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Journalism as an affective institution

Emotional labor and the discourse on fraud at *Der Spiegel*

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Abstract

This paper explores the underlying aspects surrounding emotional labor in everyday life inside newsrooms and how these aspects contribute to discursively (de)stabilize journalism as an institution. In order to do this, we apply the literature on affect and emotion in journalism as well as on discursive institutionalism to the analysis of a particular moment of crisis: the fraud scandal around Claas Relotius, an award-winning German reporter for the news magazine *Der Spiegel*. The discovery of his massive fake feature stories caused a fierce and controversial discussion on the media about structural problems in journalism as well as the use of emotion in feature stories and exclusion mechanisms inside the newsroom. In our textual analysis of 138 articles on this case published in German and selected international media between December 2018 and December 2019, we uncovered four main areas in which the role of emotions is discursively negotiated (1) *Form*: feature stories and their use of emotions, (2) *Actor*: emotional attributions to Relotius, (3) *Practice*: emotions as part of *editorial practices*, understood here as emotional labor in the newsroom, and (4) *Institution*: the description of the event and its affective implications for journalism as a whole.

Introduction

On 19 December 2018, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* revealed that its award-winning reporter, Claas Relotius, had been publishing massive forgeries in the magazine for eight years. This revelation stirred extensive debate in German and international media about *Der Spiegel's* responsibilities and mistakes, and about the consequences for both *Der Spiegel* and for journalism as an institution more broadly. His fraud is part of a “history of media faking” (Leigh, 2019, p. 162) that has consistently involved highly respected media organizations. However, the shock articulated in this debate drew its intensity from far-right accusations raised against legacy media under the term “lying press” (Haller & Holt, 2019). Over the past years trust in journalism as an institution has been put into doubt (Krämer, 2018). Journalism as a profession has seen a lowered standard of working conditions and a rise of precarious freelance work. Yet the fraud case at *Der Spiegel* seems to point to the opposite direction. Relotius was one of the most privileged actors in the field of journalism in terms of working conditions, salary and reputation. In contrast, it was Juan Moreno, a freelance reporter work-

ing with Relotius on a story, who finally revealed the fraud despite the head of department's resistance. As a son of Spanish immigrants, he felt like an outsider in the newsroom (Moreno, 2019). As a freelancer, his insistence on the disclosure put him at personal risk.

While some analysis has been done on ethical or linguistic issues of the fakes (e.g. Heinecke, 2019), we are interested in how emotions become visible here. Rooted in more recent research on the “turn to affect and emotion in media and communication studies” (Lünenborg & Maier, 2018) as well as in journalism studies (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019), we focus on the ways journalism as an institution is established, challenged and contested in relation to emotions in the coverage of Relotius' frauds.

Media discourse about the fraud primarily focused on practices of fact-checking, and on the need for objective, fact-based news. However, under the surface of this focus on facts, it is possible to detect indications for adequate ways to perform emotions as a journalist and in journalistic work. In our analysis, we distinguish emotional labor in journalism on four areas: (1) journalistic forms, (2) journalists as actors, (3) work in the newsroom, and (4) finally, journalism as an institution. To understand how journalism as an institution is established and challenged affectively, we will analyze the discourse around emotions and affect in the fraud scandal of Relotius and *Der Spiegel*.

We start with a short overview of the role of affect and emotion in public communication, contextualized by emotion theory in the social sciences and by affect studies in the humanities. We link this literature with ongoing debates on neo-institutionalism. We then turn to our specific case study, presenting the significance of the news magazine *Der Spiegel* in the German media system and briefly outlining the series of occurrences.

Journalism, Affect and Emotion

We understand affect and emotions through a relational lens. Affect constitutes “a dynamic building block, potentially transgressing normatively prescribed and learned ways of relating to the world” (von Scheve & Slaby, 2019, pp. 44–45). Emotions are “episodic realizations of affect” (von Scheve & Slaby, 2019, p. 46) that individuals can label through culturally and historically established categories such as anger, fear or joy. As affect circulates, bodies and objects become involved in a process of both affecting each other and being affected by each other. At the same time, the act of pin-

pointing an affect as a known emotion may also lead to an intensification of the experience. Thus, emotional reflexivity as a contemporary social technique is increasingly valued and includes the ability to bring emotions, as a structure of the social, more strongly into focus.

For the current study, we zoom in on two particular forms of circulation of affect and emotion: feeling rules and emotional labor, which are strongly connected. Following Hochschild's (1979) concept of feeling rules, Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen (2011, p. 108) discuss how "media work as a bridge between personal and public emotions: (...) personal emotions become public, and public emotions in turn shape personal emotions." As a mediated form of communication, journalism, thus, establishes feeling rules for society while its own relation to emotions stays ambivalent. This places journalists at permanent contradiction between their field's normative expectations, which include emotional distance towards events, and the role that journalism plays in mediating emotions in the public sphere as a specific type of emotional labor.

