



Truthiness: *This American Life* and the Monologist

On January 6, 2012, the weekly public radio program *This American Life* (TAL) aired what turned out to be its most popular show ever, “Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory,” an adaptation of Mike Daisey’s monologue, *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*. Daisey’s expose of working conditions at a Chinese factory that produced the iPad had been playing to sold-out New York audiences for months. TAL host and reporter Ira Glass saw a performance, and engaged Daisey to tape an abridged version for the radio show.

On the radio program, Daisey described working conditions at the Foxconn factory in Shenzhen, which supplied Apple. He gave lurid details of deformed, underage and poorly paid workers. Listeners were riveted: they downloaded the TAL podcast over one million times, nearly double the usual rate of 600,000. Listeners tweeted and retweeted the show’s URL, and bloggers had a field day. Daisey made appearances on The Ed Show (CSNBC), CBS News, the PBS News Hour and others.

Whether in response to the TAL report or other developments, Apple a week later released an annual Supplier Responsibility Progress report nearly a month earlier than the previous year. In it, the company announced that it had hired a nonprofit organization to conduct periodic unannounced visits to its factories to observe and report any violations. TAL could not know whether the Daisey segment had inspired the announcement, but Apple was addressing issues Daisey had raised. Meanwhile, *New York Times* reporters were preparing a three-part investigative series about dangerous conditions at Apple’s suppliers and factories in China. The first article appeared on January 25.

But in early March, what had been an unusually successful TAL show turned sour. Rob Schmitz, the China correspondent for another public radio program, Marketplace, had listened to the podcast a week after it aired and found pieces of it did not ring true. Schmitz did some research. In a lengthy email to his editor in late February, Schmitz detailed discrepancies and inventions he had uncovered in Daisey’s monologue. The Marketplace executive producer in turn contacted TAL.

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Glass and his production team were dismayed: *This American Life* had made a mistake on the air. For years, Glass and his staff, veteran reporters and producers, had held themselves to high standards of balance and accuracy in creating their show. Now it appeared they had been duped, and in turn had misled the devoted audience the show had built over nearly two decades.

Faced with Daisey's falsehoods, Glass and his team considered the options. How would they tell the audience? They worried that people would stop trusting what was said on the program in general, and about a backlash against the show. While Daisey was primarily responsible, the incident raised grave questions about the rigor of the show's fact checking. The podcast was still available online. What should they do with it? They realized they would have to say something on air—but what should they say, and how much time should it take? Should it be a story in a show on another theme? Or a show on its own? They also wanted to give Daisey a chance to respond—but in what context? The *TAL* team had to think it through.

New Kind of Radio Journalism

Glass was a public radio lifer. He started in 1978 as a 19-year-old intern at National Public Radio's (NPR) Washington, D.C., headquarters. He interned every summer of college and, after his 1982 graduation, became a full-time staff member in DC, moving up through the ranks to work on almost all NPR news programs at various production levels. In 1989, he joined the NPR Chicago bureau WBEZ. An in-depth series about Chicago school reform earned him awards from the National Education Association (1991) and the Education Writers Association (1992; 1994), along with nationwide name recognition. During this time, Glass also co-hosted with Gary Covino *The Wild Room* radio program, a live show for Chicago audiences that he described as "free-form documentary banter."¹

In March 1995, the MacArthur Foundation announced a one-year, \$150,000 grant to Glass to produce and host a new weekly radio show, *Your Radio Playhouse*, to feature Chicago-based reporters, writers and performers with segments focused on one theme each week.² The program would not sound like anything else on public radio—think documentary, but on radio. Reporters would speak in conversational, not polished radio, voices. Segments would feature ordinary people dealing with some emotional question. As Glass characterized it:

As in the best of fiction, tone counts for a lot. But a lot of effective and interesting radio is based on one character who reacts to the world... Many of the best radio moments, the most compelling moments, have

¹ Michael Miner, "What becomes of the Brokenhearted?" *The Chicago Reader*, November 19, 1998. Retrieved Aug. 11, 2012: <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/what-becomes-of-the-brokenhearted/Content?oid=897809>

² Steve Nidetz, "WBEZ Show Gets \$150,000 'Vote Of Confidence'," *Chicago Tribune*, March 12, 1995. See: http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1995-03-12/features/9503120050_1_wbez-radio-playhouse-grant

something at stake, some dramatic story someone tells, using all of the tools of narrative art—characters, and some issue at stake, and something that gets learned from the whole experience.³

The first episode aired on November 17, 1995 and quickly became popular among Chicago listeners.

