

Debate: Is there a place for fictionality in journalism?

Tanjev Schultz

No, there is no place for fictionality in journalism

On the difference between fictional and factual storytelling

Abstract: The question »fact or fiction« is by no means obsolete in journalism. In fact, it is central. This paper emphasizes the importance of factual storytelling that adheres strictly to the standards of authenticity and truthfulness. Using examples, it demonstrates what this means for journalistic practice and especially for reportage, which has found itself in such need of justification following the falsification scandal at *Der Spiegel*.

Fiction generally has no place in journalism. However dramatically refined a reportage might be, however well-told a portrait, journalists are not poets. They put limits on their imagination. They compose, edit, and assemble texts, scenes, and articles, but they remain factual storytellers. Or that is the idea.

When the boundaries between fact and fiction are demolished – as they were in the Relotius case – it is rightly considered a scandal. This shows that our expectations of journalism are different from those of a novel. Penmen in journalism produce journalistic texts that are enjoyable to read, but not beautiful literature. Erasing the differences in theory, too, and pretending that fiction is an unavoidable part of journalism, is not the correct reaction to deceptions like the Relotius case. The informative effect of constructivist, narratological discourse, with which naïve understanding of objectivity and media reality are overcome, can morph into a dangerous relativism. What is true? What is objective? What are facts? After all, it is all just a story...

Luckily, many people still expect journalism to provide them with accurate information. This also applies to reportages, whose subjective perspective by no means gives journalists carte blanche for invention or deception. Reportage is a fact-oriented form of presentation or, in the words of Kurt Reumann, a »fact-fo-

cused report on experience with personal color« (Reumann 2009: 150). As well as the external facts, reportages focus on the experience, emotions and mental processes. These, too, have to be represented truthfully and treated as internal facts. Making them up would be reprehensible.

One of the ways that falsifiers like Relotius are revealed is when it becomes clear that a person quoted in the text does not actually exist. But interior worlds can also be falsified – and this is much harder to prove. If an author writes about how a situation chilled him or others, even though neither he nor others actually were chilled, it leads people to believe in an experience that did not actually occur. That cannot be allowed to happen in journalism. One fear is that writers of reportages concoct impressions and emotions that did not exist, or exaggerate them for dramatic effect. The problem begins when a certain behavior is presented in a qualified way. Someone speaks a little louder, and the writer claims he is shouting. Someone thinks for a minute, and the writer claims he is brooding. It sounds more interesting, more dramatic. But is it actually true? If it is not true, a journalist should not write it.

No justification for becoming lax

The fact that any storytelling, even factual storytelling (cf. Renner/Schupp 2017), necessarily makes a selection, puts information in a certain order, and builds on interpretation (when does shouting or brooding start?), i.e. that it does not depict »pure« reality, cannot be used as justification for becoming lax in reproducing events and experiences. The function and credibility of journalism depend on authenticity and orientation on the truth – even in storytelling forms of presentation.

Incidentally, true reproduction does not have to be any less thrilling or colorful than manipulated reproduction. Reporter Carmen Butta once said, »In order to find something unconventional or surprising, I have to replay a situation in my head again and again. Time and again, I am tempted to stop this laborious dissection and whitewash a little. How often has a shepherd or a policeman failed to say something that would have fitted in so beautifully with their character or the story. But [...] I stick rigorously to what I have experienced, without giving in to the temptation to orchestrate (i.e. to falsify) a single detail (a gesture, filler word, or facial expression). At the end, I am always amazed, as I hone the story with all the senses, that the situation I have accurately reproduced is more exciting, fitting, and dramatic than any manipulated sequence« (quoted in Wolff 2011: 171).

I thus vehemently reject the hypothesis presented by Gunter Reus in this edition of *Journalistik* (Reus 2019). »Fact or fiction« certainly is the question.

