

# How Jeff Berry zapped Mike Bowers with the “Adultery and Sodomy Page”

The Mike Bowers Adultery and Sodomy Page became the hottest underground website in Atlanta, bringing its creator death threats and intimations of litigation, raising almost as many questions about journalistic ethics as it did reader eyebrows.

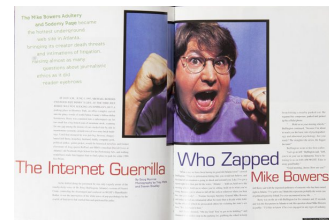
By **Doug Monroe** - October 1, 1997

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**At 10:05 A.M., June 5, 1997, Michael Bowers changed Jeff Berry’s life.** At the time Jeff Berry was not seeking an epiphany, but a parking place in Hembree Park, an office complex carved into the piney woods of north Fulton County’s billion-dollar boomtown. Berry was crammed into a subcompact car, far too small for a big-boned man of mountain stock, scanning for one gap among the dozens of cars stacked side by side in monotonous symmetry around rows of two-story brick buildings. Until that moment he was just big, brawny, shaggy-haired Jeff Berry, homeboy, husband, daddy, computer geek, political junkie, guitar picker, would-be historical novelist, and former classmate of drag queen RuPaul and HBO comedian David Cross at Atlanta’s old Northside High School for the Performing Arts, and nothing would have made him happier than to find a place to park his white 1990 Geo Prizm.

As he drifted along the pavement he was only vaguely aware of the touchy-feely voice of Dr. Perry Buffington, Atlanta’s version of Frasier Crane, counseling the disarranged and confused on WGST’s PlanetRadio. Rather, it was the interruption of the white noise of pop psychology by the crackle of hard news that startled him and quickened his pulse.



“What a day we have been having in good old Atlanta town!” crowed Buffington. “There is information hitting like you would not believe, and this kind of information is going to shock and astound you. Like, I’ve got a report right here that just hit the wires: ‘Atlanta’—hold on, hold on to the steering wheel, hold on to where you’re sitting, hold on to what you’re doing, because you’re about to fall off the sofa or wherever when you hear this. Are you ready?—Former Georgia Attorney General Mike Bowers said today he had an extramarital affair for more than a decade while holding the office in which he prosecuted others for violating the state’s sex laws’ Yes, you heard it here.”

Jeff Berry shouted, “Oh my God! You’ve got to be kidding!” and slammed to a sudden stop in the parking lot, grabbing the wheel to keep from hitting a nearby parked car. He regained his composure, parked and picked up his cellular phone.

“ . . . Hold on to your steering wheels,” Buffington continued, “because I’m about to teach you the basic rule of psychopathology and abnormal psychology. Are you ready? The straighter the arrow, the bigger the kink!”

Buffington went to his first caller.

“Let’s go to Jeff,” Buffington said. “Jeff you’re in your car in Alpharetta. You’re listening to us on 640-AM WGST. Take it away good buddy.”

“Good morning, doctor. How are you?” Jeff Berry said with the ingrained politeness of someone who has been raised right in Atlanta. “I’ve got to say I think this represents probably the worst case of political hypocrisy I think I’ve ever encountered in my life . . . .”

Berry was on the air with Buffington for five minutes and 15 seconds and was the first person in Atlanta to ask this question about Mike Bowers in public: “I’d like to know if he ever engaged in any

type of sodomy behavior during that 10 years with either his wife or his girlfriend." Jeff Berry's excellent adventure as a media gadfly had begun.

The news about Bowers was the flash point that changed Berry's life. A single moment of shock and outrage that turned years of pent-up feelings into a bright, focused beam, a sudden realization of just how much he disliked, no, *abhorred* Mike Bowers; a thought that the public had no idea about what went on behind the closed doors of sanctimonious politicians it entrusts and that the public should know. It was an awakening that within days led Berry to create a site on the World Wide Web with a play on his name, JeffBob, as his mailbox. Within a week the contents of the JeffBob homepage, called The Mike Bowers Adultery and Sodomy Page would become a red-hot underground website for Atlanta. The page would bring Jeff Berry death threats through cyberspace, place him at the center of a cross-country fight over freedom of speech on the Internet and land him in a legal confrontation with L. Lin Wood, the attorney who represents Richard Jewell, the exonerated Olympic bombing suspect, in his libel suit against "The Atlanta Journal-Constitution."

