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LiePad: Why Nonfiction Writers Must Never Change the Facts

Brandt Goldstein

Contributor

Author and Visiting Professor, New York Law School

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By now, you've surely heard that "This American Life" [has retracted](#) a story it broadcast in January about misery and abuse at a Foxconn factory in China that makes iPads for Apple. The story was an excerpt from *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*, a one-man stage show by Mike Daisey. Daisey's show is supposedly nonfiction, but it now turns out that some of it isn't true. Which leaves the many people deeply moved by his performance wondering what, if anything, we can still trust about his work.

This mess highlights a question that's raised every time a memoir or other supposedly fact-based work (Greg Mortenson's *Three Cups of Tea*, for instance) is exposed as a partial fabrication: Can a writer working in the realm of nonfiction ever change the facts because he's Making Art or Delivering an Important Message?

The view of basically every respected journalist is Hell No. But in a recent book entitled *The Lifespan of a Fact*, essayist John D'Agata of the University of Iowa (a writers' mecca) takes the opposite view. And in the wake of the Daisey dust-up, it's worth explaining why D'Agata is just plain wrong.

The Lifespan of a Fact is an odd book. It's the blow-by-blow account of the fight between D'Agata and Jim Fingal, a dogged fact-checker, over inaccuracies in a nonfiction piece D'Agata sought to publish some years ago in a journal called *The Believer*. D'Agata's essay, a meditation on Las Vegas and storytelling, uses as its literal jumping off point the suicide of a man who leapt to his death from atop the Stratosphere tower. But like Mike Daisey, D'Agata takes liberties with the truth. He changes facts and figures, places and dates, and names and numbers, all in the service of Art.

Fact-checker Jim isn't happy about any of this. Jim wants John to get the facts right. John, meanwhile, wants Jim, whom he obviously considers a dunderhead and a philistine, to get the hell out of his grill. Back and forth they go, over the course of years, with D'Agata telling Jim things like this: "The facts that are being employed here aren't meant to function baldly as 'facts.' The work that they're doing is more image-based than informational."

This sounds frighteningly like a politician caught telling us something that isn't true. (Remember Senator Jon Kyl's [lie about Planned Parenthood?](#)) The response is simple: The "facts" that D'Agata was "employing" to do "image-based" work aren't facts at all. But this is all part of D'Agata's larger project, which seems in *The Lifespan of a Fact* to be a war against the stark division between fiction and nonfiction. As best I can tell, he prefers that his essays, like those of past greats (Montaigne, say) simply be taken on their own terms, caveat-free, and with no accountability for whatever distortions and even fabrications he deems necessary to fully realizing his creation.

This mindset, and any number of closely related syndromes, is responsible for an endless stream of untrustworthy nonfiction. (It was only a few weeks after the publication of *Lifespan* that we learned Daisey's work contained fabrications.) In response, and in the hope of encouraging as many writers as possible not to stray into such territory, perhaps

it's worth restating in the most extreme terms possible the argument for factual accuracy in nonfiction writing.

That argument, I think, would go something like this: We live in a world of massive cruelty and brutality, of extreme and unapologetic abuse of power, of needless human suffering on a horrific scale. Genocide. Torture. War Crimes. Mass starvation. Drug wars destroying civil society in one country; the rights of women being pulverized in another. Children used as sex slaves, HIV patients wasting away for no good reason, the deaths of countless people who had no access to clean drinking water, and on, and on, and on.

Fiction may give us the emotional truth about all of these matters, and it may well be the most effective way to generate real empathy for - and thus genuine efforts to stop - the suffering of others. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* might have done as much for the abolitionist cause as any nonfiction work, no matter how well-reasoned, no matter how freighted with facts and figures.

But whatever the advantages of fiction, we rely on nonfiction writing — from daily reporting and on-the-scene blogging to long-form journalism and book-length accounts — to understand and analyze in (relatively) raw form the wrongs and injustices in our world, and to create a set of shared factual understandings that underpin our moral and policy arguments about how to deal with those wrongs and injustices.