Funding. The business plan for Radio Playhouse was to pilot the show with grant money, offer it to stations first at no charge and, after a while, start charging. But there was a problem: few radio stations proved willing to sign on. So in spring 1996, Glass submitted a one-year, \$150,000 grant proposal to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). CPB rejected the one-year proposal, but only because it loved the idea and had a better version. CPB proposed instead \$500,000 over three years, specifically because that would reassure potential customer stations who, it perceived, had worried that the show might founder for lack of funding. Indeed, radio stations quickly lined up to syndicate it.⁴

In June 1996, the show aired under the name *This American Life*. Each week, the hour-long show centered on a theme, usually told in one to three acts. Although its stories were not news-driven, TAL reporters used the tools of journalism to spotlight everyday lives. As Glass puts it, “we apply the tools of journalism to stories so small and personal that journalists hadn’t bothered with them.”⁵ The storytelling was narrative nonfiction, often in the form of memoirs or essays. Occasionally, the show aired fictional segments—but always labeled as such. Glass served as the show’s host and executive producer. His co-executive producer was Chris Wilcha, who was also TAL’s director.

The show was broadcast nationally on 130 stations, with Public Radio International (PRI) as distributor. In 1996, the show won its first Peabody Award; TAL received two more in 2007 and 2008. One episode “This Giant Pool of Money,” which used personal stories to explain the underpinnings of the housing crisis and aired in April 2008, received a 2009 duPont Columbia Award. That same year, Glass was the recipient of the Edward R. Murrow Award, given by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

In 2006, Glass and his staff relocated to New York City because the cable channel Showtime was willing to adapt TAL for television (in addition to the radio program). The TV program premiered March 22, 2007. To capture the quirky essence of the radio show, the TV producers created “a mosh-up of visual styles, with short animation, found video, highly formal

³ Ana Marie Cox and Joanna Dionis, “Ira Glass: Live and Uncut,” *Mother Jones*, posted August 11, 1998, retrieved May 5, 2012. See: <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/1998/08/ira-glass-live-and-uncut>

⁴ For more details on the genesis of TAL, see Glass’ acceptance speech for the 2009 Edward R. Murrow award: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRlbGiWckEU>

⁵ Ira Glass email to author, September 22, 2012.

interior shots and expansive exteriors,” wrote one reviewer.⁶ After two seasons, Glass decided that the weekly radio show plus the TV series demanded too much of the staff of 16 and he ended the TV show.

TAL continued to prosper. By 2012, it aired on 500 public radio stations and had a weekly audience of 1.8 million listeners. Its producers were always on the lookout for promising material, which they sometimes found on stage.

Daisey on Stage

Mike Daisey had performed monologues since 1997, but first received critical acclaim in February 2001 for his one-man show, *21 Dog Years: Doing Time @ Amazon.com*, about his three years working at the Seattle company. That August, it won best solo show at the New York Fringe Festival and had a six-month run off-Broadway. By 2012, Daisey had created 15 one-man shows that, according to the *New York Times*, blended “personal stories, historical digressions and philosophical ruminations.”⁷ Each of his monologues, which were quasi-scripted, featured Daisey sitting behind a table with a glass of water and a pad of paper on an otherwise bare stage. His collaborator, Jean-Michele Gregory, was also his director.

In 2006, Daisey performed *Truth* about author James Frey’s embellished memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*. As one theater critic reported: “During his monologue, Daisey admits to once fabricating a story because it ‘connected’ with the audience.”⁸ The article continues:

After telling this lie over and over, he recalled, it became so integrated into the architecture of his piece that it became impossible to remove or to distinguish from what had really happened. Daisey seemed embarrassed by this confession, but he also pursued the issue to ask whether lying was acceptable in the service of a greater truth. What, he asked, did truth mean in the context of art?

