

# MEDIA DIAGNOSIS: A NEWS AGGREGATOR'S COVERAGE REGARDING HILLARY CLINTON'S HEALTH DURING THE 2016 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

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## Abstract

This paper will explore how the online news aggregator *Drudge Report* presented stories about Hillary Clinton's health by repeatedly referencing a "cough". While the website linked to a story highlighting coughing by Clinton at one point in 2007, and to a video on a blog again in 2008, there was little mainstream news coverage until *Drudge Report* increasingly ran headlines about the subject. Clinton's health became something highlighted regularly in linked sites and in original content posted on *Drudge Report*.

Without arguing the accuracy of the coverage, nor the veracity of subsequent coverage about Clinton's or any other candidate's health, this paper will examine the timing and frequency of such stories. This is a unique study of how a news aggregator eventually set the agenda for other online, print and broadcast media and will be an exploration of how *Drudge Report* specifically emphasized a particular health angle for its millions of readers. This paper will also detail how the response of other online, print and broadcast outlets, whether complicit or contradictory may have demonstrated cultivation theory, which has been typically researched in respect to film and television entertainment.

Studying this specific time frame for this specific story will potentially shed new light on how popular online news organizations can set the conversation and coverage for other media.

## Introduction

In the most recent U.S. Presidential campaign, the subject of the top two candidates' health received quite a bit of attention online and in traditional television and print media. According to a Google News search of news coverage during the campaign, much of the commentary on Republican candidate Donald Trump's health centered on his age, family medical history and a note purported to be directly from his doctor.

However, Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton faced criticism and concern in the media about her health for many months prior to a recorded and much publicized incident where, as she left a ceremony commemorating the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attack, she appeared to faint while she was being helped to a waiting vehicle. Initially, her campaign said she was overheated. Later, she said after the incident she was visited by a doctor who diagnosed her with pneumonia.

But that incident was not the first time Clinton faced questions about her health, more specifically about "coughing", or generally sounding unhealthy. This paper will investigate mentions of Clinton's cough in coverage presented by the news aggregator The Drudge Report, specifically from the early months of 2016, when the headlines about Clinton's coughing appeared more frequently on *Drudge Report*.

In studying the *Drudge Report*, there have been many references to the website in presentations and papers, but only four academic works whose primary focus was to examine *The Drudge Report* or Matt

Drudge as one of their primary inquiries. Two of those dealt with the early appearance of the *The Drudge Report* as a major news source in the late 1990s, specifically becoming well-known for providing new information and a hub to find other coverage during the Monica Lewinsky scandal involving President Bill Clinton. Only two other papers discuss *Drudge Report* in a more current context. Kalev Leetaru wrote *New Media vs. Old Media: A Portrait of the Drudge Report 2002-2008* (2009). Political scientist Kevin Wallsten composed an article examining *Drudge Report's* influence on political media coverage that was considered but never published.

## Materials and Methods

While there are many sources for news and information online, one popular type of source that is often revisited multiple times by readers and has received significant investigative inquiry by scholars are news aggregators. While researching changes to traditional media, D.S. Park wrote, “News aggregators gather stories from content originators and repackage it for a reader” (2010). *Drudge Report* acts as a news aggregator but also as a new content creator for some of the stories presented on its website. Recent research on online news reading habits shows that news aggregators still exert influence in the new content sphere, saying, “aggregators remain the most popular way to find news” (2011).

Wallsten’s paper, while apparently never being published in an academic peer-reviewed journal, contains the most recent and thorough examination of the literature - both academic and popular - on the *Drudge Report*, Matt Drudge and claims regarding *Drudge Report’s* perceived political agenda. Wallsten wrote about *Drudge Report* and its creator Matt Drudge, “The conventional wisdom among media consultants, campaign directors and political journalists is that *Drudge Report* drives the agenda of the mainstream news media” (2010). In his explanation on why *Drudge Report* is worth examining, Wallsten quoted a book by Halperin and Harris – *The Way to Win*: “Matt Drudge rules our world. With the exception of the Associated Press, there is no outlet other than *The Drudge Report* whose dispatches instantly command the attention and energies of the most established newspapers and television newscasts” (2006).

Certainly, there are new news aggregators and popular sources for news and information that have taken a place in the online news and information culture today, but since the appetite for such websites has grown there is no doubt *Drudge Report* continues to exert influence (Olmstead, Mitchell, & Rosenstiel, 2011).

*Drudge Report* is one of the most popular news aggregators. As recently as the summer of 2016, Mediaite.com, an industry multimedia publication focusing on political media, announced, “DrudgeReport.com topped the list of U.S. media publishers for June 2016, coming in at #3 in terms of total page views.” That month, the simply designed news aggregator was only surpassed by the websites of MSN and Disney (Resman, 2016).

