Claas Relotius, 2018. Image by Krd. Wikimedia Commons.

Metajournalistic Discourse on the Reportage in the Context of the Claas Relotius Affair

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Abstract: This study focuses on metajournalistic discourse on the reportage genre, specifically in the context of the Claas Relotius affair, a large-scale journalistic fraud at *Der Spiegel*, Germany's widest circulating weekly news magazine. Techniques of manual content analysis and automatic text analysis are combined to examine how print and online media outlets in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland covered the fraud case and discussed the role of the reportage within this case. An analysis of 240 articles from eighty different media outlets uncovered two central themes in making the reportage the subject of the discourse on the fraud case: First, journalists covering the fraud case frequently stated that fact-checking and verification processes in the context of reportages were rather challenging, especially when reportages covered events from abroad. Second, journalists covering the fraud case argued that journalism awards and the expectations of readers and editors created misguided incentives and increased the risk of reporters striving to create a literary art form, rather than focusing on accurately reporting the story. The programming language Python, employed for automatic text analysis, showed enormous potential for the analysis of metajournalistic discourse in journalism research.

Keywords: Relotius – reportage – journalistic fraud – metajournalism – content analysis – Python

Five years ago, in December 2018, the news magazine *Der Spiegel* made public that its renowned and award-winning reporter Claas Relotius had "manipulated dialogues [and quotes], invented protagonists and fabricated facts in his reports" for several years.[1] Neither the documentation and fact-checking department nor the editors-in-chief at *Der Spiegel* had noticed. Relotius had published manipulated reportages, mainly, but not exclusively, in *Der Spiegel.* Other renowned media were affected, such as *ZEIT Online*, *SZ* and *TAZ* from Germany, and *NZZ Folio* and *NZZ am Sonntag* from Switzerland. The news of this fraud case burst amidst an ongoing crisis of confidence in legacy media and heated debates about the credibility and quality of journalism in Germany.[2] Thus, the disclosure of the fraud case further fueled this discourse. Soon the reportage as a journalistic form became the focus of the discussion. Contemporary reportage, it was argued, often blurred fact and fiction and as a subjective form of representation was particularly susceptible to misrepresentation.

Taking this debate as a starting point, the present inquiry poses the following research question: How did journalists cover the Relotius fraud case, and what role did reportage play within this case? To answer this, the inquiry will view the debate as a metajournalistic discourse and address causes, contributing factors, and consequences of the fraud case, in terms of Entman's framing approach.[3] For an empirical analysis of the metajournalistic discourse, the inquiry will combine a qualitative content analysis and computerized text analysis. This mixed methods approach is used to get a multifaceted view of the media coverage. The use of computerized text analysis is still not common in journalism research, yet it is useful in this case, particularly when its results are cross validated with qualitative content analysis. This method of analysis allows for managing massive amounts of data and the large numbers of articles published on the fraud case.

The Claas Relotius Affair

Der Spiegel, founded in 1947, is a renowned German news magazine. With a current weekly circulation around 650,000 copies, it is the largest news magazine in Europe. Its exposure of political scandals and what is commonly referred to in Germany as the *Der Spiegel* affair of 1962, when the magazine was accused of high treason after publishing a critical article about the nation's defense forces, only further secured its reputation. *Der Spiegel* is also well-known for its fact-checking department (*Dokumentationsabteilung*). In its editorial statute *Der Spiegel* points out that the magazine aims to have its articles rigorously reviewed and double-checked by this department.[4] Which texts are verified by this department is clarified by the editors-in-chief.[5] Despite these copyediting processes, in December 2018, the journalistic fraud of

Claas Relotius, an award-winning journalist and reporter at *Der Spiegel*, was made public. The managing editor of the editorial department for reportages (*Gesellschaftsressort*), in an extensive online article, informed the *Der Spiegel* audience about Relotius's journalistic fraud.[6] The next print edition, which carried the cover line, "Reporting the Truth" (*Sagen, was ist*)—the motto of *Der Spiegel* founder Rudolf Augstein—devoted twenty-three pages and six articles to the case.[7] In May 2019, a public report containing the conclusions of an internal investigation commission reconstructed the case in great detail.[8] Because of this report and other studies—for instance, by Eberwein,[9] Nowak, and Altmeppen,[10] or Hoffmann and Russ-Mohl[11]—the following details are known.

The first suspicions regarding the veracity of Relotius's reportages emerged in November 2018, when Relotius's freelance colleague Juan Moreno addressed his doubts about the authenticity of some facts in the reportage "Jaegers Grenze."[12] Moreno and Relotius had worked on the story together, but they researched separately. Moreno began to investigate Relotius's contributions to the co-bylined story and found evidence of fabrications in "Jaegers Grenze" and in other reportages. Moreno showed that Relotius had both included protagonists Relotius had never met or spoken to and made up entire quotes and dialogues. When *Der Spiegel*'s management eventually confronted Relotius with Moreno's allegations, Relotius confessed.[13]

Until then, Relotius had been a renowned, award-winning reporter. After writing his first articles for *Der Spiegel* as a freelancer in 2011, he became an editor and reporter in the Gesellschaft section of *Der Spiegel* magazine in 2017. The Gesellschaft section is one of the most prestigious editorial units in the magazine. Its reporters mainly work on reportages, and Relotius soon became one of the most successful journalists in the unit.[14] Several reportages, both before and after he joined the Gesellschaft section, including "Der Mörder als Pfleger" (2013), "Nummer 440" (2016), and "Ein Kinderspiel" (2018), won prestigious journalism awards. Ironically, juries praised his reportages for their "unparalleled lightness, intimacy and relevance that is never silent regarding the sources on which it is based."[15]

