

F I L M E D U C A T I O N

SHATTERED GLASS

'Without trust we cannot stand.'
Confucius

WHAT IS THE TRUTH?

It was once all so simple. In Feudal times, if you wished to prove someone a liar you could subject them to a 'trial by ordeal'. In order for their account or evidence to be believed they would have to carry a red-hot iron bar for nine paces. If their flesh did not blister, they were deemed to have been protected by God and won the right to be trusted. A trial by water was even less desirable, involving a person being thrown bound into water. Sinking indicated the truth of their words, floating suggested they were unreliable.

Every day we have to believe a succession of things in order for life to be bearable and we have to make statements that we hope will be believed.

Task One

In a pair or group discuss all the things that you have promised or the statements that you have made that you need others to trust today. Then compile another list of all the things that others have asked you to believe today.

Now review the lists you have compiled. Decide how you might go about proving some of these promises or assertions you have made or have received.

Task Two

Rank the following types of people in terms of their trustworthiness.

Teenagers
Teacher
Financial Adviser
Child under 10
Journalist
Factory worker
Parent
Doctor
Plumber
Grandparent
Estate Agent
Poet

Why did you rank them as you did? How important was past experience in shaping your views of these categories of people? Were there any that you categorised as either high or low trust according to second-hand reports? If so, which ones? Share your findings with the group.

Task Three

Read the following short piece of dialogue. It is taken from the film *Shattered Glass* and occurs early on. The characters are both young reporters on a prestigious American magazine called 'New Republic'. Moments before this exchange occurs, Stephen has complimented an older female co-worker on her lipstick.

Stephen: I really got to stop doing that.

Amy: Why?

Stephen: All I do lately is give people more reasons to assume I'm gay. Lately it's everyone. The other night I went out to dinner with this guy from the Post*.

Amy: Who?

Stephen: I can't tell you, he made me promise. Anyway, we were walking around afterwards talking about Medicare for God sakes, and the next thing I know, we're standing on the corner of 18th and T and he somehow managed to slip his tongue down my throat...and I'm like...wait a moment...how'd this happen?

Amy: I don't understand.

Stephen: Neither did I.

(*The Post is the Washington Post – a world famous American newspaper).

Immediately after this exchange Stephen is called away by his editor. On the surface this may be a perfectly ordinary conversation, but at the end of it Amy is clearly confused, although the film does not reveal the source of her doubts.

What strikes you as odd about this anecdote?

What elements make it convincing and which parts are doubtful? What factors might prevent Amy from challenging Stephen?

Task Four



About nine minutes into the film, Stephen Glass gives us an explanation of how a reporter must behave when working undercover on a story – in this case pretending to be a member of the Young Republicans at a Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in a hotel. He tells us how important it is to note everything that you see and hear – ‘everything down to the mini-bottles in the fridge’.

During this explanation we see him at the conference surrounded by young men drinking heavily in a hotel room. We see him sitting in a toilet, secretly making notes. We also witness the humiliation of an overweight girl that one of the Young Republicans has earlier referred to as a ‘heifer’.

Assess the following elements in this scene for the way in which they contribute to our taking the example seriously:

1. The fact that we hear the explanation in voice-over, as part of a talk that Stephen is giving to a class of high school students.
2. The close up details such as the ‘do not disturb’ sign on the hotel door or the mini-bottles that one character deposits on a table.
3. The fact that we see Stephen Glass in the scene, interacting with the other Young Republicans.
4. The fact that we see Stephen Glass from a distance, shot in third person, both in the hotel room watching the antics of the young men and in the toilet making notes of what he has witnessed.
5. The use of quite specific disparaging terminology by one of the Young Republicans when describing the kind of vulnerable girl they should get to humiliate.

6. The fact that we see events unfolding without Stephen Glass' voice-over to accompany them – for example the clearly distraught girl running away while the gang of young men gibber at her further down the corridor.
7. As viewers, the feeling is that it would be good to know that these young men have made a grave mistake in inviting Stephen Glass into their company and that their appalling and hypocritical behaviour is now likely to be exposed. What impact does this have on our believing this scene?

The fact is that this entire story was an invention – one of the 27 out of 41 articles Stephen Glass published in the New Republic over the two-and-a-half years he worked there that were wholly or partially fabricated.

