

Debate

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A small word with a great impact

The first person in journalism: exemplary transparency or a line crossed?

Abstract: Long frowned upon, use of the first person form is now becoming more prevalent, especially in reportage journalism. Potential causes include the media transformation, a change in the way journalists see their role, and erosion of the credibility of established media.

»Foul weather, wind whistling through coats« is a quote from a reportage in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Höll 2019). What would be gained by the sentence being: »Foul weather, wind whistling through *my* coat« or »Foul weather, I'm absolutely freezing?« Nothing. It is neither clearer nor more authentic. The first person form has its place in literature and autobiographies, but in journalism it is at the very least superfluous, usually self-important, and in many cases crosses a line. Why? Because the role of journalists is to report not on themselves, but on an event, person, or issue – about what they experience, see, hear, smell, taste. The sentence »I drive through the mountains in a rattling old minibus« is not the style of a gripping reportage, but a trivial *Making of*. The readers do not need to know which means of transport the reporter used, but what the mountains look like and what exactly is making the minibus rattle. They should be safe to assume that the reporter really was there and is not just reporting on something he has heard second-hand.¹⁾

1 Smart explanations about »scenic reconstructions« by reporters who give the impression that they were there although they were not, are still considered to break the rules. René Pfister of *Der Spiegel* was stripped of the Henri Nannen Prize in 2011 for writing a reportage that described situations and rooms in which Pfister had not been present, but which he reported in such a way that implied that he had experienced them. Specifically, the topic was a toy railway in the basement of Horst Seehofer, a leading CSU politician. Most German chief editors consider scenic reconstructions only permissible if they are unambiguously labelled as such (Seiler 2019: 14f.).

If done with poor style, the first person form even produces bloopers: »If I turn my gaze back towards the North, rugged rocky mountains rise up behind Lecco, topped with glittering snowcaps« (Luther 2019: R7). The fallacy that the rocky mountains only rise up when the author looks at them is easy to avoid: »Rugged rocky mountains rise up behind Lecco, topped with glittering snowcaps.« The first person author is as unnecessary as stage directions: »I want to take a look at that,« announced a reporter from *Hessen-Fernsehen* (Hurtzig 2019). Golly!

Distance was once considered a cardinal virtue – including concerning the journalist's own role

It is not all a question of style, however; after all, writing can be kitsch without using the first person. It is also about how journalists see their own role. For a long time, there was a consensus that journalists lend their eyes and ears to the readers, but remain in the background as a person. Readers would learn from a reportage that the weather was scorching, but did not need to read, »Even early in the morning, I am sweating« (Sontheimer 2014). The opinion that prevailed for a long time was that journalists should act as professional observers, communicating to their audience the state of the world outside when considered in a non-prejudiced way, and, as reporters, allow their readers to take part in events that they cannot experience themselves.

Distance was considered a cardinal virtue and a mark of serious journalism – distance from the issues and the actors being reported on, and distance from one's own role. The subjectivity permitted and desired applies to the access to the material – to how a reportage is composed or how the argumentation in a comment piece is set up. It does not apply to the exhibition of the author. The author's restraint is not merely an aesthetic category – it guarantees credibility by making clear that the author is the servant of his material and the trustee of his audience, but not a self-publicist. The reporter »does not post, does not communicate himself, but his perception of the world – what he can see and bear witness to« (Grossarth 2017).

However, the first person singular has recently been spreading, especially in reportages: »The first fish appeared diagonally from under the boat. I saw white belly and an enormous bubble of air rising to the surface« (Meyer 2019). A one off? Stephan Seiler asked reporters about their views on the first person form for the *Medien-Werkstatt* [Media Workshop] series: Nine were somewhat or definitely in favor; one was undecided; six were more or less against (Seiler 2019: 12f.). Michael Haller reflects arguably the prevailing opinion when he writes, »If events change (in terms of content) as a result of my presence, the first person

form is not only legitimate, but necessary« (Haller 2008: 177).^[2] As a result: »»I« is being used more and more in German newspapers and magazines. »I« is used an awful lot,« sighed Michael Sontheimer as long as five years ago (Sontheimer 2014). Why? Sontheimer cites the psychologizing theory that many journalists want not only to laud significant people, but also occasionally to be lauded themselves. If necessary, »they do it themselves. And in an age of progressive individualization, »Me incorporated,« and self-stylization, many journalists view vanity as an important part of their capital stock« (Sontheimer 2014).

Digitalization and the crisis of credibility

In Ursula Weidenfeld's view, »digitalization and the crisis of credibility in journalism [have] brought back the »I«« (Weidenfeld 2017: 331). »Brought back« implies that it was there once before. In the 1960s, Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, and other authors published literarizing reportages in a forced subjective narrative style under the signet *New Journalism*. Although the protagonists of *New Journalism* maintained the separation between fictional literature and journalism that remains true to the facts, the latter tapped topics that journalism had so far left untouched: pop music, the drugs scene, subculture. They wrote about these in an incredibly subjective style because, in their view, journalism had withdrawn into a questionable objectivity in which the desired vividness was buried under facts (cf. Haller 2008: 55f.; Wolfe/Edwards 1973: passim). A skeptical view of the first person form of course does not necessary equate to an appeal for tedious graveyards of facts. However, the belief that the first person singular is the only way to write vividly and authentically about a pop concert or the drugs scene is highly flawed.