In its public report, *Der Spiegel*'s internal investigating commission documented Relotius's having invented at least some elements and, sometimes, almost everything in most of the sixty articles that he authored or co-authored at *Der Spiegel*, from 2011 through 2018.[16] The report discussed, extensively, reportage and its role in the fraud case. It described reportages in the Gesellschaft section as "stories told like films."[17] It claimed that, as in film, Relotius fictionalized facts: He planned the plot, invented the protagonists, and made up the quotations.[18] In the scandal's aftermath, the commission emphasized

the relevance of basic journalistic standards: "the story has to be right" and "being right doesn't just mean the facts are right, but that the people and the places are authentic, so that the text reflects reality."[19]

Since then, several studies have dealt with the Relotius affair. Eberwein investigated possible causes and consequences of the fraud case as they were described in the coverage given the issue by German media outlets. In his study, Eberwein found that most media outlets argued that a mix of individual, editorial, and professional influences led to the fraud. At the micro level, Relotius's personality was seen to be the main reason. At the meso level, a lack of editorial quality oversight was identified as the culprit. And at the macro level, the subjectively driven reportage itself was deemed susceptible to fraud and misrepresentation.[20] Nowak and Altmeppen examined Relotius's reporting in terms of *Der Spiegel*'s editorial and ethic responsibility. They analyzed which actors attributed responsibility to whom in the affair and why they did so. The results showed that *Der Spiegel* delegated responsibility largely to Relotius, emphasized its own credibility, and deliberately distanced itself from the reporter and his fabrications.[21] Hoffmann and Russ-Mohl analyzed the magazine's crisis communication, showing that while *Der Spiegel* took partial responsibility because of the failure of its editorial fact-checking processes, in the main the magazine portrayed Relotius as the primary culprit.[22]

Reporting on the Relotius Affair as Metajournalistic Discourse

Journalism fulfills important functions for a democratic society: observation of society and provision of information.[23] If journalism itself is the object of observation, the focus is self-observation. In this context, Malik names various tasks for journalistic self-observation, among them are self-control and quality assurance in the journalistic product, acceptance of and knowledge about journalism on the part of the audience.[24] Malik argues that journalistic self-thematization, that is, journalistic reporting on phenomena and topics from the media and journalism, should serve to ensure the quality of journalistic work and media output, make journalistic work processes transparent, and thereby increase the credibility of the media and improve the media literacy of the audience. Thus, journalistic reporting on journalism is a form of public self-reflection: the system's own actions are reconsidered and re-evaluated in the journalistic output for all to see.[25] In Carlson's sense, this can be understood as "metajournalistic discourse," which he defines "as public expressions evaluating news texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their reception."[26] The Relotius case led to such discourse on journalism. At a time when so-called "fake news" and declining trust in media were already recurring topics of reporting,[27] the scandal only further heated

the debate about journalism within society.[28]

In studies focusing on metajournalistic discourse, framing is often used to describe how different issues are represented. Entman defines framing, thus: "To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described."[29] Following this definition, framing means that certain aspects are linguistically emphasized while others are pushed into the background. Thus, framing can be understood as a linguistic scheme that influences perception or understanding of a specific aspect of metajournalistic discourse.[30] Empirically, framing can be identified using content or text analyses.[31] Hence, framing analysis allows for understanding how the selection and focus of certain words, phrases, or ideas contribute to shaping public perceptions on certain issues.

A framing analysis was conducted to examine both the metajournalistic discourse on the Relotius affair in general and the extensive discourse on the genre of the reportage specifically. The focus for the framing analysis of the metajournalistic discourse on the Relotius affair was on the framing elements of causal interpretations and treatment recommendations. Causal interpretations were defined as explanations or contributing factors addressed within the discourse on the affair. Treatment recommendations were defined as either solutions for or consequences of the fraud suggested within the discourse.

Mixed Methods Approach

To respond to the research questions posed above, a mixed methods approach was used to better understand the metajournalistic discourse on the fraud case. While qualitative research focuses on open exploration and detailed, in-depth analysis, quantitative research emphasizes statistically oriented data collection and analysis, usually referencing inference techniques. The mixed methods research paradigm combines the strengths of both research traditions.[32] Johnson and Onwuegbuzie define mixed methods research as "*the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study.*"[33]

Following this approach, the present study is based on content and text analyses. The content analysis combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study also compiles data in formal categories (such as medium, publication date, unit, scope, authors, author editorial roles, and journalistic forms of presentation). Other categories comprise framing elements, as introduced above (such as causal interpretations or possible consequences of the

fraud case). The analysis largely took place using MAXQDA, a software for computer-aided content analysis.[34]

This exploration then served as the initial point for conducting the text analysis with Python, a solely quantitative approach. To focus on the role of the reportage as a genre in the coverage of the fraud case, the first step was to examine how often the word *reportage* occurred overall in the data set and in how many texts it was mentioned at least once. Following this, a quantitative text analysis using linear regression analysis was run to examine the co-occurrence of the word reportage with other words.[35]

Based on the results of the content analysis, two main themes were identified: the *foreign reportage theme* and the *literary reportage theme. Themes* were defined as fields of meaning in the sense of a semantic frame providing context for a linguistic object, in this case, the reportage. The analysis assumed these *themes* could be identified with the help of keywords, called, for the purposes of this study, *theme cues.* Lists of tokens (that is, individual words) were defined to use as indicators for theoretically relevant elements of the frames employed as predictors to model the occurrence of the term *reportage.* To do this, the articles of the study's sample were broken down into tokens that were then tagged according to their part of speech, using the Treetagger, a Python tool for annotating text with part-of-speech and *lemma,* or root word, information.[36] In each case, word classes, that is, the part of speech (nouns, adjectives, etc.), were identified. In addition, the basic form (*lemma*) of the corresponding tokens was included, because the individual noun phrases can also occur in different manifestations.