A CRASH COURSE IN JOURNALISM



We are told early on in the film that the New Republic is only one among 16,800 magazines in the USA, but it is the only one that is known as the 'in-flight magazine of Air Force One'.

Air Force One is the President of the United States' private jet and so this is his preferred reading. As such it is likely to be the must-read title of many other powerful men and women and so, as Stephen Glass suggests, has the power to influence the priorities of Government and the design of policy currently under discussion.

In your view what are the differences between a newspaper and a current affairs magazine? Which are more likely to feature:

- Longer articles
- More in-depth analysis
- Discussion of big themes rather than individual subjects or happenings
- A greater number of named writers with a distinct style or strong opinions
- More comment rather than strict observational reporting
- Fewer pictures
- Less frivolity – for example comic strips or a horoscope?

Task One

When you see the film, try to make a note of the montage sequence that accompanies the film's opening credits. A montage is a mixture of images, often overlapping to create an effect based on the accumulation of certain kinds of shot or by virtue of contrasting shots.

How do these opening shots contribute to our sense of the New Republic's being an important magazine?

Consider some of the following ingredients:

1. The shots of Washington sites such as the White House.
2. The montage of headlines both from the New Republic and other publications that appear to be making reference to the New Republic.
3. The shots of traffic continually on the move.
4. The snippets of TV interviews featuring pundits (political commentators and interviewers) making points on the basis of coverage in the New Republic.
5. The restless music.

Task Two



The film explores the relationship between reporters and their editors. What differences do you note between the three men with authority over the reporters in the film - the editors Michael Kelly and Chuck Lane and the owner Marty Peretz?

There are some key moments:

1. The way Michael Kelly handles the first query we see in the film concerning the accuracy of one of Stephen Glass' articles – the mini-bar incident.
2. The way Marty Peretz behaves when angered by something he feels his writers are doing wrong – 'the great comma debate'.
3. The response of Michael Kelly to this incident.
4. The transition scene in which Michael Kelly leaves the New Republic and how the new editor Chuck Lane handles the staff on first entering what is now his office.

5. The way that Chuck Lane behaves with the editor of Forbes Digital Tool following the first painful discussion of the article 'Hack Heaven'.
6. The way that Chuck Lane decides initially not to sack Stephen Glass when his duplicity is first exposed.
7. The way that Chuck Lane actually takes Stephen Glass out to visit one of the locations he has described in the article 'Hack Heaven'.

Task Three



The film *Shattered Glass* gives us a ringside seat to some of the backroom practices that make up the day-to-day operation of a news publication.

1. The story pitching sessions during which reporters are asked to feed back on the ideas they are pursuing and what progress they are making. We witness several of these in the film, in particular the ones in which Stephen describes the 'human-on-human biting' story he is researching and the 'Hacker Heaven' story. In the first of these, we witness Chuck Lane struggling to 'follow' Glass' performance with details of his forthcoming trip to Haiti. Discuss how Glass managed to make his pitches so persuasive and entertaining. Consider both the words he speaks and the way in which he brings the story to life – actually dancing in front of his colleagues, for example, in the manner of the young hacker Ian Restil.
2. We are taken through the fact-checking process. How does the film at this point emphasise both the exhaustive and exhausting nature of this practice? For example, what impact does the use of slow motion have at this point in the film?
3. We hear discussions about New Republic's losses, advertising, redesigns and the fact that the magazine does not include photography. How do these elements add to your understanding of the publication as a classy and authoritative 'read'?

Task Four

In May 1998, the World Wide Web was still relatively new but it was growing and with a new form of journalism emerging – e-journalism. It is a world that the writers at New Republic have little contact with or respect for and so it is a major coup for the writer Adam Penenberg of Forbes Digital Tool to have spotted the fraud that Stephen Glass has committed. This is a key part of the tension in the film – an old and respected giant of journalistic responsibility (New Republic) being brought low by an upstart publication working in an entirely different medium.

There are many differences between writing for the web and for a printed magazine like The New Republic. One way to consider this difference is to compare the home pages of an on-line newspaper and the front page of that same newspaper. Go to Guardian Unlimited (www.guardianunlimited.co.uk) and you will encounter a far more lively sight than any newspaper can muster.