Before the June 5 announcement Jeff Berry had already heard, like almost everyone addicted to the warm rush of rumor off Capitol Hill in Atlanta, that Mike Bowers had a cheating heart. What disgusted Berry was that nobody seemed to care about the "stupefying hypocrisy" of the former attorney general, who had carved out a niche as a moral arbiter, a Mr. Clean in the pig slop of Georgia politics. Bowers had positioned himself as the champion of open records and ethics in government and had gained national attention for his support of Georgia's archaic bedroom laws, which use the power of the state to punish people for acts of love that put faces in forbidden places, and for withdrawing a job offer to a lawyer, Robin Shahar, because she intended to marry another woman in a religious ceremony. And even though Bowers had just admitted to an affair that lasted a decade, for Berry that was not enough. JeffBob would tell what none of the mainstream media would tell.

He already had a head start. His enmity toward Bowers had brewed for years because he felt the attorney general's support of the sodomy law made progressive Georgians look like yokels. As a Southern Democrat, Berry was angered by Bowers' defection to the Republican Party. But most of all, his passion was inflamed two years ago when he says he saw Bowers praying for the American family on a fundamentalist Christian television program at the same time Berry had heard that Bowers was "aggressively" committing adultery. That was what pushed Jeff Berry into the land where a grudge burns like an eternal flame; he vowed to do anything he could to derail Bowers' quest for governor. He talked with fellow political junkies, wrote letters seeking information, followed leads and did his own sleuthing. A year earlier, in fact, he says a friend working as an intern at the prestigious law firm King & Spalding had not only told him the name of Bowers' purported mistress but took Berry upstairs for a fleeting introduction to the woman he would later dub a "temptress" on the Internet.

But his quest fizzled in mid-1995. He had no outlet for his political passion, although he fed his craving for the real news about Georgia through a circle of tuned-in friends and sources. Berry concentrated on his work as a personal computer network manager for a California company, an around-the-clock job that requires beepers, cell phones and computers at every port and on moving his family—wife Liz and sons Crawford and Jackson—into a new brick home overlooking a cul-de-sac in a fashionable Alpharetta subdivision with its own man-made lake. Along the way he reluctantly began to accept Bowers' election as governor as inevitable.

Just a few years ago a political junkie like Jeff Berry might have called talk radio and telephoned a few friends to discuss his outrage over Bowers' hypocrisy, and that would have been the end of it. This time it didn't end there. After Bowers' public admission of infidelity Berry called a few political insiders he has known all his life through his father. Like a good reporter, Jeff Berry refuses to identify his sources because they are so recognizable. He says two of them said Bowers was political toast, then told Berry "some little odd information bits," including their belief that the affair had lasted far longer than Bowers had admitted.

As he and his sources gossiped Berry found himself typing notes in shorthand. He types with a sort of self-taught limp, using only the index finger of his left hand and all five fingers of the right. He had just installed a new HTML (HyperText Markup Language, the coding language of the World Wide Web) editor on his personal computer. "I'm typing these things in, and I'm thinking, You know, if I save my little file where I've made these little notes here, that's an HTML file. I can put that on the web right this minute."

That night, and over the next weekend, he created The Mike Bowers Adultery and Sodomy Page, mostly, he says, as a joke. He and Liz laughed out loud as he unleashed the wild sense of humor he honed to a sharp edge in the performing arts magnet program at Northside High, a show business crucible, and as a devoted fan of the iconoclastic musician Frank Zappa and the gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson. Berry registered with GeoCities, a California-based Internet community, and put up the web page on Sunday, June 7. He says he alerted a few friends and sent a dozen or so e-mails to his political contacts.

In just three days Berry became an amateur muckraker with a roar as loud and bite as sharp as any political writer in American memory, putting a wickedly funny, utterly tasteless and downright mean page on the Internet, describing it as "The No. 1 Hypocrisy Site on the World Wide Web." The page includes video clips of a seductively gyrating woman in a bikini and links to "The Bedroom," "The Mike Bowers Red-Light Lounge of Forbidden Love and Sodomy" and "The Republican Wife-Cheating Hall of Fame," which alleges infidelity by a long list of well-known figures, including Newt Gingrich, Guy Millner, George Bush, Rush Limbaugh and thrice-married Congressman Bob Barr, whom Berry dubs Midgetboy for his short stature.

