

Germany's Der Spiegel spreads fake news

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The German news magazine *Der Spiegel* has published numerous reports in recent years, which were entirely fictitious. The editors of Germany's most widely-read weekly news magazine were forced to make this disclosure last week.

According to the latest issue of the magazine, one of its writers, Claas Relotius, has "manipulated his own stories to a large extent" and told "beautifully made fairy tales." "Truth and lies were mixed together in his texts." Some of his stories were "complete inventions, and others tartered up in part with doctored quotes and other types of factual distortion."

Der Spiegel, according to its own admission, has published 55 original texts by Relotius, "many of which are wholly or partially invented, falsified, fake." Born in 1985, the journalist had been working for *Der Spiegel* for seven years, the last one-and-a-half years as a full-time editor. He has also written articles for numerous other German publications, including *Cicero*, *taz*, *Die Welt*, *SZ-Magazin*, *Weltwoche*, *ZEIT online*, *ZEIT Wissen*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung am Sonntag*.

The 33-year-old Relotius was regarded as a star journalist and received numerous prizes for his reports, including the Peter Scholl-Latour Prize and Konrad-Duden, Kindernothilfe, Catholic and Coburg Media Prizes. CNN named him "Journalist of the Year." He also received the Reemtsma Liberty Award, the European Press Prize and was on the Forbes list of "30 under 30--Europe: Media."

Der Spiegel has responded to the revelation that it is responsible for the distribution of massive amounts of fake news with a mixture of admission of guilt, self-pity and attempts to shift the blame. The editorial staff presents itself as the innocent victim of an impostor and solemnly promises to wipe its slate clean.

Der Spiegel's latest edition dedicates 24 pages and a cover photo to the Relotius affair. In it, the editorial board declares: "This house is shocked. The worst that could happen to an editorial team has happened to us. We're going to turn every stone upside down and have created a commission that will thoroughly check the Relotius case, as

well as anything else that might come up."

In fact, the fake reports of Relotius were not hard to uncover. Another *Spiegel* employee, Juan Moreno, conducted a thorough research effort that exposed Relotius' lies, but when he warned *Spiegel* editors, he met with a wall of rejection.

"In the dispute surrounding Relotius, Moreno risked his own job, researching his colleague on his own time, desperate, and all at his own expense," *Spiegel* editor-in-chief Ullrich Fichtner admits. "For three or four weeks, Moreno went through hell, because colleagues and supervisors in Hamburg did not initially believe his allegations."

Moreno had his suspicions long before Relotius started working for *Der Spiegel*. As he reports in the new edition, he had read an article by Relotius about "the supposedly first tax adviser in Socialist Cuba," which claimed that shoe shiners were lining up to seek his advice. "So, once again, shoe shiners have tax problems, and this is in Cuba!", Moreno describes his reaction and concludes: "Anyone reading a Claas Relotius text today will wonder how stupid *Der Spiegel* and all the prize juries must have been to believe such nonsense."

Four years ago the Swiss magazine *NZZ folio* had already terminated its collaboration with Relotius, after bizarre contradictions surfaced in a report he wrote about Finland.

One can only conclude from this that *Der Spiegel*, the other newspapers and the prize juries published and rewarded Relotius' forgeries because he was writing what they wanted to hear. His lies fit into their official narrative, reinforcing the propaganda of the ruling elites.

Josef Joffe, longtime co-editor of *Die Zeit* and notorious for his own vile propaganda articles, openly admits this in a post for *Politico*. He writes: "In Relotius' case, another, a more insidious dynamic may have been at work—the unarticulated expectations of editors as they send off their reporters, and their anticipation the reported piece that comes back will confirm what they already know to be true."

A glance at some of Relotius' reports, which according to *Der Spiegel* are based on falsifications, confirm this.

Factually they are as fantastic as Grimm's fairy tales, but fit in well with official foreign policy and militarist propaganda.

