

Running head: TRUTH IN JOURNALISM



By and large, journalists are regarded as “seekers-of-truth.” People rely on them to make them aware of certain truths that they might not otherwise know existed. Most journalists take this as the huge responsibility it is, but occasionally someone comes along who fails to see the big picture. Occasionally someone focuses all of their energy on telling captivating stories at the expense of their integrity. In terms of their journalism careers these people can be looked at as little more than masterful storytellers with faulty moral compasses. They place personal gain above everything else, most often in pursuit of furthering their careers. This attention-seeking behavior can be seen in the actions of Stephen Glass, a former journalist with *The New Republic*, whose career was destroyed because he repeatedly submitted fictional material to the magazine all the while passing it off as fact. The film *Shattered Glass* offers an insiders’ perspective into the unraveling of his career, a process that included Glass handing in many works of fiction before ever being discovered (Baumgarten, Merims, Hirsch, & Christenson, 2003)(Willis, 2005).

The film opens with Stephen Glass relaying his acquired knowledge in the field of journalism. His apparent youth as he talks about his work with childlike wonderment initially make it difficult to comprehend that he is guilty of little more than being an idealist. At first it appears that he approaches all of his articles as a storyteller, or from a sort of ‘village’ perspective, taking detailed, descriptive notes, and stressing the human aspect of every story from an eyewitness account. Ultimately this proved most effective for disguising the amorality that actually existed in the construction of most of his articles, as his notes often provided the only means of verification for them (Baumgarten et al., 2003)(Willis, 2005).

The film also makes note of Glass’s hypocrisy and inherent arrogance as he freelances for other publications providing the same sorts of falsities, while unapologetically correcting slight

oversights in his colleagues' work. He is able to do this with such finesse beyond his years that no one ever suspects him of any wrongdoing whatsoever. In fact, most if not all of his co-workers look at him with awe and admiration, affections that Glass seems to revel in. The film repeatedly suggests that Glass is motivated by this attention, constantly formulating stories more entertaining than the last. In the end, this proves to be his downfall as he perhaps becomes overly confident in his abilities to "spin a yarn" with no one questioning the validity of his tales (Baumgarten et al., 2003)(Willis, 2005).

This film provides subtle clues throughout of Glass's dishonesty through rather unbelievable stories he shares with his co-workers in which he provides enough detail to make them believable. He is also repeatedly seen brushing off questions about his freelance work. At first this seems to be little more than a minor annoyance until questions are raised about the facts in an article he presents about the misconduct of delegates at a CPAC conference. After writing this article entitled "Spring Breakdown," Glass's editor, Michael Kelly is contacted by the conference's director disputing the story. He points to a detail included in the article in which the delegates supposedly obtained alcohol from the mini-bar in their hotel room. From this information the director had concluded that the article was fabricated on the basis that the hotel did not have these mini-bars. Glass readily admits that he must have made a mistake and that the delegates must have instead rented a refrigerator, but insists that that is the only discrepancy in his story. Receiving confirmation from the hotel that guests can indeed rent refrigerators, Kelly is satisfied with this explanation and the subject is dropped. Throughout the film Glass proves to be a master at distortion. He shows remarkable ability at being able to twist unbelievable elements of his stories around and make them look like honest mistakes. His readiness to admit

even the tiniest discrepancies in his stories makes it seem impossible for any major discrepancies to exist (Baumgarten et al., 2003)(Willis, 2005).

In the film Glass is portrayed with a sense of earnestness that seems to inspire a lot of trust and tendency for people to want to believe him. This trust is not so easily broken, particularly when everyone is so entertained by his storytelling abilities. Despite the approval from his co-workers the film shows Glass's apparent need for constant reassurance when he is seen doubting his abilities in front of them. The reassurance he receives seems to motivate him to continue writing these works of fiction and seems to serve as a barometer with which he can gauge the believability of his stories. This technique seems to work for him for awhile until Kelly is fired and replaced by Chuck Lane, a fellow co-worker. The film indicates that this was not an easy transition for anyone, least of all Glass, who ironically remarks at Lane's apparent offense at having his articles fact-checked. Glass, however, is the first person to accept Lane as the new editor, an obvious attempt at personal advancement (Baumgarten et al., 2003)(Willis, 2005).

With the change in leadership, Glass proceeds to his next article, a piece entitled "Hack Heaven" about a teenage hacker turned company security advisor. This story is approved and published like all of the others complete with descriptive details that go completely unquestioned. This is until Adam Penenberg, a journalist with the online magazine *Forbes Digital Tool* raises questions about the article's credibility. This proves to be the beginning of the end for Glass's career and provides the first real insight into his true character and how far he was willing to go to further his career. Penenberg's attention was first called to the article by his boss who wondered how he was scooped on a computer related story. This prompts him to begin

investigating the article's contents. When he fails to find any information on the sources or details provided in the article he contacts *The New Republic* and Lane requests that Glass provide phone numbers for all of his sources. This begins an elaborate maze of lies as Glass struggles to cover up his indiscretions. He begins repeating a pattern of behavior he exhibits whenever he is cornered which is to stall by insisting that all of his source material is at home. When Lane asks him to provide phone numbers for his sources from the "Hack Heaven" piece, Glass returns with specific details about answered e-mails, voice messages, and the web address for Jukt Micronics, the computer company that the hacker supposedly advises. In an effort to verify these sources and appease Penenberg, Lane calls Jukt Micronics hoping to speak to the chairman George Sims, but only gets a voicemail. He then gives the number to Penenberg, who, along with a co-worker discover that this perceivably large computer company only has one phone line, another element in Glass's article that raises suspicion (Baumgarten et al., 2003)(Willis, 2005).

