

BETWEEN THE LINES

April 23, 2020

Lions and Tigers and Lies? Oh My!

Introduction

The hugely popular Netflix series “Tiger King” is a reality series focused on Joe Maldonado-Passage, better known as Joe Exotic, who is a former zoo operator, media personality and convicted felon. Mr. Maldonado-Passage has long accused Ms. Carole Baskin, animal rights activist and owner/CEO of Big Cat Rescue, of killing her second husband, Don Lewis, over 20 years ago and feeding his body to the wild cats she owned and kept on her sanctuary. Mr. Lewis went missing in 1997 and has not been found. Ms. Baskin has never been charged with any crime and she denies having any involvement in Mr. Lewis’s mysterious disappearance.

While typically we apply BIA’s proprietary Tactical Behavior Assessment® (TBA™) methodology to help investors evaluate the completeness and reliability of verbal and written corporate disclosures, many of our friends and clients who followed the series have asked for our take on the allegations surrounding Ms. Baskin and her role in her former husband’s disappearance.

This request poses unique challenges to conducting behavioral analysis. First, because the Netflix program is staged and edited for television, it is difficult to know the completeness and full context of statements made by Ms. Baskin on the show. Second, since the case is over 20 years old, Ms. Baskin has had plenty of time to craft and rehearse her story of what happened. In such a scenario, we have to be aware of the concept of “psychological entrenchment;” the more a person repeats a rehearsed and deceptive story, the more psychologically wedded he or she will become to that story. As the person becomes more comfortable with telling the deceptive story, discerning truth from deception in their statements becomes more difficult. Nevertheless, in a written rebuttal Ms. Baskin published in a blog on her company’s website, and in her appearances in Episode 3 of the series, we observe some behavioral indicators that suggest to us that she knows more about her second husband’s disappearance than she implies.

Brushing Off the Dementia Theory

At the time of the disappearance, Ms. Baskin implied that Mr. Lewis may have wandered off and was not able to find his way home due to dementia. Decades later, she reinforces this idea in her blog, saying that “In the few years preceding his disappearance Don’s behavior was gradually showing signs of mental deterioration.” She makes similar statements in the show, including that Mr. Lewis “had had several plane crashes, and had really damaged himself in one of them and I don’t think he was ever completely right after that last crash.” However, as she says, “I don’t think he was ever completely right after that last crash,” Ms. Baskin discernably brushes her hair back even though her hair was not out of place. Furthermore, we do not observe Ms. Baskin do this when making other comments. In this context, this behavior is what BIA calls a grooming gesture, which is an unconscious effort to “dress up” a deceptive statement and a signal of anxiety associated with it. It is notable that, in the later blog statement, Ms. Baskin does *not* make this connection between the plane crash and the mental deterioration. This omission in the blog combined with the grooming gesture when she made the statement on the show suggests that she does not actually believe the plane crash triggered dementia in Mr. Lewis. Furthermore, in her blog, Ms. Baskin provides an overly elaborate explanation about trying to get medical help for Mr. Lewis’s mental condition. This behavior is intended to convince readers of Mr. Lewis’s dementia, but also to account for why he was never officially diagnosed. Her need to do this suggests that Ms. Baskin is unable to prove Mr. Lewis’s diminished mental capacity, thereby weakening her story.

The Meat Grinder is No Laughing Matter

More significantly, when Ms. Baskin addresses accusations that she ground up Mr. Lewis’s body so she could feed it to her wild cats, she makes an aggressive attempt to give the impression that it would have been impossible. First, she characterizes

this accusation as the “most ludicrous of all the lies” in the show and says that “the media loved it” when the accusation first arose. She goes on to say that the meat grinder shown in the episode was “enormous” but that hers was “one of the little tabletop, hand crank things, like you’d have in your kitchen at home;” and that “the idea that a human body and skeleton could be put through it is idiotic.” These attacks are overly dismissive of the matter and indicate that this allegation, not surprisingly, is highly threatening to Ms. Baskin. In the episode, when she speaks about the meat grinder, Ms. Baskin uses a similar strategy saying that “if you’ve ever seen a Butcher Boy meat grinder, it’s about that big around” and “that became like this wholly exciting thing, that I ran him through that meat grinder and it’s like I couldn’t have run his hand through the grinder [laughing] much less a body.” Again, this is an aggressive attempt to cast the accusation of a grisly act as laughable, but she does not take the opportunity to say she did not do it. Also, she is overly narrow when she comments on how the “exciting thing” was that she ran the body through “that” meat grinder. This narrow focus does not preclude the possibility that she had access to a larger grinder that could have done the job. Her aggressive and dismissive attempts to cast the notion of grinding up Mr. Lewis’s body as ridiculous, rather than simply saying she did not do it, suggests that she is unable to say so. This is a strong indication that the accusation has merit.

Certainly Not Credible

Finally, Ms. Baskin concludes her blog with saying “I never threatened him and I certainly had nothing to do with his disappearance.” While the statement “I never threatened him” is devoid of BIA Indicators, the statement “I certainly had nothing to do with his disappearance” needlessly contains the qualifier “certainly.” The inclusion of this word is meant to boost the credibility of the statement and the need to do so suggests Ms. Baskin lacks confidence in it or that she does not fully believe it herself.

Additionally, after making these statements, Ms. Baskin turns readers’ attention toward a more positive portrayal of herself. She highlights that Robert Moor’s Wondery Podcast “Joe Exotic” pointed out that a private investigator hired by Ms. Baskin told the show runners that Ms. Baskin “was courteous and there was nothing that jumped out at me in terms of her demeanor that to make me think that she was not giving us accurate information or hiding anything.” She chooses to highlight the private investigator’s comments about her demeanor rather than the findings from his investigation. This reflects another effort to boost the credibility of her statements by invoking statements from an outside, authoritative source rather than present facts. Again, this suggests Ms. Baskin does not believe her statements stand on their own merit.

Other Observations

It is also notable that in her blog, before addressing the accusations made in the show, Ms. Baskin devotes considerable attention to discrediting the “main” people in the episode who made the accusations, namely Anne McQueen (Mr. Lewis’s assistant), Wendell Williams (Mr. Lewis’s business associate) and Gladys Lewis Cross and her daughters (Mr. Lewis’s previous wife and children). Ms. Baskin provides information designed to predispose readers to not believe what her accusers say. She highlights that Ms. McQueen was embezzling from the Lewis’s business, that Mr. Williams repeatedly cheated Mr. Lewis and that Ms. Cross and her daughters had “strong selfish motivations to lie and make implications about the meat grinder and Don being buried on the property 23 years ago that have absolutely no basis in fact whatsoever.” While the evidence she lays out may be true, the fact that she does this before addressing the accusations themselves suggests that she lacks confidence that her subsequent explanations will appear credible.

Even so, when Ms. Baskin does address the accusations, apart from her overly dismissive statements about the meat grinder, she presents seemingly reasonable explanations for most of them. However, much of the evidence she puts forth is unverifiable; and after 20 years of responding to these accusations, she has had ample time to craft and internalize believable stories, and convincingly deliver them. But, so have her accusers...

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