



Truthiness: *This American Life* and the Monologist

Teaching Note

Case Summary

Upholding the highest standards of accuracy is an ongoing challenge for any news organization. Sometimes errors occur despite all efforts to vet sources and check facts, leaving outlets in the challenging position of trying to correct the record while preserving their credibility with the public.

This case explores one news program's efforts to maintain strict accuracy, and its strategy to pick up the pieces when those efforts fail. Ira Glass, host of the hit public radio documentary show *This American Life*, and his staff are always searching for interesting voices to incorporate in their weekly program. Veteran journalists, they pride themselves on presenting stories told in a familiar, narrative style, but as factually precise as straight news. When Glass attends a one-man show by a performer named Mike Daisey about the punishing working conditions he witnessed at manufacturing plants in China where popular Apple products are built, he quickly arranges for Daisey to adapt the monologue for radio.

Before the performance airs, Glass and his producer, Brian Reed, discuss with Daisey the necessity of unassailable accuracy, which Daisey seems to understand and embrace. They also take steps to fact-check the story, running the details by experts familiar with working conditions in China. While producers are not able to double-check every detail of Daisey's trip to visit the factories—most notably, they do not locate his translator, the one person who accompanied him throughout—by that point they have little reason to doubt Daisey's word and proceed in good faith.

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When the program airs, detailing Daisey's encounter with underage and maimed workers, gun-wielding security guards, and a nascent union movement that holds secret meetings at Starbucks, it quickly becomes *TAL*'s all-time most popular show, prompting a nationwide discussion among horrified Apple fans and a media frenzy to cover the relevant issues. Even Apple takes steps that appear to be a direct result of the story. Both *TAL* and Daisey himself continue to promote the program by giving interviews and posting follow up material online.

Meanwhile, Rob Schmitz, a Shanghai-based reporter for *Marketplace*, another NPR program, has a different reaction. Many details of Daisey's report simply do not ring true: Chinese security guards do not carry arms; Starbucks is far too expensive for poorly paid factory employees; and underage workers are far less common, in his experience, than Daisey claims. Schmitz tracks down the translator, and quickly determines that much of Daisey's story has been fabricated: numbers are overblown, injuries exaggerated, and several episodes conflated or apparently invented outright. While the spirit of the story may contain some greater truth about working conditions in Chinese factories, the details fall far short of journalistic standards of accuracy.

When Schmitz shares his findings with his editors, who subsequently contact *This American Life*, Glass and his staff are horrified. The story has already generated a huge amount of publicity. They know they must correct the error and plan to address it on the air, but how can they do so effectively without permanently damaging their credibility? The case ends with students contemplating a strategy for managing the crisis, and wondering, along with *TAL* staff, what they could have done differently to prevent it in the first place.

Teaching Objectives

Use this case to start discussions about correcting the record when errors occur in the news product; managing credibility crises at news organizations; vetting sources; fact checking; and standards of accuracy and truth in journalism.

Begin where the case ends by asking students what they believe constitutes an appropriate error correction by a news organization. This is a more complex question than it first appears, and one that has caused no shortage of disagreement within the industry. Should the news organization simply flag the error and supply the correct information? Explain how the error

occurred? Explain how it will prevent similar errors in the future? Apologize? Ask students to consider corrections not just of small errors of fact, but outright fabrications or strings of errors such as those in this case. How can *TAL* most effectively correct the multiple inaccuracies in a story that has gotten so much exposure?

Students should also consider whether ethical error correction differs by genre: errors in broadcast news are notoriously difficult to rectify, since most people will hear or see the story only once. Is it enough to simply mention the error on the subsequent program and hope the original audience will hear or see the correction? What about the podcast of the show: should *TAL* staff remove it from the website or try somehow to correct it? Moreover, the original story has gone viral and spawned multiple responses online, none of which will automatically incorporate the corrections. Given these challenges, encourage students to brainstorm a strategy for *TAL* that will reach the widest possible audience, and limit the misinformation in the original story as much as possible.