Write down a list of the main differences – notice the need for brevity and also the highly interactive nature of the site.

Of course, for some true web-only publications, conventional newspaper sites are often little more than the daily paper placed on the web and ‘repurposed’ in other words provided with the benefit of a search engine and little more. True web news sites can provide an array of new material and new interactive possibilities.

In an on-line article hotwired.wired.com/i-agent/95/29/waynew/waynew.html Joshua Quittner helpfully spells out the possibilities offered by true on-line journalism. Some of the key differences include:

- Links to video and sound
- Hypertext links to other articles and other sites
- Brief articles in response to the fact that reading on-screen is not easy
- The greater opportunity for writers to be idiosyncratic and personal
- The opportunities that readers have to communicate with writers – ‘flaming’ them with e-mails if they get things wrong or say something controversial.

Another on-line article that is worth reading is by Jody Raynsford in the publication dot Journalism (www.journalism.co.uk/features/story604.html). The article describes the emergence in the period since 9/11 of a new kind of on-line phenomenon – the ‘blogger’. Bloggers are people who maintain what are effectively on-line diaries. One of the most famous of these in recent years is Salam Pax – ‘the Baghdad Blogger’. He maintained a constant stream of information about events inside Iraq during the build up to and subsequent invasion of Iraq by American and British forces. He is now a regular correspondent. Clearly bloggers are giving a highly personal view of the world but that fact is clear when you read their articles and, as Jody Raynsford points out, the reader is free to carry out their own fact-check of anything the writer asserts.

There is an interesting on-line debate concerning blogging involving Salam Pax at www.guardian.co.uk/arts/guesteditors/story/0,14481,1194724,00.html

Task Five

The fact that through e-journalism it is possible to check out the original sources that the journalist has referred to, and that you can contact them via their e-mails makes it much easier to spot if writers are playing fast and loose with the facts.

Choose an article in a current newspaper and do as Adam Penenberg did when confronted with Stephen Glass' article 'Hack Heaven': go through it highlighting everything that claims to be a fact and which needs checking. Use another coloured highlighter to indicate places where the writer is expressing his or her own personal view of the subject. If you are fact-checking a news article there should be far less, if any, 'editorialising' than if you are checking a 'feature' article in which the writer has a license to express their own views.

Once you have identified all the elements that need checking, describe what you would need to do to fact-check them. If there are some that might be confirmed using the web or sources in your library, then have a go at doing a bit of fact-checking in this way. This will give you a sense both of how time-consuming and difficult this can be.

What flaws are there in this kind of exhaustive fact-checking?

For example, just because you find a figure or a statement in another article by another journalist, that does not mean that they are correct.

Equally, if you rely, as the fact-checkers on the New Republic did, on the journalist's notes as a first hand 'source', what problems could there be with this?

The following passage is from a Vanity Fair article by Buzz Bissinger, the original inspiration for the film *Shattered Glass*:

'His reports described events which occurred at nebulous locations, and included quotes from idiosyncratic characters (with no last names mentioned) whose language suggested the street poetry of Kerouac and the psychological acuity of Freud. He had an odd, prurient eye for a department store Santa with an erection and evangelists who liked getting naked in the woods. And nobody called his bluff. What finally brought Stephen Glass down was himself.

He kept upping the risk, enlarging the dimensions of his performance, going beyond his production of fake notes, a fake Web site, a fake business card, and memos by pulling his own brother into his fading act for a guest appearance. Clearly, he would have done anything to save himself.'

'He wanted desperately to save his ass at the expense of anything,' said Chuck Lane. 'He would have destroyed the magazine.'

To make the odd mistake in journalism is inevitable, given the time pressures and the need sometimes to rely on secondary (often on-line) sources that sometimes should be checked out themselves. What Stephen Glass did was something altogether different. He made up the stories and then fabricated all the evidence he needed to prove that they were solid. He lied to his editors and of course every time they approved and printed one of his pieces, their commitment to him rose, and they became his unwitting associates in the fraud, making him even more unassailable.

That is until one of his articles came under scrutiny of the altogether brasher and more web-wise journalists at Forbes Digital Tool.