Studies have focused on journalists' strategies for managing this contradiction as well as their own emotions while performing their work. These strategies reveal some of the feeling rules established in the journalistic field. For instance, when dealing with interview partners, journalists must be empathetic in order to establish a trusting relationship – without, at the same time, violating professional standards. In addition, research shows that many journalists consider the coverage of emotions necessary for an adequate representation of reality (Pantti, 2010). However, they are also wary of losing credibility if their public or colleagues consider their use of emotions in the coverage to be excessive or sensationalist (Richards & Rees, 2011). In this sense, they perform a type of emotional labor towards fellow journalists, regulating how much emotion makes it into their reports (Rosas, 2018). One strategy journalists employ in order to maintain their professional claims of emotional distance while producing their coverage is source selection that privileges "citizens' emotional responses" (Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011, p. 116) to events. This way, journalists relegate the emotions in a story to the quoted sources. This may also lead to specific dynamics inside the newsroom, as for instance journalists' own experiences with trauma while covering events such as war and natural disasters are far less discussed in newsrooms than sources' emotions (Richards & Rees, 2011).

The studies we have described so far focus mostly on journalists' emotional labor in the context of crisis reporting. However, the case we analyze reveals another aspect of emotional labor that is performed in everyday life inside the newsroom. We argue

that journalists carry out emotional labor as they interact with each other through quotidian negotiations around work routines inside their organization. Based on practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002), we understand human agency and social structures as mutually constituted. Thus, the doings and sayings of journalists rely on their personal embodied competences, as well as on the socioeconomic and technical resources of the newsroom and the media company. With a focus on the everyday, practice theory is centered on how actors use shared knowledge in their symbolic organization of reality. Journalists use incorporated and implicit knowledge to perform their work successfully, and this knowledge in turn becomes part of the established practices accepted or even praised by their colleagues. With the analytic ‘turn to affect’, more attention has been paid to the affective dimension of social practices. As Reckwitz points out: “*every social order as a set of practices is a specific order of affects*” (Reckwitz, 2017, p. 116, italics by the author). Relying on Wetherell (2012), we thus understand affect and emotions as integral parts of any kind of social practice. We use such an understanding to identify how emotions become relevant to the building of social order in the newsroom and in journalism more generally. Scholarship on new institutionalism helps us understand the relation between practices, discourses and social institutions.

Understanding Journalism as an Institution

New institutionalism is an approach that defines institutions “in terms of informal routines, scripts, rules, or guidelines for behavior that span across organizations” (Ryfe, 2006, p. 136). As such, it is a promising path towards better understanding how journalism reacts and adapts to challenges. By considering institutions’ embeddedness in a broader cultural, economic and political context, it becomes visible how organizational routines and rules reflect the norms of societies (Kaplan, 2006, p. 173-174) as well as how various actors provoke or resist institutional change.

While there are a variety of approaches subsumed under new institutionalism¹, in this study, we draw in particular on discursive institutionalism, emphasizing actors’ agency in “processes of negotiation, conflict and contestation” (Mackay, Kenny, Chappell, 2010, p. 575). Institutions here are understood as based on norms and meaning systems. As such, they focus on the circulation of ideas through discourse inside and beyond an institution. It is through this interactive process that actors negotiate institutional change (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017, p. 120). Discourse maintains the tension be-

¹ For an overview of the main theoretical strands, see Schmidt (2010) as well as Mackay et al. (2010).

tween stability and change. Actors can reflect critically about the institutions they integrate by communicating and deliberating about them, in order to convince themselves and other actors to enact change inside institutions (Schmidt, 2010, p. 16).

Applying new institutionalism to journalism allows us to focus on the rules and practices that both limit and enable the news-making process. Journalism’s institutional character can be observed in the fact that very different and often competing newsrooms still implement similar rules and routines, even if these would seem to run counter to market interests (Cook, 2006, p. 162). However, there is no static set of rules. Rather, actors continuously negotiate them through discourse. Such negotiations reveal the journalistic institution’s dynamic character, since the “logic of appropriateness” that permeates rules and practices “is subject to discursive (re)creation, (re)interpretation, appropriation, and contestation” (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017, p. 121). Therefore, it makes sense to talk about the continuous process of (de-)institutionalization that marks journalism.

Connecting the scholarship on affect and emotions to new institutionalism, we understand feeling rules and journalists’ emotional labor as an important part of the ongoing negotiations and cultural consensus forming journalism as an institution. In our research, we focus on the discursive negotiations happening inside the journalistic field, while also reflecting on the relationship between journalism and society at large. Current challenges to journalism cannot be fully understood by focusing on the internal dynamics of the journalistic field alone, as they pertain to broader processes. These processes include the increasing precarization of various economic sectors, including the media industry (Deuze & Witschge, 2018, p. 176). They also include digitalization, which for journalism means a higher diversity of media sources to challenge legacy media’s interpretation of events and gatekeeping capabilities (Bennett and Livingston, 2018, p. 128). There are also political processes, such as the rise of far-right actors, whose discourse strongly relies on distrust towards legacy media and on disinformation strategies (Krämer, 2018, p. 138).