There is no doubt that the media world has changed. In the analog world, anyone who wanted to share something with his fellow citizens had only a small circle of efficacy – in the workplace, among friends, in a bar. Today, anyone who wants to can reach an audience of millions. Whatever happens, anywhere in the world, can be spread and received on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and other channels without passing through an editorial office.

This is what Weidenfeld means when she argues that one of the reasons why the first person has spread so much is the fact that, in a world of so many voices, journalists are more likely to be heard if they actively turn their name into a brand. In the *Like* economy of the digital channels, journalistic items are beco-

2 There was a time when comment – at least in written media – meant that reporters tried to stay in the background in order not to influence events through their presence. Of course the presence of a camera or even merely a radio microphone changes any scene, but does that mean that every radio or television reportage has to use the first person form?

ming increasingly distant from their original carriers – who pays attention to whether an article shared by friends comes from *Der Spiegel* or the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*? As a result, the importance of strong authors (or author brands) is rising. Most likely to gain attention is a distinct ›I.« According to Weidenfeld, this in turn results in journalists having to draw ever greater attention to this ›I,« be it on talk shows or on Twitter. »For editors in chief, the journalist's frowned-upon ›I« is being overlaid with the necessary ›I« of the editorial manager« (Weidenfeld 2017: 335).^[3]

No patented formula against fakes

There is something that appears even more relevant here than the question of how journalism may change if editors in chief also become conférenciers of their media houses: Weidenfeld's indication of the crisis of credibility in journalism in general. There is no doubt that the profession's image has been damaged by fakes such as those by Claas Relotius, and it is worth taking every precaution to prevent attempts at fraud. This difficult area is made all the more unclear by the fact that, with its flamboyant nature, reportage has always been the most vulnerable to fudging of all journalistic forms (cf. Haller 2008: 167 ff.).^[4]

The first person form is not a remedy for fakes, however. If a journalist wants to make up stories, he will do it in the first person, too. Nor does it help to counteract media skepticism among the population – those who fundamentally distrust the media will not be persuaded simply by reporters addressing the outside through ›I.« Besides, cases like that of Relotius play only a small role in creating mistrust in ›the media.« This discussion »is just one for the sector. The population is not interested at all. It is important to make that distinction,« assesses the television entertainer Harald Schmidt (Schmidt 2019). In addition, only a minority of people in Germany fundamentally mistrust the media (cf. Blöbaum 2018; Simon 2018; Jakob et al 2019), and their skepticism is fed by other sources: sloppy work, a lecturing tone that talks down to people, partiality and prejudice (cf. Haller 2018).

3 The theories of Julia Bönisch show that the way the role is understood is beginning to change. The (former) member of the main editorial office at *Süddeutsche Zeitung* responsible for digital issues, she posits that the future belongs not to the kind of managing editor that is used to composing »bulky texts,« but to those who think in marketing categories (cf. Bönisch 2019). This triggered a lively debate and some conflict in the main editorial office of the *Süddeutschen Zeitung* (cf. Messner & Wiegand 2019).

4 This has not only been the case since Relotius – Egon Erwin Kisch was also found to be making up stories (cf. most recently Raue 2019) and the work of Ryszard Kapucinski, allegedly the reporter of the century, is also subject to doubt over whether it was always whiter than white (cf. Ruß-Mohl 2010).

Is the first person form more honest?

The question remains, whether the first person form demonstrates that, however much a journalistic author might strive to achieve distance, he is still a discerning, active subject who shapes his material anyway – whether ultimately the first person form is not more honest or at least creates more »transparency about the production conditions in reportages« (Seiler 2019: 13).^[5] The argument that some of the semantic acrobatics required to avoid the use of »I« appear very labored is also worth listening to.

On the other hand, at the moment, there are more arguments in favor of adhering to a certain strictness of form than for abandoning it. Journalism based on professional standards is becoming more blurred at the edges, with semi-professional actors entering the scene. In terms of style, good authors will always find an elegant way out of the first person dilemma anyway. From a normative point of view, the imperative to maintain distance, and the will to achieve this, is not self-delusion on the part of journalists with regard to their own role. The idea of the distanced observer, who follows Grossarth in sharing not himself, but his perception of the world, is – for all the justified objections – not merely a fiction. Instead, it yields useful guiding principles, even in an age of rapid change in the media. To put it another way in the year in which we commemorate 50 years since the moon landings: »I« might be a small word in a text, but it has giant consequences for journalism.

Translation: Sophie Costella

About the author

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- 5 Surely anyone who answers this question with »yes« would have to call for the first person singular in comment pieces, i.e. in a form in which the subjectivity of the author has a very different and much greater power? And surely the imperative for transparency also applies to other styles, such as news and reporting?

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