

# SPOT NEWS

## THE PRESS AND THE DRESS

BY LAWRENCE K. GROSSMAN

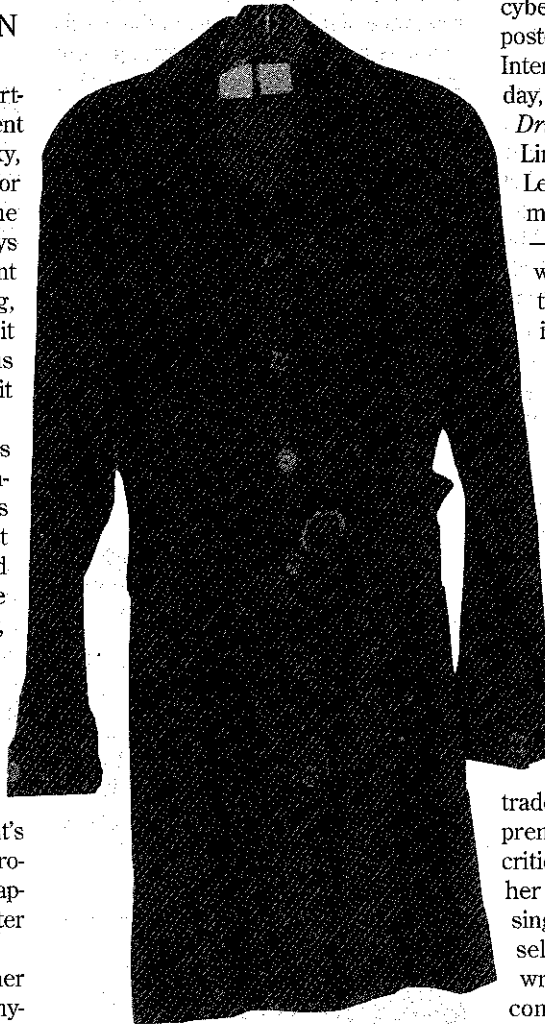
**"O**f all the stories we reported involving the president and Monica Lewinsky, ABC was most vilified for our reports about the semen-stained dress," says ABC News Washington correspondent Jackie Judd. "Critics kept asking, 'where's the proof?' Most people think it was the story's 'yuk' factor that made us so unpopular, but there was more to it than that."

Here is an account of how the press covered the bizarre story of the semen-stained dress (photo, right), which was more accurately reported than most critics have been willing to admit, and what that coverage reveals about the journalism in today's high intensity, echo-chamber world of cyberspace.

Jackie Judd first reported the semen-stained dress story on ABC's *World News Tonight* on Friday, January 23: "Lewinsky says she saved, apparently as some kind of souvenir, a navy blue dress with the president's semen stain on it. If true, this could provide physical evidence of what really happened." Judd repeated her account later that night on *20/20*.

Surprisingly, in the first draft of her script, Judd had failed to mention anything about the dress, even though she had nailed down the basic facts from two trusted sources and had alerted her editors in New York to the story. Asked why she held back, Judd told me, "At that stage, only the third day into the Lewinsky scandal, I was still squeamish about putting a story like that on the air. It was all new territory for us."

*Lawrence K. Grossman is a former president of NBC News and PBS.*



But Judd's editors persuaded her to revise her script and report the facts she had learned about the dress with President Clinton's semen stain still on it. The dress, they argued, would be "the smoking gun" that could contradict the president's denials and take the scandal out of the "he-said, she-said" cul-de-sac in which it seemed to be stuck.

Judd was not the first to go public with the story. That distinction went to

cyber gossip Matt Drudge, who had posted his attention-getting scoop on the Internet two days earlier. On Wednesday, January 21, his heavily trafficked *Drudge Report* broke the news that Linda Tripp had told investigators Lewinsky claimed she "kept the garment with Clinton's dried semen in it — a garment she allegedly said she would never wash." Drudge repeated the story the next morning in an interview on NBC's *Today* show.

