

Spiegel's shame over false stories of Claas Relotius

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Claas Relotius, the award-winning reporter, invented people and quotes EPA

The chain of events that led to the humbling of one of the stars of German journalism and the biggest scandal in the 70-year history of Der Spiegel, the country's most venerable news magazine, began last month in a nondescript town on the Arizona side of the US-Mexico border.

Claas Relotius, 33, a high-flyer whose reporting from across the world had won him a string of awards in Germany and beyond, had been sent to report on the activities of a vigilante group that targeted migrants.

Usually Relotius worked alone, but this time he had been paired with a fellow reporter, Juan Moreno, who would cover the story from the Mexican side. It had been decided that Moreno, 46, who had reported for the magazine from across the world since 2007, would send the material he gathered to Relotius, who would combine it with his own reporting and then send the article back to their editors in Hamburg.

The result was the kind of colourful and highly readable account with which Relotius had built his reputation during the seven years he had written for the magazine. Moreno, however, thought it was just a little too brilliant and, after discreet complaints to his bosses were met with disbelief — and with veiled threats his own job might be on the line — he took the extraordinary step of travelling back to Arizona at his own expense to retrace his colleague's steps. He found two sources quoted extensively by Relotius in the article, both of whom denied having met him.

Confronted with the evidence by one of his bosses, Ozlem Gezer, deputy head of the Gesellschaft (society) section, 10 days ago, Relotius came clean. He admitted making up large chunks not only of the Arizona story but also of many of the other 55 pieces he had written for Der Spiegel — including one about an imaginary “Mexicans keep out” sign outside Fergus Falls, a Minnesota town that voted for Trump, another about a Yemeni prisoner in Guantanamo, and an award-winning piece about a Syrian boy convinced he had contributed to the country’s civil war through a piece of graffiti he had daubed onto a wall.

“It has now become clear,” Spiegel wrote as part of its self-excoriating 23-page account of the saga that it published this weekend, that Relotius “is neither a reporter nor a journalist. Rather, he produces beautifully narrated fiction.

“Truth and lies are mixed together in his articles and some, at least according to him, were even cleanly reported and free of fabrication. Others, he admits, were embellished with fudged quotes and other made-up facts. Still others were entirely fabricated.”

Relotius’s unmasking last week — and immediate departure from Der Spiegel — spelt the end of a glittering career. During his confession, the magazine said, he had claimed “it wasn’t about the next big thing. It was the fear of failure. . . and the pressure not to fail grew as I become more successful.”

In a further twist this weekend, Der Spiegel alleged the writer had emailed readers from a private account encouraging them to send money to help orphaned children in Turkey — which then ended up in Relotius’s private account.

Comparisons have been drawn with the case of Jayson Blair, a then 27-year-old reporter with Time magazine, who resigned in 2003 over claims he had plagiarised and made up stories, and with Janet Cooke, a reporter for The Washington Post who won a Pulitzer prize in 1981 for an article later found to be fabricated.

The damage, from what has inevitably been dubbed Spiegelgate, goes much further, however, in an era when the so-called mainstream media finds itself under fire, especially from the populist right. For Der Spiegel, which has a print circulation of more than 800,000 a week and has made its reputation with its hard-hitting investigations, it is embarrassing to have to investigate one of its own.

The magazine reported last week with commendable speed and thoroughness on Relotius’s fabrications. But this has not prevented it from being attacked by fellow German newspapers and magazines — for some of which Relotius had also written during his career — who have demanded to know how so many falsehoods could have found their way through the army of fact checkers meant to go through every piece it publishes.

The affair is also a gift to its critics, especially those in the anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, who have been at the receiving end of some of the left-leaning magazine’s most critical reporting. “Der Spiegel, the self-declared standard bearer that loves to bad mouth Trump, AfD and others, delivered fake news for years,” Götz Frömming, an AfD member of parliament, wrote on Twitter.

This weekend Richard Grenell, the US ambassador to Berlin, also weighed in, demanding the magazine hold an independent inquiry. Grenell is a controversial figure in Germany after having told America’s right-wing Breitbart news website in June of his desire to “empower other conservatives throughout Europe”.

Grenell said reports of Relotius's fabrications were "troubling to the US embassy, particularly because "several of these fake stories focused on US policies and certain segments of the American people". He later tweeted a collage of 20 of the magazine's past covers on US themes, adding: "Der Spiegel says they don't have any anti-American bias. But the facts tell a different story."

Dirk Kurbjuweit, one of Spiegel's deputy editors-in-chief, apologised to all Americans "who have been insulted and denigrated by these reports" but rejected Grenell's accusations of anti-US bias. "If we criticise the American president, it is not anti-Americanism, but criticism of the policy of the man in the White House."

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