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This difficult, never-ending, and sometimes very dangerous work is far from all that nonfiction does. But it constitutes non-negotiable territory in nonfiction's province. (Indeed, it is of such fundamental importance that we as a civilized society use it, in part, as a gauge for sanity. After all, what do we call people who deny factual accounts of the Holocaust or

the Cultural Revolution or the Killing Fields, or who believe — contra the *9/11 Commission Report* — that September 11 was an inside job? Nuts. Wacko. Crazy.)

Without nonfiction writers dedicated to producing factually accurate accounts that convey the horrific particulars of our world, we end up living a collective lie — a lie readily perpetuated by those who stand to lose political, military, or economic power if the truth is told.

That, in part, is why it matters exactly how many people died in the Srebrenica massacre in 1995, and by whom they were killed, and how, and under what circumstances. Why it matters exactly how many victims were tortured or otherwise abused or humiliated in Abu Ghraib, and by whom, and how, and under whose authority. Why it matters exactly how many people are dying in Homs, Syria, right now, and who is killing them, and how. And why it matters exactly how old the workers are at the Foxconn plants in China, exactly how many of them are suffering injuries on the job, and exactly what sort of misconduct Apple is — or is not — engaged in.

Like Mike Daisey, D'Agata seems to think that hewing too closely to the facts can interfere with the ambitions of an enthralling narrative, a vividly wrought image, the sound and shape of a sentence formed just so. Wrong. The greatest nonfiction writers manage all of what D'Agata and Daisey seek, even as they remain faithful to the most minute factual details of their subjects. Philip Gourevitch on Rwanda in *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*. Tracy Kidder on Dr. Paul Farmer and the fight against AIDS in Haiti in *Mountains Upon Mountains*. Jonathan Harr on the failings of the American legal system in *A Civil Action*. Katherine Boo on Mumbai's underclass in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*.

At this point, a defender of D'Agata's position might respond: You're talking about subject matter of great moral gravity where, it must be conceded, nonfiction work cannot afford to tamper with the facts. And maybe, since Daisey has ventured into that territory, he shouldn't be allowed to keep his Artist's Pass. But if a writer's putative subject is one

teenager's suicide in Las Vegas, how can it matter if he changes the name of a bar from the Boston Saloon to Buckets of Blood?

It matters. Because once we concede that the nonfiction writer must stay true to the facts when writing about, say, genocide or child trafficking, there's no room anymore for tampering with the truth in the name of Art. To do so, the nonfiction writer would have to be able to draw a line between when it's permissible to play fast and loose with factual truth and when it isn't. And that simply cannot be done. There cannot be two kinds of nonfiction — the "serious" stuff that grapples with the injustices of the world and the "arty" stuff about everything else that allows the writer to do whatever the hell he wants, facts be damned, and still call it nonfiction.

The moment writers sacrifice factual rigor in anything that purports to be nonfiction (other than, let's say, satire or the yarn-like monologues of a David Sedaris), they undermine their own credibility regarding any nonfiction they write on any subject in the future. ("Listen, I may have been writing about Las Vegas before, but now that I'm writing about the death penalty, you should know that I didn't stretch the truth at all.") They also undermine the broader nonfiction enterprise by generating even more skepticism among those in the public who, confronted by inconvenient truths, are happy to disregard them as the inventions of (for instance) the "liberal media." Neither the writers nor the readers of nonfiction — and that's all of us - can afford this.

Yes, there is room for make-believe in the writer's world, whether it's simply changing the number of Vegas strip clubs from 31 to 34 because the rhythm of the latter number works better in a particular sentence (so said D'Agata) or fabricating, as Daisey evidently did, the story of an enraptured factory worker exploring an iPad with a hand crippled by his work at Foxconn.

We call this stuff fiction, and we demand that it be identified as such. When it isn't, we have another name for it. Lies.