Description of the Sample and Findings

Sample. A total of 961 articles from German, Swiss, and Austrian print and online media dealing with the Relotius affair, published from December 19, 2018, up to and including January 3, 2019, was identified. The sixteen-day period was chosen to capture the first reactions in the media discourse on the Relotius question, to analyze, in detail, the discourse during this time. The articles were extracted from the media and press database WISO.[37] Because *Der Spiegel* was directly affected by the fraud and was itself criticized, the articles published in *Der Spiegel* on the fraud were not included in the study sample. The choice of approach was based on studies that show *Der Spiegel* set different priorities in its coverage than did other media outlets. Eberwein notes that in *Der Spiegel*'s self-reporting the frames of the individual perpetrator and the passively tolerant editorial team dominated the articles in *Der Spiegel* until May 2019, while other media had already come to more differentiated assessments.[38] Hoffmann and Russ-Mohl also point out that *Der Spiegel* consistently named Relotius as the main culprit in their report-

ing and portrayed Relotius as a resourceful swindler who outwitted a robust system, while *Der Spiegel* was a victim.[39] For the study sample, all articles were removed that were duplicates (articles that included the exact same wording). Ruled out were short texts (<100 words), to ensure all articles in the study dealt with the fraud case in depth. Also excluded were English texts, because German-language tokens (that is, individual words) were used in the study. In this way, the sample was reduced to 240 articles from a total of eighty different German-language print and online media. While not statistically representative, the sample was designed to represent diverse perspectives on the fraud case. Most of the articles were published in German media (190), followed by Austrian (31), and Swiss media (17). The articles included regional or local print newspapers (151), national print newspapers (65), and online media (4).
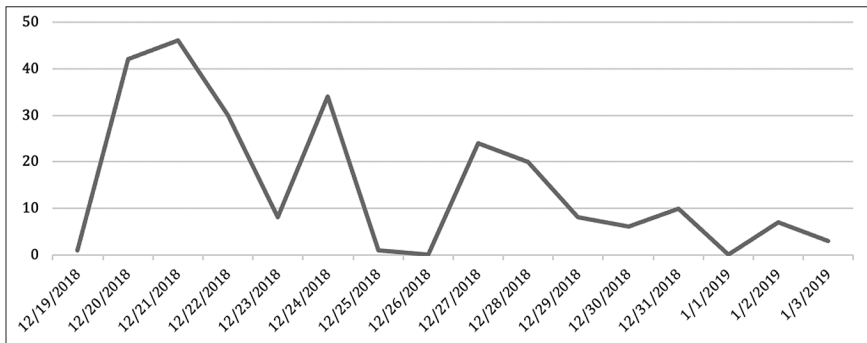

Figure 1: Publication of articles in the research period (in absolute numbers).

Findings. As noted earlier, a total of 240 articles dealt with the affair within the research period. During the first week after the revelation (from Wednesday, December 19, 2018, up to and including Tuesday, December 25, 2018), 162 articles were published on the matter. During the second week (from Wednesday, December 26, 2018, up to and including Tuesday, January 1, 2019), sixty-eight texts were issued on the case. During the last two days of the study period (Wednesday, January 2, 2019, and Thursday, January 3, 2019), ten articles dealing with the affair were published. During the research period, interest and media attention decreased significantly, as Figure 1 shows. The days when there were no publications on the subject were public holidays.

The fraud case seemed to be relevant from different perspectives that offered journalists various points of contact: About a fifth of the 240 articles, 17.1 percent (n=41), were published in the opinion sections, followed by

13.3 percent (n=32), published in the media sections. The case was also discussed in the politics, features, and culture sections.

The authors of the articles filled different editorial roles: In the study sample, editors wrote 27.5 percent (n=66) of all articles. Editors-in-chief penned 17.5 percent (n=42) of all articles. News agencies contributed 17.5 percent (n=42) of all articles. Unit heads wrote 6.6 percent (n=16) of all articles. That means journalists in executive positions wrote a high number of articles in the sample. This was surprising, for two reasons. First, in most news desks, there are more editors than editors-in-chief. Second, editors are likely to have higher journalistic output than their superiors due to their intensive involvement in the editorial process. This result suggests the publishing houses and editorial offices gave high importance to the fraud case and found it appropriate for editors-in-chief to comment on and clarify the case for their audience. Other studies on metajournalistic discourse come to similar conclusions and give evidence that metajournalistic discourse is often a "matter for the boss."[40] This seems also to have been true for the debate on the Relotius affair in most media outlets.

Journalists used a range of journalistic styles in their articles about the fraud case. The classification of texts gave evidence that more than half of the texts, 53.8 percent (n=129), used informative forms of presentation (news, reports, or analyses) and another third of all texts, 35.4 percent (n=85), were opinion pieces (commentaries or editorials). This finding aligns with other studies that show informative forms of presentation often dominate journalistic self-observation in the form of so-called media journalism.[41] However, in the current study, the proportion of texts commenting on and expressing opinions about the case was surprisingly high compared to the results of other studies on reporting on media journalistic topics.[42] This result can be interpreted to mean the fraud case triggered both an often emotionally led debate about journalistic core values and that journalists preferred to address these issues from a personal angle rather than fact and information-oriented articles. Relotius's violations of central rules and norms in journalism were so far-reaching that many journalists may have wanted to express their opinions on the matter rather than simply echo the facts of the case. This suggests once again that this specific fraud case was given importance in the metajournalistic discourse.