Reus is of course right when he refers to comment pieces, satire, and features, in which there is a place for »elaboration and transformation of reality in an imagi-

native way.« But these are specific forms of presentation in which the public, as Reus himself highlights, is able to judge the status of what is written. Of course a columnist like Axel Hacke has every right to bring his fridge – the famous »Bosch« – to life and have it speak, and of course odd ideas can be employed in »Streiflicht« [a column in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*] or by Hans Zippert [author of the »Zippert zappt« column in *Welt*] in a comment piece. Ludic forms of journalism like this (cf. Peters/Schultz/Wimmel 2007: 223f.) are an exceptional and unmistakable case that crosses over into fictional literature. Recently, we have also seen the emergence of more and more hybrid formats, such as news shows (*Heute-Show* etc.) and satirical, political talk formats (cf. Lünenborg 2017).

Needless to say, even ludic and hybrid formats like this are subject to some boundaries. »Streiflicht«, for example, usually contains a core of up-to-date news. Even if a quote, the findings of a study or another fact is represented incorrectly there, beyond the permitted satirical license, this is at least considered incorrect and tainted.

In all other forms of journalistic presentation, including reportages, the audience should be able to expect not to be served fiction. The same applies when literary figures write journalistic reportages (just as there are journalists who write novels; they switch between two roles).

Metaphors are allowed, and I agree with Reus that they translate reality into an image. However, unlike in fictional storytelling, factual storytelling must be connected to a solid basis of fact. Literary figures are allowed to pick out interesting, beautiful, and attractive metaphors and shape the world of their storytelling around them. Journalists, on the other hand, must find the metaphor that fits the basis of fact. It can be just as interesting, beautiful, and attractive – but its link to reality is crucial.

There is no doubt that reportages can also use the same kind of stylistic devices as literature, giving them the look and feel of literature. Some call this »literary journalism« (Eberwein 2013). Movements like »new journalism« and »gonzo journalism« are famous for deliberately breaking down the barriers between literature and journalism. But this becomes a problem if, in doing so, they blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, or replace a link to reality with poetry.

Many will flinch at hearing words like »reality« and »truth.« The question of the access journalism has to the (social) world brings with it complex epistemological issues. But it would be wrong, indeed disastrous, to conclude from this that there is no difference between fact and fiction and that journalistic pieces were just as much creative compositions as literary pieces. They are not. Composition of a journalistic text is subject to certain rules and limits – even, or indeed especially, if we accept that a completely neutral, objective observer role is not possible or (particularly in reportages) even desirable.

People wear clothes, do their hair, get tattoos. One could say that they design their bodies. But would we therefore say that all kinds of genetic manipulation are also acceptable and must be permitted? Of course not. Journalists design their

pieces. But would we therefore say that all kinds of content manipulation are acceptable and must be permitted? Of course not. When it comes to design, there are vital distinctions to be made in terms of extent and quality.

Gunter Reus has not written a defense statement for journalistic imposters either. His main concern is transparency for the audience. I share this desire, but from a different starting point. The way I read Reus' argument is this: It is impossible to separate fact and fiction rigidly anyway, so it is important to expose journalistic production and explain aesthetic interventions to the recipients. In contrast, this is how I see it: There is a clear distinction between fact and fiction in principle and the drive to refer to real events (not fiction) is integral to journalism. When consuming journalism, readers, listeners, and viewers need to be able to assume that the presentation is not fictional. Wherever there is a chance that an intelligent audience could be misled, aesthetic interventions and the journalistic method need to be made transparent and explained.

Rules for practitioners

My concern is that general labelling, as suggested by Reus, could cause (or even tempt) journalists to take ever more dubious liberties. Even Reus would surely not approve of this. After all, it can be no coincidence that his example of a general statement includes the sentence »However, at no point in this reportage has the author invented named characters or altered the content of quotes.« (Reus 2019). The fact that such interventions or inventions are absolutely not permitted in journalism is not as trivial as it first appears. It is vital – and it defines a key difference between journalism and fictional representations.

It is best that we take a more specific look at what should be allowed or taboo in journalistic pieces. The list below is in no way exhaustive – it merely serves to illustrate what it means to separate factual from fictional storytelling.