A particularly relevant development that reflects this broader context is that publics are becoming increasingly complex due to the convergence of legacy media and personalized networks of communication in social media. This poses a direct challenge to journalism’s interpretative functions, giving rise to “an ongoing struggle” among competing elements of “tone, modality, volume, and dominance of speakers in a given public” (Lünenborg, 2020, p. 34). This, in turn, questions the Habermasian division between public and private communication, since both modes of articulation collapse into the same (mostly digital and networked) space. In order to capture this complexity,

we propose the concept of affective publics, which considers the performative, networked nature of current public communication, and overcomes the division between rationality and emotion in the deliberative model of the public sphere. Affective publics include “modes of relational interaction among citizens and between citizens and (digital media) technology” (Lünenborg, 2020, p. 30-31). We consider how these modes relate to journalists’ boundary work, as they discursively interact with audiences’ demands on journalism as an institution, and the changes this can lead to in journalists’ internalized professional roles (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017, p. 125-126), thus integrating the perspectives provided both by discursive institutionalism and field theory.

Journalists are largely expected to act autonomously, i.e. to define and enforce their own rules and practices (Benson, 2006, p. 189). Communicating journalism’s autonomous character to the public and to other social actors becomes central to “produc[ing] the symbolic boundaries of journalism and news practice” (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p. 33).

Journalism as an institution is dynamically constituted and challenged through three levels of boundary work: actors (Who is a journalist and who is not?), forms (What characterizes a piece of journalism?), and practices (What does a journalist do?). Understanding journalism’s boundary work as dynamic allows us to analyze transformations over time as a “discursive struggle between competing views toward journalism’s identity and position in society” (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017, p. 130).

This struggle also takes place when journalists employ textual forms and style conventions culturally connected to journalism in a specific society. These textual forms arm journalists with the authority to provide reliable information, as the public cannot verify whether events really did transpire as covered (Schudson, 1982).

Claas Relotius seemed to perform his work in a way that contributed to asserting journalism’s boundaries, especially through his writing of feature stories. This brought him wide recognition in the field, as reflected in the many journalistic prizes he won, another tool for boundary work and production of symbolic capital (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p. 30). However, he broke the essential rule that reporting must be truthful.

We analyze the coverage of the scandal around Relotius’ fabrications as a case that lends insight into how journalism, as a discursive institution, is self-reflexively challenged in a moment of crisis. In particular, our analysis focuses on how affect and

emotion shape discursive negotiations that lead to changes in journalism as an institution. Before we present our findings, some background information on the German media landscape is necessary.

The Relotius Scandal

Germany's high level of press freedom is protected by constitutional guarantees and an independent justice system. However, the country's media landscape also faces serious challenges. These include decreasing levels of media diversity, heightened precarity for freelancers, and an escalation of verbal and physical attacks against individual journalists (RSF, 2020). Moreover, far-right actors have increasingly targeted journalists, particularly since the ascension of the far-right movement PEGIDA in 2015, fueled by a discourse that combines the historically authoritarian term "lying press" with conspiracy theories around legacy media (Haller & Holt, 2019). Against this background, *Der Spiegel*, Germany's widest circulating weekly news magazine, faced a major challenge to its credibility after its star reporter Claas Relotius admitted to having faked various feature stories.

On December 19, 2018, *Der Spiegel* dedicated the cover of its print magazine to the Relotius scandal, apologizing to its readers and announcing a rigid investigation of the case (Der Spiegel, 2018a). *Der Spiegel*'s famous fact-checking unit and professional proofreading had failed to uncover a variety of mistakes and lies. These facts had only become public through the persistent research of Relotius' colleague Juan Moreno. Moreno fought tenaciously against his editors to bring attention to his doubts about the working methods of the "faithful Claas" (Moreno, 2019), as he later described in a detailed report on his research. Further investigation revealed that, of Relotius' 60 stories published in the magazine, a substantial part contained mistakes. These ranged from inaccuracies to false statements, and from invented locations and descriptions to wholly fictional actors and completely made up stories. An external commission was appointed to examine the case. In May 2019, they delivered a report describing in detail how substantial negligence of professional structures resulted from naïve trust in the young successful reporter, failing professional standards of fact-checking, and an editorial climate privileging the Society beat and separating it from the rest of the newsroom (Der Spiegel, 2019).

After delivering some pieces to *Der Spiegel* as a freelancer starting in 2011, Relotius gained a staff position as an editor and reporter at the magazine in 2017. He thus became part of the Society beat, an editorial unit responsible for feature stories. As a

freelancer, he published for various other media outlets, and won, throughout his career, 19 journalism prizes. His feature stories, mostly from abroad, were based on classical forms of storytelling, in-depth introspection of characters, and dualist structures of hero and villain. His work was praised by a jury for its "unprecedented lightness, density and relevance, which never leaves its sources undisclosed" (SZ, 2018b), a statement that became cynical after the falsification came to light.

The scandal triggered an extensive and critical debate on trust in journalism. Most of this discourse became visible in journalism itself – a self-reflexive view of the field that Carlson (2016) called "meta-journalistic discourse". We understand this discourse as part of journalism's current boundary work and as such an element of ongoing discursive institutionalization.

Method

National and regional media covered the Relotius scandal widely in the weeks following the first pieces in *Der Spiegel*. The publication of the internal investigation report in May 2019 (Der Spiegel, 2019) caused another – yet significantly lower – peak of media coverage. One year after the scandal, several media used the anniversary as an institutionalized form of memory work to revisit the topic and reflect on its long-term consequences.