When Berry posted a picture of the woman he believed to be Bowers' mistress, he wrote, "Hubba, hubba! . . . Way to go, Mikey! I mean, even the hardest-line Christian Coalition member would have to say that she's quite the looker!" The page's content ranges from the puerile ("She was working on his staff, if you know what I mean!") to the satirical ("So if you are a female, beware in the presence of Republicans. Statistically there is a 17 to 7 likelihood that you will be propositioned by one of them, and at least two of them will be stinking drunk. Somebody really ought to do something about the 'Party of Family Values!' They're simply too horny!"). He keeps tabs on bumper stickers, such as "Vote for Mike Bowers—two first ladies are better than one!" And in an open letter to Bowers' supporters he asks, "Have you no decency left? Has the Bible taught you *nothing*?"

No one in Atlanta has written anything so controversial, audacious and politically incorrect since the days of the late "AJC" columnist Lewis Grizzard. As mean as it is, The Mike Bowers Adultery and Sodomy Page is a 100-proof shot of fun in a city where most of the mainstream media has turned to syrup. "It bothers me to see anybody taking the Bowers web page very seriously," Berry says. "They're missing the humor factor. Anybody who engages in a 15-year adulterous affair and continues to run for governor, hey man, that's funny."

He posted the page anonymously, but Berry's name quickly surfaced as rumors swirled outside of his own circle of friends and into the Capitol press. Berry hasn't tried to hide his identity with reporters and has agreed to on-the-record interviews with Morris Newspapers (which include the Athens, Augusta and Savannah papers), "Creative Loafing," WXIA-TV, "South." Magazine, the "Fulton County Daily Report" and "Atlanta" Magazine. Although the Bowers campaign accused Berry of sending e-mails to reporters soliciting attention, he says he was answering the e-mails and calls that came to him. Berry's first information came from sources he already knew. But he quickly found his e-mail clogged with confidential tips from what has been called the Internet's electronic "network of whippers." He has become a clearinghouse for news from the attorney general's office, other state offices, lawyers who despise Bowers, reporters exchanging information, even, he says, from an observant mole within the Bowers campaign itself. Berry was quick to report that a special counsel would be appointed to investigate ethics complaints against Bowers. The page morphed from a

frathouse-style prank into a daily news update on a topic of widespread interest that, for weeks at a time, was ignored by Atlanta's mainstream media.

The Mike Bowers Adultery and Sodomy Page plunges boldly into territory where the establishment media dares not tread. Berry not only posted the name of the woman many believe was Bowers' mistress, but claimed she was once a Playboy Bunny in Atlanta and went to work at King & Spalding after leaving her position in Bowers' office. The page raised tough questions about conflicts of interest between King & Spalding and Bowers concerning the firm's lawyers doing business for the attorney general's office and contributing campaign funds to Bowers. Two months later, Bowers was fined \$3,600 by the State Ethics Commission for failing to disclose campaign contributions, including some from King & Spalding lawyers. Berry questioned the salary increase the alleged mistress received while working for Bowers and whether the couple had traveled to assignments on state funds. Berry argued that the affair may have lasted as long as 15 years and published a report, based on information from a confidential source, that Bowers and his mistress spent the night together in a Macon hotel on June 3—two days before Bowers' confession. Communications Director Bill Crane, of the Bowers campaign, maintains the affair lasted a decade, and states the Macon hotel story is untrue—he says he was with Bowers that night until 10 p.m.

The content of the page is so inflammatory and outrageous that it immediately raises almost as many journalistic questions as reader eyebrows, and nobody is quite sure of the legal implications. Berry adopts a homemade standard of ethics: "Before I will go with a story I will independently confirm it either directly with the source, if I can get it, or through whatever peripheral contacts there may be who have the information."

