

The Human Stain: Why the Harvey Weinstein Story Is Worse Than You Think

It goes much deeper than one big creep.

| By [Lee Smith](#)



Harvey Weinstein and Bill Clinton at the premiere of SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER at Pier Sixty on October 6, 2006 in New York City. (Patrick McMullan/Patrick McMullan via Getty Images)



The *New York Times* last week [broke the story](#) of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein’s long record of sexual harassment. Actresses including Rose McGowan and Ashley Judd came forward to detail Weinstein’s depredations, and so did former employees of the man who founded one of the most important independent film companies of the last 30 years, Miramax. The details were so jarring and the trail of abuse so long, that it was impossible to read the story and not come away wondering: How did no one know what he was doing?

But of course people knew about Harvey Weinstein. Like the *New York Times*, for instance. Sharon Waxman, a former reporter at the *Times*, writes in [The Wrap](#) how she had the story on Weinstein in 2004—and then he bullied the *Times* into dropping it. Matt Damon and Russell Crowe even called her directly to get her to back off the story. And Miramax was a major advertiser. Her editor at the *Times*, [Jonathan Landman](#), asked her why it mattered. After all, he told Waxman, “he’s not a publicly elected official.”

Manhattan’s district attorney knew, too. In 2015, Weinstein’s lawyer [donated](#) \$10,000 to the campaign of Manhattan district attorney Cyrus Vance after he declined to file sexual assault charges against the

producer. Given the number of stories that have circulated for so long, Weinstein must have spread millions around New York, Los Angeles, and Europe to pay off lawyers and buy silence, including the silence of his victims. But he had something else going for him, too. He knew his victims would be reluctant to go public because it might suggest that some of their success, their fame even, was a function of their inability to protect themselves from being humiliated by a man who set the bar for humiliating others at the precise level of his own self-loathing.

Hollywood is full of connoisseurs like Weinstein, men whose erotic imaginations are fueled primarily by humiliation, who glut their sensibilities with the most exquisite refinements of shame. A journalist once told me about visiting another very famous Hollywood producer—you'd know the name—who exhibited for my friend his collection of photographs of famous female actresses—you'd know their names, too—performing sexual acts for his private viewing. As with Weinstein, this man's chief thrill was humiliation, and the more famous the target the more roundly it was savored: *Even her, a big star—these people will do anything to land a role; they're so awful, they'll even do it for me.*

One of the refrains you hear today from media experts and journalists is that they'd known about Weinstein's transgressions for a long time. The problem, they say, was that no one was able to nail down the story.

Nonsense. Everyone had it, not just Waxman. Sure, reporters hadn't been able to get any stars to go on the record. But that means the story journalists were pursuing wasn't really about Weinstein's sexual depredations. It means that what they wanted was a story about actresses, junior executives, or assistants who had been humiliated, maybe raped, and chose to remain quiet in exchange for money and/or a shot at fame.

Of course no one was going to get that on the record—very few journalists would even want to publish a story like that. But journalists always had the actual story of how a Hollywood producer humiliated and sexually assaulted women. How? Because he victimized journalists.

Fox News reporter Lauren Sivan [told](#) Huffington Post that a decade ago, Weinstein masturbated in front of her. She says she didn't say anything at the time, when she was an anchor on a local cable show, because she was “fearful of the power that Weinstein wielded in the media.” She was right and her fear was understandable.

Writing in [New York Magazine](#), Rebecca Traister remembers the time when she asked Weinstein an interview question at a book party, he screamed at her, spit in her face, called her a “c—t,” and then put her boyfriend in a headlock and dragged him to the street. Traister said nothing at the time because she figured she had little chance against “that kind of force.”

I don't blame her or Sivan for not saying anything, never mind reporting the story. Weinstein is violent, vindictive, and litigious—as well as sexually abusive—facts that the entertainment and political media knew for years. No one wanted to publish that story. But that's not the same thing as “not being able to nail it down.” “Nailing it down” would have amounted to nothing more than printing a collection of facts under a byline.

The real issue, as Traister notes, was that “there were so many journalists on his payroll, working as consultants on movie projects, or as screenwriters, or for his magazine.” Traister is referring to *Talk*, the magazine Weinstein started at Miramax with Tina Brown. The catchword was “synergy”—magazine

articles, turned into books, turned into movies, a supply chain of entertainment and information that was going to put these media titans in the middle of everything and make them all richer.

Traister and I worked at *Talk* together in the late '90s. There were lots of talented journalists but it was still a mess. Outside of “synergy,” there was no idea driving the magazine, and Tina’s search for a vision was expensive. She spent lavishly on writers, art directors, photographers, and parties. Harvey got angry. Every time Tina went downtown to meet with him he screamed at her the whole time. He humiliated her. At least this was the story that went around the office every time she went down there, a story circulating through, and circulated by, several dozen journalists.

Or, to put it another way: More than 20 people in one magazine office alone all had the story about Harvey Weinstein’s “mistreatment” of women.