Task Six

In Shattered Glass we are offered a portrait of two very different kinds of news environments. If you can, try to spot as many contrasts between the two environments, the behaviour of the staff and their approaches to research as you can. Use the following table to help formulate your thoughts:

| | New Republic | Forbes Digital Tool | Analysis of differences |
|--|--------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| The working environment - airy or claustrophobic; high-tech or low; open or more secretive? | | | |
| The staff – polite or uncouth; articulate or not; white/middle class or not; obviously competitive or not; ironic or cynical or not? | | | |
| The editors – their backgrounds, and their way of dealing with staff. | | | |
| The relative familiarity with and use of new IT technology | | | |

Tips

(*1) Compare the way that Penenberg's colleague Andie Fox behaves concerning the 'Hack Heaven' article and the way that Glass is always seeking help from his colleagues.

(*2) Spot how Penenberg uses the web, search engines and web contacts to investigate the article 'Hack Heaven'. Also, spot the times when he assists the New Republic's editor Chuck Lane in understanding the nature of the web and web sites – for example the curious nature of Judt Micronic's website that is available only via AOL.

CHARACTERS AND MADNESS

The first editor of New Republic we meet in the film is Michael Kelly. In 2003, the real Michael Kelly was killed while reporting on the war in Iraq. As part of his preparation leading up to filming the Kelly role in Shattered Glass, the actor Hank Aziria discussed Glass with Kelly. What he was told by Kelly has been reported:

'He is literally a pathological liar, a sociopath, that he had no other motivation than being addicted to tricking people and the thrill of doing that. And that combined with a lot of ambition and this kind of pressure that a lot of bright young people feel today to achieve. Kelly thought Glass had a kind of con man mentality. He became addicted to the con.'

What is your view of Stephen Glass as he is depicted in the film Shattered Glass? The following activities will help you examine his role and his relationship with reality.

Task One

The following link will give you access to the trailer for Shattered Glass:

www.apple.com/trailers/lions_gate/shattered_glass.html

View the trailer and then consider the following questions.

- Having viewed the trailer where do your sympathies lie? With the editor Chuck Lane or with Stephen Glass? Can you explain why?
- The trailer is structured into three distinct phases – establishment; creating the story ‘Hack Heaven’ and the challenging of the story ‘Hack Heaven’ – can you spot the moments when each phase begins and what happens to the mood or tempo of the trailer at each of these points?
- What aspects of the story does the trailer highlight? What moments does it focus on? Again, can you suggest why?
- The trailer really has two endings – the sequence culminating in the joke about Nevada and the voice-over of Chuck Lane saying he wants to hear the truth. Why do you feel the trailer ends with these two elements? Remember this trailer is designed to sell the film.

Task Two

There are several occasions that we see Chuck Lane at home and on one occasion we are shown Stephen Glass in his apartment. What are the major differences in their home circumstances and how does this (if indeed it does) alter or affect the way we think about the two characters?

After the shots of Glass at home studying his computer screen and then lying looking into space on his sofa, the next scene shows Glass going to Lane and making his peace with him. How does this perhaps alter our understanding of the previous scene with Glass where his behaviour has been shown to be distinctly private and unrevealing?

How might it have altered our perception of Glass if we had seen him?

- Coming under pressure from his parents to be a lawyer. It has been suggested that part of his desire to become the hottest reporter on the block so quickly was due to the need to prove undeniably that his choice of journalism could be successful and lucrative.
- At home feverishly trying to create the evidence to support his fabricated tales. We do see him staying at the office all night near the end of the movie but at no time do we see the effort that must have gone into his frauds. Here is Buzz Bissinger writing in Vanity Fair describing the scale of the fraud that Glass maintained:

‘For those two and a half years, the Stephen Glass show played to a captivated audience; then the curtain abruptly fell. He got away with his mind games because of the remarkable industry he applied to the production of the false backup materials which he methodically used to deceive legions of editors and fact checkers. Glass created fake letterheads, memos, faxes, and phone numbers; he presented fake handwritten notes, fake typed notes from imaginary events written with intentional misspellings, fake diagrams of who sat where at meetings that never transpired, fake voice mails from fake sources. He even inserted fake mistakes into his fake stories so fact checkers would catch them and feel as if they were doing their jobs. He wasn’t, obviously, too lazy to report. He apparently wanted to present something better, more colourful and provocative, than mere truth offered.’

