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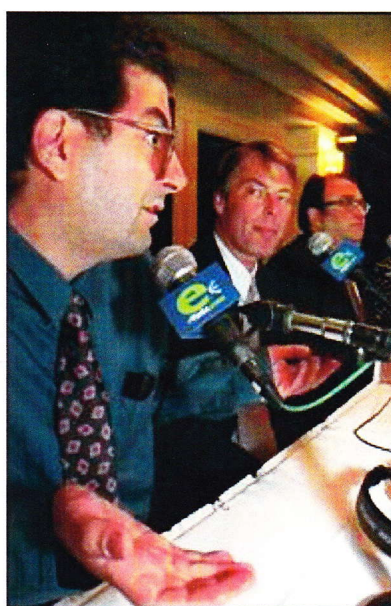
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The Skinny on the Scoop

America's preeminent gossip columnists gather for dish and debate



Tina Fineberg / AP

The Village Voice's Michael Musto, seated next to the New York Post's Richard Johnson, gabs about the gossip trade

By **B. J. Sigismund**
NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

October 20— The line between gossip and news has never been fuzzier—even around something as serious as a presidential campaign. There are more than a few examples: suggestions that George W. Bush had abused more than alcohol during his flamboyant youth, speculation about Bill and Hillary's "arrangement," talk about the Rudy and Judi thing.

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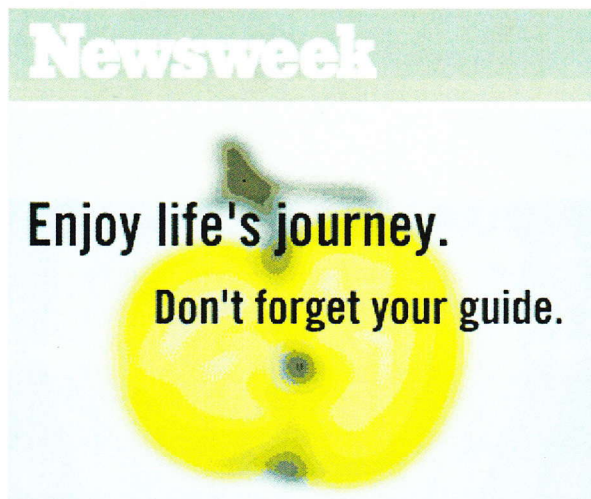
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Newsweek
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JUST THIS WEEK, Al Gore has won himself space in gossip columns regarding his all-too-revealing appearance on the cover of the current Rolling Stone.

In the end, it's up to readers to decide what's news and what's nonsense. But in our celebrity-obsessed culture, gossip columnists have become more influential than ever. The press's preeminent star-watchers gathered this week at the first ever Gossip Summit, an event sponsored by eyada.com, an all-talk site on the Web. Columnists at the Manhattan symposium included USA Today's Jeannie Williams, the New York Post's Richard Johnson, The Washington Post's Lloyd Grove, MSNBC's Jeannette Walls and E! Online's Ted Casablanca. All were there to talk shop on how they cover celebs and scandals.

Gossip went mainstream, it was noted, in October, 1994 when the New York Times lauded the National Enquirer's coverage of the O. J. Simpson case. At the time, the paper wrote that the supermarket tabloid "has probably shaped public perceptions of the case more than any other publication. In a story made for the tabloids, it stands head and shoulders above them all for aggressiveness and accuracy."

Since then, some of the country's biggest news stories—Diana, John Kennedy, and especially Lewinsky—have forced every media outlet to redefine the way they look at gossip. So where does that leave good old-fashioned columnists? In a world where the President of the United States can admit to an affair with a 23-year-old intern, what is off limits?

For starters, "A famous person's children," said Richard Johnson. (A certain politician's son was suspended from school when he was 12 years old, and



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Eric Nies, Jaid Barrymore and Chuck Zito (formerly bodyguard to Jean-Claude Van Damme) add up the plusses and minuses of fame

the media buried it, he explained.) What else? Diseases, everyone agreed—including eating disorders. The group was far more divided on the issue of “outing,” the practice of revealing that a celebrity is gay. Johnson—who writes the New York Post’s delectable Page Six column—said he is against it, though he sees its hypocrisies. “You can write all you can about the sex lives of heterosexuals, but you can’t out people.” MSNBC’s Walls is not against revealing that someone is gay. She famously outed Matt Drudge in her book, “Dish,” leading to months of mud-slinging in the press between the two. The Village Voice’s maverick Michael Musto isn’t against it either. “People saw Ellen and Anne making out in lesbian bars,” he says, “so I went with it.” Still, all the gossips noted that the mainstream press is wary of coming close to revealing a subject’s sexuality. Comic John Leguizamo outed a New York politician at a public event earlier this year, the gossips said, but none of his quotes made it into the newspapers.



Tina Fineberg / AP

With all the power they hold in their newsprint-stained hands, what are their jobs like? “Celebrities don’t want to be friends with me,” said Musto. “I don’t get calls from Meryl Streep to go bowling.” Walls says publicists call to threaten her. “If a bomb went off in here, Pat Kingsley [head of PMK, Hollywood’s top celebrity PR firm] would be thrilled.” Liz Smith, who phoned in her comments, complained that “No one wants to talk about anything anymore! All the stars only want one thing... the cover of Vanity Fair.”

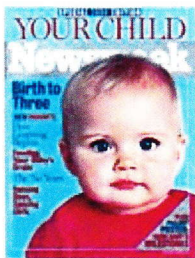
George Rush and Joanna Molloy, a husband-and-wife team of gossips from the New York Daily News, provided the afternoon’s best dish. When Julia Roberts began dating Benjamin Bratt, Rush & Molloy planned an item. But Roberts called Rush herself to sweet talk him into leaving her alone for a bit. Molloy imitated

her: "Geooooorge," she began, all syrupy. "I've always respected you because you print the truth." Roberts told him the relationship was new, "but if it moves on a little further, you'll be the first to know." Rush & Molloy softened the item. But guess what? They never heard from her again.

A few celebrities were on hand to talk about being *in* the gossip columns. "I'd been anonymous for 30 years," said "Survivor" Sean Keniff. "I thought it'd be pretty cool to be famous, get into restaurants and stuff." He gets 30 or 40 calls a day now on his home answering machine. How's the whole thing feel? "It's pretty cool... you get better treatment as a jerk from 'Survivor' than you do as a doctor."

Two other survivors, Jaid Barrymore (an actress and Drew's mom) and Eric Nies (castmember of "The Real World: New York" and former host of MTV's "The Grind") were also present. Barrymore called gossip a "double-edged sword." She loves the publicity and says when you're a celebrity, "people treat you in a more deferential manner." But she hates how invasive the press can be. Eric Nies said the whole fame thing sucked. "Our natural instinct is to be wanted by other human beings," he said. "They say the worst disease is loneliness."

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The Star's Janet Charlton was the only supermarket tabloid journalist present that afternoon. She regularly writes checks to her sources. "You get what you pay for," she says. Because her sources earn cash, "they get the story right, and get every detail right. And

usually, the stories check out." She said the Globe's Frank Gifford expose—in which they paid a woman to sleep with Kathie Lee's husband in front of a camera—"was one of the greatest stories ever printed." Hmm—maybe a new Pulitzer category?

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