



## Truthiness: *This American Life* and the Monologist Epilogue

Ira Glass, host of *This American Life* (TAL), realized as soon as he spoke to Rob Schmitz of *Marketplace* that TAL would have to run an on-air correction of its January 6, 2012 show featuring Mike Daisey and his visit to Foxconn, an Apple supplier in Shenzhen, China. Glass was relieved to have some breathing space because *Marketplace* had contacted TAL rather than broadcasting the story on its news show first. “I’m not sure if other organizations would have done that,” says Glass.<sup>1</sup> “They were reaching out to say, like, how should we handle this? Do you want to do something on your air?”

Over multiple email and telephone exchanges beginning Monday, March 5, Schmitz and the TAL team of Glass, Senior Producer Julie Snyder and Producer Brian Reed decided to collaborate. The group concluded that a simple on-air announcement at the start of a segment on another subject would be insufficient. The plan was that Schmitz would file a story for *Marketplace* that would include an interview with Daisey’s translator, Cathy Lee, and excerpts from the original broadcast of “Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory,” along with his own reporting. The *Marketplace* report would be broadcast (and posted to its website) on Friday, March 16. The same day, TAL would air a “retraction” show addressing Daisey’s fabrications. The show would include a longer version of Schmitz’s story, and—if he agreed to it—an interview with Daisey.

Daisey agreed, and on Friday, March 9, Glass and Schmitz jointly interviewed Daisey for three hours. Schmitz was in his Shanghai studio, Glass and Daisey in TAL’s New York City studio. The two reporters questioned Daisey extensively about his visit to the factories in Shenzhen and other encounters during his China visit. Daisey admitted that he was afraid to tell the TAL staff what had really happened:

I think I was terrified that if I untied these things, that the work that I know is really good and tells a story, that does these really great

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<sup>1</sup> Kirsten Lundberg telephone interview with Ira Glass, September 22, 2012. All further quotes from Glass, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

things for making people care, that it would come apart in a way where it would ruin everything.<sup>2</sup>

Schmitz phrased his interview questions carefully. “I avoid[ed] using the words ‘truth’ and ‘true’ during the interview because to [Daisey], truth is unknowable,” he says.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, he feels that Daisey “kept digging in his heels about the discrepancies between his and Cathy’s stories.”

Over the weekend, Daisey texted Glass asking for a second follow-up interview. During the second interview, which lasted two hours, Daisey maintained his defense. “I’ll be honest. I thought that he was going to admit more of the monologue wasn’t factually accurate, wasn’t truthful,” Glass later told listeners.<sup>4</sup> “But that is not why he decided to come in. He was sticking by his story. But he wanted to explain the context for what he did.” Daisey maintained that because press coverage of problems at Foxconn, including worker suicides, had waned by the time of his trip, he aimed to enlist audience sympathy by presenting a theatrical monologue that would make it seem that he had witnessed the problems firsthand.

The retraction episode aired on *This American Life* on March 16, 2012. Glass told his audience that, in retrospect, TAL should not have broadcast “Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory” without talking to the translator during the fact-checking process.<sup>5</sup> If she was unreachable, as Daisey had asserted, then TAL should have canceled the episode. The retraction received intense media attention. The TAL team decided to let the episode speak for itself, however, and declined interview requests. On the website, it removed the audio of the January 6 episode, but left a transcript with an editor’s note at both the beginning and end informing readers that the original show had been corrected.

Going forward, the TAL staff wanted to establish a more rigorous fact-checking process to avoid any future mistakes. They called news organizations, dailies and broadcasters as well as weeklies like the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times Magazine*, to learn about their fact-checking protocols. Glass says they discovered that, for most daily journalism, fact checking was minimal. He says:

Daily journalism was always produced under such time constraints that fact checkers weren’t used. If you were reporting or writing a

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<sup>2</sup> “Retraction” Episode 460, *This American Life* March 16, 2012. See: <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/460/retraction>

<sup>3</sup> Author’s telephone interview with Rob Schmitz on May 23, 2012. All further quotes from Schmitz, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

<sup>4</sup> TAL, Episode 460.

<sup>5</sup> For the online treatment of the January 6 episode, see: <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/454/mr-daisey-and-the-apple-factory#>

story in four to six hours, I mean, you were barely getting the information and writing it up quickly enough to get it into a paper or get it on the air. There isn't time for somebody to go back over all it and call all your sources again.

But some with longer lead times used professionals. TAL decided to do the same. "What we shifted to was a model where now pretty much everything on the show is fact checked," says Glass. The program earmarked \$60,000 in the TAL budget for professional, freelance fact checkers. Admittedly, that added time to the production process. "And it's money. And it's extra effort," says Glass. "But it's worth it because we want the story to be accurate." The show could afford the extra service and, because it ran weekly, could afford the time. Glass adds:

We're doing ambitious documentary work and reporting, and increasingly, investigative stories. There's probably one every few months now. And it seems like we should step up; it seemed only right to take this extra step.