So why didn’t anyone write it? Not to take anything away from Jodi Kantor’s excellent *New York Times* piece, but the reality is that everyone had the story.

The reason no one wrote it is not because the press wanted to get Weinstein, but couldn’t prove the story. No, it’s because the press was protecting Weinstein.

Why wouldn’t they? He made terrific movies and he was a big mover in Democratic party politics, raising millions for local and national campaigns, including the Clintons. (Hillary, some readers will recall, was on the cover of *Talk*’s first issue.)

John Kennedy, Jr. tried to blend politics and entertainment with the magazine he founded, *George*. His basic insight was correct; but he misunderstood something crucial. And John John misunderstood it because he was, by all accounts, a good man.

You know the old joke about Washington: That it’s Hollywood for ugly people. Kennedy thought that this was unfair to Washington and that the people in the nation’s capital had the capacity for glamour, too.

But it turns out that the joke works in the opposite direction: Hollywood is for ugly people, too. That was Harvey Weinstein’s essential insight, and how he managed to combine the worlds of politics, entertainment, and media. *They’re all repulsive—and I know they’re disgusting or else they wouldn’t be courting, of all people, me.*

Thus his fortress was quarried from the misshapen material of human vanity, ambition, and greed.

Writers and journalists—the intellectuals, in his mind—were nearly as contemptible as actors. They wouldn’t dream of crossing a guy who could turn them into culture heroes with a phone call. *Hey, I just optioned your novel and I already know who’s going to make the movie. And oh yeah, please confirm that you don’t, like I think I may have heard, have a reporter looking into a story about me.*

A friend reminds me that there was a period when Miramax bought the rights to every big story published in magazines throughout the city. Why mess with Weinstein when that big new female star you’re trying to wrangle for the June cover is headlining a Miramax release? Do you think that glossy magazine editor who threw the swankiest Oscar party in Hollywood was trying to “nail down” the Weinstein story? Right, just like the hundreds of journalists who were ferried across the river for the big party at the Statue of Liberty to celebrate the premiere of *Talk*—they were all there sipping champagne and sniffing coke with models in order to “nail down” the story about how their host was a rapist.

That's why the story about Harvey Weinstein finally broke now. It's because the media industry that once protected him has collapsed. The magazines that used to publish the stories Miramax optioned can't afford to pay for the kind of reporting and storytelling that translates into screenplays. They're broke because Facebook and Google have swallowed all the digital advertising money that was supposed to save the press as print advertising continued to tank.

Look at *Vanity Fair*, basically the in-house Miramax organ that Tina failed to make *Talk*: Condé Nast demanded massive staff cuts from Graydon Carter and he quit. He knows they're going to turn his aspirational bible into a blog, a fate likely shared by most (if not all) of the Condé Nast books.

Si Newhouse, magazine publishing's last Medici, died last week, and who knows what will happen to Condé now. There are no more journalists; there are just bloggers scrounging for the crumbs Silicon Valley leaves them. Who's going to make a movie out of a *Vox* column? So what does anyone in today's media ecosystem owe Harvey Weinstein? And besides, it's good story, right? "Downfall of a media Mogul." Maybe there's even a movie in it.

Rebecca Traister says the stories are coming out now because "our consciousness has been raised." Between Bill Cosby and Roger Ailes, Bill O'Reilly, and Donald Trump, argues Traister, people are now accustomed to speaking and hearing the truth about famous, sexually abusive men.

This is wrong. It has nothing to do with "raised consciousness"—or else she wouldn't have left off that list the one name obviously missing. It's not about raised consciousness or else the Democratic party's 2016 presidential campaign would not have been a year-long therapy session treating a repressed trauma victim with even its main slogan—"I'm with her"—referencing a muted plea for sympathy for a woman who'd been publicly shamed by a sexual predator.

Which brings us, finally, to the other reason the Weinstein story came out now: Because the court over which Bill Clinton once presided, a court in which Weinstein was one part jester, one part exchequer, and one part executioner, no longer exists.

A thought experiment: Would the Weinstein story have been published if Hillary Clinton had won the presidency? No, and not because he is a big Democratic fundraiser. It's because if the story was published during the course of a Hillary Clinton presidency, it wouldn't have really been about Harvey Weinstein. Harvey would have been seen as a proxy for the president's husband and it would have embarrassed the president, the first female president.

Bill Clinton offered get-out-of-jail-free cards to a whole army of sleazeballs, from Jeffrey Epstein to Harvey Weinstein to the foreign donors to the Clinton Global Initiative. The deal was simple: Pay up, genuflect, and get on with your existence. It was like a papacy selling indulgences, at the same time that everyone knew that the cardinals were up to no good. The 2016 election demolished Clinton world once and for all, to be replaced by the cult of Obama, an austere sect designated by their tailored hair shirts with Nehru collars. "That is not who we are as Americans," they chant, as Harvey Weinstein's ashes are scattered in the wind.

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