His other monologues included *Monopoly*, about the conflict between Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison over electricity; *Great Men of Genius*, the interwoven biographies of four famous megalomaniacs; and *The Last Cargo Cult*, about Daisey’s encounter with natives on a remote South Pacific island who worshipped America and its cargo. Glass first saw Daisey perform in *If You See Something Say Something*, which opened in New York in 2008. In it, Daisey told the history of the US Department of Homeland Security, discussed the life of the father of the neutron bomb, and described his visit to the Trinity blast site, where the first atomic bomb was tested in 1945.

⁶ David Carr, “A Radio Host Tries His Voice on Television,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2007.

⁷ Jason Zinoman, “The Need to Think Onstage is Driving Mr. Daisey,” *New York Times*, January 21, 2007.

⁸ Jason Zinoman, “Telling Tales About the Past, and Maybe Fudging Facts,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2006.

In June 2010, Daisey, a lifelong Apple fan, traveled to Shenzhen, China, for a six-day trip. He wanted to gain access to the Foxconn factory, which manufactured electronics products for Apple, Dell, Nokia, Panasonic, Sony and many more. "I don't do monologues unless there's something compelling in collision with something else in my life," Daisey said.

There was really nothing to say about [Apple] until a couple of years ago, when I started reading and learning about the working conditions in southern China and investigating the supply chain.⁹

Daisey hired a translator, Cathy Lee, to help him interview workers at the gates of the Foxconn factory (the factory's Apple assembly lines were off-limits to reporters).¹⁰ "At this plant, they make all kinds of things, including MacBook Pros and iPhones and iPads. And so my plan [was] to take this taxi to the main gate and talk to anybody who wants to talk to me," Daisey said.¹¹ Daisey said that when he met Lee two days later in the hotel lobby, he told her that he wanted to visit other factories as well, and would pretend to be an American businessman to gain access.

On returning to New York, Daisey started work on his next monologue, *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*, based in part on his interviews and experiences in China. Among the China observations that Daisey included were guards with guns at the entrance to Foxconn; a taxi driver who accidentally took an exit ramp that stopped, unfinished, in midair; excerpts from his interviews with nearly 100 workers at the Foxconn gates; a tour of a different factory a few days later; and interviews with 25-30 workers, including members of an illegal union, at a café (the union members told him they met regularly at a Starbucks coffee shop).¹²

The show, billed as a work of nonfiction, was booked for the Public Theater's 2011-2012 season. By coincidence, Steve Jobs, who had pancreatic cancer, died on October 5, 2011, a week before opening night. Daisey's monologue was such a hit that its run was extended beyond the original November 13 closing to March 18, 2012.

Idea for an Episode

Every week, Glass and his TAL staff scouted for stories and themes. His team in early 2012 included Senior Producer Julie Snyder and Producer Brian Reed. Sometimes, they spent hours

⁹ Catherine Rampell, "A Trip to China Can Make a Guy Hate his iPhone," *New York Times*, September 29, 2011.

¹⁰ In late January 2012, ABC News' Bill Weir became the first journalist allowed to visit the Apple production lines at Foxconn. See: <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/technology/2012/02/foxconn-apple-and-the-fair-labor-association-respond-to-abc-news-exclusive-report/>. A British journalist (*The Mail*) reportedly visited the Shenzhen Foxconn factory secretly in 2006. Source: Charles Duhigg and David Barboza, "In China, Human Costs Are Built Into an iPad," *New York Times*, January 25, 2012. See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/26/business/ieconomy-apples-ipad-and-the-human-costs-for-workers-in-china.html?pagewanted=all>

¹¹ Episode 454, *This American Life*, January 6, 2012.

¹² Ibid.

following and taping someone, only to abandon the segment because it did not work. In an interview, Glass gave an example of an idea that had to be dropped—but which led to another. TAL had sent out an amateur interviewer to talk to her great-aunt and uncle for a Valentine’s Day show. The young woman had told TAL that in the courtship stage, her uncle at first was stand-offish, but after a year he fell hard and the couple had been married for 22 years.