However, it was Judd's January 23 report on ABC that was the first in the mainstream media to rely on the reporter's own sources, rather than on secondhand information from Drudge. Peter Jennings introduced Judd's report this way: "Today, someone with specific knowledge of what it is that Monica Lewinsky says really took place between her and the president has been talking to ABC's Jackie Judd."

Where Judd got the dress story has become a matter of tradecraft controversy. Last June, in the premiere issue of *Brill's Content*, media critic Steve Brill accused Judd of basing her report on an untrustworthy, biased single source, Lucianne Goldberg, the self-confessed Clinton-hater. He wrote, "Although Judd would not comment on her source, Lucianne Goldberg told me that she herself is the source for this Jackie Judd report and for others that would follow." While Goldberg, a New York book agent, claimed to have given Judd the story, she denied to Brill that she had been the source for the Drudge scoop, even though in January she had bragged to the *New York Daily News*: "The dress story? I think I leaked that. . . . I had to do something to get [the media's] attention. I've done it. And I'm not unproud

of it." Brill's article charged, "[W]hether it turns out that [the president] stained one dress or one hundred dresses, Judd's every utterance is infected with the clear assumption that the president is guilty at a time when no reporter can know that."

In her own defense, Judd insisted to me that she had adhered to ABC's two-source rule on the dress story. She got her information, she said, from two sources she knew well and considered to be reliable, a fact confirmed by ABC News senior vice president Richard C. Wald, who oversees the network's news standards. Judd says she had met Goldberg only once briefly, and "spoke to her only for thirty seconds or less." It was made clear that Brill was mistaken in his assertion that Goldberg was her source.

I asked Judd why, in her January 23 piece, both she and Jennings had referred to only a single source for the story, when now she says she had relied on two sources. "The first person who told me about the dress told it to me off the record on condition that I not use it," Judd replied. "Then I confirmed the story from another source who insisted on anonymity, but who did not say we couldn't run it. So, to be accurate, we cited only one source on *World News Tonight*."

**D**rudge, as was his custom, had cited no source for his story of January 21. But his revelation earned the former Hollywood gift shop clerk with no journalistic credentials an interview on *Today*, the number one network morning news show. Most mainstream journalists disdain *The Drudge Report*. They consider it not a legitimate news outlet but a gossip sheet posted on the Internet, where anybody can report or expose anything as fact whether true or not. Nevertheless, with many scoops about recent scandals to his credit, Drudge has become a hot media property. The Fox News Channel has given him his own news-gossip show.

Introducing Drudge on *Today*, co-anchor Matt Lauer described *The Drudge Report* as "a media gossip page known for below-the-Beltway reporting." Lauer then asked his guest about his semen-stained dress story that had appeared on the Internet the day before. Said Drudge: "I have reported that there's a potential DNA trail that would

tie Clinton to this young woman." Lauer asked Drudge if he had any confirmation. Drudge answered, "Not outside of what I've just heard, but I don't think anybody does at this point."

Another *Today* guest that morning was *Newsweek*'s Michael Isikoff, whose reporting on the president's sex scandals had earned him a consulting contract with NBC. Appearances by *Newsweek* staffers on television's rapidly expanding schedule of talk shows generate valuable publicity for the magazine, part of the high decibel ricochet effect of today's nonstop multimedia environment. *Time* has even installed a small TV studio in its New York offices so its editors and reporters can appear on screen at the drop of a newsbreak.

Lauer asked Isikoff if he heard anything about the dress. An experienced journalist, Isikoff knew better than to speculate on network television: "I have not reported that, and I am not going to report that until I have evidence that it is, in fact, true," he said. "I've heard lots of wild things, as I am sure you have. But you don't go on the air and blab them."

Still, simply by appearing on NBC News's highly regarded *Today*, the stained-dress story immediately graduated from gossip to news, gaining a measure of credibility and legitimacy despite the fact that no mainstream journalist had yet verified it. At that point, NBC News had done none of its own reporting on the story or gotten any independent verification. Landing a guest who makes a bombshell revelation on an established show like *Today* is a ploy guaranteed to gain instant worldwide attention, as Drudge's interview certainly did.