We understand the scandal coverage as part of an institutional discourse, including actors with differing "discursive abilit[ies] to shape public conversations about journalism's identity and position in society" (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017, p. 122). We chose the sample for our analysis by focusing on those with the most "discursive power" (ibid.). In addition to the reporting in *Der Spiegel* itself, our material includes print and online contributions by the German national daily and weekly newspapers *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)*, *die tageszeitung (taz)*, *Die Welt*, *Bild*, *Die Zeit* as well as specialist media reporting on journalism and media (*Kress*, *Meedia*, *Übermedien*, *telepolis*, *Salonkolumnisten*). The national newspapers cover a wide spectrum of political positions, including liberal (*SZ*), conservative (*FAZ*, *Welt*) as well as moderate left (*taz*), and broadsheets as well as a tabloid paper (*Bild*). For international reporting, *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and the Swiss national paper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ)* were taken into account.

We examined three periods: (1) immediately after the fraud became known (December 19, 2018 to March 30, 2019), (2) following the publication of *Der Spiegel*'s investigation report (May 24, 2019 to May 31, 2019), and one year after the fraud

scandal (November/December 2019) as a form of memory work and reflection on lasting consequences. A total of 138 articles form the basis of our analysis².

The analysis of this corpus was organized as textual analysis with a special focus on the articulation and discursive construction of emotion and affect. Textual analysis describes “a type of qualitative analysis beyond the manifest content of media, [which] focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text. Text is understood as a complex set of discursive strategies that is situated in a special cultural context” (Fürsich, 2009, p. 240). Based on this tradition of critical cultural analysis, we read the texts as articulations of journalists reflecting on their own position and institutional power in society. As such, we are interested in how journalism reflects and (re)produces the conditions of its authority in a moment of crisis.

To address our interest in the emotional and affective dimensions of this discourse, we employ the interdisciplinary approach of “*Reading for Affect*” (Berg et al. 2019). This approach “foregrounds affective phenomena as a hermeneutic lens, capitalizing on affect and emotion as sensitizing concepts in the interpretation of discourse” (p. 51). The authors build on existing work on emotion in language as developed by Reddy’s (2001) concept of ‘emotives’, which he defines as “specific forms of speech acts that do not simply have emotions as referents but are performatives that ‘do things to the world’” (Berg et al. 2019, p. 47). Adding to this performative understanding, they argue for extended access including (1) the attribution of “emotion words” to specific actors, (2) forms of emotion-based linguistic collectivization and (3) the materiality of discourse itself (Berg et al., 2019, p. 51). “Emotion words” refers to the use of emotional terms to describe persons. We use this approach to look for the emotional description of journalists, whether as individual journalists (especially Relotius) or as journalists more broadly. Looking for linguistic collectivization allows us to identify the construction of emotion-based groups in the discourse, e.g. readers or star reporters. The materiality of discourse becomes a subject of analysis when we look for stylistic forms of hyperbole or linguistic excess in the description of the event.

These methodological tools enable us to analyze the material alongside our research question:

How does the discourse around emotions and affect in the Relotius scandal contribute to (de)stabilize journalism as an institution?

² A complete list of articles cited as well as a table with the amount of selected articles per media in the overall material are included at the end of the article.

To answer this question, we take a detailed look at these four areas: (1) How are emotions produced and staged in forms of *storytelling*? (2) How are journalists as *actors* expected to perform feeling rules as part of their professional role? (3) How does emotional labor in the newsroom play out to establish an *affective community*? (4) How is journalism as an *institution in crisis* discussed and (re)produced affectively?

In the next section, we present the answers our analysis provides to these questions, drawing on the Relotius case as an example of how journalism as an institution is grounded in affect and emotions.

The Relotius scandal: Form, Actor, Practice, and Journalism as an Institution

It was striking to observe how intensely emotions and affect were either explicitly mentioned or indirectly referred to in our material. Our systematization made this even clearer. By distinguishing different areas of attribution, we identified four aspects: (1) *Form*: feature stories and their use of emotions, understood here as emotional labor in storytelling and its partly conflictive relation to the notion of objectivity, (2) *Actor*: emotional attributions to Claas Relotius, (3) *Practice*: emotions as part of *editorial practices*, understood here as emotional labor in the newsroom, and (4) *Institution*: the description of the event and its affective implications for journalism as a whole.

We will first describe in detail how these four aspects are negotiated in the media coverage, and then consider how they (de)stabilize journalism as an institution.

Form: Emotions in Feature Stories

Relotius' articles were particularly praised for their narrative style, their dense description of intimate details, and their empathetic treatment of vulnerable protagonists. However, many of these details and protagonists turned out to be fictional. Relotius aimed to generate emotions, first among his colleagues and later among his readers. A *Der Spiegel* colleague tried to put this effect into words: “I can't remember the last time I was so moved by a text. Unbearably strong text” (Der Spiegel, 2019, p. 132). This manner of *producing emotions* through journalism is heavily discussed in the coverage of the event. While traditionally such a focus on emotions is considered to be part of tabloid journalism, the fraud scandal offers an opportunity to switch these roles. Germany's biggest tabloid *Bild*, quoting the communication scholar Hans Matthias Kepplinger, jumps at the chance: “The information contained in the fake stories is near zero. They sell emotion instead of information” (Bild, 2018).