The day after the page first appeared the Bowers campaign raced into action. Crane says he was alerted to the page by reporters and called a toll-free number for GeoCities and left a voicemail asking "if they had content regulations as to libel, defamation and slander, to please review the page against those standards and let me know their thoughts." Two hours later he says he got a call back from a customer service representative "who reviewed the content and found that it didn't hold up to their standards," Crane says. GeoCities took the page off the Internet. The new fans of the page immediately complained to Berry that they couldn't call it up on their computers. He contacted GeoCities, found out the page had been yanked and immediately turned to Atlanta's hometown Internet service provider, MindSpring. He set up an account with a credit card online, put the webpage back up and sent messages to his friends and e-mail correspondents with the new address. Crane says he called MindSpring with the same questions he asked GeoCities, but MindSpring contends it is a service provider, like the phone company, and not liable for the content of its client pages. Therefore, MindSpring won't take it down. A story of censorship swept the Internet community like a summer storm and brought awareness of the page to the media, from the Athens and Augusta papers to "The Wall Street Journal." "The Atlanta Journal-Constitution" briefly mentioned the page, then let the issue drop.

Crane says the campaign considers the page "an irritant, a nuisance," but says it is not costing Bowers votes or campaign contributions. "It's mean-spirited, false, salacious and slanderous," he says. "It's hurtful to completely innocent people." Crane contends the page is riddled with errors about Bowers' record.

Berry's page appeared so quickly and was so satiric that many political observers at first felt it was a sophisticated attack prepared in advance by professionals. Some thought it was the work of Tom Perdue, who has earned a reputation as the state's most ruthless political consultant, who has been allied with Bowers' rival Guy Millner, who is openly dismissive of Bowers' chances to be elected governor and who, prior to the announcement, discussed with reporters the fact that Bowers had kept a mistress on the state payroll. Others blamed militant homosexuals who despise Bowers for his sodomy law stand. Others said it was Democratic Party loyalists. And others, aware that Jeff Berry

had worked for four years with the state Labor Department's computers, blamed operatives in that steamy political hothouse, which has bred its own gubernatorial candidate, Commissioner David Poythress. Both Perdue and Poythress disavow any connection with Berry or his web page. Georgia Democratic Party Executive Director Steve Anthony says the party has nothing to do with it.

Among those who feel the page cannot be the work of a lone computer geek is Republican political consultant Jim Lovejoy, of Cobb County. He says that the appearance of such a slick site only three days after Bowers' announcement is "too incredible to be believable. I think someone in the background has mounted a concealed but well coordinated negative attack against [Bowers] to escape any accountability. I believe that whatever political operative it is is a very devious person, who is good with the ability to do what he's doing—and dangerous." Lovejoy notes the lack of journalistic standards on the page: "He names the woman, but he provides no documentation to it whatsoever. And many of the charges he makes are innuendo. There isn't any accountability. What the guy says about Bob Barr is an example. There is no source whatsoever, no documentation whatsoever."

Jeff Berry insists the page is the work of one man, unaligned with any campaign, who is "married to an actual woman." He is extraordinarily well qualified to launch the electronic sniper attack that reduced Bowers to a lovesick laughingstock. The Adultery and Sodomy Page is a harmonic convergence of Jeff Berry's talents.

**He was born to Georgia politics.** It was neither a hobby nor a pastime, but something that surged through him like blood, a chromosomal trait like his looming size (6-foot-3, 240 pounds) and booming baritone voice. He is a true son of the establishment: born in Piedmont Hospital, educated in the city, and raised in Midtown in a family where bread was put on the table by government service paychecks.

His father, George, has served in both public and private leadership roles with distinction. George came to town from Blairsville, in the mountains, and rose through the ranks in City Hall to serve as chief administrative officer and aviation commissioner, then as Georgia Commissioner of Industry and Trade and as chairman of the Metropolitan Atlanta Olympic Games Authority. He then became a senior vice president with Tom Cousin's development empire. George ran for lieutenant governor in 1990, jumping into the Democratic primary with only three months to go and finishing a respectable third among nine candidates, but missing the runoff, which was won by Pierre Howard.

One of the enthusiastic campaign volunteers working for George Berry was his son Jeff, who had majored in political science and computer information science at Georgia State University. Jeff has been playing with computers since the early Atari models and learned more about the machines in the U.S. Army and as a computer specialist with the Georgia Labor Department before going into the private sector. He volunteered in two campaigns of former state Sen. Ron Slotin, a young intown Democrat.