What are your feelings about Glass having read this passage? Is there anything to admire in all this and would it have changed your reaction to him had you been a witness to some of this feverish activity?

Task Three

Glass is a highly unreliable witness. This is brought shatteringly home to us in the final part of the film as the Highland Park schoolroom scenes are revealed to have been a fantasy. Of course in much the same way that the sequences bringing the stories he wrote for New Republic to life, the schoolroom scenes are believable because we see them, and we see them from a third person angle as well as subjectively through point-of-view shots.

Looking back on those sequences, and particularly those in the opening part of the film, which elements become more obviously the ingredients of a young male's fantasy?

Consider:

- The overall circumstances – returning to one's school a successful and respected practitioner in one's chosen profession.
- Seeing all one's articles displayed on a notice board in the classroom.
- The emphasis the sequence lays upon the prettiest girls in the class – there is not a single close-up or medium shot of a male student in the scene.
- The behaviour of the girls – smiling at Glass' every observation and giggling at his jokes.
- The exaggeratedly warm response of the teacher Mrs Duke – even reading out all the titles of Glass' articles at one point.
- The close-up of the girl, anticipating the title of one of Glass' articles – writing it down in her notebook under a doodle of a star.

Task Four

Early in the film Stephen Glass spells out his philosophy to the class of adoring students. He explains that despite the pressures of journalism, it was still possible to be 'human and pleasant'. He continues by saying that even the Pulitzer prize-winning writers Woodward and Bernstein who were responsible for uncovering the Watergate scandal that ultimately unseated President Nixon went out for a burger now and then. In many ways the early announcement of this outlook is disarming for an audience as it seems to explain some of Glass' odder, over-attentive behaviour towards his colleagues.

What made Glass such an effective manipulator of people? Consider the following elements, decide whether or not they were genuine or not. If not, then describe how they may have assisted his overall deception and finally rank them in order of seriousness as lies.

| | Lie – Yes/No? | Contribution of lie to overall deception | Rank of lies |
|--|---------------|--|--------------|
| He is a journalist and as he says 'I record what people do and I find out what moves them, what scares them, and that way they're the ones telling the story...' | | | |
| He is highly observant – noticing people's habits and interests. For example, he compliments the receptionist Gloria twice about her scent and lipstick. | | | |
| He is very good at playing low status – asking for people's help with articles that he is preparing. | | | |

| | Lie – Yes/No? | Contribution of lie to overall deception | Rank of lies |
|--|---------------|--|--------------|
| He is very self-deprecating about his achievements – often after making a spellbinding pitch, he will announce that the idea is silly and he will probably stop working on it. | | | |
| He is seen acting as a ‘fact-checker’ on other people’s articles and makes an impassioned speech at one point about the New Republic and how ‘nothing slides here’. On another occasion, he condemns Chuck Lane for getting angry when one of his facts is challenged. | | | |
| He is good at hedging his bets – condemning the new editor with his colleagues and then sliding into his office to pledge his support the next. | | | |
| He seems remarkably young – innocent almost. He gives out chewing gum to colleagues, invites them to play Monopoly and wears a school kid style knapsack. | | | |
| He expects editors to defend their staff automatically. | | | |
| He overreacts at the time when he discovers that there were no mini-bars in the Omni-Shoreham Hotel in which he described under-age drinking going on. He offers to resign. | | | |
| He has an extraordinary ability to recall detail and make people seem significant. For example, notice the incident regarding the Diet Coke at his party. | | | |
| When it is suggested that the business card belonging to George Sims is a fake, Glass uses its cheapness as a means of backing up Sims’ existence. | | | |
| He gets his brother to fake voice mails and even ring his editor pretending to be the boss of Judt Micronics. | | | |
| He suggests that he has been the victim of a deception at one point as the ‘Hack Heaven’ story collapses. | | | |
| His offers to say he made up the ‘Hack Heaven’ story if it ‘helps out’ his editor Chuck Lane. | | | |

| | Lie – Yes/No? | Contribution of lie to overall deception | Rank of lies |
|---|------------------|---|--------------|
| He reacts in a very child-like way to criticism – ‘are you mad at me?’ He also tends to repeat the phrase ‘I didn’t do anything wrong’. | | | |
| He is guarded when talking about the other magazines he is writing for. | | | |
| He suggests that he is not safe when finally confronted with the sack and asks Chuck Lane to drive him to the airport. | | | |

Task Five

Do you think that Glass is a sympathetic character or a terrifying one? It has been suggested that part of the pain and the pleasure for audiences seeing this film is to see someone exposed and hung out to dry. As Adam Penenberg says at one point of Stephen Glass – ‘he’s toast’. Do you feel the completeness of Glass’ exposure somehow offsets the scale of his deception? Does it speak to the fear many of us feel of being shown up as a fraud?