In addition to the need to correct the record, Glass and his staff are acutely aware that doing so will create a credibility crisis for their program, which has spent years building a passionate, loyal audience. Any strategy for addressing the inaccuracies in the Daisey story must also address this major public relations problem. How can Glass reassure audiences that this not only has not happened before but will not happen again? Perhaps, in light of the credibility issue, students will suggest simply flagging the errors on the website, calling as little additional attention to them as possible. But given the attention the original story received, word of the errors is likely to spread quickly.

How can *TAL* take control of the situation and be as thorough as possible in its correction strategy? Should it share the blame with Daisey, or shoulder it all? Should the show's staff reach out to the press and, if so, what is the message? By the case's end, the *TAL* staff has decided to go on air to correct the error, but students should consider how exactly this should be done. What voices should be included? Ask students which of these strategies is the most fair, ethical, and practical.

Working backward through the case, ask students what Glass and his staff could have done differently to prevent the crisis. Prompt them, for example, to consider the source-vetting that took place. Ensuring that sources are telling the truth is one of a reporter's most basic tasks, yet the

experienced TAL staff was duped. What went wrong? Were they seduced by Daisey's effectiveness as a storyteller onstage? Was the news value of the story or the "greater truth" being told so seductive it dulled their skepticism? Or is it simply impossible to guard oneself against deliberate lies? How can less experienced journalists ensure they are not similarly deceived? Is there anything about the philosophy and process behind *This American Life* that might have made this an accident waiting to happen?

Also ask students to examine the fact-checking procedures adopted by the TAL staff. They face several challenges that do not apply to straightforward, locally reported stories: the main reporter is a non-journalist who is not on their regular staff, and the reporting was done in a foreign country. Encourage students to consider how these factors complicate fact-checking procedures and what editors can do to compensate. Should stories reported by non-journalists receive more thorough fact-checking treatment? Are non-verifiable facts from abroad publishable? In this specific case, should the *TAL* staff have done anything differently to catch the inaccuracies before publication, or did they do everything in their power?

The case also raises a broader question about whether the standards of accuracy in journalism differ from those in other forms of nonfiction. Ask students if they agree that journalistic reporting has a higher standard for accuracy than nonfiction theater, as proposed in this case. What about compared to other genres, such as biography or memoir? Do students agree that the source of the problem in this case was differing standards of truth in theater and journalism, or was Daisey's level of artistic license unacceptable in any genre claiming to be nonfiction?

What about within journalism itself: do different sub-genres merit different approaches to accuracy, or is it one-size-fits-all? Glass and most of his staff are veteran journalists, and are outraged at the degree of fabrication in Daisey's monologue. But ask students if they agree that the standards for accuracy on a narrative documentary show like *TAL* are, or should be, every bit as rigorous as those at a straight-news organization.

Class Plan

Use this case in a class on journalism ethics, editorial management, fact-checking, source/journalist relations, broadcast journalism, documentary journalism, or crisis management.

Pre-class. Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

- 1) What steps do you think *This American Life* should take to correct the record?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students' work both to craft talking points ahead of class, and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

In-class questions: The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 80-90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

- a) In general, what do you think constitutes a thorough and ethically defensible error correction by a journalistic organization? Do these differ for print and radio? What about when the error goes beyond a basic misstatement of fact, as it does in this case?
- b) What exactly should TAL do to correct the errors in this case? Consider options such as printing a retraction on the website, removing the inaccurate podcast from the site, mentioning the errors on the radio show, devoting an entire show to explaining how the errors occurred, confronting Daisey on-air, and any combination of these. What are the pros and cons of these various options?
- c) At the case's end Glass and his staff are facing a public relations/credibility crisis. What steps should they take to regain audience trust?
- d) Consider the choices Glass and his staff make in the process of adapting the Daisey story for their radio show. What might they have done differently to have prevented the crisis they find themselves in at the case's end?

