

# Aliens ate our market share

*The Enquirer hopes political gossip can boost flagging sales*

**H**illary's Psychic Contacts Elvis." A headline unlikely to appear anywhere—but, then, so were "Clinton Aide Has Secret 2nd Wife and Love Child" and "Top Dole Aide Caught in Group-Sex Ring." And even if the King isn't haunting the corridors of the White House, you might read about it anyway, courtesy of the *National Enquirer's* Washington bureau, due to open by year's end.

Yes, that's right. After decades of dipping into the occasional bit of Washington salaciousness, the quintessential supermarket tabloid plans to establish a permanent D.C. presence. "We just sat down and said, 'We've been doing Hollywood forever—let's expand to D.C.," which, thanks to Clinton, has become Hollywood East," says Steve Coz, the *Enquirer's* editor.

But in addition to the solid, uh, journalistic reasons for the move, there's another, more compelling reason for the *Enquirer*, based in Lantana, Fla., to turn its gaze northward: Washington gossip may help boost its flagging circulation. "The tabloids are first and foremost a business," says Phelps B. Hoyt, a tabloid-industry analyst with KDP Investment Advisors. "And right now, celebrity reporting is very competitive."

Every journalism student is taught that advertising is the lifeblood of a publication. With the tabloids, however, this rule doesn't apply: Roughly 85 percent of the *Enquirer's* money comes from supermarket sales. Although the *Enquirer* has done some excellent reporting in recent years—even the *New York Times* described its O. J. Simpson coverage as ahead of the curve—the paper actually saw its circulation nose-dive 20 percent during the Simpson trial as most people watched the drama unfold on TV.

Newsprint prices went up at about the same time, and the once mighty *Enquirer*, which sold an average of 4.3 million copies a week in 1989, saw its circulation



**Gotcha!** The *Star's* exposé on Dick Morris made political waves—and sold well in the supermarkets.

plunge to about 2.6 million last year. Other tabs have felt the pinch as well: The *Star*, which four years ago sold about 3 million copies a week, is down to about 2.4 million. (Revenues at American Media Inc., which owns both papers, nevertheless jumped 8.7 percent in the first quarter, thanks to a harder drive for advertising sales.)

In a sense, the tabloids are a victim of their own success. As mainstream media have become more star-struck and sensational-

ist, the *Enquirer* and others no longer have a lock on the market for glitz and sleaze. "Ten years ago, we were the only real game in town," explains Peter Burt, new Los Angeles bureau chief for the *Star*. "Now even *USA Today* has a whole celebrities section. And the network magazine shows all go after stories that used to be reserved for the tabs, like teenagers divorcing parents."

**Fighting back.** So with the traditional media encroaching on tab territory, the tabloids are fighting back by poaching on theirs—with surprisingly impressive results. The *Star's* September 10 exposé on Dick Morris, one of President Clinton's top political advisers, sold an extra 300,000 copies. The *Enquirer* also sold more of its own Morris issue and got a circulation bump from its cover story on the antics of GOP consultant Roger Stone and his wife, who, it claimed, have been regulars on the swingers' circuit for some time. (Stone says the *Enquirer* made up the story.)

The tabloid—which pays anywhere from \$30 for tips to \$20,000 for exclusive stories—doesn't plan to uncover a scandal a day. It will instead focus on covering Washington personalities. As the lines between politics and entertainment blur, argues Coz, the American public really needs to know Washington's celebrities as intimately as it does Hollywood's.

Does that mean that people waiting in line at the supermarket will soon be reading headlines about the federal budget deficit alongside the usual ones about Lisa Marie's latest fling? Says Coz: "We'll leave [those stories] to you guys." ■

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