

both within Idaho and nationwide. Shafer noted that “at least three-dozen daily newspapers in the United States published the Craig news the day after the *Roll Call* scoop, but this morning not a single U.S. daily mentioned the *Enquirer* piece.” Shafer wondered:

Why hasn’t the press commented on the story yet? Is it because it broke too late yesterday afternoon, and news organizations want to investigate it for themselves before writing about it? Or are they observing a double standard that says homo-hypocrisy is indefensible but that hetero-hypocrisy deserves an automatic bye?¹⁷

Nor had the press shunned then-unconfirmed allegations of an affair between President Bill Clinton and White House Intern Monica Lewinsky in 1998. Though the story first appeared on the news and gossip website Drudge Report in January 1998, the *Washington Post* followed up only days later, detailing the allegations and revealing the existence of taped conversations between Lewinsky and a friend that supposedly described the relationship in detail. The *Post*’s reporters could not reach Lewinsky, but mentioned that she had signed an affidavit denying the affair. Clinton’s lawyer, who was defending him in a separate sexual harassment case, denied the relationship on the president’s behalf.¹⁸ On January 24, *Newsweek* released transcripts of recorded conversations between Lewinsky and her friend and colleague, Linda Tripp. In them, Lewinsky and Tripp seemed to be discussing a relationship between Lewinsky and the president, and Lewinsky’s intention to deny the affair under oath. Excerpts appeared in several newspapers the next day.¹⁹

Cable news stations, too, devoted considerable time to scandal coverage, and benefited enormously in ratings. Web traffic of then-fledgling news sites spiked. Summarized a member of *Time* magazine’s Web staff in February 1998:

All week Monica ruled the waves. It was radio Monica every day and TV-talk-show Monica every night. Monica made every morning’s paper and the cover of the weekly magazines. Like an endless D-day announcement, she rippled across the other famous zipper, in Times Square. But if you craved Monica maximus, there was only one place for you. On the Web it was all Monica all the time.²⁰

¹⁷ Jack Shafer, “Why the press is ignoring the Edwards love-child story,” *Slate*, July 23, 2008.
Available: <http://www.slate.com/id/2195869/>

¹⁸ Susan Schmidt, Peter Baker and Toni Locy, “Clinton Accused of Urging Aide to Lie,” *Washington Post*, January 21, 1998.
Available: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/stories/clinton012198.htm>

¹⁹ “The President Under Fire: The Recordings; Excerpts of Taped Phone Conversations,” *New York Times*, January 25, 1998.
Available:
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9503E7DD133BF936A15752C0A96E958260&scp=3&sq=excerpt%20lewin%20tripp&st=cse>

²⁰ Joshua Quittner, “All Monica All the Time,” *Time*, February 9, 1998.

Clinton continued to deny the allegations throughout the first half of 1998, though the story did not lapse into obscurity for that. In August, Kenneth Starr, the independent counsel investigating the matter, granted Lewinsky immunity from prosecution in exchange for her full testimony. Lewinsky testified for six-and-a-half hours before a grand jury; newspapers secured descriptions of her testimony from unnamed individuals close to Lewinsky or to the proceedings themselves. President Clinton admitted to the affair days afterward, first to a grand jury and then in a nationally-televised address. Clinton called it a “critical lapse in judgment and a personal failure,” expressing regret for having misled Americans, including his family. He admonished, however, that “even presidents have private lives. It is time to stop the pursuit of personal destruction and the prying into private lives and get on with our national life.”²¹

Less than a month later, in September 1998, Independent Counsel Starr delivered a 445-page report of his investigation to Congress. The House of Representatives posted the full report on its website on September 11, and on September 12, several newspapers, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, posted it on their websites as well, in addition to printing substantial excerpts. The report recounted, in lurid detail, several sexual encounters between the president and the intern, who had then been 22. One journalist described to *Columbia Journalism Review* the dilemma newspapers faced once the Starr report was public. If newspapers did not publish the report, he said, they would be seen as covering up for the president. And yet, he said, “when we did print it, people called us pornographers.”²²

After President Clinton left office, public fascination with the Clintons had to some extent endured. As recently as the summer of 2006, the *New York Times* had published a 2,000 word front-page piece on the Clintons’ marriage, as many had concluded that Hillary Clinton was preparing for a 2008 presidential run. The author had interviewed close to 50 people and reviewed the Clintons’ activities, concluding that “since leaving the White House, Bill and Hillary Clinton have built largely separate lives—partly because of the demands of their distinct career paths and partly as a result of political calculations.”²³

News or Not?