Here we find the traditional dichotomist structure of fact versus emotion, equivalent to journalism versus fiction writing. It is not the fraud that is seen as the main problem, but the concentration on a form of storytelling that immerses readers into individual characters and their feelings. Beyond the Relotius case, some actors in the field argue that storytelling techniques often attempt to overcome contradictions that cannot be easily explained. In this vein, one op-ed author attributed a “tranquilizing effect” to the way combining fact and fiction simplifies complex realities in storytelling, “stabilize[s] feelings and bring[s] order into chaos” (Die Zeit, 2018a). On the other hand, many reporters defended their use of storytelling in feature stories, arguing that this format fulfills an important function in journalism, since it “connects facts with feeling (...) [and] tries to make tangible what the facts only describe” (Die Zeit, 2018c).

Debates about feature story writing in journalism have a long tradition, from muckrakers to *new journalism*. The coverage of the scandal was marked by competing attempts to draw a precise line between *describing reality* and *composing reality itself*. A former editor wrote: “When I worked for *Der Spiegel* (...), the Society beat had a reputation for not overdoing a love of truth when in doubt. It certainly didn't mean fraud and fabrications, but condensations, exaggerations, creative freedom. (...) The most important goal is to tell the best possible, densest, most inspiring story, not necessarily the most accurate one” (Übermedien, 2018). The goal described in this quote is to commodify affect and emotion in journalism, as the CEO of the Springer publishing house, Matthias Döpfner, mentioned: “Relotius delivered a product that was desired, and no doubt not only by *Der Spiegel*” (NZZ, 2019a).

Journalists’ expectations about what constitutes a great feature story also aided Relotius’ success. Regarding the fabricated story of a young boy who started the Syrian war by spraying graffiti on the wall, *Übermedien* wrote: “It is a story journalists dream of. Because it is emotional, dramatic, relevant. And because it seems like an incredible piece of contemporary history” (Übermedien, 2019a).

In addition, journalists and the publics’ expectations about reality itself are another aspect in the discussion. Reflections around how Relotius’ US stories fed the European imaginary of the country, for example, are prominent in the material. *The Washington Post* wrote about Relotius’ piece on the Minnesota town Fergus Falls: “(...) he delivered the editors' expected portrait of a place populated by openly bigoted yokels” (Washington Post, 2018).

As a foreign correspondent, Relotius' fraud seemed to confirm the biases of his peers and audiences back home, not only towards the US. As an article in *Die Zeit* summarized it, Relotius' stories "provided shivers and delight, as they contained exactly the clichés (...) that everyone suspected in the audience" (Die Zeit, 2018a).

Charlotte Wiedemann, a foreign correspondent writing on Muslim societies in the global South, noted that these expectations are embedded in a broader context of prejudices rooted in colonialism: "What needs did Claas Relotius' fraud meet? (...) Where does falsehood border on common legend when the white eye turns to other cultures?" Some reports, she wrote sharply, "satisfy (...) the rather white desire to suffer from the evil world, without consequences, without responsibility. It's bad out there" (taz, 2019b). She argued for exercising cautious restraint towards journalists' claims of having immersed themselves in the inner lives of complete strangers. Instead she identified news stories that try to reduce complex entanglements to personal stories as insufficient. Her analysis adds an important aspect to the critical self-reflection of journalism's objectivity norm, which is instrumental in obscuring global inequalities of knowledge production by claiming to provide non-situated knowledge, while in fact remaining mostly in the perspective of the white, powerful observer.

Feature stories are susceptible to fraud as they rely on personal observation and individual experience. Schudson introduced the idea "that the power of the media lies not only (...) in its power to declare things to be true, but in its power to provide the forms in which the declarations appear" (Schudson, 1982, 98). However, the stability of a number of formats that developed over centuries - among them the news - has given way to the diversification of 'contingent hybrids.' In turn, this diversification process has led to the ongoing re-signification of established conventions, in an attempt to defend journalism's authority to deliver valid interpretations of reality (Lünenborg, 2017). Storytelling in feature stories is one of these hybrid forms, using dramaturgical rules from fictional writing and alternating between literature and journalism. It combines description with analysis, and subjective introspection with fact-based scrutiny.

The *immersive quality* that marks feature stories, including immersion into the feelings of the reporter and protagonists, raises questions about the epistemic character of journalistic knowledge production. Beyond a naïve understanding of truth by the transmission of facts only, feature stories address the question of positioned knowledge, always relying on the observer's position and his or her ability and willingness to share the conditions and limitations of such observation. Emotions are a core element of this form. These can include the emotions of the reporter in an unexpected situation, the emotions of the protagonists, and indeed, the emotions triggered in the readers. Using

immersive techniques of storytelling, journalists practice the “strategic ritual of emotionality” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012).

This use of emotions became the subject of extensive journalistic debate and criticism, as it was prevalent in both Relotius' storytelling and in *Der Spiegel's* own coverage of the scandal. The field's reactions when *Der Spiegel* used a style similar to Relotius' own style to uncover the fraud in one of its first online pieces were not just positive. An example of this is the reaction to a personalized story on Claas Relotius by his colleague Fichtner, which depicted Relotius as the bad guy betraying Germany's most important newsmagazine (*Der Spiegel*, 2018b). This depiction was the object of heavy disagreement, as one author wrote: "And as he writes his former colleague into immeasurable depths, he overestimates his own magazine. (...) Fichtner then drives self-elevation to extremes through demonstrative, record-breaking throwing himself at our feet. (...) The apparent attempt to unsparingly investigate becomes such vain, sticky glop." (Übermedien, 2018). Here, the journalistic field no longer accepts the strategic use of emotion – visible as exaggerated humility – as authentic.