Reportage as a Contributing Factor for the Relotius Affair

A second focus of the content analysis was the explanations and consequences of the fraud case that journalists addressed in the sample articles. For both categories, multiple coding was possible, because, for example,

several explanations for the fraud could have been given in one article. There was a total of 500 codings in the category of explanations or contributing factors and 329 codings in the category of possible consequences or solutions.

Figure 2: Explanations or contributing factors addressed within the sample (in percent, in proportion to 240 in the study sample, based on 500 codings in this category, including multiple codings).

Figure 2 gives summaries of the explanations or contributing factors that journalists addressed within their articles on the fraud case. In the study sample, the data gave evidence that in 28.8 percent (n=69) of the 240 articles, journalists identified readers', colleagues', or editors-in-chiefs' expectations as possible contributing factors for the Relotius fraud. Some journalists covering the fraud case stated that Relotius only wrote what his readers, colleagues, or editors-in-chief wanted to read. The journalists frequently claimed Relotius fictionalized facts. They also argued that Relotius described the protagonists or designed the plot of his reportages in such a way that the accounts confirmed the *Spiegel* readers' stereotypes and fitted perfectly into their (mostly left-liberal) worldview. For instance, journalists quoted Relotius's 2017 reportage, titled "In einer kleinen Stadt" (March 25, 2017) as an example: In this reportage, Relotius wrote about the United States in the Trump era, confirming clichés about Trump supporters: pettiness, xenophobia, gun mania, backwardness, intolerance.[43] In this sense, Relotius drew a stereotypical portrait of the "Ugly American" in his reportage. Rather than approaching the complexities of reality, Relotius created preconceived images of reality, a fact that most journalists covering the fraud case harshly criticized. In 22.9 percent (n=55) of the 240 articles in the study sample, journalists covering the fraud case also mentioned deficits in the structure and management of *Der Spiegel*'s publishing house, Spiegel-Verlag. For instance,

the journalists criticized that publishing house and editorial offices lacked a culture of constructive criticism. This means that they called for an environment where it was acceptable to discuss and resolve potential errors in an open and transparent manner. The reportage as a reporting genre was also addressed as a possible contributing factor for the fraud: In the study sample, 21.7 percent (n=52) of the 240 articles included mention of crossing the boundary between literature and journalism in the genre of reportage as a possible contributing factor for the fraud. For example, journalists addressed growing concerns about fuzzy boundaries between journalism and literature, and a too vague distinction between facts and fiction in their articles on the fraud. They argued that the excessive use of literary and stylistic devices to describe places and protagonists could blur the boundaries between literature and journalism. While the reportage is conducive to subjective descriptions by reporters, the excessive use of stylistic devices, journalists argued, poses the danger of mingling fact and fiction and creating an invention rather than a truthful depiction of reality. Furthermore, in 21.3 percent (n=51) of the 240 articles, journalism prizes usually awarded for artfully written reportages were viewed as misguided incentives for journalists and, thus, a factor that may have contributed to Relotius's unethical behavior. Journalists also harshly criticized colleagues who wrote for the sake of appearances and, consequently, were more likely to be rewarded with prizes than those who concentrated on factual accuracy and truthful reporting. In 20.8 percent (n=50) of the 240 articles, journalists criticized mistakes made in the fact-checking department at *Der Spiegel*. They argued that the fact-checking department should have either checked the facts more rigorously or contacted the reporter's interviewees at least on a random basis to ensure the authenticity of the interviews. In 15 percent (n=36) of all articles, journalists noted both that fact checking a foreign reportage is particularly difficult and a lack of ability to verify the foreign reportage might be possible contributing factors for fraud. There might be two reasons for this. First, reporters frequently travel alone (mostly for cost reasons) when they work on foreign reportages in other countries or continents. Second, it is hard for the fact-checking department at home to verify both quotes from interviewees and facts and details in the aftermath of the reporters' research in other countries or continents. Consequently, trust often replaces strict fact-checking processes in foreign reportages, a fact that was harshly criticized in articles on the fraud case. Last but not least, 14.6 percent (n=35) of all articles mentioned reporters' pressure to succeed or fear of failure as possible explanations for unethical behavior. Other research parallels the findings from this study. Menke and Serong, in their content analysis of the metajournalistic discourse on the fraud case, point out that journalists

argue literary reportage contradicts professional standards of journalism.[44] Menke and Serong emphasize that many journalists addressed a lack of reflection about a journalistic culture and a focus on publishing award-winning reportages in their coverage of the affair.[45]

