

# Where does an article end and a story begin?

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The trend for journalism to move **from reporting facts to telling a story** based on facts is becoming increasingly recognised by German media. This trend is best illustrated by the conflict in Ukraine, where German journalists were able to tell the story of the war through the prism of a heroic tale of good versus evil.

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The relationship between German journalism and its readers has been significantly disrupted over the last several years. Misreporting and hoaxes have frequently been identified, even in highly-respected news programmes published by public broadcasting channels, which used to be regarded as the flagships of German “quality journalism.” The situation became especially evident during coverage of the civil unrest and Russian intervention in Ukraine. TV reports confused Ukrainian and Russian soldiers, transmitted unverified material and misidentified dates and times. Populist right wing movements have made particular use of these circumstances to launch an attack against the free press. The most prominent of these groups has been Pegida, which claims to be the sole ambassador of a patriotic Europe. The name Pegida is an acronym for “Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlands” (patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident) and one of their tactics is to accuse journalists of representing the “liar’s press” or “Lügenpresse.”

This simplification fails to recognise the real challenges faced by journalism today. When news bias occurs, it is not just a matter of publishing lies. A better

explanation for the malpractice, or even malfunction, of German journalism can be found in the winding paths of its narratology.

### What is a story?

The first ascertainment is that in principle, journalism is telling stories. Storytelling in this sense does not necessarily mean fiction. Once we accept that there are both fictional and factual stories then most forms of journalism can be understood as a type of storytelling. Therefore, narratology as the theory of storytelling can help us understand not only how journalists tell stories, but also which stories they will tell and which ones they will not. Naturally, in factual storytelling, the facts must be true, lest the story become fiction. However, there are also other laws of storytelling which are sometimes more important than the commandment to tell the truth.

The most important question of narratology is: What is a story? In the words of the French narratologist and structuralist, Gerard Genette, a story is basically the expression of a conflict between at least two people over a given period of time. Even if this definition seems to be quite simplistic it already contains explosive material in the debate regarding journalistic storytelling: the two people can be identified as a protagonist and an antagonist. Therefore, when it comes to journalistic inquiry, a reporter will first of all look for those two main characters.

With the concept of conflict, we then touch on the most widespread theory in journalism. At the starting point of journalism studies in the 1920s Walter Lippmann wrote about the theory of news values for the first time in his famous book *Public Opinion*. Lippmann answered the difficult question of which news items should actually make the news. In other words, out of the thousands of events that happen around the world every day, which ones should end up in a report in the newspaper or on TV or radio. With a catalogue of attributes, which events are considered worthy enough to warrant a place in the news? This is where the term “newsworthiness” originates from.

Lippmann's theory was further elaborated upon by Norwegian scholars Einar Östgaard, Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge who, interestingly enough, were not specialists in communication but researchers in peace theory. They investigated why such self-evidently important issues as the destruction of mankind by nuclear weapons only occasionally found their way into newspapers. In their empirical analysis of newspaper reports about war in the 1950s and 60s, they found that besides criteria such as big names, locality, unexpectedness or continuity, the concept of conflict and competition is a major one. Without a considerable conflict, there is no news to tell. This is also the reason for the negative slant that

most journalism seems to have: since we perceive conflicts to be negative, we also evaluate stories about them as negative.

### The new lack of clarity

Competition marks the intersection between journalism theory and narratology: news, like stories, needs conflict and opponents. The difference is that while classical journalism saw the value of news as the attribute of a given event, narratology made a conflict/narrative the core of the story. Journalistic inquiry in this sense is no longer a hunt for the largest amount of or best information but for elements to build a story.

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The pros and cons of such an approach are clear. During times of information overload, gathering information is pointless. What journalists really need is a mechanism to filter and select information, which is what narratology offers. What journalists are looking for (and what they sell to their readers/customers) are not events or information, but stories. Filtering information through the lens of storytelling means always getting a good story, i.e. a good product. On the other hand, the suspicion that journalists tend to dress up their stories in order to create a good product rather than a true and fact orientated report is justified.

What does all this have to do with the German journalistic misbehaviour during the conflict in Ukraine? That will become clear shortly. According to narratologist Joseph Campbell there is only one unique story. Campbell calls it the monomyth and identifies it as the quest. The quest is the journey of the hero to achieve a goal comparable to the tales of medieval knights questing to find the Holy Grail. The monomyth is a kind of template or archetype for storytelling. Lippmann stated that journalists often use stereotypes in their reporting through the prism of narratology, in that way one can identify those stereotypes as different storytelling archetypes.

The civil unrest in Ukraine and Russia's subsequent intervention highlight the typical problems of journalism. Before the conflict, Ukraine was barely mentioned in German media. It was not, to use the vocabulary of newsworthiness, an "elite nation" from the point of view of German journalism. German mass media foreign correspondents were not located in Kyiv, but in Moscow. Therefore, the new political circumstances in Kyiv led German journalists to a situation that German philosopher Jürgen Habermas once called "die neue Unübersichtlichkeit", a phrase that can be roughly translated as "the new missing overview" or, more accurately,

“the new lack of clarity”. Operating under these circumstances, narratology is a big help, as in recourse to archetypes and stereotypes, journalists are still able to tell a story, even when not in full possession of all the necessary facts.

