

FORWARD-SLASH BIZ

MEDIA SERVICES GRAPHICS (SANJAYA DE SILVA)



# TRUTH, LIES AND IPHONES

**Angelo Fernando** uncovers some home truths in the complex world of business and government – and learns a lesson or two as well

There's a man who works in a Chinese factory that manufactures iPhones and iPads with a hand that has been severed by one of the machines. Workers in China are sometimes as young as 12; and conditions are so bad, it seems, the factory has angry armed guards at the gate. How could this be? Apple Inc., the model company that is a symbol of breakthrough innovation, whose stock valuation exceeds General Electric, would surely not sanction such industrial practices?

It doesn't. The trouble is, most of that story was fabricated by the media. In fact, it's a much longer story. The source of such gruesome 'facts' was a chap called Mike Daisey who visited China in 2010. He visited these factories operated by Taiwanese electronics company Foxconn in China, which Apple uses for its phones, tablets and laptops. But his so-called research was embellished with material about events that never happened.

His purpose was to create a stage act: a monologue that he performs called 'The Agony and Ecstasy of Steve Jobs.' But the bottom line is that Daisey is a liar who hides behind the label of 'artiste.' He claims he is an Apple fanboy, "a worshipper in the cult of the Mac." But is he just trying to make a fast buck off Apple's success?

In his introduction to the transcript of the

monologue, he implies that he stands by his work – meaning it is defensible: "We've been asked if we are afraid of what will happen when these words are free, if we're afraid of what will happen to this work. We are not afraid at all."

Why? Because it is true, he insists: "The truth is that this work is not ours now – it's yours." The stage act that takes the form of a 'report,' albeit theatrical, was so popular that he has been featured in the media many times, repeating the 'facts' about factory conditions, unchecked...

But when one organisation, Chicago Public Radio, ran a story about Daisey's China experience, one journalist based in China suspected that there was something wrong with the details. He had covered the Foxconn-Apple connection before and visited the factory, so he knew there were no armed guards outside the gates. This was a big red flag.

Other inaccuracies stood out. Small lies, such as factory workers discussing their plight at the local Starbucks (there is no



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Starbucks in the vicinity). Daisey recounts how he met factory workers whose hands would "shake uncontrollably" after using hexane, a dangerous chemical that cleans the glass panels of devices on the assembly line. Here's how he described it: "Hexane is an iPhone-screen cleaner; it's great because it evaporates a little bit faster than alcohol does, which means that you can run the production line even faster and try to keep up with those quotas. The problem is that hexane is a potent neurotoxin, and all these people have been exposed to it."

Their hands shake uncontrollably; some of them can't even pick up a glass. I talk to people whose joints in their hands have disinte-

grated from working on the line, doing the same motion hundreds of thousands of times. It's like carpal tunnel syndrome on a scale we can scarcely imagine."

Although there had been a case of the use of the harmful chemical at one iPhone factory, was a thousand miles away from the one Daisey visited. Rob Schmitz, the

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journalist who spotted the inaccuracies, had visited the Foxconn factory and knew the facts.

Daisey's translator in China, when contacted, said neither she nor Daisey had witnessed the shaking hands. Daisey later admitted that he had however, met with workers in Hong Kong who were going to an Apple protest, and people at this gathering had talked of other workers who had been affected. In other words, Daisey had *met* people who *knew* people, but this made it unreliable third-party corroboration. But he had gone ahead and edited these details to make it seem as if it was one encounter, and his monologue made it appear to be first-hand experience.

So the radio show, a weekly one-hour magazine-type airing called 'This American Life,' did what few in the media do well when they publish an inaccuracy. It retracted the story, but did not just limit it to an apology and a few words of correction. It dedicated an entire show to it, doing an investigative piece to expose the truth. Its host Ira Glass is an award-winning journalist who uses media as a form of compelling storytelling. His show is usually divided into three acts and he, the narrator, pulls together the threads to create a marvellous narrative. Instead of simply apologising for the terrible mistake – that of not fact-checking the details – Glass summoned the 'liar' to the studio and put him in front of a microphone. Rob Schmitz was also in the studio-grilling session. It went like this:

**Schmitz:** So you lied about that. That wasn't what you saw.

**Daisey:** I wouldn't express it that way.

**Schmitz:** How would you express it?

**Daisey:** I would say that I wanted to tell a story that captured the totality of my

The 2012 Edelman Trust Barometer found "an unprecedented nine-point global decline in trust in government." Trust in business fell three points globally, to 53 per cent. In several countries in Asia however, trust remained well above the 50 per cent mark. Who do you think earned most trust in 2011? NGOs! They came out as the most trusted institutions in the world. Moreover, in 16 of the 25 countries surveyed, NGOs were more trusted than businesses.

Before we throw poisoned darts at each other, let's do a reality check. Inventing or paraphrasing versions of what someone says has been a convention of business communications. We come across this all the time – in press releases. The 'made-up quote' or the 'insert appropriate verbiage here' sentence is one of the worst residual practices of the public-relations practitioner who wants the chief executive to say something profound. No one ever calls a company spokesperson to ask if he or she really said that. Even the media lets it slide by with a wink and a nod. If lying is so outrageous, we ought to weed it out of all our marketing and communications.

trip. So when I was building the scene of that meeting, I wanted to have the voice of this thing that had been happening that everyone had been talking about.

*A lie by any other word would be as nauseating.*

To Daisey, paraphrasing an experience was justified. Some would argue that we do it all the time, when we tell others about our experiences with others. Some people who launch into a 'he said,' 'I said' story format largely paraphrase for us. However, when what is said is presented with an aura of truth that captures 'the voice of this thing that has been happening,' it takes the storyteller down a slippery slope. The casualty is trust.

In our quest to make an impact, we ought to guard against the slick quotes, arbitrary statistics and unverified 'facts.' If the media doesn't filter these out or point them out, someday the loss of trust will be incalculable. Fact checking is not something that has to be left to a post-production stage. "I'm not going to say that I didn't take shortcuts in my passion to be heard. But I stand behind my work... It's not journalism. It's theatre," Daisey says.

The larger lesson for businesses here is that institutions that we want to trust, based on their credentials, are not always credible. This includes the media and those representing organisations in the public space such as marketing companies, advertising agencies, PR departments, individuals such as editors of newsletters, speech writers and all manner of social-media practitioners within the company. It's easy to hurl accusations at the Mike Daiseys of this world.

Accountants at one time earned public distrust especially with the Enron scandal of 2001. In the media, Jayson Blair of The New York Times was found to have fabricated a whole series of stories in 2000/03, based on fake sources from which he had made up quotes. It's also common to suspect internet-based stories that get passed around and treated as 'truth' without much fact-checking.

In the age of 'always on,' ubiquitous media, you would think that fact-checking is just a hyperlink away. But we get lazy. We just trust any pass-along information that comes by way of email or social-networking channels, often without reading the story. Technology and social media appear to have provided safeguards, but they have not.

Don't say you were not warned.

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