“And so we send this person out; she’s never done a radio story,” recalled Glass. “We show her how to use the equipment. So she talks to them for, like, an hour. And that story turns out to be completely untrue.”¹³ But listening to the tape she brought back, Glass realized that during the interview, something else had revealed the couple’s mutual love and respect. TAL could still use the material. “To find three or four stories, we look into 10 to 20 stories usually, and then go into production on six to eight stories,” says Glass.¹⁴

On October 26, 2011, Glass went to see Daisey’s monologue on Steve Jobs and Apple. Glass found it powerful, and was moved by the details of Daisey’s story: his conversations with underage 12- to 14-year-old girls who worked at Foxconn for long shifts; an encounter with an old man with leathery skin whose hand was like a claw because it had been caught in a metal press while working at Foxconn; and workers whose hands shook uncontrollably after exposure to a potent neurotoxin used to clean the iPhone screen. As Glass later recalled:

I saw this one-man show where this guy did something onstage I thought was really kind of amazing. He took this fact that we already know, this fact that our stuff is made overseas in maybe not the greatest working conditions, and he made the audience actually feel something about that fact... [Daisey] turns himself into an amateur reporter during the course of the story, using some investigative techniques, once he gets going, I think, very few reporters would ever try, and finding lots of stuff I hadn’t heard or seen anywhere else.¹⁵

Glass wondered whether Daisey’s monologue, which ran an hour and 50 minutes, could be pared to fit within TAL’s format and one-hour time constraint. As he exited the theater, he found himself “editing the radio version in my head.”¹⁶ At the same time, Glass thought, “He’s not a reporter, and I wondered, did he get it right?”¹⁷

¹³ “Mo’ Better Radio,” excerpt of an interview with Ira Glass, originally published in *Current*, May 25, 1998; retrieved July 24, 2012. See: <http://www.current.org/people/p809i1.html#structure>

¹⁴ Lundberg telephone interview with Ira Glass on September 22, 2012. All further quotes from Glass, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

¹⁵ Episode 454, *This American Life*, January 6, 2012.

¹⁶ Alicia Shepard, “Glass & Co.: Emboldened to tell hard-news stories,” *Current*, February 27, 2012.

¹⁷ Episode 454, *This American Life*, January 6, 2012.

Glass contacted Daisey and invited him to lunch on November 16. “I came with a whole big speech on why he should do it,” Glass recalled. “My fear was he wouldn’t want to do anything while the play was still up.”¹⁸ Glass’s qualms were unwarranted. Daisey was eager to modify his show for TAL.

From Stage to Radio

Glass and his producers listened to a recording of *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*, and realized they couldn’t simply edit it to fit an hour of airtime. Some aspects, such as certain vocabulary and pacing, wouldn’t translate well to radio. So first Glass and Producer Reed trimmed the stage show to the sections they thought would work on-air (for example, they dropped the material on Jobs), and then together with Daisey honed a TAL script. In mid-December, Daisey went to TAL’s New York studio to record it, but another problem arose.

On stage, Daisey performed in a booming voice. During taping, Glass interrupted Daisey repeatedly and asked him to modulate his voice for the more intimate radio setting. It made no difference; Glass realized another approach was needed. So he reserved a theater for 40 people, where Daisey could perform before a live audience.

On Dec. 20, TAL via Twitter invited New York City listeners to a free live taping of a “mysterious, TAL-related event” in Brooklyn that evening.¹⁹ They held a second live taping the same night.²⁰ The two versions would be edited together in a seamless, 39-minute whole. Daisey, says Glass, “was a very good collaborator, just in terms of understanding with a great deal of sensitivity how different it would be to perform his piece on the radio from the way it was performed in the theater.”

Checking the Facts

Meanwhile, as was standard, a TAL producer fact-checked the monologue. Any news organization, says Glass, “has to be very careful about the perfect accuracy of everything,” not least to avoid libel charges. In March 2011, for example, TAL aired a show about a Georgia judge, which examined her sentencing history.²¹ “The story raised a number of questions about her and the way she ran the courtroom, and that was something that was meticulously fact checked,” says Glass, including a review of the script by libel lawyers. TAL was especially careful after its experience

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ @ThisAmerLife: December 20, 2011. Retrieved June 7, 2012. See: <https://twitter.com/ThisAmerLife/status/149151007958511616>.