Do your feelings change when you see him in the final scene sitting with a lawyer, helping to confirm the articles that are fraudulent only via a carefully non-incriminating mechanism?

Do your feelings for Glass alter when you hear that he wrote a novel afterwards called ‘The Fabulist’ in which he described the activities of a journalist who made up all his stories?

Do your feelings for Glass alter when you hear that he has started writing again – having an article published recently in Rolling Stone magazine?

NEWS VALUES AND OTHER FORMS OF NEWS MANIPULATION

In the Observer (18th April, 2004) Peter Preston, a former editor of The Guardian, wondered if what Glass did actually mattered to anyone except those in the incestuous world of current affairs publishing. ‘Does Joe Public not mind being lied to, or doesn’t he care?’ he asked. It is also the case that in some ways Stephen Glass brilliantly anticipated events that actually came to be. A few years on from when Hack Heaven was discredited, there were genuine reports of companies recruiting hackers to help protect their IT systems. Does this alter the scale of his ‘crime’?

Task One

There have been some dissenting voices among the critics – most of whom have celebrated Shattered Glass. The following article suggests that the film leaves a lot of questions unanswered. It also suggests that the Glass drama is a distraction, focusing the attention away from where the power and danger in journalism really lies. And that is with the media’s owners who can pursue their own political agendas via their magazines, newspapers, television stations and radio networks.

www.wsws.org/articles/2003/nov2003/glas-n27.shtml

Read the article, summarise its contents and then discuss whether or not its criticism of Shattered Glass is justified or not. Do you feel the film helps you understand the business of journalism more? Does it help you become more critical of what you read?

What, for example, is your reaction to the 'group hug' scene in which Chuck Lane is applauded and an abject apology is signed by all the staff? It may provide a neat and heart-warming end-scene for the closing stages of the film, but does it leave lots of questions unanswered?

Task Two

In their book *Manufacturing Consent*, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky identify five principal 'filters' that can operate to prevent us gaining a true picture of the world from the media we consume. Read through the list and consider the kinds of stories that such filters might cause to be dropped or not covered at all in the world.

1. The size, ownership and profit-orientation of most mass media.
2. The reliance most media have on advertising for the majority of their income.
3. The sources that the mass media have to rely on for information.
4. The alarm and inconvenience that certain well-organised groups representing certain viewpoints can pose the media if they try to report or endorse opinions that they do not favour. This pressure can take many forms – letters of complaint, boycotts, and even law cases.
5. Certain set views – that socialism, for example is bad and a market economy is good.

Task Three

Read through an edition of one of today's newspapers and try to work out which stories are being reported at first hand by the newspaper's journalists and which may have come to them indirectly, mediated probably by professional public relations experts or press officers. If a lot of the news is being 'sourced' in this way – does it matter? Are these articles critical of the information they receive or do they tend to report the stories uncritically? Compile a report examining the extent to which your chosen paper is dominated by the news agendas of commercial organisations desperate to get free advertising in the shape of mentions in articles.

Task Four

In his article about *Shattered Glass* in the *Observer* (18th April, 2004), the former *Guardian* editor Peter Preston suggests that the general public is far too busy being distracted by stories concerning minor celebrities and football stars to worry about journalists making up current affairs stories. Do you feel his point is a good one? Do you feel that the public's obsession with 'celebrity' is far more dangerous to a free press than a single maverick writer making up stories?