Some actors also noticed a positivist turn in the whole discussion: “You play beauty and truth against each other as if to will the positivism controversy of the 1970s into journalism again” (Kress 2019b). Against this trend, authors argued for a return to stricter reporting methods and transparency towards readers, in order to prevent further fabrications. Yet they also recommended embracing the reporters' subjectivity as a way to capture reality's nuances more accurately. Often, this argument is embedded in comparisons between Relotius' representation of emotions in his stories, seen as too perfect, and the work of excellent reporters in history. Unlike Relotius, it is argued, the latter were empathetic while acknowledging their own limitations: “They articulate their own biases, expose insightfully their own perplexity, astonishment and (...) incomprehension” (SZ, 2019).

The debate around feature stories as a genre proves to be complex. It is permeated not only by aspects pertaining to journalistic techniques, but also by journalists' various understandings of the role emotions should play in feature stories and in the reporters' interactions with the world. Relotius is presented as employing forbidden methods of fabrication in order to appeal to audiences and peers by perfectly confirming their biases. The emotional labor he performed when writing his pieces had a “tranquilizing” function, reassuring readers that they were right all along. As the next section will show, this stark perception of Relotius as an over-simplifier was not so predominant before his fabrications emerged. How other actors perceived him seems to

have contributed strongly to his peers' shocked reactions when they discovered that he had violated the field's (feeling) rules for so long.

Actor: Emotional Attributions to Relotius

Barely an article in the first weeks after the scandal went without mentioning Claas Relotius' modesty. This impression was enhanced through the contrast between his modesty and *Der Spiegel* reporters' well-established image. Relotius was described here as an exception: "Claas Relotius (33) is actually a nice person, a dream colleague: Without conceit, which is not always strange to *Der Spiegel* reporters, without arrogance, rather a little introspective" (Kress, 2018). This appealing modesty – or more precisely, the impression of modesty he left on the observer – seems to have lent Relotius a special credibility which, combined with the news magazine's institutional weight, enabled him to remain credible even when confronted with critical interventions.

Although he was always described as “nice and friendly” (Spiegel, 2019, p. 132) he intervened persistently to avoid critical letters to the editor and critical questions about his stories from becoming public – and was successful for years. Moreno, who eventually managed to prove Relotius' fraud, summarized the situation later in an interview: "On one hand, you have the nicest colleague on earth (...), as everyone I talked to described him. On the other hand, you have me, someone behaving kind of strangely" (SZ, 2018a). Through his distrust of Relotius, Moreno became an outlier in the general perception of his peers. This becomes clearer in the description contained in *Der Spiegel*'s final investigation report of the relationship between Relotius and his bosses as being “marked by absolute confidence, partly admiration” (Spiegel, 2019, p. 132).

The strong focus on Claas Relotius' personality in the coverage of the scandal reflects broader trends in journalism towards personalization (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Interestingly, these very trends were also criticized in some of the debates about Relotius' writing style, such as his reduction of structural issues to a story about an individual. The contrast between Relotius' actions and the emotions his colleagues projected onto him can also be seen in the broader context of the *Spiegel* newsroom.

Practice: Emotional Labor in the Newsroom

The external commission's meticulous reconstruction of the case not only uncovered details about errors in decision-making and failures in fact-checking, but also revealed the emotional structure within the organization as such. The editorial office can be understood as an "affective community" (Zink, 2019) that organizes its social order through forms of inclusion and exclusion. This becomes obvious in the statements the commission collected among reporters and editors, as well as in criticisms from wider media discourse on the case

Relotius was part of the Society beat, which was endowed with privileges inside a magazine that already had a reputation for housing big egos. "Reporters' privileges were extensive: opulent salaries, exemption from compulsory subjects, all travel options, if necessary foreign posts of your choice - trivialities of everyday life took place elsewhere" (taz, 2019a). Coverage of the affair portrayed the closed community of star reporters as "real men's business" (taz, 2019a) where members performed their virility and vanity. Involuntarily, one of the editors reproduced this image when describing the team's arrival to the newsroom as a hostile conquest: "We came in here like Israel came into the Arab territories and immediately had a six-day war" (Der Spiegel, 2019, p. 140).

The privileged position of the Society beat stirred envy and caused conflicts. The final report noted that "hatred for the department had grown ever stronger" (ibid., p. 140). Members of the beat explicitly refused otherwise established forms of cooperation and peer-control. Practices based on informal arrangements distinguishing the inner group from the rest of the newsroom trumped professional rules of fact-checking and proofreading. Media discourse described the situation sharply: "(...) an *esprit de corps* flourished that is unparalleled in German journalism. Accordingly, the authors, especially the male ones, presented themselves as knowing, sublime, untouchable" (taz, 2019a).

Rather than correcting mistakes, emotional bonding within the team was prioritized, as in the following report about loyalty: "A documentarian told the Commission that it was unusual to snitch on sloppy colleagues" (Der Spiegel, 2019, p. 142). Star reporters' authority, widely asserted in the field through prizes and recognition from the bosses, seemed to both intimidate and fascinate fact-checkers into not doing their work: "And then fact-checkers are expected to interrogate such stars? To call every person quoted in the story? In theory, yes; in practice you trust the author, who is part of the team and has contributed to increasing the magazine's reputation" (Die Zeit, 2018b).

