



free-range thinking is a monthly journal of best practices, resources, and generally useful stuff for public interest communicators who want to reach more people with more impact.

When True Stories Stop Being True

The Mike Daisey controversy reminds us that the truth can stretch only so far.

In my storytelling workshops, I encourage participants to write stories with vivid scenes, to conjure a world that their audience can easily visualize and, in turn, will want to enter. This requires the storytellers to include specific details and recall actual dialogue exchanged among the characters, and that invariably leads to the question: "If I can't remember, how much can I make up?"

I was reminded of this question recently when I heard Ira Glass interviewing Mike Daisey on "This American Life" on NPR. In his one-man play, "The Agony and The Ecstasy of Steve Jobs," Daisey described his visit to a Foxconn factory in China where Apple iPads and iPhones were being manufactured under deplorable working conditions. Glass had seen the play and was so moved by Daisey's account that he invited him on his radio program to share his story.



Mike Daisey

That broadcast was the most downloaded episode in the program's history, but it led to revelations that critical parts of Daisey's account were simply not true. Daisey claimed to have met factory workers as young as 12, but this could not be confirmed. He said that workers in the Foxconn factory in Shenzhen had been poisoned by the chemical hexane, and while this occurred in a factory in Suzhou, there is no record of a similar occurrence in Shenzhen. The list goes on.

Glass was furious with Daisey, and rightly so. The central point of Daisey's story was that Apple's factories in China exploited workers by subjecting them to inhumane labor conditions. Fabricating facts directly related to that point compromised the truth of the entire story. Which brings us back to the question I frequently hear in my workshops.

April 2012

When True Stories Stop Being True

Learning from Mike Daisey's mistakes.

How to Run Better Webinars

The answer is inside your radio.



About Us

free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Lori Matsumoto. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit www.agoodmanonline.com and www.thegoodmancenter.com.

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In a perfect world, the answer to "How much can I make up?" is "Nothing." If the events in the story are fresh in your memory, or if you can interview people directly involved, you should be able to extract enough details and dialogue to tell a story that is engaging and entirely accurate.

But who lives in a perfect world? Memories fade, and interviews can turn into a *Rashomon*-like experience in which each person tells you a different story about the same incident. If you end up glossing over the details or omitting dialogue, your story may feel flat, generic and inauthentic. But if you fabricate some particulars to hold the story together, you run the risk of "pulling a Daisey." (If that's not an expression yet, it should be.)

So, where do you draw the line? If you're a journalist writing a news story, there is no confusion on this point: all facts must be double-checked for accuracy. All quotes should be verbatim, confirmed by either the speaker or backed up by a recording.

If you are a public interest professional telling stories about your work, you should always strive for journalistic accuracy, and there can be no compromising on any facts connected to the central truth of your story. But you also have a limited license to incorporate "best guesses" when necessary to keep the story moving forward.

As an example, consider the following story. In just seven sentences, Margaret Martin creates a memorable scene and tells you the creation story of the nonprofit she founded in Los Angeles:

Hardcore LA gang-bangers walk through a street market on a Sunday morning. Tattoos, shaved heads, oversized clothing. They stopped in front of a tiny kid playing Brahms on a tiny violin. After five or six minutes, without saying a word to one another, I watched those gang members pull out their own money and lay it gently in the little kid's case. I was earning a doctorate in public health at UCLA on what it takes to make a healthy community. That day, those gang members handed me a powerful lesson. They led me to research linking early sustained music study with improvements in math, language, brain development and behavior - the basis of Harmony Project.



Margaret Martin

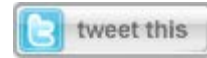
To the best of my knowledge, this story is entirely accurate. But let's say that Martin was mistaken as to what day it actually occurred. Or perhaps what she thought was Brahms was really Stravinsky. Would either of these inaccuracies change your feeling about the story? Probably not, because while these details help paint a vivid picture, they are not critical to the central truth of the story.

On the other hand, what if you learned that only one of the gang members had thrown money in the child's violin case while the other three sneered and walked away? Would that change your feelings about the story? It might now, because the central truth of the story is that *all* of them were moved by the music.

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Let me be clear: I never encourage storytellers to make up stuff in lieu of doing the necessary homework. And there can be no fact-fudging where the central truth of your story is concerned. But if you incorporate a few reasonable assumptions or best-of-my-recollection guesses to knit the rest of your reporting together, you can still say with confidence, "The following is a true story..."

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How To Improve Your Webinars

Join our Webinar on Webinars April 27th and find out why a good webinar may be more like talk radio than anything else.

When I first started attending webinars, I was probably just as bored as you. But as the host/teacher droned on, I started to notice a few things. Having worked in talk radio earlier in my career, I started to see distinct similarities between the webinar format and a talk radio show.

Later on, as I began developing webinars to teach at The Goodman Center, I incorporated some of the principles that have been proven to make talk radio engaging. As a result, our webinars receive consistently high marks, and good causes that frequently conduct webinars of their own have asked me to teach these techniques to them.



We've condensed those lessons into a one-hour class open to the public. In ***The Webinar on Webinars*** you'll learn:

- How to keep participants engaged from beginning to end
- The fine details of creating a good online experience
- How to use your two assets (voices and visuals) to maximum advantage
- What else we learned from talk radio that makes webinars even better

Check out [The Goodman Center](#) to learn more and register online for the April 27th class (11a-12n PT, 2-3p ET).

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