

# If you want to be an investigative journalist, make sure you dig up the dirty secrets of the right persons

[May 26..2020 | The following guest article was sent to me by a budding young investigative journalist because he was still unable to find an established media outlet that wanted to publish his finding that the CEO of adidas has pimped his CV. His story is instructive for media consumers and for everyone who has ambitions and ideas which are similar to those of the author.](#)

## A happy failure on the road to becoming an investigative journalist

By Tim Gökalp.

At the age of 22 I heard about a business scandal in the USA on the radio. I found the story so fascinating that I decided to become one of those critical, independent and indomitable business journalists who uncover scandals like that one.

In 2012, Yahoo CEO Scott Thompson stumbled across a Washington Post publication. He had awarded himself a degree in Computer Science which he did not actually have. Four months later, he announced his resignation from his job as Board Chairman.

Digging up deeply hidden facts as part of a team of investigative journalists, courageously holding powerful people to account, being committed to the public and dedicating oneself to the truth sounded like the epitome of freedom to me.

Seven years later, I had a scholarship for a journalism programme from a political foundation and had a mentor from the field of public service broadcasting, who was an investigative journalist. I also had an interview with a German news agency coming up.

I was aware that I had not earned my opportunity to enter the exclusive circle of journalists thanks to good work in the field of journalism, but just through networking and connections.

There was nothing wrong with that, I thought, especially since this gave me the opportunity to get a position with a European radio station thanks to networking again and to prove myself as a journalist.

I remembered the story of the CEO who fell from grace in the USA and came up with the research hypothesis that there must be a similar case among the board members of German DAX30 companies, of which there were over 180.

For months I battled with Excel spreadsheets, systematically designed an investigative data research concept and requested the actual degree certificates of German board members from more than 200 domestic and foreign universities in order to compare them with the individual and group statements made by the board members. This was all on behalf of the European radio station.

I found something. I uncovered that the CEO of adidas, Kasper Rorsted, Manager of the Year 2019 (*Manager Magazin*), publicly claimed to have studied at a renowned business school, whilst in actual fact he only had a college degree from an institution with a similar-sounding name. After a long period of indecision, the world-renowned news agency Bloomberg News changed the entry in their CEO directory on Rorsted accordingly based on my research results, but they did this quietly without publishing any news about it.

## Money and more

Blog by Norbert Häring  
<https://norberthaering.de>

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His CV as a member of the Nestlé Supervisory Board included a degree from the renowned Copenhagen Business School and this was also included in his CV for an interview with McKinsey.

In the CV on the Nestlé website, this was changed in February to “1985: International Business Studies, Copenhagen Business College, Denmark”. However, the Copenhagen Business School is still in the PDF version (as of 23.05.2020).

According to adidas, the false impression that Rorsted had completed a university degree was simply the result of the wording in his CV being unclear. They said that they would clarify in the future where necessary that Rorsted's alma mater was a college.

In his short biography on the adidas website, this has not (yet) happened because it still says (as of 23.05.2020): “He holds a degree in Business Administration from the International Business School, Denmark”. There is an “International Business School” in Copenhagen, but this has only been there since the 2000s.

In an interview in the “Bild” newspaper, available in English, in January 2020, Rorsted was presented as someone who, although he is the son of a professor, financed his university education himself. He is quoted as saying:

I cleaned company toilets for six years. Not the worst experience.

In actual fact, Rorsted did not attend university but attended Niels Brock College in Copenhagen. However, the courses there took a maximum of two years to complete in the 1980s. In 1985, when Rorsted graduated from there, it still went under the name of Niels Brock's School of International Business.

A business school, as the adidas bio has it, is generally understood, unlike a college, to be a university institution.

You may be wondering why you haven't come across headlines such as “adidas CEO's career doping” or “Manager of the Year 2019 with fake university degree” yet.

This is because I have been trying, in vain, for a very long time now to find a media outlet willing to publish my research results. All in all, I have contacted over 60 established media outlets over the last three months and presented my facts. From large newspapers and magazines to relevant local editorial offices. The game would always be over at the latest when a journalist who was interested in the topic asked the editor in chief whether the story could be published. Some unusual reasons were given for the refusals.

I lost my position at the radio station in the course of my research. The interview with the German news agency was cancelled after I told the person who invited me about my research and suggested that they get involved.

Self-critically, I need to add that I also made mistakes as a young journalist and perhaps did not always find the right neutral tone. However, this does not detract from the research results. I cannot see any good reason not to publish them.

When the first two media outlets rejected the story, I was still just as enthusiastic about it. It wasn't a big deal since the media landscape is so large and diverse. I had my facts and I thought I had come across a story that was of public interest. And if there had been an article on page 23 about it, even one the size of a beer mat, then I would still have been halfway satisfied.

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I made contact with the investigative teams at large editorial offices and quickly had top journalists on the phone who seemed interested too. I was hopeful every time I presented all of my facts to them. "Above my pay grade" was the response of an investigative journalist at a major newspaper. The story was rejected the day after that.

Another well-known business journalist rejected the story because: "Kasper Rorsted is so successful with adidas, though". An editor in chief of a major financial publication said thank you warmly but noted that the facts did not fit in with the media outlet's agenda. I have heard and read "this is not for us" several times from national newspapers with a tendency to be to the left as well as conservative.

"This is just feuilleton and we don't want to pan anyone" was also a statement I had to digest.

The most unusual reasoning was the logic of a broadcasting company that had believed there to be a structural problem at the start, namely, that there were many small and more significant discrepancies between corporate data on management personnel and their own data on career networks. But they rejected the story at an early stage because there still wasn't a high enough ranking protagonist. After I had the high-ranking protagonist, the reasoning shifted and it was seen as just an isolated problem without structural significance.

This is just feuilleton and we don't want to pan anyone.

Having made contact with a wide range of media outlets about 50 times, I now believe that the story of my failure is more interesting than the results of my research.

An important point I had not considered is that Scott Thompson had been new to Yahoo and had been controversial from the beginning. He had powerful enemies. He was toppled at the instigation of an activist investor after he had just announced a staff reduction programme that led to high-profile management resignations. In addition, shortly after taking up his post, he began a legal battle about a patent with Facebook.

Kasper Rorsted, on the other hand, was successful, not particularly controversial and at the height of his power and reputation. I probably should have waited until his reputation was tarnished before trying to publish.

I had to learn that the media business appears to work in accordance with the principle that it is healthier to kick those who are faltering or who are already on the ground than those who are secure in their lofty positions. The latter often kick back hard.

And what now?

I am pleased to have had the privilege of looking behind the scenes of German journalism, grateful to have been allowed to tell my story and happy to have failed on my way to becoming an investigative journalist.

My efforts were definitely associated with a great deal of frustration. Admitting that you have failed and having to give up is not easy either. However, as time went by, I came to realise that my idealised image of investigative journalism was probably a false one. It wouldn't have made me happy to have continued pursuing it. I will rather dedicate my efforts to something new.