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Four old-media veterans may have solved the future of news with the Politico Web site, whose audience of six million obsessives and insiders consumes—and feeds—a real-time download of power data. The twist? Politico's print version is what's helped make it profitable.

In the fourth issue of Wired magazine, in the fall of 1993, just as the Internet was entering public consciousness, Michael Crichton, the author of *The Andromeda Strain* and *Jurassic Park*, wrote an essay arguing that newspapers were doomed because they were too dumb. As information became cheaper, more plentiful, and easier to get, consumers, he argued, would become ever more immersed in their specific interests and understand that their more generally oriented paper—at least in the matter of a reader's special interest, but also by inference everything else—had no idea what it was talking about.

Sixteen years later, the ultimate result of Crichton's theory about the fallacy of general-interest news—and, as a corollary, the answer to the riddle of who's going to report the news when traditional, general-interest news organizations stop doing it—is, for better and worse, Politico.

Politico is the Web site (and accompanying newspaper) launched by two former Washington Post reporters to cover the 2008 presidential campaign, and which, with 100 or so staffers, is defying all reason and expectations by continuing to prosper beyond the election season. Not only is it, in its way, a direct manifestation of Crichton's observation about flaccid and dumbed-down news, but it is also something rather close to one of those sinister and unstoppable forces in a Crichton novel: more information than you want to know, as well as more than you probably should know and can know, altering the very metabolic rate of the people who supply it and of those who become habituated to trying to know it.

CNN changed the nature of politics and political reporting by compressing the time it took for something to happen, for it to become widely known, and for newsmakers and the public to react to it (i.e., the news cycle) to half a day—whereas the newspaper news cycle, from next-day publication to day-after reaction, was 48 hours, and network television's news cycle, from one day's evening news to the next day's evening news, was 24 hours. Politico brings the news cycle down to about 15 or 20 minutes.

Politico further alters the nature and effect of news by undermining the favorite view of old-line news organizations that news can be “platform agnostic”—a preferred phrase of New York Times publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. This implies that content is content and it doesn't matter how it's delivered—hence, existing news organizations, with their existing content, can yet find a way to sell it. But Politico's news is not like political news has ever been. Its Internet-focused version is some obsessive-compulsive mix of trade journal, Twitter feed, and, quite literally, real-time chat with seniormost newsmakers and leakers.

It is constant, unrelenting, second by second. It exalts, and fetishizes, in breathless, even orgiastic news flashes, the most boring subject in the world: the granular workings of government bureaucracy. It is, arguably, in its hyperbolic attentions and exertions, in its fixations on interests that could not possibly interest anyone but the person doing it and the writer writing about it, something like a constant parody of itself.

“Sasha Obama is 8 today (really, this time—traveling press got a little ahead of itself last weekend). Plus Gov. Jindal, Joe Trippi and Jeff Greenfield. And get this: John Edwards and Eliot Spitzer,” reads the lead of a recent dispatch.

In the Marshall McLuhan prescription, the demands of the medium—for ever more information about actions or events or thoughts nearly simultaneous with their occurrence—change the message and, likely, politics too.

For two generations—since Watergate, let us say—politics has been about opposing Washington. The true modern American ideology was to believe that the federal government, if not evil, was grossly ineffective and pathetically out of touch. Practicing politics, or writing about it, was a job not for the best and brightest but for the narrow-minded and obtuse. Even Washington reporters, once the zenith of the trade, became stodgy relics. Washington was not even the center of power—finance, media, and technology had much more immediate effects on people's lives than government did. A whole language grew up to characterize the oddness, and the emotional limitations, of the Beltway-centric: “wonks” or, their own, self-loathing favorite, “political junkies” or, that most merciless characterization of Washington, “Hollywood for the ugly.” Even cable television, with its left and right divide, was not interested in politics per se, or

in Washington, but in the clash of opposing sides. Nobody, except the wonks, was interested, except to deride it, in the civics-class culture of insider relationships, horse-trading, and compromise that most obsesses political professionals.

But, all of a sudden, the politician as player, politics as the art of the astute, Washington as the true Hollywood of billion-dollar deals and iconic careers, are back. This is because of Barack Obama (not just a star, but the first senator—i.e., Washington insider—to be elected president since J.F.K.), and because the economic crisis has centered so much wealth in Washington—and because of Politico.