The beauty of getting the guest to deliver the sensational news is that the network itself doesn't have to hold back and risk being scooped on the story

until its own reporters and editors are satisfied that it is accurate. No one at the network has to spend time and money digging for facts. Even better, if the story turns out to be wrong, the network has an out: "Matt Drudge said it; we didn't. We were only doing our job trying to find out from him whether it was true." This can be a dubious practice, and lately it has become all too commonplace, especially on cable talk shows.

A story of that magnitude appearing on *Today* also creates a king-sized dilemma for the rest of the press. Editors ask themselves, "Now that it's been on *Today*, shouldn't we carry it? True, we have no verification ourselves, but neither does anybody else. The fact that *Today* carried the story is itself news. Besides, if we don't run it, you can bet other guys will." And so, before any reporter for the mainstream press had even checked the story out (Judd's



The beleaguered ABC News correspondent felt vindicated at last

piece on ABC did not appear until January 23, the day after Drudge's *Today* interview), the unsubstantiated gossip posted by Matt Drudge on the Internet had risen to the level of apparently credible news. NBC's Tom Brokaw calls this multimedia, echo-chamber effect, "the Big Bang theory of journalism." But is it journalism, or gossip-mongering on a worldwide scale?

On Thursday, January 22, while

Drudge was dropping his bombshell on NBC's *Today*, Sam Donaldson was breaking an entirely different dress story on ABC's *Good Morning America*. Donaldson talked about a dress that, he said, the president had allegedly given Lewinsky as a gift. (Later on, *The New York Times* and many others were to confuse the gift dress with the semen-stained model.) "How do we know" about the gift? *Good Morning America* co-anchor Lisa McRee asked Donaldson. "Well," he replied, "I guess we don't know. We're talking about leaks." Donaldson's revelation on *GMA* is a textbook example of an unsourced, unsubstantiated, pseudo-fact, disseminated by

tions. The garment, in print, on-air, and on cable, was the blockbuster story of the week. The *New York Daily News* blared on page one, SHE KEPT SEX DRESS. The *New York Post* bannered, MONICA'S LOVE DRESS. Many newspaper and broadcast accounts picked up a UPI story that reported as fact that Lewinsky had kept a dress with Clinton's semen, eliminating the detail that Lewinsky had only *claimed* to have such a dress.

*Time* and *Newsweek*, released on Sunday, January 25, carried almost identical reports about the dress, adding a few marginally different details of their own. *Time*: In an untaped conversation with

ment. The next night on ABC, Judd, citing "law enforcement sources," said, "Starr so far has come up empty in a search for forensic evidence," explaining that the Lewinsky clothes the FBI tested had been dry cleaned. As it later turned out, dry cleaning had nothing to do with the absence of the semen stain; the FBI had tested the wrong garments. *The Washington Post* reported that President Clinton assured associates there was no such dress.

In the spring, the tale of the semen-stained dress fast lost credibility. Critics came forward in force. *The Toronto Star* wrote, "Take the notorious blue dress, the one said to have been stained with the president's 'residue.' Can anyone blame the public for not trusting wild and sometimes truly unbelievable daily news reports, no matter what medium?" A Cox News Service piece by Scott Shepard began, "The dress? It has vanished into the misty realm of yesterday's newspaper and last night's TV news broadcast." Shepard blamed "the well-traveled route of hearsay in today's brave new information world, where a few established 'facts' are repeated and mixed with speculation and allegations from unidentified sources." Kathleen Hall Jamieson, dean of the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, complained on PBS's *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* about the press's lack of careful sourcing and confirmation, citing allegations about the semen-stained dress. "It turns out now that there may be no dress."

Longtime TV news producer Ed Fohuy, now at the Pew Center in Washington, D.C., deplored the apparent fact that, "so many good journalists [were] spending so much time analyzing so little." *Los Angeles Times* contributing editor Robert Scheer wrote of the press performance, "It's sick. There was no blue dress and no semen stain, but America's mass media fell for the lurid tales." *The New York Times* columnist Frank Rich blasted the reports of "phantom semen stains."