Overall, two main lines of argumentation about the reportage were evidenced in this study's sample. First, challenges to conducting thorough fact checking and verification of foreign reportages were discussed as a possible contributing factor for Relotius's fraud. In the discussion that follows, this aspect will be referred to as the *foreign reportage theme*. Second, an orientation toward readers' expectations and a strong focus on winning journalism awards were discussed as misleading incentives and, thus, another possible contributing factor to Relotius's fraud. In the following, this aspect will be referred to as the *literary reportage theme*.
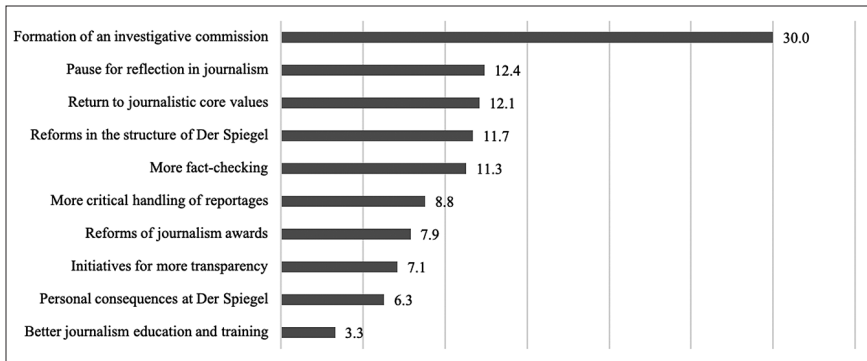

Figure 3: Possible consequences or solutions addressed within the sample (in percent, in proportion to 240 in the study sample, based on 329 codings in this category, including multiple codings). See above.

In the study sample, journalists covering the fraud case also articulated proposals for consequences (e.g., possible penalties for journalistic misconduct) or solutions to prevent journalistic fraud in the future (e.g., improvement of journalism education and training). Figure 3 gives an overview of the consequences or solutions that journalists discussed within their texts on the fraud case. The most frequent demand was for a commission to investigate the fraud. This call occurred in 30 percent (n=72) of the 240 articles in the sample. This could also be because *Der Spiegel* itself announced early in the process that it would set up such a commission. In 11.7 percent (n=28) of the articles, journalists called for reforms in the editorial structure and management at *Der Spiegel*, notably introducing stricter fact-checking and verification processes. In 6.3 percent (n=15) of the articles, journalists suggested

personnel consequences at *Der* Spiegel—dismissing editors in charge, for instance. Furthermore, in 11.3 percent (n=27) of the articles, journalists covering the fraud case urged the fact-checking department at *Der Spiegel* to establish stricter control processes. While these suggestions for consequences are directed at the micro-level of the publishing house, other suggestions addressed the macro-level of journalism as a field. In 12.5 percent (n=30) of the 240 articles, journalists suggested more critical self-reflection in journalism. In 12.1 percent (n=29) of all articles, journalists suggested a return to or recollection of journalistic core values. In 8.8 percent (n=21) of all articles, journalists urged more critical handling of reportages in general. In 7.9 percent (n=19) of all articles, journalists called for reforms of the much-criticized journalism prizes. When addressing possible causes of the fraud, journalists frequently mentioned the reportage in their articles. In contrast, the reportage was not mentioned when the journalists dealt with the consequences of the fraud case in their articles.

How can these results be summarized? On the one hand, the study's content analysis gave evidence that journalists identified problems within the publishing house, with the reportage genre, and personal issues on Relotius's part, as the main causes for the fraud case. In their suggestions for consequences and solutions, on the other hand, they referred in part to adjustments at *Der Spiegel*, but more clearly to the demand for more fundamental changes in journalism, especially for better journalism education and more reflection on the part of journalists in their daily work. A possible reason for this focus on individual causes and systemic consequences might be that such causes could contribute to stabilizing journalism as a system. As Carlson points out:

> The reliance on individual violators circumvents more uncomfortable questions about journalism's relations with centers of power, its own role as a powerful institution shaping public knowledge, and its accountability within democratic society. In the end, this individualizing focus suggests that press failures are inherently individual failures remedied by better adherence to professionally ascribed norms, which forecloses on the broader critique of journalism taking place in academia and other public circles.[46]

Nevertheless, several statements in the sample note that no media outlet is immune to fakes or frauds. The fakes or frauds when they occur in foreign reportages, however, likely do so because there is less editorial control because of the distance from the reporting site.

Frequencies and Contexts of the Reportage

Following the content analysis, an automatic text analysis was conducted, using Python, with the goal of gaining a clearer understanding of the role

reportage played in the metajournalistic discourse on the fraud case. The first step was to look at quantities. In the 240 sample articles, the term *reportage* occurred a total of 502 times. The term *reportage* was not mentioned in fifty-six of the 240 articles. It was mentioned at least two or more times in 113 of the remaining 184 texts. These frequencies indicate the reportage was mentioned on a regular basis in the context of the fraud case. A frequent occurrence of the word *reportage* does not necessarily mean it played a central role in explaining the fraud, but it is an indication that reportage was an important aspect in the discussion of the fraud case.

The theme cues (independent variables) were then tested with a linear regression analysis to see how well they predicted the occurrence of the term *reportage* (dependent variable). Linear regression analysis is a standard technique of predictive analysis for explaining the relationship between independent and dependent variables.

