

Debate: Is there a place for fictionality in journalism?

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Yes, there is a place for fictionality in journalism

Transparency is the key

Abstract: When fiction in journalism is used to deceive and mislead readers, the culprits need to be named and shamed. But it would be a mistake to think that fiction has no place in journalism at all. In fact, the history of journalism is a story of the elaboration and transformation of reality in an imaginative way. What counts is making sure that the audience knows when and why this is done.

»This film is based on a true story.«

We have all seen this in the credits at the cinema, taking for granted that facts are shown and used in a fictional genre.

So why can we not finally accept the opposite? That a fact-based genre like reportage can, indeed must, include fiction? Could we not label it in the same way? Perhaps like this:

»This *reportage* deliberately deviates from the pure facts in some areas. The owner of the gas station has a different name and lives in a different town. Not all robberies took place on the same day; the author has condensed them for dramatic effect. Some peripheral incidents used to create atmosphere, such as life in the town's night club, are recreated and based not on first-hand experience, but on conversations with visitors. However, at no point in this reportage has the author invented named characters or altered the content of quotes.«

This kind of notice would undoubtedly be possible and could become the norm, just as referring to points or difficulties in research at the end of longer pieces has been standard practice for a while now. Such labelling would certainly

be fair, and definitely more useful than the constant debate about fact and fiction in journalism and the work that goes into keeping them apart – effort that merely serves to show how little journalists and the academics that follow them reflect on professional standards.

Fact or fiction: That is not the question

Whether craving recognition or hoping to increase their audience, journalists have always cheated, deceived, and presented as reality events that either never happened or were actually totally different. Only the tip of a presumably enormous iceberg, a famous example is Janet Cooke's fabrications in the *Washington Post* in 1981, for which she won the Pulitzer Prize (cf. ras 2000). Other famous cases include Michael Born's brazen enactment for *stern tv* in 1996 (cf. Haller 2000), the fictitious home stories made up by Jayson Blair for the *New York Times* at the turn of the millennium (cf. Winkler 2003), and the celebrity interviews and portraits that Tom Kummer invented and published in top newspapers and magazines at around the same time (cf. Reus 2004). Journalists who simply make up stories that sell are almost a topos of the history of journalism, as reflected in Erich Kästner's novel *Fabian* and Gustav Freytag's comedy *The Journalists*.

The latest is Claas Relotius from *Der Spiegel*. There is no doubt that he deserves to be named and shamed for misleading the media audience – but not by repeatedly insisting that simply exploiting creative options in reportage equates to deceiving readers as Markus Kowalski did in an [interview with Michael Haller](#).^[1] As Andreas Wolfers, Head of the Henri-Nannen-Schule school of journalism, rightly complains, outspoken critics continually ranting about »penmen« in journalism is not productive and does not help to escape from the trap of deception (*Die Zeit* on January 31, 2019).^[2]

»Fact or fiction« is not the question. Both are part of journalism. Instead, what counts is making sure that the media audience knows when and where it can expect each one. We need to agree on this in this debate.

The history of journalism is essentially a story of the elaboration and transformation of reality in an imaginative way. In comment pieces, satire, and features in which they exaggerated, distorted, or indeed entirely invented events of the time, »penmen« constantly strived for the journalistic goal of recognizing reality, monitoring those in power, and exposing them where necessary. Features and satire were some of the few media-based opportunities to approach the truth about society in DDR journalism (cf. Knobloch 2002). Germanist Manfred Brauneck referred to Tucholsky's Parables, in which he reacted to events in the Weimar Republic, as

1 <http://www.taz.de/!5568567/>, accessed on February 18, 2019

2 <https://www.zeit.de/2019/06/journalismus-claas-relotius-reporter-faelschungen-transparenz-glaubwuerdigkeit>, accessed on February 18, 2019

»fictitious immediate reports« (Brauneck 1984: 593). Even ›false‹ interviews are part of the honorable tradition of media history. Leipzig-based David Fassmann wrote and edited his *Gespräche in dem Reiche derer Todten* [*Conversations in the realm of their dead*] from 1718 to 1739 (cf. Schmidt 1973). In this monthly publication, dead militia, princes, academics, and even their mistresses discussed their time and commented on the last messages from the realm of the living, moderated by a Secretarius. Many tried to copy him. Conversations with the dead remained a successful magazine format well into the 19th Century.