²⁰ @ThisAmerLife: December 20, 2011. Retrieved June 7, 2012. See: <https://twitter.com/ThisAmerLife/status/149259085408243714>.

²¹ The show, “Very Tough Love,” ran on March 25, 2011. See: <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/430/very-tough-love>

with Stephen Glass (no relation), a contributor who in 1998 was discovered to have fabricated much of what he wrote for the *New Republic* and others, and had also discussed on TAL.

For the Daisey story, TAL exercised its usual caution. “In fact-checking, our main concern was whether the things that Mike says about Apple and about its supplier, Foxconn, which makes this stuff, were true,” Glass later recalled.²² Producer Reed contacted industry sources to verify facts in the script. The facts checked out, corroborated by other press articles, advocacy group reports and Apple itself in audit documents. Said Glass:

Overall, we checked with over a dozen people—those would be journalists who covered these factories, people who work with the electronics industry in China, activists, labor groups—about the working conditions that Mike Daisey describes in his show. And nobody seemed surprised by them.²³

Reed also communicated with Daisey through extensive emails and conversations. In one email, Reed wrote at the top: “Here’s a list of things I want to run by you. Some are questions just for clarifying facts.... Being that news stations are obviously a different kind of forum than the theater, we wanted to make sure that this thing is totally, utterly unassailable by anyone who might hear it.” Added Glass: “Although he’s not a journalist, we made clear to him that anything that he was going to say on our program would have to live up to journalistic standards. He had to be truthful.” The TAL production team did uncover and correct some errors. For example, Daisey’s translator apparently misunderstood or mistranslated the number of seats in the Foxconn cafeteria as 10,000, whereas other press accounts indicated that while Foxconn served 10,000, it could seat only 4,000 at a time.

Daisey seemed to appreciate the extra digging. “I totally get that,” he wrote to Reed. “I want you to know that makes sense to me. A show built orally for the theater is different than what typically happens for news stations. I appreciate you taking the time to go over this.” Glass, too, recalled that “Mike [Daisey] wanted it to be as accurate as possible. He viewed with pleasure what we were doing because it was going to give him, in effect, the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.”²⁴

Reed also asked Daisey for contact information for his translator, Cathy. “Brian asked Mike for the phone number of his translator, and Mike told us that he actually had changed the name in the stage show, because he didn’t want her to get harassed,” recalls Glass. Daisey told Reed that

²² @ThisAmerLife: December 20, 2011. Retrieved June 7, 2012. See: <https://twitter.com/ThisAmerLife/status/149259085408243714>.

²³ Episode 454, *This American Life*, January 6, 2012. All further quotes in this section from the show come from this episode.

²⁴ Alicia Shepard, “Glass & Co.: Emboldened to tell hard-news stories,” *Current*, February 27, 2012.

her real name was Anna.²⁵ When Reed nonetheless asked for her phone number, Daisey answered that “the phone numbers that he had for her just weren’t going through, that she must have gotten a new cellphone, and he had no way to reach her,” notes Glass. He adds:

Because other things that he had said to us seemed to check out when we talked to over a dozen people familiar with the practices of Apple and other electronics manufacturers in China...when he said he didn’t know how to reach the translator anymore and the phone numbers didn’t work, we believed him.

Taped, and Aired

As was customary when making charges against a person or institution, TAL producers invited Apple and Foxconn to respond to Daisey on-air. Both declined. In addition, Glass was looking for other guests who could speak knowledgeably about conditions inside Chinese factories. He also wanted to discuss the question raised by Daisey’s monologue: should US consumers feel bad about buying computers and phones made under the conditions he described?

Glass lined up two additional guests for the show: Ian Spaulding, whose company helped Chinese factories meet Western social responsibility standards, and *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, who had chronicled poverty and working conditions in China and developing countries. Spaulding and Kristof would provide additional context and help corroborate Daisey’s findings. Glass also planned to quote from Apple’s audit reports—available on its website—on working conditions at its suppliers worldwide.