Or, put another way, much of the country may still find politics to be an execrable and mind-numbing proposition, but Politico has built a far-flung network of actual and armchair political professionals who find it not just exhilarating but habit-forming. They're on the edge of their seats. Politics may not be the national sport again, but it's a niche sport with the right audience.

While it's almost unheard of for a revolution to come from the people most engaged with the system they're overthrowing, Politico is an insider's coup.

Its founders, John Harris and Jim VandeHei, along with Mike Allen, who joined them early on, all between 35 and 45, are standard-bearers of the Washington press corps rather than its malcontents. They're small-town boys—Harris from Rochester, VandeHei from Oshkosh, Allen from Orange County—who came, wide-eyed, to Washington and rose to top political jobs at the top news organizations. VandeHei and Allen have, between them, cycled through The Washington Post, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and Time magazine. Harris, whose 2005 book, *The Survivor*, is regarded by the in-the-knows as hands down the best book on the Clinton presidency, was at The Washington Post's White House and campaign coverage. since he was an intern, in 1985, rising to become the national-politics editor, a position from which he supervised the

Their radical idea was not to flatten or break open this most insular of towns but in effect to make it more parochial and self-obsessed.

As insider journalists, they feared that newspapers, more and more the province of the defeated

and apathetic, would bring journalism's stars and elites down with them.

"Newspaper people are living 1950s-style organization-man lives years after that career model became obsolete," says Harris, a suburban-dad-looking type, who is clearly fighting his own organization-man destiny.

The problem is not, for any of the three founders, merely that the newspaper business is broke, but that newspapers themselves, which so many people are arguing now need to be preserved, are busted: "The Post's reputation was superior to its actual day-in-and-day-out achievement," says Harris. "I don't say that with any kind of malice. It's not to disparage the Post, but it's definitely true that a lot of the material was done with a shrug of the shoulders."

News organizations, in the Harris-VandeHei-Allen formulation, are deadweight. Institutional authority, which once defined journalists—"The most important words were what came after your name: 'I'm John Harris of The Washington Post'"—has increasingly become an indication of mediocrity. "In 2006 we didn't yet know that newspapers were dead," Harris continued, in my conversation with him one afternoon in Politico's Virginia offices. "I think we thought they'd drag on, but the institutional age of newspapers was clearly over. What mattered was the individual talents and reputations of journalists. The best journalists had broken free. The best have their own names. They were carrying the business."

In a world of commodified news—"President Bush said yesterday, blah blah blah ... " intones Harris—a newspaper's greatest value is more and more concentrated in the work of a few people. "If Google wanted to own Washington coverage, well, all it would have to do is take the six or seven journalists who are really producing stuff—remember, reporters don't make shit—and put them in one place and overnight Google would own Washington." That was the first part of the Harris-VandeHei-Allen business perception. The second part was: "Well, why couldn't we do that? With a small group of the best—six of the best, and then six in their 20s with all the right moves—on day one we could compete with the New York Times Washington bureau or Washington Post national desk."

That is, screw the 800 slugs that make up the Post newsroom—although, as it happens, the Harris-VandeHei-Allen ideal of 12 perfect reporters shortly rose to an editorial staff of 75, including 8 reporters at the White House, meaning Politico now has a larger presence in the West Wing than any other news organization.

Politico is such a Washington-centric, politics-obsessed business that, befitting the culture and true values of the town, its entrepreneurs won't make much money for themselves beyond their salaries—nor does it ever really seem to have occurred to them that they might (or should). For them, as for anyone who is anybody in Washington, money is not the best currency; information is—which they control more and more of with Politico.