Admittedly, these were all journalistic formats whose audience was always fully aware of what to expect. They did not deceive or mislead when they moved away from the factual, while still remaining closely linked to events of the time. We have no problem with that. In contrast, we find it harder to concede that any writing process, however much it appears merely to report on and reflect only real events, can become disengaged from the factual reality. We know that journalism can never be a perfect representation of reality; that it has to select and then reassemble building blocks of reality. We talk about the ›narrative‹ that is formed, ›framing‹ and ›media reality,‹ without a second thought. Of course this process is initially based on empirical evidence, on investigation of reality. But at the very moment in which we want to grasp and capture this reality, the depiction becomes interpretation that goes far beyond ›facts, facts, facts.‹

Of course television reportage on a game of soccer does not withhold the actual score, nor the players who are injured or substituted. That forms the match statistics – the ›facts.‹ But what makes the broadcast a living reportage is the deliberate selection made from the countless options available to our eyes and ears: the camera angles, the image detail, zooming into faces in the crowd, the bench, the faces of injured players, the positioning of the exterior microphones, the voice of the commentator. These all come together to form the image of what is happening within the viewer – it is a different, new, shaped image. It is fiction. We know that.

Journalism translates reality into perceptions of reality

Why are we not more confident in admitting that, through its very processes, journalism stands against the empiricism that is so crucial to it? This is the case because it can inevitably only filter out individual forms – images, sounds, and language that it then has to put together into something that can be read, watched, or listened to. It is then no longer like the starting material – it has been imaginatively reshaped.

Metaphors are a good example of this. Without metaphor – condensing what has happened into language images – we would be unable to speak or even think. But metaphors also convert the ›actual‹ into the ›non-actual,‹ translating reality into an image or a representation of reality. We are often unaware of them, and

we certainly do not find them spectacular (they are »firmly established«), but they can elevate a situation ideologically or euphemistically, trigger new associations, and remove themselves significantly from real events (»anchor centers«). Metaphors are found in all types of text, even apparently sober political news. Although little research has been conducted into their effect in people's minds, they are key components of a journalism that fictionalizes by necessity.

If journalism does not wish to limit itself purely to the factuality of tables, it must constantly be aware of the dramatization of its processes. Journalists themselves say that they want to »tell stories,« with their work in writing articles similar to that of storytellers and novelists. They have to break through the chronology of events, reconfigure and reweight sections, round out and smooth details, incorporate repetition and leitmotifs, cut and reassemble, compare and contrast. However many facts it contains, the end product – the report – is always far removed from the factuality of the starting material. It invites its readers to imagine a piece of reality. But it can still contain a high degree of truth and credibility that is intersubjectively perceived in a similar way.

Although reportages that do not take such a storytelling approach, instead attempting to rely simply on records, can occasionally succeed, their lack of padding generally makes them less enjoyable to read. The same goes for interviews. Anyone who has ever tried to transcribe an interview knows how chaotic, unclear, superficial, and even contradictory authentic speech can be. Turning a conversation into readable text means intervening in the factuality of what was originally said: Deskmen have to reorganize, abbreviate, or cut passages, insert additions, create links, or change the wording. Although published »word for word,« the result often looks nothing like a simple transcript of what was said.

Journalism without fiction is not possible. Nor is journalism without fiction necessary. Instead, what is necessary and credible is journalism that clearly states when and why it needs fiction – where it has modified, intervened, added, copied, or used »logical imagination« (Kisch 1983: 206). Transparency about sources is advisable here, too, as is adding brief instructions for use as described above. Although it involves a little more work, it makes deception like that committed by Claas Relotius impossible.

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