*Drudge Report’s* content is accessed by millions of viewers in the U.S. and tens of millions globally each month. We used data from a commercial company that offers some data free online, called Quantcast “...provides free cross-platform audience measurement...” (2017). See figures 1.1 and 1.2 for screenshots of Quantcast’s measurement of *Drudge Report* views. This data is updated regularly and a link to Quantcast.com appears on *Drudge Report’s* main page.



Figure 1.1 – screenshot of Quantcast’s 30 Day Total of unique visits for *The Drudge Report* as shown on February 23, 2017.

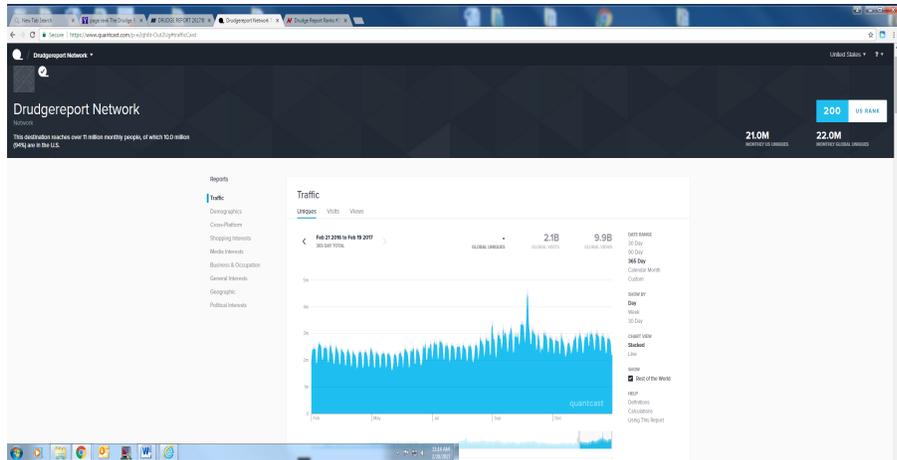


Figure 1.2 – Screenshot of Quantcast’s 365 day total traffic for *Drudge Report* as shown on February 23, 2017.

Several online website and content tracking tools exist and are in development, but many of those contain large gaps of information and don’t account for the appearance of similar stories with multiple headlines, which is typically how they appear on popular news aggregators such as *Drudge Report* (2017). For this research, *DrudgeReportArchives.com*, the content search tool on *Drudge Report*’s site was used to identify stories with the word “cough” or “Clinton cough” or “Clinton Coughing”. See figure 2.1 below.

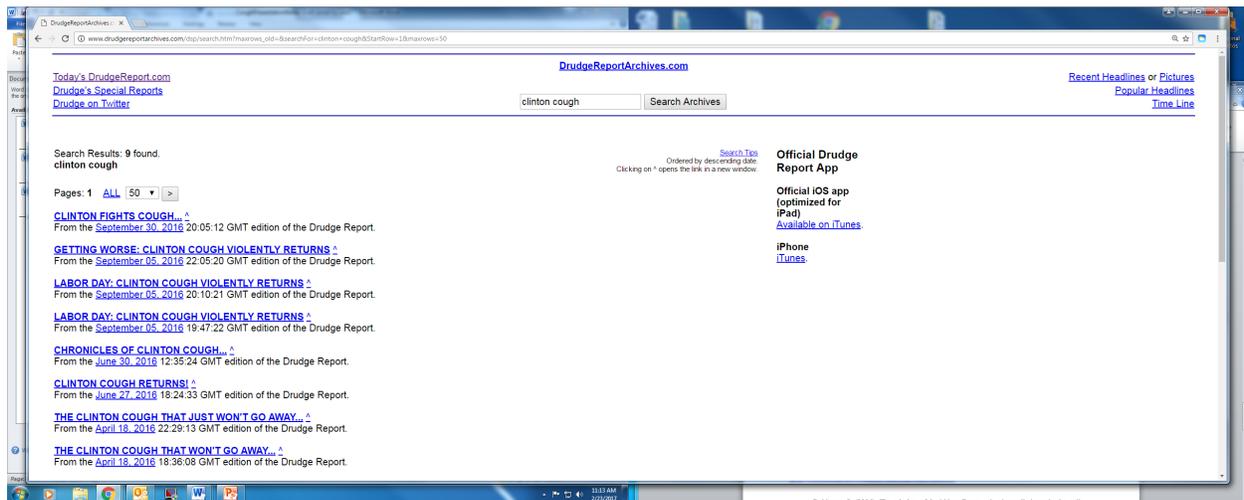


Figure 2.1 – Screenshot of first 8 entries for search query “Clinton cough” on *DrudgeReportArchives.com* as accessed on February 23, 2017.

