The New York Times Magazine

https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/26/magazine/the-fact-checker-versus-the-fabulist.html

RIFF

The Fact-Checker Versus the Fabulist

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

Feb. 21, 2012

“On the same day in Las Vegas when 16-year-old Levi Presley jumped from the observation deck of the 1,149-foot-high tower of the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino, lap dancing was temporarily banned by the city in 34 licensed strip clubs in Vegas, archaeologists unearthed parts of the world’s oldest bottle of Tabasco-brand sauce from underneath a bar called Buckets of Blood and a woman from Mississippi beat a chicken named Ginger in a 35-minute-long game of tic-tac-toe.”

So begins John D’Agata’s “What Happens There,” a poetic tour of turn-of-the-millennium Vegas as desperate boomtown. Or at least, that’s how the essay began until it got to The Believer magazine’s fact-checking stage.

“Hi, John. I’m Jim Fingal. I’m the intern who’s been assigned to fact-check your article about Las Vegas, and I’ve discovered a small discrepancy between the number of strip clubs you’re claiming there are in Las Vegas and the number that’s given in your supporting documents.” To which D’Agata responded: “Hi, Jim. I think maybe there’s some sort of miscommunication, because the ‘article,’ as you call it, is fine. It shouldn’t need a fact-checker; at least that was my understanding with the editor I’ve been working with. I have taken some liberties in the essay here and there, but none of them are harmful.”

Thus begins the alternately absorbing and infuriating exercise that is the book “The Lifespan of a Fact,” a Talmudically arranged account of the conflict between Jim Fingal, zealous checker, and John D’Agata, nonfiction fabulist, which began in 2005 and resulted in this collaboration. D’Agata’s original paragraphs appear in chunks at the center of the pages, and their exchanges on the disputed facts in

question appear in the marginal running text. D'Agata starts with the casual assurance that the article doesn't need to be fact-checked, but the process is standard at most magazines, and it remains a fundamental, if hidden, support for their credibility. And besides, the only reason the article ended up at The Believer in the first place was that Harper's had already killed it — on the recommendation of its own fact-checker.

"The Lifespan of a Fact" is the record of Fingal's increasingly exasperated attempt to hold D'Agata to a common-sensical standard of accuracy and D'Agata's increasingly defensive attempt to make Fingal feel primitive for believing in something so superannuated. Take, for example, the first sentence. Fingal confirms Presley's age and name. He confirms the height and the name of the Stratosphere. He cannot confirm the number of strip clubs. The hot-sauce excavation actually occurred 15 days before Presley's suicide, underneath a bar called the Boston Saloon. It is close to a bar called the Bucket of Blood Saloon, but neither is anywhere near Vegas. The chicken-lady tic-tac-toe happened a month after the jump.

D'Agata's response to these discrepancies, as Fingal kindly calls them at first, is basically: Who cares? It sounds better to say that all these events happened on the same day than it would to hobble the opener with lumpy qualifiers. "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." Over the next 100 or so pages — the fact-checking comes to at least five times the length of the piece itself — Fingal questions not just a few dates but also the existence of entire conversations, etymologies, histories. By the end, they're reduced to exchanges like this:

Jim: "I, the hypothetical reader, am putting my trust in you to give me the straight dope, or at least to make some effort to warn me whenever you're saying something that is patently untrue, even if it's untrue for 'artistic reasons.' I mean, what exactly gives you the authority to introduce half-baked legend as fact and sidestep questions of facticity?"

John: “It’s called art, dodobrain.” (He doesn’t actually say “dodobrain”; I had to alter the quote, in keeping with The Times’s standards of crude language thereby violating another Times rule that quotations cannot be changed. But why should D’Agata mind?)

D’Agata proposes that we give up the idea that there is a genre called “nonfiction” and instead return to the blurrier, artier time (from Herodotus until around 1940) when we were content with the term “essay” — “an attempt, a trial, an experiment.” From his rostrum as an influential professor in the nonfiction program at the University of Iowa, D’Agata has often argued that we read such essays for the poetry of “experience” rather than for mere “accuracy.” This rhetoric has gained him a cult following among young writers who write what is typically if inadequately called “nonfiction.” If it were possible to stop using the term “nonfiction” and instead to talk about “essays,” what might that mean for writers and readers?