Task Five

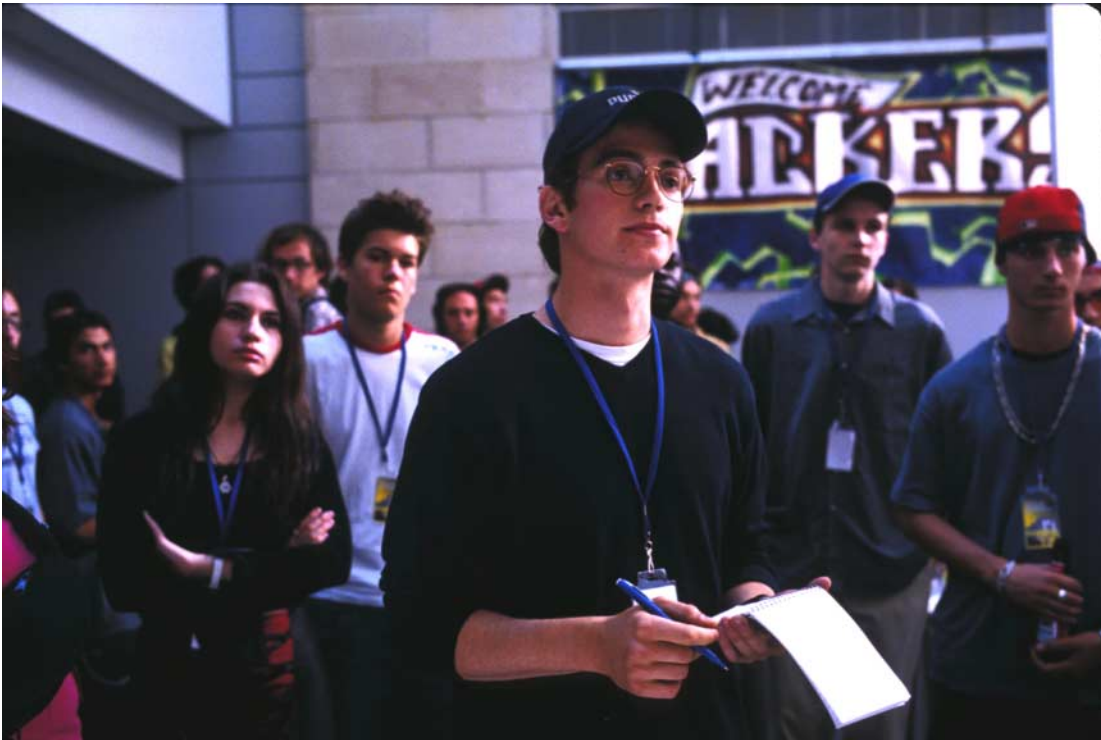
Investigate other stories involving journalists that have made up or distorted their stories.

Jack Kelley of USA Today www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,3604,1197352,00.html
observer.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,1174466,00.html

Jayson Blair

www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,3604,1158294,00.html
www.guardian.co.uk/weekend/story/0,3605,1161868,00.html
www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,3604,1165042,00.html

BE A JOURNALIST



In the film *Shattered Glass*, Stephen Glass makes a number of interesting observations about journalism, one of the most useful of which is the idea that to be a good reporter you need to be curious about people. He describes how he tries to get inside people's skin, understanding their concerns, fears and hopes and so really getting them to write the articles he authors. In one sense this is a subtle part of his overall deception. The idea that he is in some way merely a passive recorder of what people say to him is clearly nonsense. The job of shaping an article can be very demanding.

A good article needs a good subject. It also relies on the reporter asking interesting, relevant questions and being able to follow up people's questions with good secondary questions. It also requires drama, emotion and accuracy.

Your task is to try to write a short 500-word article about a subject you care about or a person you feel would make an interesting topic for a 'case study' feature.

The key thing at this stage is to write about something you are interested in or feel passionate about. Ideally, the story should include one or more of the following:

- It should be about something that will interest other people, your readers. It does not have to be something of national importance. Something local or even of concern only to people in your school would be fine.
- It should contain some drama or conflict – even if that means just including two different sides to an argument.
- It should contain direct quotations from people you have interviewed.
- It should have a clear structure. The first paragraph should answer the what, why, where, when and who questions. The main part of the story should develop the story and include evidence about the story (quotations, arguments for and against, descriptions that make it come alive). The last part of the story can round it off – perhaps with humour, or a call to action, or perhaps with a reference to something in the opening paragraph.