To create theme cues, the two main *themes* were broken down into their individual components. For the *literary reportage theme*, there were references to journalism awards (*awards tokens*), the associated pressure to succeed or fear of failure (*success tokens*), narrative (*story tokens*), or literary elements (*literature tokens*), and references to expectations of relevant reference groups (*expectations tokens*). Defining the lists of tokens was comparatively simple for each of these components: The first step was determining the common word stems and word families. To generate these lists of words, the corresponding terms in the data set were read out using Python and then sorted out manually. For the *story* tokens, for example, the word parts searched in the data set were: [Ee]rzähl|[Ll]üg|[Ee]rfind. What was meant here were the

Theme Cues	Unique Words	Frequency of Tokens
Awards Tokens	72	592
Success Tokens	16	82
Mistakes Tokens	17	127
Story Tokens	36	146
Literature Tokens	23	107
Fact checking Tokens	64	312
Expectations Tokens	11	36
Genre Tokens	4	41
Fake News Tokens	28	100
Sum	271	1543

Table 1: Theme cues and their frequencies.

word fields, "telling," "lying," "inventing." In a manual correction, semantically inappropriate terms were identified and deleted. This process resulted in a list containing the German equivalents of words like "invention," "invent," "lie," "lier," "narration," "tell," and words that were combined with them.[47]

A similar procedure was followed for all other lists. For some lists, such as the *award tokens*, all terms found in the data that corresponded to *award* were used: the word part [Pp]reis ("award") was searched in all texts. In the data set, seventy-two different words from the list appeared a total of 592 times, including, for example, *Preis* ("award"), 178 times; *Reporterpreis* ("reporter award"), eighty times; and *Journalistenpreis* ("journalist award"), fifty-three times. *See Table 1*

For the *foreign reportage theme*, the definition of *theme cues* was more difficult because it was difficult to generate references to "foreign countries" or incidents "far away" via word families without including too many meanings in the analysis. Thus, for this theme, only one list was created, the *fact-checking tokens*.

In addition to the terms for the two *theme*s already mentioned, a list of *fake news tokens* was formed to determine how often the term *reportage* was used in this context. Furthermore, in the analysis, *genre tokens* and *mistakes tokens* were included to determine the extent to which the explicit use of the term *genre* or the mention of mistakes or journalistic misbehavior could serve as predictors for the mention of the term *reportage* in the sample. The word *reportage* was removed from the data for the linear regression analysis because the term was used as a dependent variable. Table 1 gives the token lists, the number of individual words that occur in this list, and the sum of the frequencies of all words from the lists.

Table 2 gives the results of the linear regression analysis. With the nine lists and 271 words, the analysis led to an R-squared (uncentered) of 0.595. R-squared is the statistical measure of fit that indicates how much variation of a dependent variable is explained by the independent variable(s). This measure checked how well the *theme cues* predicted the use of the word *reportage* in the data set. Based on the R-squared of 0.595, the model seemed to be quite a good predictor for the occurrence of the word *reportage*. Two of the *theme cues* were especially meaningful: Words from the list of *awards tokens* and those from the list of *fact-checking tokens* predicted the occurrence of the term *reportage* quite well. This confirms the assumptions from the content analysis regarding the *foreign reportage theme* and the *literary reportage theme*. When the articles on the fraud case in the sample dealt with *journalism awards,* the genre of the *reportage* was usually addressed, too. The same holds true for articles mentioning the documentation department, fact-checking, or other control mechanisms.

Kind of Token	coef	std err	t	Pt	[0.025	0.975]
Awards	0.2277	0.039	5.820	0.000	0.151	0.305
Success	0.2350	0.188	1.252	0.212	-0.135	0.605
Mistakes	0.2235	0.158	1.419	0.157	-0.087	0.534
Story	0.4692	0.141	3.328	0.001	0.191	0.747
Literature	0.3427	0.152	2.253	0.025	0.043	0.643
Fact-checking	0.3218	0.088	3.646	0.000	0.148	0.496
Expectations	0.6250	0.338	1.847	0.066	-0.042	1.292
Genre	0.9180	0.281	3.264	0.001	0.364	1.472
Fake News	-0.1218	0.199	-0.614	0.540	-0.513	0.269

Table 2: Results of the Linear Regression Analysis; R-squared (uncentered): 0.595; Adj. R-squared (uncentered): 0.579.

The lists on genre or story were not quite as informative: Words from the rather limited genre list (especially the lemma *genre*) were mentioned a total of forty-one times in twenty-six articles, almost always with mention of reportage. However, the expectation was that *reportage* would appear in the context of the term *genre* because reportage is a concretization of the generic term *genre*. Even if the correlation regarding the frequency of appearance is not as strong as in the cases mentioned first, this result is particularly telling given the number of cases: In these articles—approximately 10 percent of the articles examined—there is a direct discussion of the reportage.

No other *theme cues* have a high correlation with the appearance of the term *reportage*. Terms from the context of the fake news debate also do not seem to be statistically associated with the mention of *reportage*, even though these occurred in seventy-five articles (where the term appeared 100 times). The content analysis gave evidence that the mention of *l*ügenpresse ("fake news") usually took the form of a general statement about current debates concerned with media credibility or as a reference to the fact that the case could provide arguments for media skeptics—in the sense of a reference to the still quite current debate about *fake news*.

Conclusions

In the context of the falsification scandal at *Der Spiegel*, reportage on the whole was connoted rather negatively in metajournalistic discourse. In 184 of the 240 articles in the study sample, journalists discussed the reportage in the context of Relotius's fabrications. From the study's content analysis two major themes in the metajournalistic discourse on the fraud case were identi-

fied—both linked to the openness of the genre of the reportage: the *foreign reportage theme* and the *literary reportage theme.* On the one hand, journalists covering the fraud case frequently stated that verifying and fact-checking a reporter's work in the context of foreign reportages is particularly challenging. This can be identified as the *foreign reportage challenge.* On the other hand, journalists regularly argued that journalism awards, readers' and editors' expectations can create misguided incentives, and thereby increase the risk of turning the reportage into a literary art form. This aspect can be identified as the *literary reportage conundrum.* The extent to which these two major themes of the metajournalistic discourse can be observed in other journalism cultures remains to be seen. Future studies might address whether these themes are specific to German journalism culture, which sometimes seems more reluctant to embrace literary forms in comparison to, for instance, the journalism culture in the United States. However, in its final report on the fraud case, the investigative commission specified that mistakes in fact-checking and an embellishing writing style had also occurred in other fraud cases.[48]

However, this study's text analysis, based on the preliminary content analysis and its results, showed that predictability of R-squared (uncentered) of 0.595 could already be achieved with a set of as few as 271 unique words. That means these 271 words provided insight into the role of the reportage in the metajournalistic discourse on the fraud case surrounding Relotius.