Quotations: Where a text contains a quote, the quote must not be made up. It must be exactly as it was said. Careful smoothing out is allowed, but no changes to content. In reportages in particular, the authenticity of the spoken word is what counts. If someone says »oh my goodness,« the journalist must not turn it into »golly,« even if this changes little or nothing of the content. After all, reportages are all about the style and appearance of people, their preferences and quirks. Anyone who has ever had a journalist put words in their mouth that they would never have said knows how important this rule is. Editing and authorizing word-for-word interviews is another story altogether. Stilted formulations that emerged not on the scene, but later at the desk of a press officer, have no place in reportages – certainly not when they are parachuted into a scene as if the person had said exactly that in the situation. I believe that is dishonest and wrong.

People and places: The people and places in a journalistic piece must be real. In order to protect sources and personalities, anonymity or aliases can be used in some cases to prevent them being identified or to conceal the real scene of the action. In such cases, however, the audience must always be notified that this method has been used and provided with a plausible explanation. I find inventing a person or combining several people to form a single character – a practice that was once considered admissible in some reportages and reportage courses – extremely problematic. That is how authors and scriptwriters work when they want to reduce complex historical subjects to create an attractive film or literature, deliberately mixing fact and fiction in the process. There may be a value and a point to it then. But it is not journalism.

Chronological order: Journalistic pieces inevitably put their material in a certain order – usually not the chronological order in which the events occurred. This does not mean that they can mix up the order any way they like. If a politician is sits on the train exhausted after giving a speech, loosens his tie, and puts his feet up on the seat, it would be a falsification to describe the scene and pretend that it had taken place on the way to the appearance, when the politician had actually been sitting much more upright. To pick up on Reus' example, if multiple robberies occurred on different days, a journalist should not pretend that they were all carried out on the same day. Sometimes the chronological order is not relevant, but often it is. Journalists must never prioritize their own preferences over correct and relevant content for dramatic effect.

Internal and external: Literary figures can invent internal monologues for their characters. Journalists must not. They cannot see into people's heads. They can record their impressions and make suggestions on what others may have been thinking or feeling, at least in reportages. They can support their theories with observations, self-disclosure, and opinions from third parties. But journalists should not pretend that they are authorial storytellers who know everything about their characters. On the other hand, just like literary figures, journalists can certainly describe the external world in a symbolic, allegorical way. A classic example is natural spectacles, which create a certain atmosphere and are used to represent certain social or internal developments: a thunderstorm that gathers just as the debate between the coalition partners in the conference room begins to escalate. But here, too, it has to be true – completely true. If the storm gathered hours earlier or hours later, it would not be correct to suggest that the two events were simultaneous.

Scenic reconstruction: In general, there is no reason why journalists should not give a lively description of situations that they did not experience in person, for example historical events. What matters is that an intelligent audience knows that

the journalist was not an eye witness – be it through information to that effect or from the context. Of course, there must also be sufficient sources for a scenic reconstruction and the usual care must be taken in handling the material and the statements of other people. A famous example is the description of CSU politician Horst Seehofer's model railway basement in a portrait by *Der Spiegel* journalist René Pfister. The journalist wrote about Seehofer's model railway without ever having been in the basement himself. However, the judges of the Henri Nannen Prize for journalism in 2011 were not aware of this and felt deceived when they discovered that Pfister's description was not based on his own observations. The scandal was not improved by the fact that the portrait had won a prize in the »Reportage« category, causing the judges to assume that its scenic start was based on the writer's own experience. Although the text never claimed that this was the case, it also failed to mention the source. This shows how important it is to create transparency. All it takes is half a sentence at a suitable point in the article.

More or less objective

No-one can simply leave aside their own (social, historic, etc.) point of view – not even journalists. Everyone sees things from a certain perspective. Journalism research offers countless models and evidence for this. But it does not change the fact that journalism is not fiction and that it needs accepted standards for the quality of the claims it makes (cf. Neuberger 2017: 418f.). It is something that journalism and science have in common. Science, too, has long since got rid of any naïve belief in its own orientation on the truth, but that does not change the need and the opportunity to approach certain ideals. Take the science of history, for example. It tells stories, too. Like in journalism, it needs to be factual storytelling, not fictional. Historians unlock the past but, in doing so, cannot simply shake off their present. Of course they cannot simply make things up – they have to stick to the rules of their discipline. They would not accept a blurring of the line between fact and fiction any more than journalists should.

