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**W**ith the Clinton-Lewinsky-Starr-Tripp-Goldberg soap opera playing into its seventh month, we have the luxury to step back and look at the big picture.

It should not be lost on us that the real story here is how government and the press conspired with self-interested parties to orchestrate the scandal. While news organizations saturated the American people with speculation in February, March and April, they also withheld important truths. News media failed to do their job. They knew, but didn't tell, that others had failed to do their jobs too.

Journalists, prosecutors and literary agents, along with a host of others holding professional or public positions, are identified by standards, boundaries and legitimate expectations.

We reasonably expect journalists to truthfully and doggedly pursue and present the important truths of a story.

We reasonably expect officers of the court to obey the law and meet the ethical expectations of their profession.

In a civilized society, even literary agents have reasonable limits of conduct. They should promote their clients' interests, but not if that promotion includes destroying individuals and turning the government upside down to achieve a book contract.

Consider some of the behaviors that have recently been brought to light:

The independent prosecutor and his deputies kept news reporters apprised of what witnesses would say before the grand jury. Now even in a city flooded with leaks, this kind is toxic.

The grand jury process works only because witnesses believe that what they say to investigators, prosecutors and jurors will be held in the strictest confidence. In sensitive criminal investigations, witnesses would rather go to jail for refusing to answer than be subjected to the consequence of having the wrong people find out the content of their testimony. If Kenneth Starr, the most public prosecutor in the country, will blatantly violate the confidence of witnesses, there is little reason to believe that other prosecutors and grand jurors, who are far less accountable, should be trusted with our secrets.

When this sort of breakdown of governmental trust occurs, we depend on the press, the Fourth Estate, to sound the alarm. By his own admission,

Starr and his staff leaked early and often. Any of those Washington, D.C., news organizations that received the leaks could have chosen to report this misuse of prosecutorial power as an important truth in the Clinton-Lewinsky investigation. Instead, veteran reporters and their bosses allowed the prosecutor and his staff to hide behind the cloak of "sources say." Rather than tell an important truth, reporters were dummies to Starr's ventriloquist.

The story of how Monica Lewinsky became the centerpiece in this ongoing melodrama has now also been told. Linda Tripp, a secretary desperate for a book contract, and her agent, Lucianne Goldberg, enlarged the newsworthiness of Lewinsky's reported relationship with Clinton through anonymous tips, strategically planted suggestions and manufactured evidence. They successfully enticed lawyers, prosecutors and a seasoned Newsweek reporter and his news managers. January's breaking news was a Goldberg-Tripp production.

Last winter, a movie, "Wag the Dog," provided an eerie echo of the Clinton-Lewinsky-Iraq events as it depicted an Oval Office that purportedly launches a war to divert attention from a presidential sex scandal.

This summer, another movie, "The Truman

Show," provides a metaphor to ponder. "The Truman Show" welcomes its audience to the worldwide viewing of a 24-hour-a-day soap opera. Here, all contrive to convince Truman Burbank that he is living a real life when, in fact, his family and friends are actors playing their parts and his life is an elaborate series of scripts. "The Truman Show" serves as artistic punctuation both for the public undressing of Lewinsky and the equally public duping of the American people.

Consider the elaborate deception that resulted in Lewinsky sending verifiable notes to the president.

According to a detailed dissection of the reporting in Brill's Content magazine, Tripp's allegations of a president-intern tryst needed some national media attention to help get a book contract and Goldberg had been wooing Newsweek reporter Michael Isikoff for months. But, Isikoff needed more evidence before a story could run in Newsweek. Tripp had already surreptitiously taped Lewinsky answering questions designed to lead the former intern into incriminating self-disclosures. But, that wasn't enough for Newsweek.

Goldberg had a plan. Tripp was to suggest to Lewinsky that she send messages to the president via a particular courier service. Receipts and an additional source, thus, magically appeared.

Isikoff reportedly wasn't concerned when he found out that the courier interviews and delivery stubs came from a company owned by Goldberg's relatives. He had what he needed for his story. When Newsweek reported Lewinsky's use of the courier service, the important truth of how the messenger had come to be used was not included in that story. Lewinsky was duped and so were we.

Entrapment, coercion and enticement, the withholding of important information — these are all techniques designed to gain an individual's agreement or cooperation without full knowledge or consent. These are techniques that strip individuals of their ability to make voluntary and informed decisions.

The surreptitious taping and subsequent disclosure of Lewinsky's fear of going on record in the Paula Jones case were gut-wrenching for anyone who reflects on the nature of intimate relationships and friendships. But worse is the realization that Lewinsky's taped hysteria was actually set up by the Goldberg-Tripp team with a series of anonymous phone calls to Jones' lawyers suggesting that Lewinsky be subpoenaed.

Now we know that Tripp's betrayal was compound. She orchestrated the event, and then offered a falsely sympathetic ear and a hidden tape recorder to scoop up Lewinsky's reaction.

As "The Truman Show" unfolds, we recoil at the objectification of Truman Burbank, the only real human being in his world.

We wince at Burbank's guileless acceptance of the lying vows of honesty and love by the actors who play his wife and best friend.

But, here the reel life analogy with real life may seem to break down. Burbank is an innocent, held for more than 30 years in an elaborate, public playpen.

Lewinsky, in the most charitable reading, is no innocent. She is at least guilty of some hanky-panky with another woman's husband and of then betraying her intimate friend by blabbing about the relationship to others.

Yet, a catalog of her sins does not justify the misuse of Lewinsky. If it did, we should accept, as a matter of course, that we will be similarly misused by others. None of us is a true innocent.

Goldberg and Tripp wanted notoriety. Isikoff hoped to break an important story. News organizations have an unquenchable thirst for juicy tidbits to report. Starr wished to promote public confidence in his office. None of these explanations justify the violation of boundaries in which each was engaged. If they did, we should accept, as a matter of course, that we will have no more of a clue of what is really happening in Washington than Truman Burbank has in his contrived town.

As citizens, we need to know what government, including the independent prosecutor, is really doing in our name. We need news media to tell us about misuse of power rather than participate in it. And we need to be protected from the manufacture of news stories by would-be authors and their agents.

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# The Clinton Show



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