



How he got away with it: *Der Spiegel* uncovers its own scandal.

## Telling it like it is – sort of

The fabrications of a promising young reporter have left the German weekly *Der Spiegel* in dire straits, with its much-lauded fact-checking department being called to account

BY THOMAS SCHULER

Journalist Juan Moreno never actually met Claas Relotius. They spoke on the phone only once, and Moreno believes this is one of the reasons he was able to eventually expose Relotius' many journalistic fabrications. Everyone else at the *Der Spiegel* seems to have fallen for the charms of the award-winning Relotius, a four-time recipient of the prestigious German Reporter Prize. Relotius had been awarded several other prominent prizes, even though the 33-year-old had worked as an intern and freelancer until only a few years ago.

The whole thing started a couple of years ago when Moreno read a Relotius' story on what was supposedly the first tax consultant in Cuba, a man who advised shoe shiners. Could that be? Moreno kept his doubts to himself. Soon thereafter, *Der Spiegel* asked him to co-author an article with Relotius about groups of Central American refugees approaching the United States. He ended up researching the piece from the perspective of the refugees, while Relotius took the position of an Arizona-based vigilante border militia seeking to keep out the intruders.

When Moreno expressed doubts about Relotius' work to his superiors, he was not taken seriously and told to back off. Moreno then looked into the matter in secret and discovered that Relotius had never met his protagonists and had invented parts of their biographies. Moreno then examined earlier texts and found more fabrications. When Relotius was confronted with this evidence, he simply forged further evidence to prove his story.

*Der Spiegel* broke the story last December and has since been busy explaining which aspects of the 60 articles Relotius wrote over the course of seven years are fictional. Similar fabrications were found at other newspapers and magazines Relotius wrote for. *Der Spiegel* has consistently boasted that its rigorous fact-checking process makes it particularly credible, which makes it all the more unsettling to see how easily Relotius was able to hoodwink the magazine's editorial staff – not to mention the entire industry.

The scandal leaves a large stain on the reputation of *Der Spiegel*, a lead-

ing force in German journalism since 1947. The magazine held a position in Europe comparable to that of *The New York Times* in the US. Today, at a time when established media outlets fear for their credibility, Relotius' lies provide critics with a welcome opportunity to question the leading role of mainstream media.

Two years ago, *Der Spiegel* celebrated itself as a pillar of democracy, reminding the public that it had emerged stronger from its greatest crisis back in 1962, when founder Rudolf Augstein was imprisoned on treason charges and many Germans took to the streets to protest for his release. At that time, the magazine's circulation skyrocketed, and Augstein's "Telling it like it is" became its famous mission statement. A plaque with that phrase still hangs in the lobby of the magazine's Hamburg offices. But does the aphorism still ring true?

Why didn't Relotius' lies attract attention before? How is it possible that the jury of the Reporter Prize actually praised his transparent approach to the job? Those same jury members now own up to a profound sense of shame yet point out that it was *Der Spiegel's* job to check the facts.

A Relotius report from Fergus Falls, Minnesota, elucidating Donald Trump's election victory makes the much-praised *Der Spiegel* in-house fact-checking look particularly bad: Again, how is it possible that not one of the more than 60 fact-checkers noticed that the distances, landscape descriptions and percentage of Trump voters were incorrect? They failed to notice that Relotius had no evidence for many of his claims, including that there was a sign at the entrance to town banning Mexicans from entering.

Relotius later told his colleagues that his fabrications were the result of the pressure he felt to repeatedly deliver top-notch reports, even though *Der Spiegel* gave him several weeks to do research in Fergus Falls. In the time since the scandal broke, a colleague traveled back to the site to apologize to the people there. Hans Leyendecker, himself once a reporter for *Der Spiegel* and now a respected writer for the Munich-based *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, called journalists like Relotius "damn privileged. [...] In my opinion, someone like Relotius has no idea what pressure even means."

US Ambassador Richard Grenell expressed that "we are concerned these narratives are pushed by Spiegel's senior leadership and that reporters are responding to what the leadership wants." In other words, he sees the forgeries as not the unpleasant act of one individual, but "fake news" ordered from above. The ambassador insisted that "a thorough investigation be conducted by an outside, independent organization to determine exactly how Spiegel violated journalistic standards and how it can reform internal processes."

This demand for external clarification is justified, but it would be taken more seriously if it weren't coming from a diplomat looking to prevent critical reporting of his president. In response to Grenell, *Der Spiegel* noted that criticism of the president did not constitute anti-Americanism, but rather criticism of his policies.

Steffen Klusmann, who took over as editor-in-chief of the magazine in January, said the scandal "has shaken us all to the core. We have high standards when it comes to the credibility of the *Der Spiegel* brand. We have to get our credibility back." Klusmann added that he and his colleagues are going to have "work through this in such a way that leaves as little room for skepticism as possible." *Der Spiegel* admitted: "The system failed." But is this enough to explain what happened? Why did the system fail? How can it be improved?