The findings of the study argue for automatic text analysis as particularly promising for future studies of metajournalistic discourse, especially when dealing with even large data sets. Future studies might focus on other journalism cultures or the development of the discourse over a longer period. It would also be desirable to proceed more comparatively and include articles from more media outlets in the sample. Future studies could also address how the reportage genre is discussed at different historical moments and in other contexts, for instance, comparing multiple fraud cases. It is possible that reportage's negative connotations in the context of the Relotius fraud case at *Der Speigel* reflects the reportage's current position. Perhaps it is a problem of context or—remembering Egon Erwin Kisch—a timeless weakness of the genre.

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Notes

1   Stark, "Claas Relotius: Ein Fall für die Lehrbücher" [Claas Relotius: A case for the textbooks], para. 1. (Unless otherwise noted, translations are ours).

2   Denner and Peter, "Der Begriff Lügenpresse in deutschen Tageszeitungen" [The term *Lügenpresse* (lying press) in German daily newspapers], 275; Schultz et al., "Erosion des Vertrauens zwischen Medien und Publikum?" [Erosion of trust between media and audience?], 246; Ziegele et al., "Lügenpresse-Hysterie ebbt ab" [Lying press hysteria is ebbing], 150.

3   Entman, "Framing," 52–58.

4   Spiegel-Verlag Rudolf Augstein GmbH & Co. KG, "Die Spiegel Standards" [The Spiegel standards], 7.

5   Spiegel-Verlag Rudolf Augstein GmbH & Co. KG, 57.

6   Fichtner, "*Der Spiegel* Reveals Internal Fraud," December 20, 2018.

7   Höges, "Ein Albtraum" [A nightmare], 36–38; Fichtner, "Spiegel legt Betrugsfall im eigenen Haus offen" [Spiegel discloses fraud case in its own house], 40–46; Moreno, "Es war ein Gefühl" [It was a feeling], 47–48; Hülsen and Brauck, "Warum gehen nicht irgendwann die Alarmglocken an?" [Why don't alarm bells go off at some point?], 49–51; Anonymous, "Wie bitter" [How bitter], 52–55; Kuntz and Sandberg, "Zu perfekt, um wahr zu sein" [Too perfect to be true], 56–58.

8   Fehrle, Höges, and Weigel, "Der Fall Relotius. Abschlussbericht Der Aufklärungskommission," 130–46.

9   Eberwein, "Sagen, was sein könnte" [Saying what could be], 279–97.

10   Nowak and Altmeppen, "Verantwortung erfolgreich delegiert" [Successfully delegated responsibility], 370–87.

11   Hoffmann and Russ-Mohl, "Der Fall Relotius und die Auswirkungen auf den *Spiegel*" [The Relotius case and the effects on *Der Spiegel*], 210–39.

¹² Moreno and Relotius, "Jaegers Grenze," 54–61; see also, Moreno and Relotius, "Der Text, der alles veränderte: 'Jaegers Grenze' " [The text that changed everything: 'Jaeger's Limit'], 65–81.

¹³ Fichtner, "*Der Spiegel* Reveals Internal Fraud," para. 5.

¹⁴ Fichtner, para. 6.

¹⁵ Fichtner, para. 1.

¹⁶ Fehrle, Höges, and Weigel, "Der Fall Relotius. Abschlussbericht Der Aufklärungskommission," 131. Original quote: "Im *Spiegel* und auf *Spiegel Online* sind in den vergangenen Jahren rund 60 Texte erschienen, die Claas Relotius geschrieben hat oder an denen er beteiligt war."

¹⁷ Fehrle, Höges, and Weigel, 137. Original quote: "Die Reportagen, die das Gesellschaftsressort mit einigen der besten Autoren der Republik Woche für Woche produziert, sind oft filmisch erzählte Geschichten; Plots werden akribisch geplant und Figuren gelegentlich wie bei einem Filmcasting gesucht."

¹⁸ Fehrle, Höges, and Weigel, 137. Original quote: "Die Geschichten leben von hoher Detailgenauigkeit. Dies ist im Fall der Entstehungsgeschichte von Jaegers Grenze in einem E-Mail-Verkehr zwischen Matthias Geyer, Moreno und Relotius gut nachzuvollziehen."

¹⁹ Fehrle, Höges, and Weigel, 145. Original quote: "1. Die Geschichte muss stimmen. Verantwortlich dafür ist die Redaktion. 2. Stimmen heißt nicht nur, dass die Fakten richtig sind, dass es die Personen gibt, dass die Orte authentisch sind. Der Text muss in Dramaturgie und Ablauf die Wirklichkeit wiedergeben."

²⁰ Eberwein, "Sagen, was sein könnte" [Saying what could be], 289–91.

²¹ Nowak and Altmeppen, "Verantwortung erfolgreich delegiert" [Successfully delegated responsibility], 376–84.