Then, at the end of July, Lewinsky and special prosecutor Kenneth Starr finally agreed on an immunity deal. On *World News Tonight*, July 29, Judd, citing legal sources (plural this time), revealed that "as part of the immunity deal with prosecutors, Monica Lewinsky agreed to turn over evidence she claimed would

*continued on page 38*

## The press got some things wrong, but the major facts right.

a reporter playing catch up, that simply feeds the public's distrust of the news media.

Donaldson was repeating a story that had been posted on Newsweek-on-Line the previous day. It said Lewinsky had been heard, on a tape in *Newsweek's* exclusive possession, claiming that Clinton had given her a dress as a present. *Newsweek's* Washington bureau chief Ann McDaniel repudiated this report two weeks later, explaining that the magazine's reporters had misinterpreted what they heard on the tape.

Other outlets would make a similar mistake. On Monday, January 26, for example, *The New York Times* reported, "People who have heard the tapes said Monica Lewinsky had reportedly claimed that Mr. Clinton gave her a dress and that it was later stained with semen." In fact, the claim was not on the tape and the dress that Lewinsky said had the stain was not the one the president allegedly gave her. *The Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Baltimore Sun*, among others, repeated that error on succeeding days. Did that story really come from "people who have heard the tapes," or did the reporters get it secondhand from Newsweek-on-Line, *GMA*, Drudge, or elsewhere and, as in the children's game Telephone, garble the information?

By Saturday morning, January 24, news of the *real* semen-stained dress hit the world and splattered in all direc-

Tripp, Lewinsky "allegedly held up a dress she claimed was stained with the president's semen and said, 'I'll never wash it again.'" *Newsweek*: "Lewinsky told Tripp that she was keeping, as a kind of grotesque memento, a navy blue dress stained with Clinton's semen. Holding it up as a trophy to Tripp, she declared, 'I'll never wash it again.'"

**N**either of the newsmagazines, which appear to have gotten their quotes from the same anonymous leaker, gave any indication of the nature of the source. A month later *Time* wrote, its "source was someone close to Tripp that *Time* believes credible." *Newsweek's* piece that week reported Lewinsky was given a dress by Clinton, although later the magazine said it was no longer sure there ever was a dress given to her by the president. *Newsweek*, however, did stand by its account that Lewinsky claimed she had the dress with Clinton's semen.

On Monday, January 26, *The New York Times* quoted Lewinsky's lawyer William Ginsburg dismissing press reports about the semen-stained dress: "I would assume that if Monica Lewinsky had a dress that was sullied or dirtied, she would have had it cleaned. I know of no such dress."

On Thursday, January 29, CBS News's Scott Pelley broke the story that the FBI had found no evidence on any of the clothes taken from Lewinsky's apart-

continued from page 36

back up her story that she had a sexual relationship with the president. The sources confirm that one piece of evidence is, in fact, the dress Lewinsky said she saved after an encounter with Mr. Clinton because it had a semen stain on it. Lewinsky's claim of the dress's existence was first reported by ABC News six months ago. The dress may provide Starr with forensic evidence of a relationship."

As Judd's script made clear, the beleaguered ABC News correspondent felt vindicated at last.

The next day, July 30, on CNN's *Inside Politics*, CNN White House correspondent Wolf Blitzer revealed the astonishing news that Lewinsky had given the stained dress to her mother, who, he said, hid it in her New York apartment for six months. According to Blitzer, when the president agreed to testify to the grand jury, he was unaware that Lewinsky would be turning over the dress with its physical evidence of their sexual relationship.

The blue dress with the president's semen stain existed after all. It was real. And it had returned to center stage.

That same day, like a recurring nightmare, an improbable connection was made between the dress and the O.J. Simpson murder case. Former Los Angeles police detective Mark Fuhrman, a key witness in the Simpson trial, appeared on MSNBC, the cable news channel that gained the dubious reputation of programming "All Monica, All the Time." Fuhrman revealed that he had been contacted the previous October by his one-time book agent Goldberg, who asked him how DNA could be extracted from a dress.