After removing other health and medical coverage, such as a Whooping Cough outbreak, some turns of phrase regarding “coughing up” other information and examining the dates stories appeared, a clear pattern emerged for the time between the first regular mention of a cough and September 10, 2016.

## Results

After removing other health and medical stories, such as a Whooping Cough outbreak, some turns of phrase regarding “coughing up” other information and examining the dates stories appeared, a clear pattern emerged for the time between the first regular mention of a cough and September 10, 2016. A list

of the headlines, or links, as they appeared on *Drudge Report*, along with the dates they appeared is listed below in figure 3.1.

| <b>Date<br/>Published/Link<br/>d</b> | <b>Headline on <i>Drudge Report</i></b>                                     | <b>Time *</b> |
|--------------------------------------|---|---------------|
| 9/10/2016                            | Hillary Ducks Behind Pillar to Cough  |               |
| 9/8/2016                             | COUGH FLASH POINT   |               |
| 9/7/2016                             | Hillary admits upping med 'load' to combat coughing fits...                 |               |
| 9/7/2016                             | Admits upping med 'load' to combat coughing fits...                         |               |
| 9/6/2016                             | Complete timeline of 2016 coughing fits...                                  |               |
| 9/6/2016                             | THE 4 MINUTE COUGH  |               |
| 9/5/2016                             | GETTING WORSE: CLINTON COUGH VIOLENTLY RETURNS                              |               |
| 9/5/2016                             | LABOR DAY: CLINTON COUGH VIOLENTLY RETURNS                                  | 20:10:21      |
| 9/5/2016                             | LABOR DAY: CLINTON COUGH VIOLENTLY RETURNS                                  | 19:47:22      |
| 7/19/2016                            | VIDEO: Her coughing fit returns...  |               |
| 6/30/2016                            | CHRONICLES OF CLINTON COUGH   |               |
| 6/27/2016                            | CLINTON COUGH RETURNS!  |               |
| 6/4/2016                             | VIDEO: Hillary coughing fit returns...                                      |               |
| 4/26/2016                            | COUGH, COUGH...   |               |
| 4/26/2016                            | COUGH, COUGH  |               |
| 4/25/2016                            | Hillary Cough Attack Returns...   |               |
| 4/24/2016                            | Cough Attack Returns...   |               |
| 4/21/2016                            | PAGLIA: ENOUGH OF THE HILLARY CULT! 'And what about that persistent cough?' |               |
| 4/18/2016                            | More Coughing...  |               |
| 4/18/2016                            | THE CLINTON COUGH THAT WON'T GO AWAY...                                     |               |
| 3/14/2016                            | NEW COUGHING FIT FOR HILLARY, CROWD CHEERS...                               |               |
| 3/13/2016                            | VIDEO: NEW COUGHING FIT FOR HILLARY, CROWD CHEERS...                        |               |
| 3/7/2016                             | CLINTON COUGH RETURNS AT DEBATE...  |               |
| 2/23/2016                            | MONTAGE: Hillary Can't Stop Coughing...                                     |               |
| 2/18/2016                            | HILLARY DRAMA: PRISIM GLASSES BACK ON AFTER COUGHING SEIZURE                |               |
| 2/18/2016                            | HILLARY HEALTH DRAMA: PRISIM GLASSES BACK ON DAY AFTER COUGHING SEIZURE     |               |
| 2/16/2016                            | DRAMA: ANOTHER Hillary Coughing Fit -- At Speech Discussing 'Privilege'     |               |
| 2/16/2016                            | DRAMA: ANOTHER Coughing Fit -- At Speech Discussing 'Privilege'...          |               |
| 2/16/2016                            | DRAMA: ANOTHER Coughing Fit During Speech Discussing 'Privilege'...         |               |
| 1/25/2016                            | HILLARY CHOKES: ANOTHER COUGHING FIT!                                       | 18:17:10      |
| 1/25/2016                            | HILLARY CHOKES: ANOTHER COUGHING FIT!                                       | 18:16:09      |
| 10/23/2015                           | HILLARY HEALTH WARNING: THE COUGHING FIT...                                 |               |
| 10/23/2015                           | HILLARY HEALTH WARNING: COUGHING FIT...                                     |               |
| 2/5/2008                             | VIDEO: HILLARY ELECTION DAY HEALTH SCARE: Coughing                          | 17:44:07      |