In response to criticism that *Der Spiegel* covered its own fabrication scandal in the style of an exciting news item, Klusmann said: "This approach is entirely appropriate when exposing a reporter who falsifies stories," adding: "We're not looking to win the next prize for it."

And what about Relotius? He returned his prizes and recently called into a radio program, acting as if he wanted to explain himself to the public. But when one of his former bosses joined the live interview, he hung up. The boss then pointed out that the caller had not, in fact, been Relotius. Apparently, a fake journalist had hoped to impersonate the real fake journalist.

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## In the name of freedom

Truth and enlightenment beyond the *Der Spiegel* case: Doing more to protect the work of journalists worldwide

BY DETLEF PRINZ

The year 2018 has marked a turning point in several respects. We Germans in particular must be quick to bid farewell to cherished certainties and the thorough dependability of our multilateral system of order. This much we know: achieving new safeguards and reinforced stability on the domestic and international front demands we restore our resolve to assert our model of a liberal, democratic and open society and thereby bolster Western democracies. A better world will not come on its own. We must be determined to advocate for such a world – together.

In this era of upheaval and disruption, our field, the media industry, is breeding its own brand of distress, as evidenced by two things that may seem at first glance to have little to do with one another – the Relotius *Der Spiegel* affair and the 2018 results of the Press Freedom Index – but in which truth and enlightenment clearly play a role. The first tells the story of a young, highly decorated journalist who strays from the principled world of investigative reporting and into the realm of sensationalism. The full impact this will have on the reputation of Germany's most authoritative news outlet – *Der Spiegel* – and on the credibility of our quality journalism more broadly has yet to be felt. The second bears the tragic news that in the past year, more than 80 journalists were killed, 60 were abducted and 348 have been imprisoned, while three remain unaccounted for. All of these individuals are colleagues whose search for the truth led them to countries without a democratic constitution comparable to the one we enjoy.

The Relotius affair has become a *Der Spiegel* affair – and not only because it has exposed the failure of perhaps all of the Hamburg weekly's quality controls. The affair has also shown how the self-declared "assault gun of democracy" is becoming a reporting factory of aesthetic-driven stories no longer anchored in the publishing house's promotional pledge. For me personally, this case is simply mind-boggling. Just the other day, I saw a customer in a magazine shop with a slender shopping bag covered in repetitions of the slogan "DER SPIEGEL – No fear of the truth." A number of potential aphorisms sprang to my mind that we might mockingly suggest as replacements, were the

matter not so dire: "No shying away from consequences," "No hesitating when questioned," "No wavering in the face of change," "No self-censorship," and so on. We wait with bated breath to see how the magazine might extract itself from this scandal. The expeditious shredding and recycling of all their shopping bags may be the smallest problem facing the boss at *Der Spiegel*.

A free, democratically minded and independent media's constitutive role in the liberal, democratic and open societies of the West has been anchored in Germany's constitution – or Basic Law – for nearly 70 years. It is thus all the more worrying that across the globe, tens of thousands of women and men – whether salaried or freelance journalists, citizen journalists or bloggers – are at constant risk of persecution, imprisonment, abduction, abuse and murder. Germany's Basic Law guarantees the absence of such perils, providing for a state of affairs that we have the luxury of taking for granted. Yet the fact that journalists in member states of the European Union must live in fear for their lives is intolerable. The murders of the Maltese journalist Daphne Galizia in 2017 and the Slovak journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018 are evidence of how high the price has become for seeking the truth, even in parts of Europe.

In today's world of global "fake news," internet-aided disinformation campaigns, hate-mail mobbing and cyber trolls, the call by Reporters Without Borders for a UN special representative for the safety of journalists, a demand echoed by the German Bundestag in June 2017, marks a first step in crystallizing the importance of the international community's protection of free and independent journalism.

Yet this alone will not suffice. The EU and its institutions must also take decisive, visible steps to protect private and public-service media and the work of journalists while guaranteeing their independence and, indeed, their social and physical security in all EU member states. For our many imprisoned colleagues across the globe, our hashtag of past years continues for 2019: #FreeThemAll! We will not relent until this hashtag ceases to apply.

Detlef Prinz is publisher of *The German Times*.