George Berry would not acknowledge awareness of Jeff's webpage for this article. Jeff says he and his father took a car trip together to Monroe County in midsummer and skirted the topic. The senior Berry had already agreed to help raise money for the man his son is attacking.

George Berry, a longtime Democrat, was a member of the campaign finance committee for the Republican Bowers. Despite rumors that the senior Berry distanced himself after the June 5 announcement, Bill Crane insisted in August that George Berry remained a member of the finance committee. George Berry says his involvement in the Bowers campaign is "private business."

Jeff Berry says he learned about his father's role with Bowers the hard way. "I had not discussed with him at all his involvement with the Bowers campaign prior to the announcement of June 5. I didn't

even know he had any association with him until the webpage was out there on the Internet. My mom told me. And when I found that out, I said, 'Oh my God, he ain't going to like this!'"

Jeff Berry acknowledges that one of the errors he has made on the page was hinting that his father had left the campaign, which Crane uses as an example to disparage the page's accuracy. Jeff later wrote in one of his daily reports, "Campaign sources close to this webmaster say that a major campaign finance figure has decided to honor his 'commitment' to serial adulterer Mike Bowers and continue drumming up some hard-to-come-by money for the embattled 'Romeo'—what an embarrassment." Asked directly if he was referring to his father, Jeff Berry concedes, "I guess you could say that." One of the wildest subplots of the fallout from *l'affaire de Bowers* is the conflict between a distinguished Bowers supporter from Georgia's old school and his contrary son, a skilled pioneer in a new type of guerilla politics.

The summer of '97 was a memorable one for the younger Berry because for the first time in his 33 years he found his own voice, speaking out loudly on his father's turf. "When I decided to do it," Jeff says, "it was a hell of a doozy." But he is a respectful rebel. A smiling picture of his parents is prominent in Jeff's computer room on the second floor of the new house. Jeff talks admiringly of his father's dignity and high personal standards, and recalls that as a youngster he got a construction job at the airport against his father's wishes and was crisply dressed down by his dad for accepting a few sticks of firewood from a contractor. He also recalls a "stinging lecture" about manners when his father felt that 7-year-old Jeff had not been sufficiently respectful to Atlanta Mayor Sam Massell. Jeff inherited his father's passion for politics, and has written 700 pages of a historical novel based on Georgia's famed "Three Governors" episode in 1946-47, following the death of Eugene Talmadge. He recalls what his father said as his interest in politics bloomed: "He told me not to take it too seriously." As for the reaction to his webpage of his mother, Jeannine, Jeff says, "My mom is absolutely thrilled with it. The only thing she told me was to be very careful in terms of possible legal activity." But he says he has not been swayed by his parents' feelings about the page.

"Frank Zappa said if you live your life in pursuit of your parents' approval, that it is tremendously dangerous to your mental health, and I would agree with that," Jeff says. "I certainly don't want to aggravate my dad by any means, but by the same token this is something that I honestly believe. I believe that Mike Bowers is a bad guy, and I think it is acceptable for me to express that; and if that opinion conflicts with my dad's, then so be it." They've had conflicts in the past, Jeff says, especially when he played in a high school rock band, Major Haze, and sometimes picked guitar for RuPaul and the U-Hauls.

"The relationship between Jeff and George Berry is better now in the past year than it ever has been in the past 10 years that I've known him," says Liz Berry, who adds that she is proud of her husband's webpage. "I always knew he had it in him. We were just shocked at the response that it got."

Years earlier, Jeff Berry had developed a distaste for Mike Bowers' moral grandstanding and defense of the sodomy law's constitutionality. His dislike for Bowers grew even more intense when he band to hear that Bowers was venturing into fundamentalist Christian territory in his search for support.

One of Jeff Berry's many passions is watching evangelical television programs on the Trinity Broadcasting Network for amusement. He says he finds special irony in the opulent sets on which evangelists beg for money. Berry, who was raised a Methodist and still goes to church on occasion, watches TBN the way young viewers watch "Mystery Science Theater 3000": "You sit there and you watch it and make funny comments about it. Most of what you see on [TBN] is outrageously funny."