The extraordinarily privileged conditions within the team result in sharp boundaries to the outside. Thus, the reaction to Juan Moreno’s revelations was „slow and erroneous, characterized by trust towards Relotius and distrust against Moreno” (Der Spiegel, 2019, p. 134). The information Moreno delivered was not handled as a severe problem but as bickering between a freelancer and the young star in the editorial office. In this conflict, the power of feeling rules to define and justify social status and hierarchy becomes obvious. The responsible editor even chose the script of a genre film to articulate his mistrust: "I also told him [Juan Moreno] because of his sometimes pretty sleazy threats, more or less literally: Juan, honestly, you sound like a character from a mafia movie right now” (Der Spiegel, 2019, p. 136).

In sum, the editorial team appears in the coverage as an affective community, characterized by corporal spirit and male virility. It establishes its own feeling rules, with an emphasis on loyalty, pride and exceptionality and based on rigid boundaries towards other teams that are considered inferior. Both *Der Spiegel*’s internal report and other media’s coverage of the scandal provide valuable insights into how actors perform emotional labor in everyday life inside the newsroom. This emotional labor is central to structuring working relationships and routines, yet, as our case study reveals, these structures are mostly intuitive, not explicitly discussed.

It is important to understand how these mechanisms unfold within the daily routine of the newsroom, and how they shape the way the journalistic field handles different forms of social and cultural capital. Doing so may provide a new perspective on the circulation of affect and emotions inside organizations and in the journalistic field as a whole. An understanding of how such affect circulates is critical to showing how journalism as an institution negotiates its social function with regard to other institutions. The next section shows how the scandal around Relotius connects *Der Spiegel* as an organization to journalism as an institution, as journalists react to this affective event.

Institution: Journalism’s Crisis as an Affective Event

“This house is shaken” (Der Spiegel 2018a). This was the opening sentence of *Der Spiegel*’s editorial about the scandal in its own ‘house’. *NZZ* (2019b) declared the “shock to the institutional doctrine of faith. (...) The dogma of infallibility is gone.” Shock, shake and vibration are notions used in many of the articles published on the scandal, seen as causing “a mix of incredulity, horror and surprise” (Übermedien, 2019b).

The use of ‘shock’ and ‘shaking’ as terms to describe the crisis refers explicitly to affective experiences. The organization *Der Spiegel* and, more broadly, the institution of journalism, are described as a body shaken by external influences. Loss of stability and reduced power are direct effects. At the same time, some actors in the field saw this as an ideal moment to settle old scores with the magazine, as an author summarizes: “Envy, collegial malice, uncertainty, legitimate criticism – all this comes up in this muddled debate” (Die Zeit, 2018c). However, actors considered that the scandal not only affected *Der Spiegel*, but also brought the very institution of journalism under attack: “No one should say ‘this would not have happened to us.’ (...) Humility is required of us all” (Die Welt, 2019). This quote already reflects one of the solutions proposed: a humble *mea culpa* from German journalists and media houses, in which they get to the bottom of the scandal and return to traditional reporting standards, regaining the public’s trust.

Another overarching discourse arises in the face of escalating attacks against legacy media on the part of far-right actors. According to this discourse, the Relotius affair provides these actors with an opportunity to question journalism’s social function. The concerns were expressed in statements, such as that by German journalist Ines Pohl, who predicted: “Trump and populists everywhere will be popping the corks” (NYT, 2018). Often, reports directly quoted German far-right politicians or Trump supporters that refer to the case as justifying their media criticism.

However, such far-right discourses are not the only threat to journalism’s institutional credibility. With its massive coverage driven by affect, journalism itself produces the affective intensity shaking its own institutional foundations. Three months after the scandal was revealed, actors criticized this dynamic: “Anyone who reads hundreds of articles on the Causa Relotius is depressed, suspects the worst and prepares for the downfall of journalism: So much turmoil! So much excitement! So much mockery and envy and malice!” (Kress, 2019a). However, there were also optimistic voices in the debate, in particular about the fact that it was journalist Moreno who brought the case to light (FAZ, 2018). These actors argue for journalism’s ability to engage in paradigm repair and reassert its autonomy.

One year after the case, procedural solutions were among the main consequences newsrooms drew from the scandal. Journalists set out to defend the field through improvements to their professional practices, such as increasing fact-checking or developing new editorial standards (Meedia, 2019). Thus, the Relotius affair is a significant example of how affective dynamics and boundary work interact when journalism as an institution engages in lively discursive exchanges while facing multiple challenges.

Discussion

In this article, we explored how emotional labor permeates both the discursive negotiations around journalism as an institution and journalists' day-to-day practices and relationships. Our analysis of the German and international media coverage of the fraud scandal around star reporter Relotius provided us with insights into how the management of emotions forms and challenges journalism's institutional character, and how this character is discursively negotiated among journalists and with the public.