A few hours after the story of Edwards’ late-night visit to Hunter appeared on the *Enquirer’s* website on July 22, *Politico* Media Blogger Calderone decided to make some phone calls for a possible media story. He called *Enquirer* Editor David Perel and Reporter Alan Butterfield to get more details on the investigation and its dramatic denouement at the Beverly Hilton. The next

Available: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,987810,00.html?promoid=googlep>

²¹ Transcript of remarks via PBS: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/lewinsky_address/address.html

²² Neil Hickey, “CJR Poll: After Monica, What Next?”, *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 1998.

²³ Patrick Healy, “For Clintons, Delicate Dance of Married and Public Life,” *New York Times*, May 23, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/23/nyregion/23clintons.html?scp=1&sq=clinton%20marriage&st=cse>

day he called another *Enquirer* reporter present at the stakeout. Edwards himself did not return several messages from Calderone, but at a press conference did label the story “tabloid trash.”²⁴

By the end of the day, Calderone felt he had enough material for a story contrasting the mainstream media’s silence on the Edwards’ story with the *Enquirer*’s reporting and many blogs’ sustained attention to it. The blog Pajamas Media, for example, argued that the *Enquirer* was “vastly more reliable than the *New York Times*” because it had broken many of the most important stories in the murder trial of former football star O.J. Simpson. The blog Outside the Beltway cautioned: “The *Enquirer* breaks legitimate scandals all the time. But they run with all manner of nonsense too—they just don’t care so long as they sell papers.”

Amina Khan, a blogger for the *Los Angeles Times* (in whose coverage area the *Enquirer* stakeout had taken place), mentioned these bloggers and others in a July 23 post rounding up Internet commentary on the Edwards affair. The next day, however, *Los Angeles Times* Editor Tony Pierce sent an email to his bloggers, instructing them not to mention the Edwards story in the future:

There has been a little buzz surrounding John Edwards and his alleged affair. Because the only source has been the National Enquirer we have decided not to cover the rumors or salacious speculations. So I am asking you all not to blog about this topic until further notified.²⁵

The Pierce email had leaked to *Slate* blogger Mickey Kaus, a persistent critic of the mainstream media’s reluctance to follow up more vigorously on the *Enquirer*’s allegations of Edwards’ affair. Kaus posted the email on his blog early on the morning of July 25.

Calderone hesitated. One problem was the steady stream of denials from Edwards and Hunter. Calderone later recalled: “It could be argued that a media story—without a corresponding news story—is sort of a weasel way around the unpleasant fact that you can’t actually confirm the rumors yourself.”²⁶ On the other hand, his beat was the political media. The fact that the mainstream media were not covering a potential scandal while numerous blogs discussed it would make a compelling story. Were major news organizations playing favorites? Did they want to protect Edwards because they liked him?

There was also Elizabeth Edwards to consider. Did a seemingly unverifiable story in a tabloid warrant inflicting further suffering on her? To what extent was an ex-politician’s infidelity a valid political story in any case? Edwards was no longer an elected official, nor even running for

²⁴ “Tabloid Trash: Edwards Slams Enquirer Account of Rendezvous with Mistress, Love Child,” *Breitbart TV* Video available: <http://www.breitbart.tv/?p=137423&comments=1>

²⁵ Mickey Kaus, “LAT Gags Blogs,” *Slate*, July 25, 2008.
Available: <http://www.slate.com/id/2195914/#latedict>

²⁶ Michael Calderone, “Why I Also Didn’t Write on John Edwards,” *Politico*, August 10, 2008.

elected office. Then again, Edwards might be under consideration for a position in an Obama administration. He was still a public figure. But to what extent did that make his private life news? Was this a story to run with, or avoid?