The business came together not so much as a start-up but as two groups combining their interests in a power play: Harris and VandeHei, with their dream of a supercharged, instantaneous, electronic, insatiable, obsessive-compulsive political newsroom of star reporters, and the Allbritton family. There have been two consistent media families in Washington: the Grahams, who own The Washington Post and whose media success was exclusive and total, and the Allbrittons, who owned The Washington Star. Other than the fact that they made money (arguably more than the Grahams) in a town that had no use for money, the Allbrittons were the perennial also-rans. They sold the Star in 1978 and retreated to the country-club-and-coupon-clipping media life of owning network-affiliate television stations. The senior Allbritton, Joseph, retired in 2001, and the junior Allbritton, Robert, turning 40 this year, took over, with a young man's hankering to get back into the game. His idea of how to do this was not an obviously smart one. What he had in mind was to match the all-news local cable station he'd launched in the D.C. area with a political specialty paper on Capitol Hill. Forgetting about the fact that, even in politics, this is trade journalism at best—small circulation, circumscribed influence, and not where you'd likely catch a hotshot journalist or publisher—there were already two established players, Roll Call and The Hill. Allbritton, who'd begun staffing up his own Hill paper in 2006, was desperately trying to attract some estimable talent to the venture and approached VandeHei, who, while he turned down that job, counter-proposed his elite-corps, hyperspeed, political-news Web site.

For Allbritton, who agreed to finance the new venture—and to hire Harris and VandeHei, without, as it happens, meaningful equity participation, to run it—his fledgling and incremental efforts to get his family business back into the Washington media game instantly became a full-fledged assault on the primacy of the Post and the Graham family.

Which, in a sleepy, lumbering way, the Post began to understand, offering Harris and VandeHei the chance to do this thing they were talking about for the Post. There ensued, especially for Harris, a crisis of conscience and identity, which ultimately yielded to the fact that neither Harris nor VandeHei believed that the Post company, increasingly focused on its Kaplan educational-test-preparation subsidiary, really had much heart anymore for the news business, not to mention imagination or savvy about the Internet (Harris and VandeHei had begun, early on, registering domain names, including postpolitics.com, which the Post, when it began to

realize it might have to do some online coverage of its own, bought back for an undisclosed sum last year).

Harris and VandeHei jumped at the end of 2006, and Allen came over from Time a month later.

In a sense, Harris and VandeHei, as editors, built the site around Allen as their model reporter.

Allen is pure monomania. He's a badly dressed, single, churchgoing Washington dweeb who lives in a small apartment within walking distance of the office, and who brings a level of frothing-at-the-mouth excitement to his work that might reasonably be off-putting, even a matter of concern, to most everyone else.

He's a reporter's reporter. Other reporters, more restrained or temperate in their behavior, have, over the years, come to rely on Allen's not just diligent but fetishistic focus. "Allen is honestly annoying. He adds several more layers of detail than anybody really needs. But you never had to worry about missing anything, because if Mike didn't have it, nobody would," says a competitor.

Allen arrives at the Politico office most mornings by 4:30. Over the next two hours what he does is digest all the known information that might impact that morning in Washington politics. What's more, everybody who affects Washington politics knows that Allen is up at 4:30 assembling Politico's "Playbook," the daily report that everybody in Washington politics and media will consult before beginning his or her day. Hence, they feed him any information that they want to feed other people before they begin their Washington morning. Allen's the perfect and ultimate conduit. He is the news.

It is often entirely undifferentiated news. The minor mixed with the game-changing. Since Allen is as close as you can get to real time itself, there is almost no filter. Since his goal is as close to 100 percent detail as possible, there is almost no distinction between the ordinary and the noteworthy. So, in that sense, he isn't the news. Indeed, what he gathers is not really news. Instead, it's something near the totality of available information.

It isn't writing either. That implies a series of choices, of shaping and weighing. This is typing. Amassing. Collecting. Channeling. It comes in to Allen; it comes out of Allen. A perfect machine. Reading "Playbook" is as close as you can come on a Washington morning to knowing everything. That's part of the Politico strategy—to own the Washington morning.

Likewise, there is Ben Smith. Smith is 32, lives in Brooklyn with his wife and two children (with a third about to be born), and is, too, a total dweeb. His blog, which he started at The New York Observer, then moved to the Daily News, and then to Politico, is another new journalism model. It has a sense of extreme autodidacticism, a kind of focus and relentlessness and unavoidability that, through sheer immediacy and constancy, forces everybody to acknowledge it—and to deal with and talk to Smith. Smith ends up being the only one as interested in what his sources are doing as they themselves are. He's made himself his subjects' soulmate. During the campaign, there was hardly anyone in a senior position with any of the candidates who wasn't one of Smith's I.M. buddies.

