

Within a few hours last November, some of the biggest large-news websites in the world published the attention-grabbing story of an attractive Argentinian teacher who had been having sex with her 16 year-old student. The video of their tryst had made its way to a porn website and gone viral, turning an already tabloid-ready tale into an irresistible blend of titillation, condemnation and internet depravity.

Britain's *Daily Mirror* and *Metro*, the *New York Daily News*, U.K. and others paired the story with an image that showed the teacher posing poolside in her bikini. "Teacher suspended after sex session with teen pupil ends up on hardcore porn website," read the *Mirror's* headline. Between them, just X of the articles published by major websites garnered over XXXXX shares on social media.

The *Daily Mail's* website – the most successful English-language newspaper website in the world – even went so far as to claim that there would be a criminal investigation, and that this wasn't the first time that the teacher in question ~~has~~ had sexual relations with a student.

Just one problem: it wasn't true.

"

As BuzzFeed News previously reported, a full two weeks before the (primarily British) tabloids picked up the story, it had already been debunked by a local paper in Argentina, *Nuevo Diario*. The video didn't show an underage boy, it turned out. Though the woman in the video was in fact a teacher, she was from Corrientes, rather than Santiago del Estero, as had been claimed in the incorrect articles. [WAS SHE MIS-NAMED? CRUCIAL DETAIL.] Some of the sites updated their articles, but some many remain inaccurate to this day.

Comment [1]: I don't think it's "many"?

~~As we reported at the time~~, the real story was that a woman's private sex tape had made its way onto the internet. It had nothing to do with illegal sex between an underage pupil and his teacher, and she had no history of such behavior. But that's not the story that was given to many websites, with images to back it up.

[WAIT DO WE NEED TO TRY AND SPEAK TO THE TEACHER FOR A KILLER CLOSING QUOTE ABOUT HER NIGHTMARE EXPERIENCE]

So how did this fake story make the leap from WhatsApp messages and news sites in South America to the English-language press?

The answer is tucked away in the photo credit at bottom right hand corner of the photo of the woman in her bikini: "CEN". That's the agency that sold the photo. [REDACTED]

Comment [2]: I mean, I'm pretty sure this is right, the only slight issue is we never asked for these pics and the copy that would have come with them. You have to assume all the tabloids based their story on CEN's copy, but I wonder if there's a tiny chance they "only" sold pics or something.

Comment [3]: I edited this section a bit to try and address this.

Central European News (and its sister agency Europics) is a small and – outside certain sections of the media – largely unknown news agency based in Vienna, Austria. In recent years it has become familiar to online news editors and careful readers as a persistent source of outrageous stories of dubious origin that often depict people in India, China and other non-Western countries as barbaric, bloodthirsty, and sex crazed, among other things.

CEN has also demonstrated a strange and unrelenting proclivity for stories about men's penises being chopped off. Some are seemingly true; others appear to be false, or at least highly questionable, due to the lack of any confirming details, and the fact that in at least one case the same image of a supposed victim was used to illustrate two entirely different penis-chopping stories.

Just since the summer, for example, CEN has been the source or a key distributor of:

- The false story of a Russian bear being scared off by a Justin Bieber ringtone.
- ~~The hoax~~ The tale of a Chinese backpacker offering sex in return for helping fund her vacation that turned out to be a viral marketing stunt.
- A story about a woman who inadvertently caused a car crash while sunbathing: there's no evidence it happened and the picture turned out to be three years old.
- The story of a Chinese man who got a tapeworm after eating Sashimi, which circulated with completely unrelated images that appear to have originated in the British Medical Journal.
- The a-story of a two-headed goat born in China that is based on an image that an forensics expert appears to have been altered, and for which a CEN-affiliated website supplied quotes that are most likely fabricated.

Comment [5]: I think maybe "appear" to have come. Again, 99% sure they did.

[ADD IN FACTS ABOUT HOW MUCH THEY WERE SHARED.]

To be clear: BuzzFeed News has in the past bought pictures and copy from CEN, and has written about stories that have originated with the agency. There is a list of these posts at the bottom of this article. In recent months we have made efforts to spread the word internally that any stories originating from the agency should be treated with extreme suspicion. [LET'S HAVE A CLEARER STATEMENT OF POLICY.] This story is, in part, an outgrowth of that effort.

Comment [6]: We need to do this properly and have a full list.

