Feeding Frenzy for a Big Story, Even if It’s False

By DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK

WASHINGTON, Jan. 28 — Jeffrey T. Kuhner, whose Web site published the first anonymous smear of the 2008 presidential race, is hardly the only editor who will not reveal his reporters’ sources. What sets him apart is that he will not even disclose the names of his reporters.

But their anonymity has not stopped them from making an impact. In the last two weeks, Mr. Kuhner’s Web site, Insight, the last remnant of a defunct conservative print magazine owned by the Unification Church led by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, was able to set off a wave of television commentary, talk-radio chatter, official denials, investigations by journalists around the globe and news media self-analysis that has lasted 11 days and counting.

The controversy started with a quickly discredited Jan. 17 article on the Insight Web site asserting that the presidential campaign of Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton was preparing an accusation that her rival, Senator Barack Obama, had covered up a brief period he had spent in an Islamic religious school in Indonesia when he was 6.

(Other news organizations have confirmed Mr. Obama’s descriptions of the school as a secular public school. Both senators have denounced the report, and there is no evidence that Mrs. Clinton’s campaign planned to spread those accusations.)

In an interview Sunday, Mr. Kuhner, 37, said he still considered the article, which he said was meant to focus on the thinking of the Clinton campaign, to be “solid as solid can be.” But he declined to say whether he had learned the identity of his reporter’s sources, and so perhaps only that reporter knows the origin of the article’s anonymous quotes and assertions. Its assertions about Mr. Obama resemble rumors passed on without evidence in e-mail messages that have been widely circulated over the last several weeks.

The Clinton-Obama article followed a series of inaccurate or hard-to-verify articles on Insight and its predecessor magazine about politics, the Iraq war or the Bush administration, including a widely discussed report on the Insight Web site that President Bush’s relationship with his father was so strained that they were no longer speaking to each other about politics.
The Washington Times, which is also owned by the Unification Church, but operates separately from the Web site, quickly disavowed the article. Its national editor sent an e-mail message to staff members under the heading “Insight Strikes Again” telling them to “make sure that no mention of any Insight story” appeared in the paper, and another e-mail message to its Congressional correspondent instructing him to clarify to Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Obama that The Washington Times had nothing to do with the article on the Web site.

“Some of the editors here get annoyed when Insight is identified as a publication of The Washington Times,” said Wesley Pruden, editor in chief of The Washington Times.

And in an interview, John Moody, a senior vice president at Fox News, said its commentators had erred by citing the Clinton-Obama report. “The hosts violated one of our general rules, which is know what you are talking about,” Mr. Moody said. “They reported information from a publication whose accuracy we didn’t know.”

Mr. Kuhner’s ability to ignite a news media brush fire nonetheless illustrates how easily dubious and politically charged information can spread through the constant chatter of cable news commentary, talk radio programs and political Web sites. And at the start of a campaign with perhaps a dozen candidates hiring “research directors” to examine one another, the Insight episode may be a sign of what is to come.

To most journalists, the notion of anonymous reporters relying on anonymous sources is a red flag. “If you want to talk about a business model that is designed to manufacture mischief in large volume, that would be it,” said Ralph Whitehead Jr., a professor of journalism at the University of Massachusetts.

With so much anonymity, “How do we know that Insight magazine actually exists?” Professor Whitehead added. “It could be performance art.”

But hosts of morning television programs and an evening commentator on the Fox News Network nevertheless devoted extensive discussion to Insight’s Clinton-Obama article, as did Rush Limbaugh and other conservative talk radio hosts.

And the Fox News rival MSNBC has picked up several of Insight’s other recent anonymous “scoops.” Among them: that Mr. Bush was afraid to fire his adviser Karl Rove because “he knows too much”; that there is a rift between President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice over the president’s support for Israel; and that Mr. Bush spent the months before the midterm elections in a bunker-mentality focused on the Iraq war and the elections to the exclusion of all else. Mr. Kuhner has appeared as a guest on both networks.

A spokesman for MSNBC declined to comment. Representatives of News World Communications, the arm of the Unification Church that owns Insight, could not be reached for comment on Sunday night.
Mr. Kuhner said, “Our report on this opposition research activity is completely accurate,” and he argued that all major news organizations relied on anonymous sources. Mr. Kuhner, in an editor’s note on Insight, said the Web site could not afford to “send correspondents to places like Jakarta to check out every fact in a story.” The Web site pays up to $800 for an article.

Mr. Kuhner said he was not yet convinced by reports from officials of the elementary school that Mr. Obama attended in Indonesia about its secular history. “To simply take the word of a deputy headmaster about what was the religious curriculum of a school 35 years ago does not satisfy our standards for aggressive investigative reporting,” he wrote.

Insight was founded two decades ago as a conservative print magazine called Insight on the News. It started the career of the journalist David Brock, who became famous for writing sensational magazine articles and books about Anita Hill and later Mrs. Clinton. Mr. Brock later recanted much of what he had written, and now runs a liberal media group dedicated to countering what it considers be conservative bias in the news media.

Insight had thousands of subscribers, but its reputation was checkered by its false reports, which included an assertion that President Bill Clinton was selling plots at Arlington National Cemetery to Democratic campaign donors, and, during the Bush administration, that Saddam Hussein’s purported weapons of mass destruction might have been found.

Officials of the Unification Church closed the print magazine about a year and a half ago, and tapped Mr. Kuhner to run it as a stand-alone Web site. He worked for three years, from 2000 through 2003, as an assistant national editor at The Washington Times. Before that, he was a history professor, but did not finish his dissertation. After leaving The Washington Times, he worked for a Republican policy group.

Mr. Kuhner said he insisted on editorial independence, reporting only to the board of New World Communications. Under his tenure, Insight’s Web site has claimed a series of anonymous scoops, many centered on the White House. In addition to the article about Mr. Bush’s feud with his father, there was also a January 2006 report that the United States was preparing for a covert attack on Iran and a February 2006 report that Vice President Dick Cheney would step down after the midterm elections.

Mr. Kuhner said Insight stopped using bylines to encourage contributions from reporters for major news organizations. He said such contributors could not write what they knew under their own names for their main employers, either for fear of alienating powerful sources or because of editors’ biases.

“Reporters in Washington know a whole lot of what is going on and feel themselves shackled and prevented from reporting what they know is going on,” Mr. Kuhner said. Insight, he said, “is almost like an outlet, an escape valve where they can come out with this information.”

“The team I have has some of the most seasoned, experienced reporters in this town, so I know the
material I am getting is rock-solid.” he said. “The reporter has to give his or her word that, ‘It is solid, Jeff,’ ” Mr. Kuhner said.

During an interview, he invited this reporter to moonlight for Insight. “I will take a look at your work,” he said. “I will do a background check. You may get a call from me.” He declined to say where the contributor who offered the Clinton-Obama story worked.

“I said, ‘That is a sexy story, if you can confirm it,’ ” Mr. Kuhner recalled. After Insight posted the article on Jan. 17, Mr. Kuhner said, he was disappointed to see that the Drudge Report did not link to it on its Web site as it has done with other Insight articles. So, as usual, he e-mailed the article to producers at Fox News and MSNBC.