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So Barney, Old Purple, we were had

Why the public self-flagellation of media types over the Barney hoax?

The two Tampa men appeared completely serious when they told newspapers and TV crews that they believed Barney the TV dinosaur was an agent of evil. After the story became national news, the men confessed: It was all a joke.

The clues were all there. Recounting them is enough to make any hardbitten reporter want to drown his sorrows — or better, drown himself in a vat of printer's ink.

■ John Bunch — the University of South Florida psychology graduate student who masqueraded as the fictitious Luscious M. Bromley — wasn't just some obscure person nobody'd ever heard of. He's a comedian who's been on local TV, a member of the comedy team the "Human Kennel."

■ And there's the letter. As Bunch said during a meeting of the Society of Professional Journalists last week, he thought up everything the "strangest nut" would say and then made it even weirder. To wit: "We feel that Barney will inevitably lead our children down a path toward cocaine, gang violence, pornography, abortion, homosexuality and maybe even marijuana." *Maybe even marijuana?*

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■ He claimed to be launching a nationwide boycott. But he said he didn't want anyone to know his phone number. Huh?

■ And what kind of name is Luscious, anyway?

If Bunch is to be believed — and admittedly his track record for veracity is not good — he and cohort Dave Bennett even went to the Salvation Army to buy geeky-looking polyester double-knit suits before giving their first TV interview.

What a luscious charade! First to take the bait were Channel 8 in Tampa and The Tampa Tribune. Other papers and dozens of TV and radio stations flocked to tell of devil-Barney, too.

After the hoaxer was remasked, some of the snookered journalists tsk-tsked Bunch for lying. But Bunch, sitting alongside his pigeons on the panel, countered: "I didn't invent the media hoax. There are going to be plenty of other ones."

Actually, newspapers are leery of flying into print with somebody's grandiose plans. We don't print stories about a person who is threatening to sue somebody. We wait until he has gone down to the courthouse and filed. There wasn't any boycott; there was only a gleam in Luscious Bromley's, er, John Bunch's eye. So ... what went wrong? Some of the journalists in the meeting room admitted the Barney-agent-of-Satan story was simply too tantalizing to pass up.

Embarrassing as the hoax might be, it was harmless, said panelist Gary Posner. Revisiting the question in an interview, the founder of the Tampa Bay Skeptics Society said *other* stories have irked him more.

There are pictures of weeping icons and tales of UFO sightings and abducted earthlings in the news all the time. But when these are revealed to be hoaxes, a funny thing happens. Reporters go silent. The stories simply fade without any self-examination or follow-up.

Double standard?

After the weeping icon story fizzled in Tarpon Springs a few years back, "there wasn't this sort of consternation by the press, no asking: 'How did we get hoaxed?'" Posner pointed out. "The difference with the Barney hoax was it was a fictional character created by, in this case, a comedian. I thought it was humorous."

But Posner, a physician, isn't laughing when it comes to those other stories. Last month the St. Petersburg Times printed a gee-whiz story about Chi Kung, a Chinese therapy in which the practitioner waves his hands over an ill person, who simultaneously moves wildly. Years ago a traveling team of investigators from the West debunked the treatment, Posner said. When newspapers gush over unproven therapies, they risk persuading the seriously ill to reject lifesaving treatment.

On the Tampa side of the Bay, Posner fingered the Tribune for running an obituary last summer of a fortuneteller that described her as a "clairvoyant." Come on, skeptics like Posner protest — no one has ever been able to convincingly display clairvoyance under controlled conditions.

Still, "journalists shouldn't feel too badly about being hoaxed once in a while," Posner said. "Even supposedly skeptical scientists have been hoaxed from time to time by people claiming to have psychic powers and such things. Police officers, detectives and even FBI agents have been hoaxed by so-called 'psychic detectives.'"

"We all are capable of being fooled. It's good that we know that and keep our eyes opened to such possibilities."

Is there a moral to this tale? Barely — and it harkens back to P.T. Barnum, who said there's a sucker born every minute. We have met the sucker, we journalists might add, and he is us.