### THOSE WE MOURN FROM 2018

AFGHANISTAN: April 25 **Abdul Manan Arghand**, Journalist | April 30 **Yar Mohammad Tokhi**, Cameraman | April 30 **Ghazi Rasooli**, Cameraman | April 30 **Abdullah Hananzai**, Journalist | April 30 **Sabawoon Kakar**, Journalist | April 30 **Maharram Durrani** | April 30 **Nowroz Ali Rajabi**, Journalist | April 30 **Shah Marai**, Journalist | April 30 **Saleem Talash**, Journalist | April 30 **Ali Saleemi**, Journalist | April 30 **Shah Ahmad**, Journalist | July 22 **Akhtar Mohammad**, Media Assistant | Sept. 5 **Samim Faramarz**, Journalist | Sept. 5 **Ramiz Ahmadi**, Journalist | Oct. 18 **Mohammad Salim Anghar**, Journalist | Dec. 4 **Kandehar**, Media Assistant | BANGLADESH: June 11 **Shahzahan Bachchu**, Local Journalist | BRAZIL: Jan. 16 **Ueliton Bayer Brizon**, Journalist | Jan. 17 **Jefferson Puraza Lopes**, Journalist | June 21 **Jairo Sousa**, Journalist | Aug. 16 **Marlon de Carvalho Araújo**, Journalist | CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: July 30 **Orkhan Dzhemal**, Journalist | July 30 **Kirill Radchenko**, Cameraman | July 30 **Aleksandr Rastorgujev**, Documentary Filmmaker | COLOMBIA: April 12 **Juan Javier Ortega Reyes**, Journalist | April 12 **Paúl Rivas Bravo**, Photographer | April 30 **Efraín Segarra**, Media Assistant | INDIA: March 25 **Vijay Singh**, Journalist | March 25 **Navin Nischal**, Journalist | March 26 **Sandeep Sharma**, Journalist | June 15 **Shujaat Bukhari**, Journalist | Oct. 30 **Chandan Tiwari**, Journalist | Oct. 30 **Achyutananda Sahu**, Journalist | INDONESIA: June 10 **Muhammad Yusuf**, Journalist | MEXICO: Jan. 13 **Carlos Domínguez Rodríguez**, Journalist | Feb. 5 **Leslie Ann Pamela Montenegro del Real**, Journalist | March 21 **Leobardo Vázquez Atzin**, Journalist | May 15 **Juan Carlos Huerta**, Journalist | May 29 **Héctor González Antonio**, Journalist | June 29 **José Guadalupe Chan Dzib**, Journalist | July 24 **Rubén Pat Cauch**, Journalist | Aug. 5 **Rodolfo García González**, Blogger | Sept. 21 **Mario Leonel Gómez Sánchez**, Journalist | NICARAGUA: April 21 **Ángel Eduardo Gahona**, Journalist | PAKISTAN: March 27 **Zeeshan Ashraf Butt**, Journalist | Aug. 23 **Abid Hussain**, Journalist | Oct. 16 **Shahil Khan**, Journalist | PALESTINE: April 7 **Yaser Murtaja**, Journalist | April 25 **Ahmed Abu Hussein**, Journalist | PHILIPPINES: May 1 **Edmund Sestoso**, Journalist | June 7 **Dennis Denora**, Journalist | July 20 **Joey Llana**, Journalist | SAUDIA ARABIA: Oct. 2 **Jamal Khashoggi**, Journalist | SLOVAKIA: Feb. 25 **Ján Kuciak**, Journalist | SOMALIA: July 26 **Abdirizak Kasim Iman**, Journalist | Sep. 18 **Abdirizak Said Osman**, Journalist | SYRIA: Feb. 6 **Fouad Mohammed al Hussein**, Blogger | Feb. 18 **Khaled Jamal Hamo**, Sound Engineer | Feb. 20 **Abdul Rahman Ismael Yassin**, Freelance Journalist | March 12 **Bashar al-Attar**, Photographer | March 14 **Ahmad Hamdan**, Blogger | March 22 **Sohaib Ayoun**, Freelance Journalist | May 30 **Moammar Bakkor**, Blogger | July 16 **Mustafa Salamah**, Journalist | Aug. 10 **Ahmed Azize**, Blogger, Nov. 23 **Raed Fares**, Blogger | Nov. 23 **Hamoud al-Jnaid**, Blogger | USA: May 28 **Michael McCormick**, Journalist | May 28 **Aaron Smeltzer**, Photographer | June 28 **Gerald Fischman**, Journalist | June 28 **Rob Haaesen**, Journalist | June 28 **John McNamara**, Journalist | June 28 **Wendi Winters**, Journalist | YEMEN: Jan. 22 **Mohammad al-Qadasi**, Journalist | Jan. 27 **Oussama Salem Al-Maqtari**, Blogger | April 13 **Abdullah al-Qadry**, Journalist | May 17 **Ali Abu al-Haya**, Blogger | June 2 **Anwar al-Rakan**, Journalist | Aug. 1 **Issa al-Nuaimi**, Journalist | Aug. 30 **Ahmed al-Hamzi**, Journalist | Sept. 20 **Omar Ezzi Mohammad**, Media Assistant.

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