- e) Consider the steps TAL took to fact-check the Daisey story. Should they have done anything differently?
- f) Fact-checking stories reported by freelance journalists, non-journalist contributors, and people reporting from remote locations all pose specific challenges. What steps should editors take in these cases to ensure accurate reporting?
- g) Daisey's role goes beyond that of a typical source, but his deception raises important questions about the relationship between sources and journalists: how can reporters determine if sources are trustworthy or not? What additional steps might TAL staff have taken to ensure that Daisey was telling the truth?
- h) Are the truth standards in journalism different from those in other nonfiction genres, or is Daisey's degree of fabrication an exception? Is it possible to ensure journalistic standards of accuracy when inviting non-journalist guests to contribute, or adapting their stories for journalistic publication? What steps would you take to do so?
- i) Did the TAL concept make it uniquely susceptible to an episode like this, or could this happen to any news organization?

Suggested Readings

"Accuracy," NPR Ethics Handbook.

SYNOPSIS: Instructors and students may find it useful to review the official accuracy guidelines at National Public Radio, which specifically address some of the issues that arise in this case, and help illuminate where the *This American Life* team may have gone wrong. For example, in the section on "Using information from non-NPR sources," the guidelines clearly state that events that were not witnessed personally by NPR reporters should be corroborated by multiple other sources with direct knowledge of events, and if such corroboration is not possible, listeners should be alerted that the information has not been verified.

<http://ethics.npr.org/category/a1-accuracy/>

Rebecca Greenfield, "Lessons from the 'This American Life' Daisey debacle," *The Atlantic Wire*, March 19, 2012.

SYNOPSIS: This blog post provides a helpful round-up of prominent journalists' responses to the scandal discussed in this case, with accompanying links.

<http://www.theatlanticwire.com/technology/2012/03/lessons-american-life-foxconn-fail/50051/>

Charles Isherwood, "Speaking Less than Truth to Power," *The New York Times*, March 18, 2012.

SYNOPSIS: In this essay, *New York Times* theater critic Isherwood rejects Daisey's defense that, as a theatrical performer, he is bound by different standards of accuracy than journalists. Isherwood argues that the growing genre of documentary theater gets much of its arresting power from its presumed basis in fact and that, since reporting is defined as the witnessing and scouting of information that is then presented to an audience, documentary theater is itself a form of reporting and subject to the same ethical guidelines as journalism.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/19/theater/defending-this-american-life-and-its-mike-daisey-retraction.html>

Scott R. Maier, "Confessing Errors in a Digital Age," *Nieman Reports*, Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard, Fall 2009.

SYNOPSIS: Maier, a former journalist turned academic who researches errors in journalism, summarizes the current state of error correction, especially in online news products. He notes that far more errors go uncorrected than journalists generally acknowledge, offers a number of reasons why this is so, and argues that news organizations must adopt more rigorous error correction strategies than they have in the past.

<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=101903>

Mark Oppenheimer, "Mike Daisey and the Inconvenient Truth," *Salon*, March 19, 2012.

SYNOPSIS: In this essay for *Salon*, the *New York Times* columnist gives a more sympathetic interpretation of the Daisey episode than many other commentators. He argues that while Daisey crossed an ethical line by presenting material as fact that was only loosely based on it, the power of a well-told narrative such as the one he put together is only rarely achieved by straight journalism. Daisey, argues Oppenheimer, is not the first writer or performer to have bent or rearranged the facts in service of a good story—he cites Orwell for one—and notes that the compulsion to do so for the instinctive raconteur may be all but irresistible. He concludes that if monologists like Daisey can learn to trust their audience more and be honest about their degree of creative license, this powerful art form will continue to thrive.

http://www.salon.com/2012/03/19/mike_daisey_and_the_inconvenient_truth/singleton/

Craig Silverman and Kelly McBride, "How to handle plagiarism and fabrication allegations," *Poynter Institute*, August 15, 2012.

SYNOPSIS: This blog post for the Poynter Institute walks journalists and newsroom managers step-by-step through the process of establishing a clear policy regarding fabrication and plagiarism; verifying when an offense is suspected; and managing the wrongdoing, both internally and publicly.

<http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/regret-the-error/184895/how-to-handle-plagiarism-and-fabrication-allegations/>