When they taped the guests, Spaulding in general agreed with Daisey’s characterization of the Chinese labor situation. “Well, unfortunately, I think some of these conditions sound actually common,” he said.²⁶ But he had one quibble: child labor, while a problem in Chinese factories, was not an issue at top-tier electronics manufacturers such as Foxconn. “Even people who are critical of Foxconn for all kinds of things agreed with this,” Glass confirmed. It was possible, conceded Spaulding, that an underage worker could get a job with Foxconn using a borrowed identification card, but that would be rare. Daisey responded: “Well, I don’t know if it’s a big problem. I just know what I saw.”

Columnist Kristof, for his part, suggested that consumers should not feel guilt about overseas working conditions. Kristof, whose wife’s ancestral village was near Foxconn, said:

If you look at Shenzhen, for example, and Guangdong [the province], where Foxconn is, then there’s no doubt that it has been a tremendous

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Episode 454, *This American Life*, January 6, 2012.

benefit, not only to southern China, but indeed to much of Asia. It created massive employment opportunities, especially for young women, who frankly didn't have a lot of alternatives. That tended to give women more clout within families, within the community.... For many Chinese, the grimness of factories like Foxconn was better than the grimness of the rice paddies.

In his segment, Daisey responded that he had often heard this argument: that sweatshops were a phase poor countries endured on their way to becoming industrialized. Daisey felt that basic labor standards should be adhered to everywhere. "[I]t's not right," he observed.

January 6 airing. The segment was scheduled to air on Friday, January 6, 2012. That evening at 7 p.m., "Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory" was first broadcast on WBEZ in Chicago. Glass ended the segment by reminding listeners of Daisey's one-man show at New York's Public Theater. The show aired on other public radio stations throughout the weekend.

The Response

By Monday, January 9, the TAL episode had attracted widespread attention. Listeners and bloggers posted the URL for the show to multiple social media sites, including Twitter and Facebook. Those who had missed the broadcast on their local NPR stations downloaded the podcast. Within two weeks, more than a million people had either listened to the streaming audio online or had downloaded it. Daisey also received over 1,000 emails in the first few days and was inundated with interview requests from cable news shows and major network news programs.

Meanwhile, TAL posted follow-up comments about Apple and Foxconn on its blog. On January 11, it posted news reports that 150 to 300 Foxconn workers had threatened to commit mass suicide by jumping off the factory roof because they were assigned to new production lines without proper training. On January 13, TAL producer Reed contributed an item: an Apple announcement that it would permit an independent third party, Fair Labor Association, to observe working conditions at the factories of its suppliers worldwide. The company also published a list of all those factories, along with its annual "Supplier Responsibility Progress" report, which usually was released in February. "We don't know that our show inspired these moves from Apple," Reed blogged, "but both of the changes are things that Mike Daisey called for in Act Two of our episode."²⁷ The same day, Daisey wrote about his experience adapting and taping his show; that was posted on TAL's blog.

²⁷ Brian Reed, "A Response to the News from Apple," Jan. 13, 2012, <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/blog/2012/01/a-response-to-the-news-from-apple> retrieved 4/24/12.

Kirsten 10/15/12 12:53 PM

Comment [1]: link to transcript:
<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/454/transcript>

The TAL Daisey show had touched a nerve and listeners wanted more. TAL kept them updated not only on its blog, but via Twitter. On February 17, TAL alerted its Twitter followers that Daisey had joined Twitter.²⁸

One Google Search, One Phone Call

One of the hundreds of thousands who had downloaded the podcast was Rob Schmitz, a reporter based in Shanghai for the public radio show *Marketplace*, a daily weekday business news program. While in the shower, he finally listened to the TAL/Daisey podcast about a week after the show originally aired. Daisey's assertions gave the reporter—a veteran of covering factories in China as a freelancer for a few years and since 2010 for *Marketplace*—pause. Many of Daisey's claims seemed implausible. But for several weeks, Schmitz had no opportunity to follow up: he and his wife were expecting a baby, who was born on February 17.

Schmitz listened to the segment a second time while he was on paternity leave. He was occupied with his newborn, but keeping an eye on his beat. He called and emailed fellow China correspondents, asking them "Have you heard this? Who is this guy?"²⁹ Living in China, he observes, is like living in a bubble. Schmitz had never heard of Daisey. He wondered whether the TAL episode was meant to be drama, not truth.

