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TELEVISION

The Path to Charlie Sheen's H.I.V. Disclosure

By **COLIN MOYNIHAN** JAN. 5, 2016

It was a secret that had finally become too burdensome to keep.

“I’m here to admit that I am in fact H.I.V. positive,” Charlie Sheen told Matt Lauer during the “Today” show on Nov. 17. “I have to put a stop to this onslaught, this barrage of attacks and of subtruths.”

To most people it was startling news. For roughly four years, Mr. Sheen had worked to keep his illness private, out of public view, by jousting with the media and paying several other people in what he called “shakedowns” for their silence.

By November, though, before his television appearance, Mr. Sheen’s ex-fiancée and The National Enquirer each seemed on the verge of making his condition public.

To track the push and pull between Mr. Sheen and the media over several years — his illness flickering in and out of public view — is to see behind the veil of how celebrity secrets are kept hidden and ultimately disclosed.

For the bloggers and tabloids competing for scoops, the tactics included blind news items to elicit tips and spark rumors on social media.

Mr. Sheen’s side used legal threats, nondisclosure agreements that visitors to his home had to sign, and money to keep people from disclosing his confidential medical condition.

“I’ve paid those people,” Mr. Sheen said at one point in the “Today” interview, “enough to bring it into the millions.”

Still, there were narrow escapes. In 2014, a Sony television executive appeared to mention the actor’s H.I.V. in an email to several colleagues, but the email would not become public for many, many months.

That same year, a blogger revealed the illness in several online posts. The first account appeared in April 2014, about three years after Mr. Sheen said he received the diagnosis and 19 months before he sat down with Mr. Lauer. The posting appeared on the blog Diary of a Hollywood Street King, which was co-founded and is largely written by a former rapper, Jacky Jasper. It reported not only that Mr. Sheen had H.I.V. but that he was paying a 25-year-old woman to keep his secret.

Over the next few months, Mr. Jasper went on to post about a half-dozen items citing Mr. Sheen’s illness on the blog, which carries the motto “Brewing and serving piping hot celebrity tea and scandal since 2008!” He was emboldened, Mr. Jasper said in an interview, by seeing photographs of Mr. Sheen’s antiretroviral medicines. The photos, Mr. Jasper said, had been taken by a woman after sex with Mr. Sheen and provided to the blogger by an acquaintance of hers.

(During his “Today” appearance, Mr. Sheen confirmed that one of the people he was paying was someone who had taken pictures of his medicine with a cellphone.)

But suddenly, at the end of the summer of 2014, the blog posts disappeared.

A lawyer for the blog, Ronald Richards, was approached in July 2014 by another lawyer, Keith Davidson, emails between the two men show. Mr. Davidson had previously represented a woman who accused Mr. Sheen of abuse. Now he was seeking “a complete blackout on objectionable subject matter,” according to the emails obtained by The National Enquirer and provided to The New York Times.

Mr. Richards said that he did not ask Mr. Davidson whom he was representing. “It was irrelevant to me,” he said, adding that the posts were taken down for “business reasons.”

Mr. Davidson later thanked Mr. Richards in an email for “the prompt work of deleting and/or redacting the offending content,” and spoke of four payments of \$15,000 being made as a result.

Mr. Jasper said that he had not been aware that items from the blog were taken down or that money had changed hands. He said that while he wrote many of the posts, the technical and business operations of the site were handled by a colleague, Darrick Angelone of AOne Entertainment. Mr. Richards said he forwarded the payments to that company.

Mr. Davidson and Mr. Angelone did not respond to messages requesting comment. Mark Burg, Mr. Sheen's manager, said the actor had nothing to do with the payments.

Regardless of who was responsible, the posts' disappearance returned Mr. Sheen's secret to the darkness, at least for a while.

As it turned out, though, The National Enquirer was also pursuing the story. Dylan Howard, the top editor at that tabloid, said the paper began looking into rumors that Mr. Sheen was ill in the fall of 2013 and its curiosity was piqued when Mr. Jasper's blog posts came down.

“There is a pitched battle for exclusives in this market,” Mr. Howard said. “Losing a bombshell to a competitor stings at the very core.”

Just about a year ago, Mr. Howard said, The Enquirer believed it had enough evidence to publish an article and it alerted Martin D. Singer, a lawyer for Mr. Sheen who has represented Bill Cosby and other celebrities. Mr. Sheen's camp fought back, saying that a recent medical exam proved the paper wrong, Mr. Howard said, and threatened a \$100 million lawsuit if the paper printed “defamatory lies.”