It was funny, that is, until a Sunday night in 1995 when Berry says he was watching TBN and, to his jaw-dropping astonishment, saw Georgia's attorney general come on television with two state

senators and evangelist Paul Crouch in a show broadcast from TBN 's Atlanta-area affiliate, WHSG/Channel 63, that Berry says, "eventually ended up with Bowers leading a prayer in which he prayed for divine guidance for the family, he prayed for revival to sweep America, for families to be brought back together, that sort of thing."

"To find out that Bowers was lending some degree of credibility to them—or at least comfort—by appearing on their show and talking in their parlance and acting like he was one of them, I found it to be a patent and overt-attempt to sway the extremist rightwing religious political agenda. I also found it to be outrageously hypocritical in light of what I'd heard about, and set about later to confirm, that he had indeed been engaged in an extramarital affair and it was still going on at the time."

Crane says Bowers does not remember if he prayed on the show, but that even if he did, there would have been nothing wrong with it. In addition, Crane contends the affair was over by the time Bowers appeared on the show.

Berry says, "I decided that if there was anything I could do to prevent Mike Bowers from being elected governor, which was his stated desire in life, I would do it."

Then came the bombshell of June 5.

That night, Berry took his HTML file and began composing his page at home, on a computer with a vast 21-inch screen near a mini refrigerator stocked with cool green bottles of Heineken beer. Liz looked over his shoulder throughout the weekend. She says they laughed hysterically when they used a mugshot of Bowers as the entry point to the page's contents. At first Jeff wanted to say "Slap Mike" but Liz noticed that the cursor changed to a finger when it passed over Bowers' face. "It looked more like a poke," she says. So Jeff rewrote the line to say, "If you are a voter with a sense of humor, poke Mike in the face for being such a hypocrite and come on in!" As a model, Berry used the Bob Larson Fan Club Homepage, a satirical attack on a Denver-based TBN televangelist. When Berry put his webpage up on GeoCities that Sunday night, he installed an internal counter and watched the hits roll in.

It was like watching an atom split.

When Berry went to bed he says he had between 25 and 30 hits, or requests for the page. By Monday morning the count had climbed to 300. By noon to 600. "I had a bush-league hit on my hands," he says.

At 3:45 p.m. the counter hit 711 and GeoCities took the page down. Berry turned to MindSpring. "Voilà! I was back on the Internet."

In retrospect it may have been a strategic gaffe for the Bowers campaign to contact GeoCities, raising a free speech issue in the Internet community that lent greater credence to Berry's effort, launching The Mike Bowers Adultery and Sodomy Page into a wider audience, where its popularity grew at geometric rates. In the eyes of Michael Binford, an associate professor of political science at Georgia State University, the Bowers campaign may have called even more attention to what at the time was an underground phenomenon. But Crane says he would contact GeoCities again if he had it to do over.

After the story of Internet censorship appeared in the Athens and Augusta papers and "Creative Loafing" and on WXIA-TV the increase in visits to the page was astounding. According to a MindSpring internal count, the page had 890 hits on June 9. The next day the hits soared to 13,218. On June 11 alone the page got 16,279 hits, and by late August, it had gotten over 300,000 hits. JeffBob became

the only game in town as coverage of the Bowers affair dropped off the radar of the establishment media.

Berry encountered early outrage and opposition. He quickly received several threats, he says, including this e-mail: ". . . You better take your gay webpage down because you are a dead man. Mike Bowers will make sure that faggots like you are all prosecuted when he gets elected and he'll be the one laughing then . . ." Another read, "I happen to know that Bowers' people are looking for you. I know someone who works for him who says that you are in danger." Berry says his employer began receiving thousands of "spams" —spurious e-mails from questionable sources. Berry took steps to thwart the spamming by showering the senders with e-mails. "They're trying to hack a hacker," he says.

But for the most part, he is basking in the sheer glory of it all. "I've had so much fun with this thing," he reflected in early July. "It started out as just sort of a private joke. I never anticipated it would be quite this popular or stir up quite this amount of interest." By mid-July, however, it stirred up more than interest. On July 16 Berry received a fax at his job from L. Lin Wood, the combative attorney representing Richard Jewell in his suit against "The Atlanta Journal-Constitution." Wood had been retained by the woman Berry identified as Bowers' mistress. Threatening to sue for libel and invasion of privacy, Wood wrote "the Bowers webpage daily publishes false and defamatory statements" that subjected his client to public contempt and ridicule. Wood sent a similar letter to MindSpring.