In their August 10 editions, both *Time* and *Newsweek* reported that Goldberg and Tripp had plotted to get their hands on Lewinsky's dress, take a swab of the stain if they could, and have it tested for semen themselves. Goldberg described their scheme, which sounded like a dark soap opera mystery: Tripp allegedly called Lewinsky and told her she was so broke she would like to come over to Lewinsky's apartment while Lewinsky was away to check out her wardrobe and borrow a dress. Would Lewinsky tell her doorman to let her in? Tripp's plan to get at the blue dress with the semen stain

did not succeed. Lewinsky failed to respond, according to Goldberg. *Time* reported the Goldberg tale and concluded, "Tripp's associates say that story is not true." *Newsweek* credited "sources familiar with the investigation" for its account.

On August 4, the *New York Post* reported that Goldberg claimed to have declined an offer of \$500,000 from the *National Enquirer* for a photo of Lewinsky wearing the infamous blue dress. Goldberg said the photo exists but since it was not in her possession, she had to turn down the offer. According to the *New York Post*, Goldberg said: "This is not about money. This is about right and wrong, . . . adding with a wicked cackle, 'Besides, I don't have it [the photo].'"

In hindsight, it is easy to be critical of those who beat up on the press for its "phantom dress" reports before the full story came out. It is also somewhat unfair. It is now clear that Matt Drudge's scoop on the dress turned out to be essentially accurate. So did the reports by Jackie Judd, Wolf Blitzer, and most other reporters. The issue here is not about how the press spread misinformation; when it came to the dress, the press got some things wrong, but the major facts right. Still, too many news organizations paid too little attention to basic rules of the trade in their hot pursuit of the story. In today's non-stop news environment, the real issue is: How can the press overcome the public's growing distrust, even when it gets the story right? (See "Rebuilding Trust," page 39.)

Many critics have complained that the press has been promiscuous in its use of anonymous sources. But those who urge the press to "Stop using anonymous sources," as former Poynter Institute president Robert J. Haiman did recently, are unrealistic. It was virtually impossible to find a firsthand source in the special prosecutor's office, the White House, or anywhere else willing to be quoted on the record. Reporters had no choice but to rely largely on anonymous leakers and spinners. The dress story could never have been reported by any news medium that held to the ideal journalistic standard of full disclosure.

Certainly, reporters try to persuade

their sources to go on the record. But failing that, they should at least indicate the level of the sources' direct knowledge and the nature of their vested interest. People recognize that it is all too easy for anonymous sources with axes to grind to avoid accountability and therefore, to lie, mislead, or exaggerate.

A study commissioned by the Committee of Concerned Journalists examined the reporting of the first six days of the scandal, in which the dress played a central role. It concluded that: "Nearly one in three statements (30 per cent of what was reported) was effectively based on no sourcing at all by the news outlet publishing it." Also: "Four in ten statements (41 per cent of the reportage), out of 'the 1,565 statements and allegations contained in the reporting [of the scandal] by major television programs, newspapers, and magazines . . . were not factual reporting at all . . . but were instead journalists offering analysis, opinion, speculation, or judgment.'"

Those who practice journalism in the volatile new media age could do worse than abide by a few of the old-fashioned rules from a more leisurely time, before the arrival of the endless news cycle: When sources insist on anonymity, disclose enough about their connection with the story so the audience can judge both their trustworthiness and the story's. Take care to separate fact from speculation and reporting from commentary. In covering personal and private matters that go public, restraint and dignity are more credible than excessive and unseemly enthusiasm. Resist the rush to judgment; it's better for the audience to reach its own conclusions based on the facts. Above all, before going with anyone's gossip, no matter how explosive, check it out.

Recently, in a special message to journalists, Pope John Paul II stressed the need for still greater responsibility in the age of the Internet and other speedy information systems. The pope called on journalists to "transmit information while respecting truth, fundamental ethical principles, and personal dignity." It's advice from a credible source, and it's worth heeding. ■