This is a flattening not only of information and sources but also of newsroom process. The point about a traditional news organization is its high level of orchestration, of hoops to jump through to get into the paper or on the air, of stylebooks to follow, of a hierarchical, tradition-bound, gatekeeping idea of who gets to say what's news.

The Politico reporters are as autonomous as you're likely to get. Everybody eats what he kills. Without the processes of page makeup and composition and feedback from the bull pen, it's seconds from source to reporter to publication to effect on the world.

Also, in a world where there are no space limits on what you can publish, why be picky or restrictive? The "Politico 44" column is called "a living diary of the Obama presidency," and, indeed, it is no more discriminating or less self-involved than a teenage girl's daily jottings, or anybody's reflexive and idle tweets.

And yet, no matter its excesses, it is all read hungrily and obsessively. Although "read" may not be the word—more monitored like an EKG. And by none more closely than other media organizations.

Politico's writers and editors do several hundred cable appearances a week. They are

becoming a one-stop source for Washington news. Politico is like an old newswire, except that it is more specialized, and focused, and fast—and it has faces. And, more important, it's free—and, unlike the teeth-gnashing old-line news companies, it has no plans or desire to charge (it will benefit from other organizations' charging, and, accordingly, undermine them). Politico is retailing the news to everyone else in the hopes that this publicity and public profile redound to its own position as the choicest destination for political news.

This has worked—sort of. Politico puts its current traffic at 6.7 million unique visitors per month (down from a high of more than 11 million during the campaign), yet it still can't support its staff of about 100 on the Internet's low advertising rates (although, with its agenda-moving audience and its preponderance of advocacy advertisers, it manages to get a higher rate than most sites). But one effect of its Internet traffic and notoriety and the ensuing attention of cable news shows is that the original Allbritton idea for a Capitol Hill paper—one that now largely reprints Internet content—has become, with its special-interest-size circulation of 32,000, a major success. Internet cachet, in other words, has enabled a tabloid-size print version of Politico (also called Politico) to thrive and more than double the company's revenues—which, just about evenly split between Internet and newspaper, will, it appears, be more than \$15 million in 2009—meaning, according to C.E.O. Fred Ryan, that Politico, paying its staffers at nearly the level that The Washington Post pays (starting salaries for reporters at the Post are about \$45,000 per year), has hit breakeven.

The Michael Crichton notion that there is something fundamentally wrong with general-interest news (i.e., it's too general) may curiously apply as well to Politico-type special-interest news (i.e., it's too specific).

At Politico's level of specificity there may be no room for a general-interest reader. The conversation arguably becomes limited to professionals and compulsives.

If one of the gravest dangers of politics, and the real rap against the Beltway, is its insiderism, Politico vastly compounds the problem. The propensity of the political class to speak only to itself is enabled to a new degree by Politico. Indeed, the ever more detailed nature of this conversation may mean there's no time to speak to anyone else. What's more, since these are the only people who matter—Politico's 6.7 million monthly visitors include almost all the people who shape the agenda, and a disproportionate number of people who pay for the shaping of the agenda—why bother speaking to everyone else?

Also, you become less and less able. The granular and focused and O.C.D. nature of Politico's view of the world changes the language. Laymen can't enter this conversation, and the people who are involved in it can't leave it—can't set aside so easily the shorthand of legislative, policy, and media talk or the thousand names of minor characters who become major for a 20-minute news cycle, or recalibrate the relative importance of Washington sound and fury against what most other people are thinking about.

Politico reduces the world to Rahm Emanuel and to the people who want to be Rahm Emanuel.

And yet, this is a passionate conversation among quick and deeply knowledgeable folk. The habit and, perhaps, necessity of traditional news organizations to reduce and simplify and attenuate and, in the process, make news flaccid and often wrong have been superseded by these over-informed motormouths. It's the raw stuff, before the family paper or knuckleheaded network news has watered it down.

It is perhaps useless to argue whether this is good or bad. Rather, the world is as it is. And Politico seems like a pretty credible version of what the world will be: obsessives everywhere in their particular narrow-focused areas of interest ("silos" is the modern information term), flashing ever more information, ever quicker, in ever shorter bites—the shorter you can make it, the more information there can be—to all the ships at sea.