In February 2017, *Der Spiegel* published "Lion cubs," a reportage by Relotius on two brothers aged 12 and 13, who were kidnapped, tortured, indoctrinated and then sent to Kirkuk with explosive vests by the Islamic State. Although the text is, according to *Der Spiegel*, "a particularly repellent example of Relotius' fakes," it goes on to praise the article even now.

"In such texts, the present is reduced to a readable format, the broad sweep of contemporary history is tangible and suddenly the big picture is understandable from a human perspective," writes editor-in-chief Ullrich Fichtner. "Anyone with access to such material as a reporter, and who has a talent for dramaturgy, can spin gold out of it like in the fairy tale. Relotius has the talent. He invents the material. He presented one of the best stories of the past few years, a masterpiece." He "blinded everyone. Chief editors, department heads, archivist, colleagues, journalism students and friends. Various juries consisting of bishops and entrepreneurs, human rights activists and media professionals, politicians and patrons were ecstatic about his texts, and rightly so: they were frequently terrific and beautiful."

If *Der Spiegel* were honest, it would have to admit that the assorted bishops and entrepreneurs, human rights activists, media professionals, politicians and patrons were "ecstatic" about Relotius' articles because they fit in seamlessly with the official war propaganda that seeks to defend imperialist military interventions and crimes in Iraq and Syria under the mantle of the struggle for democracy and human rights.

Relotius' report is not only false on an empirical level because he freely invented events, individuals, and dialogues, he also falsified the context, background and causes of the catastrophe in the Middle East that has driven millions of people either to their deaths or in flight from their homelands.

Relotius remains an amateur in this regard. His exposure is so embarrassing for *Der Spiegel* and the rest of the media because he was working with crude falsifications while they do the same but somewhat more subtly. At a time when the left-wing and the socialist press is regularly denounced as fake news and censored on the internet, the *Spiegel* scandal has led many people to realise that they are being deceived, manipulated and duped by the mainstream media.

Another of many examples of how Relotius reinforced officially propagated prejudices was his reportage "In a Small Town," published by *Der Spiegel* in March 2017. He portrayed the inhabitants of Fergus Falls in Minnesota, who in their majority voted for Donald Trump, as primitive

country bumpkins. The story was subsequently thoroughly checked by two residents of the town over a period of one-and-a-half years and exposed as a work of complete fiction. For their part, the editors at *Der Spiegel* had no problem with the article.

Once again, the forgery suitably served official propaganda. The complex reality—in particular, the anti-working class and militaristic policies of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, which made Trump's electoral victory possible—is left out. Instead, Trump's voters are universally portrayed as a backward, reactionary mass.

It is no coincidence that Relotius was awarded a journalistic post at *Der Spiegel*. The news magazine has repeatedly published aggressive campaigns in the interest of German imperialism, disguised as reports. In February 2014, Dirk Kurbjuweit, now deputy editor at the magazine, published the article "Culpability Question Divides Historians Today," aimed at playing down the crimes committed by German imperialism during the First and Second World Wars in order to support the revival of German militarism.

Later, *Der Spiegel* participated in the campaign against the Trotskyist youth organization, the IYSSE, which had criticised this article—and in particular the statement by historian Jörg Baberowski: "Hitler was not vicious." In its university edition and on *Spiegel Online*, Sebastian Kempkens fiercely denounced the IYSSE without even seeking to substantiate his allegations. "Gutter journalism in the service of German imperialism," we commented at the time.

In July 2014, *Der Spiegel* appeared with a front cover fuelling the campaign for war against Russia. In huge print it demanded "Stop Putin Now!" surrounded by a gallery of private photos showing the victims of flight MH 17 shot down over Ukraine. Up to today there is no conclusive evidence to indicate that Russia was responsible for shooting down the plane.

Based on its record and the latest revelations, the magazine's claim that it had been deceived by Relotius and has remained committed to the truth and to *Der Spiegel*'s journalistic ideal "Say what is" lies in tatters.



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