The paper held back on the article. “I had to act in a prudential manner given Mr. Sheen's emphatic denials,” Mr. Howard said.

The editor said that over the next 11 months, The Enquirer turned up additional evidence that confirmed Mr. Sheen was H.I.V. positive and had paid to keep that hidden. Last October, eager to shake the secret loose, The Enquirer engaged in what

Mr. Howard described as a “Ping-Pong” tactic; it ran a blind item about “a bad-boy Tinseltown star” who had been hiding “an explosive secret from the world — he is H.I.V.-positive.”

“We were batting the ball across the table and seeing what bounce it got,” Mr. Howard said.

Web forums filled with speculation on the star’s identity. As rumors swirled, pressure on Mr. Sheen built. His ex-fiancée, Scottine Ross, was threatening to make Mr. Sheen’s medical condition public, according to court papers his lawyers filed last month in California.

On Nov. 2, representatives for Mr. Sheen called The Enquirer to ask if the paper planned to publish the actor’s name, Mr. Howard said. That same day, Mr. Sheen’s lawyers agreed in principle to pay Ms. Ross \$1 million and a percentage of the profits from his TV show, “Anger Management,” to resolve various claims she had made and to maintain confidentiality going forward, according to a copy of their settlement.

On Nov. 11, a Wednesday, Mr. Howard said, The Enquirer, confident in its article and concerned that Mr. Sheen had not divulged his condition to all his sex partners, told Mr. Sheen’s camp that it would publish soon. By the following day, Mr. Sheen’s camp had begun discussions with NBC about an interview with Mr. Lauer.

“I have no doubt that Charlie Sheen wanted to establish his own narrative, and the best way to do that was to attempt to reveal the news before The National Enquirer published,” Mr. Howard said.

But an NBC News executive familiar with the process said that, actually, the network, acting on a tip, had approached Mr. Sheen first. Mr. Lauer contacted the actor directly that Thursday to see if he wanted to talk, according to the executive. Mr. Sheen, who had previously spoken to Mr. Lauer after he had been fired from the CBS show “Two and a Half Men,” called back the next day and the interview was confirmed over the weekend.

Mr. Burg said that Mr. Sheen had been thinking about disclosing his condition before he heard from Mr. Lauer. The Enquirer’s impending article “was part of the

decision-making process,” he said, but a bigger motivation was to end the payments Mr. Sheen had been making.

“There were rumors, there were girls talking,” Mr. Burg said. “He was tired of paying to keep his privacy.”

And word of his illness was beginning to slip out. On Sunday, Nov. 15, a blogger named Jason Quinlan, based in Los Angeles, posted a detailed account of how a friend had photographed bottles of antiretroviral medicines in Mr. Sheen's bathroom. He later told his story to The Daily Mail in Britain.

On Monday, Nov. 16, at 12:18 p.m., the “Today” show said on Twitter that Mr. Sheen would appear the next day to make “a revealing personal announcement.”

Minutes later, Mr. Howard said, The Enquirer published its article online, naming Mr. Sheen. The Daily Mail and The Sun in England, TMZ and others, including The New York Times, also published reports that day.

The next day the “Today” show's ratings soared as Mr. Sheen showed up, tie somewhat askew, to explain that he was coming forward to stop the payments and halt the “very harmful and mercurial stories that are about threatening the health of so many others, which couldn't be farther from the truth.”

Though his health is reportedly stable, Mr. Sheen's troubles did not end with his public revelation. Within days, a former girlfriend, Bree Olson, complained that he had never told her that he was H.I.V. positive. And Ms. Ross, the former fiancée, sued Mr. Sheen, saying he did not tell her that he had H.I.V. before they had sex.

Mr. Sheen has insisted he was forthright about his condition with all his sexual partners, citing a policy of “condoms and honesty.” His manager has said Mr. Sheen did not have H.I.V. during his relationship with Ms. Olson.

Soon after Mr. Sheen's announcement, the posts about his H.I.V. went back up on the Hollywood Street King blog.

“They were legitimate stories,” the blog's lawyer, Mr. Richards said, “and we knew them to be accurate at the time.”

John Koblin contributed reporting from New York, and Noah Smith from Los Angeles.

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