In the monologue, Daisey talked about factory guards with guns. Schmitz had never seen guards carrying guns in China. By law, only military and police were permitted to bear arms. Daisey also mentioned that union members met at a Starbucks coffee shop. For Chinese factory workers earning \$15 to \$20 a day, Starbucks was too expensive—one cup of Starbucks coffee cost more in China than in the US.

Shortly after his second listen to Daisey's monologue, Schmitz entered "Cathy," "Shenzhen" and "translator" into Google. (Daisey used the name "Cathy" with no last name in the monologue, although he had told TAL that her real name was "Anna.") The first entry that popped up was a translator's phone number. On February 29, Schmitz set up his equipment to tape the conversation and dialed the number.

Schmitz: *I'm looking for somebody in Shenzhen named Cathy—and that's why I'm calling you—who worked with a gentleman named Mike Daisey. And I'm wondering if you've ever worked with a man named Mike Daisey.*

Cathy: *Yes. He's from America, right?*

Schmitz: *Did you work with him?*

²⁸ See: <https://twitter.com/ThisAmerLife/status/170530584228134912>

²⁹ Cabe telephone interview with Rob Schmitz on May 23, 2012. All further quotes from Schmitz, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

Cathy: *Sure.*³⁰

Schmitz learned her real name was Li Guifen, but that she used “Cathy Lee” when translating for Westerners. Lee thought Daisey had been researching an article; she was unaware that he performed in the theater, or that she was helping him collect material for the stage. Lee emailed Schmitz Daisey’s itinerary, which included three factory visits—not 10, as Daisey had claimed—plus a few other emails she had saved. Schmitz sent her the link to the podcast so that she could listen to it.

Meanwhile, Schmitz researched Daisey to learn more about his background and his performances. He watched videos on YouTube, perused reviews of his shows and newspaper interviews, and read Daisey’s blog posts. Three hours later, Schmitz boarded a plane bound for Shenzhen to meet Lee in person and get the story. He notified his editors in the US that he was no longer on paternity leave.

Shenzhen. The next day, March 1, Lee and Schmitz retraced Daisey’s itinerary. Schmitz had brought along a transcript of the TAL episode for reference. Lee told him that she listened to the monologue the night before and found much of it incorrect. For example, at the Foxconn gates, Lee and Schmitz had observed guards, but no guns were in sight. In fact, Lee said she had never seen a real gun in her life, except on TV and in the movies. In addition, she had rarely seen underage workers during the 10 years she had been taking businesspeople to visit factories, including Foxconn.

As for the café meeting, Lee could recall only a discussion at a different restaurant with two workers, not 25-30 as Daisey had asserted. Schmitz continued going through the transcript asking Lee to verify each event. Daisey’s encounter with people whose hands were shaking uncontrollably as a result of being poisoned by hexane? She had not witnessed that. Daisey’s meeting with the elderly man with a mangled hand, who apparently saw a working iPad for the first time when Daisey pulled his out of a satchel? That, too, had not happened, said Lee. Ditto the taxi that took an unfinished exit ramp that ended in midair.

Furthermore, Daisey’s chronology didn’t seem to fit, given the considerable distances he would have had to travel in just six days. Lee allowed that on some matters, her memory had dimmed. After all, she had taken Daisey on his tour in June 2010, and her job as translator brought her to the same places repeatedly. But she was sure of these key points. She did not seem mad at Daisey, but disappointed. Schmitz recorded their conversation:

Lee: *He’s a writer. So I know what he says, maybe only half of them or less are true. But he’s allowed to do that, right? Because he’s not a journalist.*

Schmitz: *I don’t know. You’re right. He’s a writer. He’s a writer and an actor.*

³⁰ TAL, Episode 460.

Lee: *Yeah.*

Schmitz: *However, his play is helping form the opinions of many Americans.*

Lee: *As a Chinese, I think it's better if he can tell American people the truth. I hope people know the real China. But he's a writer, and he exaggerates some things. So I think it's not so good.*³¹

After a day filled with Lee's revelations and verification, Schmitz boarded a plane back to Shanghai. He would have to tell his editors.