Using affect and emotion as a lens allowed us to distinguish four main themes that permeated the discussion. First, the discourse around storytelling in feature stories was marked by negotiations around reporters' emotional labor, both when researching on the ground and in their attempts to fulfill colleagues' and audiences' expectations. Relotius' feature stories were deemed "too perfect to be true", in the sense that they confirm readers' biases towards certain countries and subjects. They were deemed to have a "tranquilizing effect" that reduces uncertainty about a complex reality. In contrast, there was a high regard for reporters who performed emotional labor in their feature stories by explicitly allowing contradictions and uncertainty into their narratives as a way to make matters more palpable to readers. In short, storytelling can be described as emotional labor with words – anticipating readers' (limited) ability to deal with emotional dissonance.

A second discursive strand related to Relotius himself as an actor in the journalistic field. Relotius' performed personality – often described as humble, nice and shy – contrasted sharply with that of his peers at *Der Spiegel*, described as arrogant and self-serving. He was almost expected to perform the same characteristics as other star reporters. Relotius' apparent deviation from the field's cultural and symbolic capital enabled the long-lasting fraud and added to his peers' shock after his fabrications were uncovered. On the level of journalistic subjects, a blatant contradiction becomes apparent. On the one hand, role expectations towards a journalist, especially one employed at a prestigious media outlet with privileged working conditions, include the performative production of certain emotions, such as arrogance, pride, vanity. On the other hand, it is precisely the deviation from this pattern that generates special trust for this journalist among colleagues. This highlights the fundamental need for research on current attempts to redefine role expectations and self-image of journalists, as journalism seems to be losing credibility worldwide.

This brings us to the third discursive strand in the coverage, namely, emotional labor inside *Der Spiegel*'s newsroom. While there is a complex debate about the place

of emotions in journalistic texts, the significance of emotions in everyday journalistic practices is rarely discussed in journalism scholarship, with the exception of the affective dynamics of the war and crisis reporting experience (e.g. Rentschler, 2009). However, what becomes visible in the media discourse on Relotius' fabrications is the relevance of emotional and affective practices in the newsroom. The coverage reveals how the newsroom's internal hierarchy was emotionally structured, in particular with regard to the privileged position that the reporters writing for the Society beat enjoyed. Feelings of envy, intimidation, hatred and admiration towards this beat contributed to processes of inclusion and exclusion. Journalism as a social field emerges as structured by emotions. As a result, one of the reasons for Relotius' long success was that he was seen as part of a privileged group whose authority went unchallenged by other *Der Spiegel* employees, including fact-checkers. It took a persistent outsider to bring the scandal to light. In short, the history of journalism is a history of (mostly male, white, bourgeois) comradeship in the newsroom, closed against others and celebrating itself with prizes awarded within these very homogenous social structures as recent research has made impressively visible (Vassiliou-Enz et al., 2020). Future studies should look into how this history has been clashing with growing demands for more diverse newsrooms, questioning power structures that have been in place for a long time. These developments will bring new challenges towards journalism as an institution.

Finally, a fourth discursive strand reflects the new institutionalist literature. This strand concerns how actors outside the organization *Der Spiegel* reacted to the scandal and interpreted it as an event relevant to journalism as an institution. Affect is also relevant for understanding the "shockwaves" that are often noted with regard to this event and its impact on journalism. This illustrates the affective intensity actors attributed to this event, especially in the context of journalism's attempts to defend its social function in the face of increasing attacks from the far right and of socioeconomic changes. Actors also reaffirmed established journalistic practices, such as fact-checking and transparency. The wide circulation of such discourses in the coverage reveals journalists' attempts to stabilize the institution of journalism by performing paradigm repair. At the same time, it is journalism itself that discursively builds the moment of crisis, which it simultaneously laments itself. The intensity and the drama with which *Der Spiegel's* 'fall from grace' is publicly branded and repentantly mourned, is a building block of a crisis narrative well known as an affective pattern in journalism. Thus, the production of institutional crisis as a narrative is an effect of this very affective regime of journalism as well as its weakness: the affective intensity of crisis production is often followed by silent lack of consequences.

Following our understanding of affect and emotions as relational phenomena, we understand the journalistic coverage of such moments of institutional crisis as an attempt to react to affective publics' growing emotional reflexivity. Our case study shows that the times when journalism could deny its interactions with emotions are over. Thus, it is essential to empirically research what this means for journalism as an institution.

By analyzing the affective dimensions of the discourse around Relotius' fabrications, we emphasize the central roles of affect, emotions, feeling rules and emotional labor in (de-)institutionalization processes, as the institution of journalism negotiates its social function through discourse. This calls for further studies focusing on emotion as a constitutive element in processes of (de-)stabilization and transformation of journalism as an institution.

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Endnotes

Media outlet	Selected articles
<i>BILD</i>	3
<i>Der Spiegel</i>	9
<i>Die tageszeitung (taz)</i>	10
<i>Die Welt</i>	11
<i>Die Zeit</i>	14
<i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)</i>	14
<i>Kress</i>	5
<i>Meedia</i>	15
<i>Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ)</i>	13
<i>The New York Times (NYT)</i>	4
<i>Salomkolumnisten</i>	2

<i>Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)</i>	18
<i>telepolis</i>	4
<i>Übermedien</i>	11
<i>The Wall Street Journal (WSJ)</i>	5
Total	138

Table 1: Selected articles in the material per media outlet.

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