²² Hoffmann and Russ-Mohl, "Der Fall Relotius und die Auswirkungen auf den *Spiegel*" [The Relotius case and the effects on *Der Spiegel*], 227–29.

²³ Kille, "Committee of Concerned Journalists: The Principles of Journalism," para. 3.

²⁴ Malik, *Journalismusjournalismus* [Journalism about journalism], 142–51.

²⁵ Malik, 131–33.

²⁶ Carlson, "Metajournalistic Discourse and the Meanings of Journalism," 350.

²⁷ Bernhard, "Lügenpresse, Lügenpolitik, Lügensystem" [Lying press, politics of lies, system of lies], 170–87; Lazer et al., "The Science of Fake News," 1094–96.

²⁸ Denner and Peter, "Der Begriff Lügenpresse in deutschen Tageszeitungen" [The term *Lügenpresse* (lying press) in German daily newspapers], 273–97.

²⁹ Entman, "Framing," 52. (Italics in original)

³⁰ Scheufele, *Frames–Framing–Framing-Effekte* [Frames–framing–framing-effects], 46.

³¹ Katzenberger and von der Wense, "Zwischen Fakten und Fiktion" [Between facts and fiction], 133–49; Riebling and von der Wense, "Framing the Mass Media," 57–76.

³² Tashakkori and Teddlie, "The Past and Future of Mixed Methods Research," 671–701.

[33] Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, "Mixed Methods Research," 17. (Italics in original)

[34] MAXQDA is a software for qualitative data and text analysis, provided by VERBI-Software GmbH, and available for a fee (https://www.maxqda.com/de/). The present study used MAXQDA to analyze and code articles dealing with the Relotius affair, taken from the daily and weekly press. The analysis was carried out in March 2019.

[35] Haslwanter, *An Introduction to Statistics with Python*, 183–220.

[36] Schmid, "Improvements in Part-of-Speech Tagging with an Application to German," 47–50; Schmid, "Probabilistic Part-of-Speech Tagging Using Decision Trees," 1–9; Pointal, "TreeTagger Python Wrapper 2.3 Documentation." Wikipedia Google defines the *lemma* as deriving from morphology and lexicography, where a "*lemma* (plural *lemmas* or *lemmata*)" is the root word, or root form, "of a set of word forms. In English, for example, *break*, *breaks*, *broke*, *broken* and *breaking* are forms of the same *lexeme*, with *break* as the lemma by which they are indexed" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lemma_(morphology).

[37] WISO is a database that provides access to full-text articles from the daily and weekly press provided by GBI-Genios Deutsche Wirtschaftsdatenbank GmbH. The database can be used online (https://www.wiso-net.de). The present study used WISO to access articles from the daily and weekly press dealing with the Relotius affair. The articles were downloaded in February 2019.

[38] Eberwein, "Sagen, was sein könnte" [Saying what could be], 290. Original quote: "Bemerkenswert ist dabei, dass in der Selbstberichterstattung des Spiegels lange vor allem die Frames vom Einzeltäter und der passiv duldenden Redaktion dominieren. Andere Medien kommen bereits in der Frühphase der öffentlichen Debatte zu deutlich differenzierteren Bewertungen. Beim Spiegel ändert sich dies erst im Mai 2019, als die interne Untersuchungskommission ihren Bericht vorlegt. Spätestens dann wird klar, dass eine redaktionelle Mitverantwortung nicht mehr zu leugnen ist."

[39] Hoffmann and Russ-Mohl, "Der Fall Relotius und die Auswirkungen auf den *Spiegel*" [The Relotius case and the effects on *Der Spiegel*], 219. Original quote: "2. Hauptschuldiger ist hingegen deutlich und durchgängig Relotius, der zunächst als findiger Betrüger dargestellt wird, welcher ein robustes System überlistete. Umgekehrt wird die Redaktion als Opfer des Täters deklariert—"

[40] Malik, *Journalismusjournalismus* [Journalism about journalism], 283–86. Original quote: "Infolgedessen gilt auch für die journalistische Selbstthematisierung, dass sie maßgeblich von der Autorität der Führungsrollen beeinflusst ist."

[41] Malik, 278; Malik, "Stars, Skandale, Sensationen—Und Immer an Den Leser Denken" [Stars, scandals, sensations—and always thinking of the reader], 54.

[42] Krüger and Müller-Sachse, *Medienjournalismus*, 69.

[43] Relotius, "In einer kleinen Stadt" [In a small town], 54–63.

[44] Menke and Serong, "Scandals of Fabricated Reporting as Critical Incidents for Journalistic Boundary Work," 18.

[45] Menke and Serong, 16–17.

[46] Carlson, "Gone, But Not Forgotten," 45.

[47] The full list contains the following words: *Erfindung, Erzählung, Lüge|Lügen, Lüge, Erzählen, Erzähler, Märchenerzähler, Geschichtenerzähler, Geschichtenerzählen, Erfinder, Lügengerüst, Lügner, Erzählfluss, Lügengeschichte, Lügen-Affäre, Gegenerzählung, Lügengebilde, Lügengespinst, Interviewerfinder, Lügenreporter, lügensüchtige, Grubenhund-Erfinder, Lügenreportagen, lügenkontaminierte, Lügnerei, Geschichten-Erzählen, Erzählformen, Lügengebäude, Erfinden, Geschichtenerfinder, Lügensucht, Lügen-PR, Nacherzählen, Erzählte, Lügen-Reporter, erfindungsreich.*

[48] Fehrle, Höges, and Weigel, "Der Fall Relotius. Abschlussbericht Der Aufklärungskommission," 142–46.

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