|           |  |          |
|-----------|--|----------|
|           | Fits Cut Short Election Day Media Interviews   |          |
| 2/5/2008  | VIDEO: HILLARY ELECTION DAY HEALTH SCARE: Coughing<br>Fits Cut Short Election Day Media Interviews...Developing...Taping had to be halted last Sunday on ABC 'THIS WEEK' when Clinton coughing fit alarmed producers, Concerned Host George Stephanopoulos told the senator to get some 'tea and lemon'... | 17:30:00 |
| 2/5/2008  | VIDEO: HILLARY ELECTION DAY HEALTH SCARE: Coughing<br>Fits Cut Short Election Day Media Interviews...Developing...   | 17:19:55 |
| 5/20/2007 | HILLARY COUGHING, WHEEZING AT COMMENCEMENT   |          |
| 5/20/2007 | WAS PLAGUED WITH DRY THORAT, WHEEZING AND A COUGHING FIT   |          |
| 5/20/2007 | VIDEO: HILLARY COUGHING, WHEEZING AT COMMENCEMENT...   |          |

\* *Stories posted more than once within the same hour*

Figure 2.1 – List of all headlines for stories involving Hillary Clinton and coughing until September 10, 2016.

The last story listed in Figure 2.1 is from September 10, 2016 - one day before the apparent fainting incident that led to worldwide media speculation about Clinton's health.

Stories about Clinton appearing to “cough” or clear her throat began on the site on May 20, 2007. Lloyd Grove from the online *The Daily Beast*, in his later examination of conservative media coverage and speculation about Clinton's health noted that this took place during a commencement speech, “...when the former first lady was a New York senator launching her first presidential campaign” (2016).

At that time, as noted by Callum Borchers in another report about conservative media's many characterizations of coughing by Clinton, Borchers quoted a New York Times writer that observed a radio program alter that year in which Matt Drudge, Drudge Report's creator, didn't appear to think it was a major concern: “Drudge expressed genuine concern for her. “Hillary, dear, take care of yourself. We need you. I need you personally...She was professional. She kept going. She finished the speech.” Later, after a caller criticized that view and wished Clinton would “drop dead”, Drudge is quoted to have replied, “I need Hillary Clinton. You don't get it. I need to be a part of her world. That's my bank. Like Leo DiCaprio has the environment and Al Gore has the environment and Jimmy Carter has anti-Americanism...I have Hillary.” (Weiss, 2007).

Coverage appeared again in 2008 when an apparent coughing spell reportedly paused or stopped media day interviews.

In October of 2015, after 10 hours of testimony at a Benghazi hearing, “Clinton had a serious coughing fit the prevented her momentarily from being able to speak.” (Halper, 2015). *The Weekly Standard* article went on to say that while she was given the opportunity to take a break, Clinton “...popped a cough drop in and kept on going.”

Then starting in January 2016, stories about the possibility of Clinton coughing, a “persistent” cough or the appearance that she may have been coughing ran almost monthly until the fainting incident on September 11, 2016. In some cases, stories were updated more than once a day, sometimes with new details, sometimes only the title was changed.

In June, 2016 at least two media outlets published stories about what had primarily been coverage on Clinton's purported coughing by conservative media outlets, including *Drudge Report* after Drudge posted a link to video of a campaign rally where Clinton stopped to cough and then continued to speak.

Both Grove and David Weigel of *The Washington Post* concluded that continuing coverage of Clinton's coughing was designed to show that Clinton was old and frail. Grove quoted post saying, “It's a desire to

portray her as lame and feeble...” *Salon* writer Katie Levingston suggested such coverage was designed to weaken a candidate so that a conservative candidate would appear more favorably. She wrote, “...the coughs are juicy but still it’s a cheap shot for Trump to use a ticklish throat to call into question Clinton’s health and stamina on the campaign trail.

### Discussion

Communication scholars regularly endeavor to examine campaign rhetoric in a current or a previous presidential campaign. And often, that examination shows how rhetoric is presented in the media. As recent research has shown, with consumers getting their information from diverse forms of media with varying and possibly narrowing agendas, and new content available every minute, it is becoming more difficult to track a story’s evolution and then to begin to understand how that coverage may inform not only selection of other media, but cultural opinions and selection of candidates (Chung, Nam & Stefanone, 2012). Recent research into how Americans get their information has emphasized that online news, specifically news aggregators like *The Drudge Report* can be a valuable tool in analyzing the online information gathering habits of individual news consumers and how increased sharing of information from some websites eventually affects more mainstream, and even more viewed traditional media sites. This examination into the pattern of coverage used to direct public opinion, combined with the repetitive nature of aggregate online news sites, blogs and a converging traditional media (Chung, Nam & Stefanone, 2012) that rely more heavily on online content is worthy of further exploration, as are themes of age, gender and health perceptions involved in media rhetoric and ultimately how that impacts voters decisions.

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