D’Agata thinks this question is interesting in the abstract, but the relevant definitions are, in the end, inescapably sociological. We compliment something by calling it “nonfiction” if it accords with the standards set out by an institution that has, over time, published credible reports. D’Agata is well aware of this and is careful not to cross any lines that would make him look silly; he’s never, for example, going to be caught claiming that Jayson Blair deserved our admiration because he was actually writing poetry. But he does defend James Frey, sort of, because even though he thinks Frey is a bad writer, he did fulfill his one obligation to his readers: “to give them a good experience.” Where, then, do we draw the line between irresponsibility and poetic license? The only way to cash out this third-way argument is to ascribe to him the wish for a new kind of institution that would generate expectations consistent with a new kind of work that would be, as he likes to say, “consequential” as art. Many writers already qualify within existing institutions, but it could be interesting to make a claim for the necessity of a third way if D’Agata could name some specific improvements.

What his argument misses, or ignores, is the fact that much of what makes a piece of writing feel “consequential” as art has to do with how it meets its readers’ expectations. D’Agata wants us to judge a piece of writing based on only its artistic merits, but in the case of nonfiction, those merits have a relationship to the world. Fictional authority is a matter of suspension of disbelief: novels must convince us that the feelings of fake people matter. But nonfiction is innocent until proved guilty. We begin with that natural sympathy we have for something we might well have experienced ourselves, so our guard is down. Nonfiction’s authority thus derives from the simultaneously rigorous (they did the legwork) and artful (they selected the right details) arrangement of impressions into a narrative that makes surprising sense.

So if the signal experience of fiction is caring about nonpeople, and that of “straight” nonfiction is one of the revelatory arrangement of verifiable details, what experience is D’Agata — with his winky manipulations — offering us? Sometimes he suggests that what he practices is the art of the “lyric essay,” a term he popularized among nonfiction M.F.A. students, which places his work in a tradition extending from Seneca and Cicero through Montaigne, all of whom got along fine without fact-checkers. Other times, he writes that he has taken up this cause because “nonfiction has been struggling to distinguish itself as art for decades in our culture,” but to the fans of sophisticated literary journalism, this is absurd. Finally he makes a condescending argument about how salutary it would be for readers to work harder to figure out for themselves what’s true and what’s invented.

This last argument suggests that we need a hybrid form, because it helps wean us from the naïve belief that just because something is labeled “nonfiction,” it represents the world as it is. But the fantasy of nonfiction isn’t just one of representational truth — it’s also one of reproducibility. We want to believe that given the same opportunities, we might have come up with the same interpretation of events. It’s appealing to think that the shared, discoverable details of the world

are enough, a comfort to believe that having an experience is the same thing as being able to narrate it. This, I think, is why Frey's readers felt so betrayed: had those events in that order happened to us, we might've written our own books.

A good example is a recent New Yorker article by Alec Wilkinson about the most successful Guinness record-holders. You have to do a lot of work to make a reader care that a fictional character has eaten nine fictitious tons of metal. You have to do practically no work at all to make a reader care about a man who calls himself Monsieur Mangetout, who attestably did. You just need reliable people to vouch for it. Fingal, in checking D'Agata, went to vouch for it himself: he used his own vacation to Vegas to fanatically retrace D'Agata's steps. Acting on behalf of all the invisible foot soldiers of institutional accountability, he tried to literalize the fantasy that experience can be reproduced.

What's ultimately so weird, though, is how superfluous D'Agata's embroidery seems. The factual stakes are almost hysterically low: most of the "discrepancies" are trivial and were reconciled for publication in The Believer. D'Agata, for example, describes the series of retail outlets that Levi Presley would have walked by en route to the observation-deck elevator. Fingal retraces the possible steps, finding that D'Agata has cherry-picked the most lurid-sounding names from all possible Stratospheric paths. These conflicts could have been avoided by early diplomacy. But D'Agata's histrionics ensured silly rigor.

It's clear enough why he wanted this codex published: the original essay is excellent, much better than The Believer's version. But that's neither the facts' fault nor the genre's; it's John D'Agata's. And it still doesn't explain why he was such a fight-spoiling dodobrain from the beginning. I, like presumably many people, am naturally sympathetic to a soft version of his arguments. There are modes of writing that get along fine in a pale gray. We all know raconteurs whose embellishments and bluffs don't rankle. But this understanding develops over time; nobody's entitled to it. And we're much quicker to grant humorists latitude than ruminators on teen suicide.

The ultimate problem then is that D'Agata doesn't actually want new institutions. His hybrids have gotten along fine in The Gettysburg Review. The fact that his liberties have made it hard for him to publish for a wide audience is an institutional cost he has chosen to bear. If he doesn't want to deal with Fingals, he might try to publish his stuff as fiction, which clearly meets his definition for art. But just trying to sneak and bully his work into magazines is a disingenuous strategy; it borrows the prestige of a credibility he forsakes. It's as if he wants to invent his metal and eat it too.

A version of this article appears in print on , Page 45 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: 'I Have Taken Some Liberties'