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Lynn Sweet

Sidestepping on Downing Street

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BY **LYNN SWEET** SUN-TIMES COLUMNIST

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Late Tuesday morning, my Blackberry starting buzzing non-stop. So many e-mails were coming in, all on the same theme, that I knew I was being targeted somewhere in the blogosphere.

This specific stream of e-mails written with passion but pleasantly without the usual vitriol ginned up by ultra-partisan sites, essentially all had the same message: The Chicago Sun-Times needed to pay more attention to British government documents dubbed the "Downing Street Memo."

It took only a few minutes on the Internet for me to discover that the e-mails were generated by an anti-Iraq war Web site, www.downingstreetmemo.com, launched last month.

I read a little dossier about myself and a Sun-Times editor, the result of research by Michael Clark, an assistant professor of history at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa., and a co-founder of the site. "I do as much research as possible on Washington correspondents before urging readers to write to them," Clark said in an e-mail that followed up on our phone conversation.

This is how the squeaky wheel gets the grease in this age of Internet political communication.

Another co-founder of www.downingstreetmemo.com is Georgia Logothetis, a 22-year-old DePaul University Law School student who lives on the North Side.

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"Everybody came together through a blog called the Daily Kos," said Bob Fesmire, from Sunnyvale, Calif., another co-founder.

They are putting up content about the documents as well as targeting three mainstream media outlets a day. Their aim is to get more stories about the memos into conventional print and broadcast outlets.

The so called Downing Street documents, dug up by the Times of London, assert that the Bush White House cooked intelligence in order to justify an invasion of Iraq.

At issue is not the veracity of the documents -- notes from a July 23, 2002, meeting British Prime Minister Tony Blair attended -- but what they really mean.

On Wednesday, Blair, in an exclusive interview with the Associated Press, said the "Downing Street Memo" should not be taken to mean the United States wanted a war with Iraq no matter what.

"People say the decision was already taken. The decision was not already taken," Blair told the AP.

Blair also said he was "a bit astonished" at the U.S. media coverage.

The media push "has been tremendously successful," Logothetis told me in an e-mail exchange. "And has helped to get media coverage of the memo. However, I have to say it's a sad testament to the current state of the media that some reporters feel the "story" is bloggers covering the Downing Street documents. (Not you, of course but other papers that have covered just the Web site and not the memo itself). The real story here is the explosive contents of the documents themselves."

Even without the prodding of the bloggers, I had been interested in the Downing Street documents, if there was an angle I could pursue. That was a reason I attended a reporters breakfast with Paul Wolfowitz last week. Wolfowitz is the new president of the World Bank, and he came to this gathering wanting to talk about his recent trip to Africa.

As the former deputy Defense secretary, Wolfowitz was one of the prime advocates for the Iraq War.

One of the documents talks about a lunch former British Ambassador Christopher Meyer had with Wolfowitz in March 2002, where the two discussed Saddam Hussein.

Wolfowitz brushed aside a string of questions. He had not read the memo. He did not remember the lunch.

"There's a lot I could say about what you're asking about, if I were willing to get distracted from the main subject," Wolfowitz said.

He continued, "I really think there's a price paid with the people I've just spent time with, people who are struggling with very real problems, to keep going back in history."

Wolfowitz hinted there may be something to say. Sometime later. "There will be a time and place to talk about history," he added, "but I really don't believe it's now."

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