

Der Spiegel's counterfeit journalism and the campaign against “fake news”

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The exposure of journalistic fraud at the German news weekly *Der Spiegel* has lifted the lid on the manipulation of public opinion by the so-called “authoritative” media. While Facebook, Google, Twitter and other social media systematically censor unwelcome posts, the supposedly “reliable” and “objective” reporting by the mainstream media proves to be propaganda produced in cooperation with the state to promote the interests of the ruling class. In the name of combatting “fake news,” freedom of the press and freedom of opinion are being gutted.

Last week, the editors of *Der Spiegel*, the highest-circulation German news magazine, admitted that they had published 55 articles by the journalist Claas Relotius that were “completely or partially invented, falsified, forged.”

Relotius has also written numerous articles for other German media outlets.

Since the public acknowledgment by *Der Spiegel*'s editors, the news weekly's editorial board has endeavoured to portray the Relotius scandal as a unique case in which genius, a desire for prestige, nihilistic energy and psychological instability came together. According to media reports, *Spiegel* has provided the counterfeiter, who voluntarily resigned following his exposure, with psychological care and a lawyer.

Relotius may be an exception in the brazenness of his forgeries, but the much more important question is why his fabrications were published by *Spiegel* and other media and why he was awarded numerous journalistic prizes. At the tender age of 33, Relotius has received almost a dozen prestigious awards by juries that included not only journalists, but also prominent figures in politics and public life.

His forgeries, as it turns out, were by no means difficult to see through. The *Spiegel* editorial board

repeatedly ignored anomalies and warnings. Now it admits with disarming openness that Relotius' reports were “too good to be true.”

What is the significance of this scandal? According to commentators, although Relotius' reports were fake, they were still “beautiful,” i.e., they corresponded to the narrative the editors and journalism award jurors wanted to promulgate. In his writing, “the present is concentrated into a readable format, the grand outlines of contemporary history become comprehensible, and suddenly the great whole becomes completely humanly comprehensible,” *Spiegel* editor-in-chief Ullrich Fichtner gushed following the exposure. As long as the forgeries were not discovered, they were welcome.

Many of Relotius' articles deal with topics that are particularly sensitive from the point of view of bourgeois propaganda, such as the background to Trump's rise in the US and the wars in Iraq and Syria.

To justify the Western military interventions in the Middle East, a fairy tale by Relotius about two young brothers (“lion boys”) kidnapped, tortured and trained by the Islamic State (ISIS) to become suicide bombers proved much more effective than a carefully researched piece into the real background to the wars. Such an article would have to admit—if it were honest—that ISIS and other Islamist militias are, above all, a product of the intrigues of the US and its allies in NATO and in the Middle East.

Relotius's fabrications fit seamlessly into a stream of disinformation that has lasted for nearly 16 years—since then-US Secretary of State Colin Powell gave his infamous speech at the UN on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Although the entire speech was based on lies and forgeries, it was largely accepted uncritically by the international media and served as a justification for the bloodiest war of the 21st century, which

continues to this day.

Freedom of the press is an achievement of the bourgeois revolution. The bourgeoisie upheld it as long as it was fighting against the supremacy of the aristocracy, and later enshrined it in its constitutions. While capitalism remained capable of social compromise, such freedoms retained a spark of life. But freedom of the press is not compatible with war, militarism and a society based on intolerable levels of social inequality.

Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, who exposed the Watergate scandal, were still being celebrated and honoured in the 1970s. Today, Julian Assange and Edward Snowden, who have uncovered incomparably more serious crimes of US imperialism, are isolated and living in forced exile, and must fear for their lives. Outrageous counterfeiters such as Relotius, on the other hand, are awarded prizes.

The incestuous relationship between the world of politics and the media has taken on a dimension that defies description. Billion-dollar media conglomerates dominate the press. Journalists and leading politicians know each other, mingle at the same bars, and frolic together alongside film stars and other celebrities at annual press galas.

As with the establishment political parties, the terms “left” and “right” have lost all meaning in relation to the media. Stefan Aust, previously the long-standing editor-in-chief of *Spiegel*, who began his career in 1966 at the left-wing publication *konkret*, is now editor of *Die Welt*, the flagship paper of the right-wing Springer publishing house.

Nikolaus Blome, deputy editor-in-chief of Springer's rag *Bild*, worked for a time for the *Spiegel* editor-in-chief. Other leading journalists also regularly switch from one publication to the other, with the pro-Green Party *taz* proving to be particularly fertile ground for up-and-coming bourgeois journalists.

Relotius has also published his articles across the entire spectrum of the German media—from *taz* to *Die Zeit*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and Springer's *Welt*. In second place behind *Spiegel* in terms of articles published by Relotius is the Swiss *Weltwoche*, mouthpiece of the ultra-right Swiss People's Party, with 28 pieces.

Social reality, the sentiments and needs of the masses hardly exist in the closed circle of the political parties,

the media and the super-rich. The media have become instruments of state propaganda. This is the reason Claas Relotius—a contemporary version of Thomas Mann's impostor Felix Krull—could become a star journalist.

Workers and young people have long been suspicious of the official media and are searching the internet for alternative, more objective sources of information. This is the reason for the hysterical campaign against “fake news,” which serves as a pretext for censoring the internet and is directed in particular against left-wing, anti-capitalist publications. Both the European Union and the German government have enacted internet censorship laws under the false flag of combatting “fake news.” Facebook alone employs 30,000 people to censor unwelcome posts. Terms such as “comrade” and “brother” suffice for an entry to be deleted.

This censorship, which is particularly directed against the *World Socialist Web Site*, shows how important it is to build and disseminate wsws.org. As the central organ of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the WSWS is completely independent of bourgeois donors and government influence. It calls things by their name, analyses the facts with ruthless objectivity and fights to arm the working class with an understanding of the capitalist crisis and a socialist perspective.



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