Berry called Gerry Weber, legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Georgia, who told him ACLU's legal committee would probably be interested in defending Berry. Weber feels Berry was within his rights to use the woman's name because she had willingly had a lengthy affair with a public figure and because there were allegations that public funds were used by the couple during their affair. But Berry's stubborn streak intervened. After discussing Wood's demand with MindSpring President Mike McQuary, Berry called Wood himself and negotiated a settlement without consulting Weber. Berry agreed to remove the woman's name, while keeping the rest of the page intact. Weber says he was disappointed, but can understand Berry's action as a solo political writer with no corporate backing. The case over the woman's name could have been precedent setting, Weber says, because no rulings specifically address the issue of defamation on the Internet.

"I thought about it long and hard and it occurred to me that this was not exactly the result I had been looking for when I put the page up there—a legal battle," Berry says. "It's hard for me to imagine that the world took this thing so seriously that it could possibly have ever gotten to his point." In weighing his options, including the aggravation it would cause his family—especially his father—he decided to take the woman's name off the page. He later apologized to webpage readers who felt he should have hung tough on the issue.

"There is no question I am in the right in this case, and I would have won. I believe in many ways I should have probably have stood up to this thing and gone ahead with it." Ultimately, he says, Bowers' mistress is not his target. "You have to pick your fights very carefully. Now, if it were Mike Bowers, bring it on. Let's go. Get ready to rumble."

Left unsettled in the case is MindSpring's role. Wood contends the service provider is a publisher and could be held responsible for the content of client pages if the company is notified about libelous material and refuses to take action. MindSpring contends it is not—that it is a service provider only. The point became moot when Berry dropped the woman's name. But even though Berry elected not to do battle with Wood, the Bowers webpage is important, Weber says. "It's an example of the significance of the Internet that this individual has been able to tell the public about an issue that the major media may never exploit. It ups the ante for the major media. They're being one-upped by a lonely pamphleteer."



But in cyberspace there are no watchdogs for the lonely pamphleteer. Only Liz Berry serves as editor for her husband, acting as "the devil in his ear" to get him to back off too many uses of such sexual terms as "booty on the side." And Berry doesn't hide behind the anonymity of his webpage. Had he chosen to do so he could have remained forever JeffBob. But some observers, such as Jim Lovejoy, worry that The Mike Bowers Adultery and Sodomy Page is a precursor of political webpages of the future that could carry altered voice and video with the likeness of a candidate making outrageous false statements, without political or even legal accountability.

"The web is going to be used more and more to publish things about public figures, elected officials and candidates," says Daniel Kent, and Alston & Bird lawyer who practice First Amendment and intellectual property law. "People looking at the information on a website need to be perhaps a little more skeptical than they used to be."

And what will become of JeffBob? Berry says that if Bowers drops out of the governor's race, he'll take down the page. But Berry says he's had so much fun with his role as a media gadfly that he may become Georgia's answer to Matt Drudge, a young Californian who publishes the Drudge Report, a popular Internet page of show business and political gossip. But Drudge, who also operates without an editor, has found himself facing a potentially devastating lawsuit by White House aide Sydney Blumenthal. Drudge retracted a report in which an unnamed Republican falsely accused Blumenthal of spousal abuse.

Berry is not worried. "As a result of this I like to think I have a little bit of the knack for it and enjoy entertaining the folks." Eventually, he may even run for office himself. What, then, if someone puts up a webpage attacking him?

"I haven't been running around positioning myself as an ethical and moral arbiter," Berry says, adding that he would eagerly look at the webpage to see what anyone could find so interesting about him. But he also recalls that a friend warned him, after reading the Bowers page in all its accusatory glory, "Boy, you'd better never cheat on Liz!"

"I don't think you have to worry about that," says the webmaster.

*This article originally appeared in our October 1997 issue under the headline "The Internet Guerrilla Who Zapped Mike Bowers."*