You are invited to read an article I wrote back in August 1999 for the Guardian about an initiative in Blackpool: www.guardian.co.uk/guardianeducation/story/0,3605,281799,00.html

Here are a few tips about how it was constructed:

The Opening:

Holidaymakers in Blackpool have no excuse to be beached without a book this summer, thanks to the launch of the UK's first roving seafront library.

For the next month two local students will be manoeuvring a multicoloured wheelbarrow between deckchairs and windshields, dishing out novels and reading advice to some of the resort's 16.4 million visitors.

These two paragraphs comprise 56 words. Identify all the information that these lines contain. Also notice the use of slightly playful language 'beached without a book' and 'roving' – this latter word having seafaring overtones. The reference to a 'wheelbarrow' and 'deckchairs and windshields' starts to paint a picture of the scene and the phrase 'dishing out' is designed to make the process sound fairly light-hearted.

The scheme has been launched through the town's library service as part of the National Year of Reading. It relies on specially donated books for all ages that beach borrowers can keep, return or swap. In the event of poor weather the students, Charlotte Bonney and Melanie Jones, will be offering story-telling sessions for children in a former lifeboat station.

Notice how this paragraph extends the information about the scheme, explains the source of its funding and starts to go into some of the technical issues arising from the problems posed by English summer weather. It also, crucially, introduces the two characters involved.

Both women have been selected for their combination of good humour, love of books and fitness. For twenty-three year old Charlotte Bonney this will not be the first time she has worked by the sea. As part of her zoology degree she spent a summer protecting the nests of marine turtles in Cyprus. 'More recently I have been studying chimpanzee mother and infant interactions. It will be interesting looking out for human equivalents this summer.'

Seventeen-year-old Melanie Jones is in the middle of A Level studies and is relying on her experience in customer services to get the reading message across. 'We'll be targeting the 'sitters', trying to persuade people to put down their newspapers and get into a book.'

I was fortunate to find myself interviewing two intelligent and lively people for this piece. That said, some of the best bits that I was able to include arose from questions I asked. Can you think of the questions that would have needed to be asked to elicit the details I included? Why was the 'chimpanzee' story worth including and why was it great that Melanie Jones had invented a phrase categorising one of the main groups of people she hoped to find on the beach that summer?

Blackpool's own reader in residence, Chuck Bennett, says the scheme shows that libraries are about 'enrichment - connecting people to books. Holiday reading isn't just a fling. Books are not just for summer but also for life. If the Blackpool idea is a success then this could be the start of beach libraries at resorts across the country.

This paragraph introduces a secondary spokesperson. He is there to lend the piece a bit more seriousness and also to explain the official side of things, including the philosophy that surrounds it. His quotation is also important because it suggests the scheme might become a national phenomenon – an important dimension in any article destined for a national newspaper.

One problem Charlotte and Melanie anticipate is that they might run out of books. 'And if anyone looks too absorbed by their reading, we have a list of tide times to ensure they don't get marooned.'

This is the final paragraph and it does a good job, I feel, of rounding off the piece. It introduces a surreal image of people getting so absorbed in their reading that they ignore the rising water lapping at their feet. This is a light-hearted summer article and needed this light ending. It also needed to end with the two beach librarians rather than the council spokesperson. It is also good to conclude, if you can, with a sharp quote – it's a bit like having the last word in an argument.

Notes

Other viewing:

Journalists feature in a lot of films. If you can, try to study one or more of these and write an essay about the screen representation of reporters:

Ace In A Hole
All the President's Men
Broadcast News
The China Syndrome
Citizen Kane
His Girl Friday
It Happened One Night
The Mean Season
Meet John Doe
Network
The Year of Living Dangerously
Under Fire
Veronica Guerin

Additional Reading

All the President's Men – Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward (1974)
New Journalism – edited by Tom Woolf (1973)
The Fabulist – Stephen Glass (2003)
Manufacturing Consent - Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (1994)

Websites relating to Shattered Glass

www.imdb.com/title/tt0323944/photogallery

www.apple.com/trailers/lions_gate/shattered_glass.html

www.imdb.com/title/tt0323944/externalreviews

www.shatteredglassthemovie.co.uk

Washington Post article about journalists in films

www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/local/longterm/tours/newseum/journfilms1.htm

Written by Jerome Monahan
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