Later on, Lane receives a call from Sims complaining about the article, which is followed by a call from Glass apologizing for giving Sims his home number. This simple act lends authenticity to Glass's story as it seems to confirm the validity of one of his sources. Meanwhile, Glass is seen at his office working on something from his computer, when he is interrupted by a co-worker and quickly closes out his work. The next morning Glass tells Lane that he has accessed the Jukt Micronics website which consists of a one page letter of complaint about his article. He also presents him with a business card that supposedly belongs to the hacker, Ian Restil's agent. Lane immediately questions the authenticity of the card which is met with yet another plausible explanation from Glass. This all occurs minutes before a meeting with the journalists from *Forbes Digital Tool*, who pose even more questions about Glass's

article. Still unable to locate any of the sources from the article or verify any of the facts, Penenberg makes repeated attempts at uncovering the truth but Glass continues to deny any wrongdoing. When Penenberg accesses the Jukt Micronics website he and his co-workers are immediately suspicious of it, insisting that it does not look like a legitimate website, noting the ease with which someone could set up a fake site. With this revelation, Glass interrupts saying that he found the number from another requested source, supposedly from Nevada. As he is reciting the number, Penenberg notices that the area code does not match any area code in Nevada. Glass insists that this was an honest mistake, but at this point it is clear that his lies are catching up with him. Perhaps sensing this shift Glass begins to assume the role of a victim, as he blames unreliable sources for his questionable material (Baumgarten et al., 2003)(Willis, 2005).

Still hoping to clear Glass's name and gain insight about the details of the article, Lane insists that he and Glass travel to the site where the article was based. Glass had given incredibly specific details about a meeting that took place regarding Restil's impending employment with Jukt Micronics. This supposed meeting took place near a National Hackers' Conference, a scene which Glass also described with great detail. Glass makes several attempts at discouraging Lane's idea to visit this site, but is eventually forced to comply. His lies continue to unravel as they reach the site and Lane realizes that the pieces of the story are not cohesive. He begins to see that Glass has presented misleading information about the size of the building where the conference took place and soon discovers that the building itself is closed on the day specified in the article. Glass makes several futile attempts at explaining these discrepancies before Lane decides that he has heard enough. Realizing that his efforts to conceal the truth are failing, Glass

admits that he never attended the hackers' conference, but instead relied on other sources for all of the details. As is depicted so often throughout the film, Glass again offers enough truth to make the rest of his story seem plausible (Baumgarten et al., 2003)(Willis, 2005).

Throughout the film it is evident that Glass has worked hard to build trust and maintain a friendly rapport with his co-workers, who remained overwhelmingly loyal to him amidst the suspicion. This presented a difficult situation for Lane, as he debated whether or not to fire him. At this point Lane is obviously having difficulty authenticating the facts in Glass's article, has not found irrefutable evidence suggesting that the piece was deliberately fabricated. This is until another co-worker brings it to his attention that Glass may be planning to visit his brother in Palo Alto. This proves to be crucial in proving that Glass deliberately fabricated his article. With this Lane remembers that Palo Alto has the same area code as the number Glass provided for George Sims from Jukt Micronics. This offers Lane an explanation of how he received a phone call from someone he could not prove existed, and leads him to believe that Glass recruited his brother to pose as Sims. Glass, of course, denies these allegations, citing that he never talks to his brother. These skillful manipulation techniques of providing specific details in his lies finally lose their effectiveness as Lane realizes he is going to have to reexamine all of Glass's articles (Baumgarten et al., 2003)(Willis, 2005).

The lengths with which Glass went to falsify a source prove how far he was willing to go to achieve success and increases the likelihood that this was not the first time he had exhibited such behavior. This prospect prompts Lane to immediately begin re-reading Glass's articles. Glass, witnessing Lane doing this, makes one last attempt at saving his job and reputation by admitting to partial dishonesty. He confesses that his brother did indeed pose as Sims, but only

because he had lost contact with the real head of Jukt Micronics. This confession only provides another reason for Lane to fire him (Baumgarten et al., 2003)(Willis, 2005).

By the next morning, Glass's indiscretions have become common knowledge at the magazine and Lane is presented with a signed letter of apology to the readers. This vindicates Lane's decision to fire Glass, who apparently fabricated most of the pieces he wrote including "Spring Breakdown." This shows an ongoing pattern of behavior where Glass repeatedly fabricated stories to further his career and achieve notoriety among his peers (Baumgarten et al., 2003)(Willis, 2005).

Throughout his journalistic career, Glass clearly approached his stories from an amoral standpoint. Through his actions he proved that he was willing to go to incredible lengths to further his career. He was obviously a skillful manipulator with a talent for reading other people's behavior and telling them what they wanted to hear. For a while this proved to be an effective tool in evading suspicion. Ironically, the relative ease with which he accomplished this became his downfall as he became overly confident in this ability. The evidence this film produces in regards to the falsities in Glass's stories encourages speculation about just how far Glass may have gone to further his career had he not been caught. This film acknowledges such actions by taking note of his novel, The Fabulist, a depiction of his own behavior disguised as a work of fiction, an ironic twist to an already unbelievable story (Baumgarten et al., 2003)(Willis, 2005).



## References

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