Exposing Daisey

Back home—as was protocol at *Marketplace* for story ideas—Schmitz sat down to write a memo to his editors and producers in Los Angeles, where the show was based. “I wasn’t sure my editors knew who Daisey was,” Schmitz says. So in his memo, he summarized Daisey’s professional background, explained the monologue and its performances to sold-out audiences, detailed his interview with Lee, stated point by point each apparent falsehood of Daisey’s, and attached the downloaded file of the TAL transcript. To illustrate the show’s impact, Schmitz did a Lexis-Nexis search of Daisey’s interviews following the broadcast. In every interview, Daisey recounted all that he claimed to have observed during his China trip—much of which was fabrication, Schmitz noted. “It took hours to write this memo,” Schmitz says. By the time he finished, it was nearly 15 pages.

“I think we’ve got a good story” for *Marketplace*, he wrote. But as a correspondent, the decision was not his to make. He pressed “send,” and the email went to Managing Editor George Judson; Executive Producer Deborah Clark; host Kai Ryssdal; and John Buckley, foreign editor. Clark and Judson met over the weekend and called Schmitz. They told him they would share his memo with TAL.

On Monday, March 5, *Marketplace* Executive Producer Clark emailed Glass as well as TAL Senior Producer Snyder to let them know that a *Marketplace* reporter was working on a story and Clark needed to talk to them. When Glass and his colleagues learned her news, they were distressed. Says Glass:

We’re a reporting outfit, so to hear that we would make an error, and that we would make an error on a show that had been so visible, was just a terrible, terrible feeling.

They were grateful that *Marketplace* had contacted TAL directly before going on air with Schmitz’ story. “They were reaching out to say, ‘how should we handle this?’... I think it speaks to the collegiality in public radio,” comments Glass. Schmitz’s producers and editors wanted *Marketplace* to run the story of Daisey’s deception—but only with TAL taking the lead.

³¹ Ibid.

On March 6, Schmitz received a call from Glass. "He was troubled by all this," Schmitz recalls. The two talked for a couple of hours. Glass questioned Schmitz closely about Lee's veracity. "He had a hard time coming to believe that much of [Daisey's monologue] was false," Schmitz says. But by the end of the phone call, Glass understood that Daisey had lied to him, the TAL staff and theatergoers. "[Glass] was almost in a state of shock," says Schmitz.

Schmitz advised Glass, who wanted to confront Daisey, to plan carefully. "I don't know if that's a good idea," Schmitz told Glass. Schmitz had read on the performer's blog how Daisey dealt with criticism: "I've seen how he's reacted. He gets very angry... When he's questioned, he goes ballistic." Schmitz advised Glass to meet with Daisey as close to airtime as possible. Interviewing him immediately "gives [Daisey time] to bully us or shift the narrative," he said.

Glass and his team moved into crisis management mode. Besides Snyder and Producer Reed, they enlisted Emily Condon, who handled relations with the press. Condon contacted Daniel Ash, WBEZ vice president for strategic communications, for guidance. "We needed to figure out if we'd talk to the press, and what we would say if we did," says Glass. "Do we issue a press release?"

More important than the press, however, was the TAL audience. How should TAL break the news, and what could it do to repair any resulting damage? "There was kind of an image and business question of us worrying that people would just stop trusting us," says Glass.

We felt like we had to be straight with the audience about what the truth was, what Daisey had said that was true and was not true. We had to be clear: how did we mess it up?

The team quickly concluded that it was essential to respond on air to what Schmitz had uncovered, and that TAL would seek a response from Daisey. "From the time that we heard that we were wrong, it was obvious that we were going to go on air and correct it, and it was obvious as soon as we thought it through that we would want Mike [Daisey] to respond," clarifies Glass. That still left some questions open. Glass recalls the choices clearly:

There was an editorial question of what exactly we were going to say on the air, and at what length. Then there was the mechanical part of it: was Rob [Schmitz] going to be an interview? Was he going to file [his own] story? Was this going to fill an entire episode, or was this just going to be a part of an episode that was essentially about something else?