An old stereotype in German history is that Russian leaders are aggressors, Russian soldiers are rapists and the Russian people are plainspoken, uncultivated, savage Asians. There are even people in Germany (thankfully, increasingly few) who are convinced that the Second World War was a German act of defence, rather than an offensive onslaught, despite Germany having invaded Russia and not vice versa.

Thus, the roles become assigned. The role of the opponent is played by Russia. Furthermore, since journalism, like narratology, prefers to personalise its stories, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, plays the bogeyman. Some of the headlines found in the German press include: “Putin’s secret army”, “Putin prepares for the Third World War”, “Against Putin, only heavy-handedness helps” and finally “Putin is breeding killer-dolphins”. In October 2015 the well-known German news magazine *Der Spiegel* published a front page picture with Putin sitting in a fighter jet accompanied by the headline “Putin attacks”.

### Heroic tale

The role of the opponent is to frame the hero as the protagonist of the monomyth. In this regard, German journalists had an ace up their sleeves. Vitali and Vladimir Klitschko, brothers and boxing champions, are both very well-known and highly regarded in Germany. Since 1996, they have both been under contract with a German boxing management company and also have multi-million dollar contracts from the biggest German private TV station, RTL. The brothers speak German fluently and, in a strange way, are widely considered to “belong” to Germany. Since Vitali Klitschko played a decisive role during the EuroMaidan Revolution, ultimately becoming the mayor of Kyiv, he is in every sense “the good guy” in this story. His muscular physique combined with his image as a “gentleman athlete” makes him look like a revenant of Rocky Balboa.

The coverage of Ukraine in the German press being conveyed as a heroic tale is even more perceptible in the case of female helicopter pilot Nadiya Savchenko, who was arrested by Russians. The German press, regardless of each outlet’s political orientation, referred to her as the “Ukrainian Joan of Arc.” Savchenko is the perfect example of journalistic reporting transitioning to fairy tale-like storytelling.

As in all fairy tales, people’s dialectics fall by the wayside in favour of the tried-and-tested schematic of good versus evil; heaven versus hell. Despite the fact that it was the Svoboda movement, which contained some nationalistic/neo-fascist

elements, that formed part of Arseniy Yatsenyuk's government in 2014, German journalists relegated it to the small print. It would have ruined the storyline and thus was widely ignored by the German press.

Journalism as a form of storytelling describes the blueprint of journalism on the whole. In his study titled *Mainstream*, German communications scientist Uwe Krüger argued that many journalists follow a political mainstream, which, unbalanced, tends towards supporting the government opinion. In his detailed network analysis, Krüger pointed out that leading German journalists (also called "alpha-journalists") are engaged in "pressure groups" that are unilaterally connected to NATO and the United States, such as the "Atlantik Brücke" (Atlantic Bridge) or the "Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik" (Federal Academy Concerning Security Policy), which belongs directly to the German secretary of defence. Krüger refers to another German communication scientist, Lutz Hachmeister, who stated nine years ago that politicians, economists and alpha-journalists have built a "closed shop". Hans Leyendecker, a legendary investigative reporter with *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, speaks of "conspiratorial entanglements". Finally Hans-Ulrich Jörges from the news magazine *Stern* calls the relationship between journalists and politicians in Germany "personal fraternisation with politics".

### One must be silent

The decision making process regarding which stories are reported as news leads to many other important stories being ignored. In Germany sociologist Peter Ludes founded the Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung (news enlightenment organisation), the German counterpart to the US "Project Censored". Every year, this organisation chooses a top ten list of stories that were ignored by the German mass media. After nearly 20 years of media criticism, empirical studies of these lists illustrate the factors that prevent stories from becoming news. Firstly, the more sophisticated the circumstances surrounding a story are, the less likely it is to be reported. Secondly, intellectual discourse and weighing up the pros and cons of data is simply not an interesting part of storytelling. That is the reason why the Syrian civil war all but disappeared from the German press as soon as Russia entered the conflict. As Russian troops battled against ISIS, the simple good versus evil narrative no longer worked.

Black and white storytelling no longer fits within the framework of a conflict that epitomises the word "confusing." Of course, journalism is supposed to make complex issues more readily digestible. However, in obscure situations such as the one in Syria, with its multitude of conflicting parties, religions and international


interests, the prime directive of German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein holds true: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”

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this model only fits when the narrator is not part of the story, or more importantly, not part of the conflict. For this reason, German journalists telling the story of the radical changes in Eastern Europe and Ukraine pretend not to be part of the game, even though Germany and the European Union are major players in Eastern Europe (and the Ukraine–European Union Association Agreement was the trigger that caused the revolution against Viktor Yanukovych). In the meantime, German readers get to hear about events taking place far away, without any form of personal involvement. The reason for this is not so much the

facts that are being reported, but rather the journalistic language that is being used. Since it fulfils the requirement of objectivity all the reports about the conflict were told in a distanced manner.

In his classical study *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe*, historian Hayden White pointed out that historiography does not tell us “how it really was”, but offers “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse” connected to the rhetorical figures of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. Even to this day, a theory of meta-journalism is still missing. This theory would, according to White’s system, explain the working method of reporting as an act of narration. It is all about storytelling, not truth-telling. 

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