Rudolf Augstein's motto, which *Der Spiegel* printed on its front cover during the Relotius scandal, is »Say how it is.« Some might consider this naive or pretentious, but as a quality standard and a regulative idea it is neither wrong nor obsolete. Historian Thomas Nipperdey provided a clever defense of this kind of standard – in his case coined through historical science and the dictum of Leopold von Ranke – arguing that he merely wanted »to show how it actually was« (Nipperdey 2013: 62). A simple reproduction of the past cannot exist, he says, but science does not simply construct history either: »The empirical fact that historians are not objective does not mean that this standard becomes invalid« (ibid.: 73).

Historians check sources and attempt to tap into a diverse range of perspectives and break out of their own biases. As scientists, they subject themselves to the

scrutiny of the scientific community (as journalists subject themselves to the scrutiny of the audience). These methods and mechanisms ensure that scientists (or journalists) approach the facts through reality. Nipperdey calls this »more or less objectivity« (ibid.: 81).

The reliable subjectivity of journalistic reportage relates to journalists' opportunity to report on their own experiences and impressions and to reflect moods. These have to be authentic. The subjectivity of the reportage remains fact-oriented. It aims to achieve objectivity and the combined effect of external and internal facts. Reportage thus plays a key role in public communication. After all, what a gap we would have if there were only sober news reports on the one hand, lively products of imagination on the other, and nothing in between! We would gain barely any authentic experience of the social world and the lives of others outside our direct surroundings.

We already face the problem of exposure to an excess of fictional worlds and imagery that shapes our view of reality and makes very free, imaginative use of the real events it subjects to its dramatizing logic. Journalism works differently – it has to. It puts limits on imagination and stays away from fiction. Otherwise, journalism would be lost.

Translation: Sophie Costella

About the author

Dr. Tanjev Schultz (*1974) has been Professor of Journalism at the Institute of Communication Studies, Journalism Seminar, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz since 2016. Before this, he spent more than ten years as a deskman for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, where he wrote numerous reportages, among other texts. His journalistic texts won many prizes. In 2018, Schultz was one of *Medium Magazin's* »Journalists of the Year.« The focuses of his research include investigative journalism, journalistic forms of presentation, and democratic theory. He studied Philosophy, Psychology, Communication Studies, and German Studies in Berlin, Hagen and Bloomington (USA) and completed his doctorate in Political Science at the University of Bremen. Contact: tanjev.schultz@uni-mainz.de

Literature

Eberwein, Tobias (2013): *Literarischer Journalismus. Theorie – Traditionen – Gegenwart*. Köln: Herbert von Halem.

Lünenborg, Margreth (2017): Von Mediengattungen zu kontingenten Hybriden. Konstruktivistische und performativitätstheoretische Perspektiven für die Journalistik. In: *Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft*, 65 (2), pp. 367-384.

- Neuberger, Christoph (2017): Journalistische Objektivität. Vorschlag für einen pragmatischen Theorierahmen. In: *Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft*, 65 (2), pp. 406-431
- Nipperdey, Thomas (2013): *Kann Geschichte objektiv sein? Historische Essays*. München: C.H. Beck.
- Peters, Bernhard; Schultz, Tanjev; Wimmel, Andreas (2007): Publizistische Beiträge zu einer diskursiven Öffentlichkeit. In: Bernhard Peters, *Der Sinn von Öffentlichkeit* (hrsg. von Hartmut Weßler, mit einem Vorwort von Jürgen Habermas). Frankfurt/M. [Suhrkamp], pp. 203-247
- Reumann, Kurt (2009): Journalistische Darstellungsformen. In: Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann; Winfried Schulz; Jürgen Wilke (Eds.): *Fischer Lexikon Publizistik Massenkommunikation* (pp. 129-167). Frankfurt/M.: Fischer.
- Renner, Karl N.; Schupp, Katja (2017): Journalismus. In: Martínez, Matías (Ed.): *Erzählen. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (pp. 122-132). Stuttgart, J.B. Metzler.
- Wolff, Volker (2011): *Zeitungs- und Zeitschriftenjournalismus*. 2., überarb. Auflage. Konstanz: UVK.