Comment [7]: We need to do this properly and have a full list.

Formatted: Don't add space between paragraphs of the same style, No bullets or numbering

Comment [8]: Technically true, but may also seem misleading? I feel we should be a transparent as possible with this, to the point of self-flagellation.)

Comment [9]: Tried to add a bit more info. I agree: we have to be super transparent and also inject some humility for this to not seem like sour grapes.

Comment [10]: It's actually not technically true - we've bought CEN pics and copy - c.f. revision.

~~CEN sells its stories and images to most major news websites, including the Daily Mail, which has the highest traffic of any English-language news website in the world, according to Comscore. s the highest trafficked English-language new website in the world. (Disclosure: BuzzFeed and the Daily Mail are of course competitors, and BuzzFeed, like the Daily Mail, has bought pictures and copy from CEN for posts, a list of which is at the bottom of this article. We have never been a client of CEN, but there have been times in the past when BuzzFeed did posts about stories that originated with CEN. In recent months we have made efforts to spread the word internally that any~~

~~content on other websites that originated with the agency should receive extra vetting. This story is in part an outgrowth of that effort.)~~

CEN sells its stories and images to most major news websites. Once published by a major English-language website, a CEN story will quickly be picked up and propagated, racking up traffic and social shares along the way, as was the case with the Argentinian teacher-and-student-sex story.

~~This~~In the game of viral news, of which BuzzFeed is undeniably a player, this small agency has managed to carve out a niche in the game of viral news by trafficking in the kind of too-good-to-check stories and images that promise social shares and traffic to whoever is first to pay its fee. Once published, others pile on to rewrite the story, making CEN the epicentre of some of the web's most dubious viral content.

The questionable nature of CEN's content is something of an open secret among online news and picture desk editors. New York Times technology columnist Farhad Manjoo recently indicated his familiarity with its handiwork:



Farhad Manjoo
@fmanjoo



Following

"Central European News reports" = "who cares where we heard it"

nypost.com/2015/01/13/wif...



New York Post

Wife chops off cheating husband's penis, twice

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. A jealous wife in China chopped off her cheating husband's penis as he slept, then snuck into his hospital room after he...



[View on web](#)

[YO LET'S REACH OUT TO FARHAD]

As didis an editor with The Guardian, who previously worked for The Sun:

Comment [11]: but is he implying they're making it up, or is he just saying it's a good story?



Chris King
@chriskking

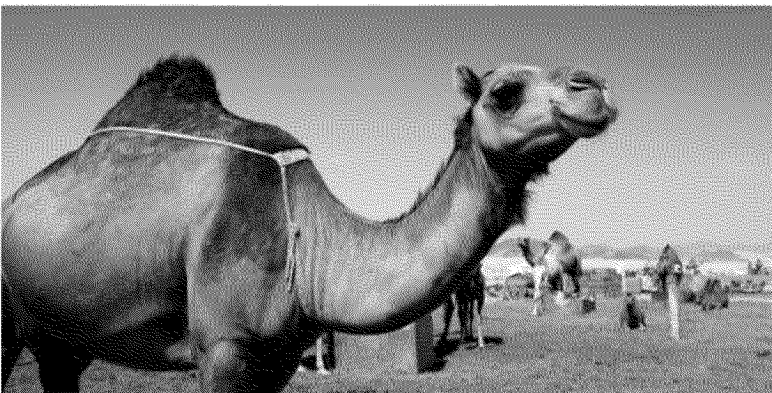


Follow

Central European News at it again:
huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/03/09/cam...



HuffPost UK



Divorce For Saudi Wife Who 'Loved A Camel More Than Her Husband'

A Saudi Arabian man has divorced his wife after an awkward trip to the country's capital of Riyadh. The unnamed couple were visiting the wife's family home when things began to fall apart. Reports...

[YO LET'S REACH OUT TO CHRIS AND ASK WHAT HE MEANT BY "AT IT AGAIN"]

The frequency with which we and other journalists have found problems with CEN's stories led BuzzFeed to reach out to Emergent, a site that tracks and confirms/debunks online rumors, to partner in order to look more closely at the agency, its stories, and its role in the online news ecosystem.

We worked to verify stories sold by CEN to clients, as well as stories published on the agency's sister websites, which include the Austrian Times and Croatian Times. This involved tracking back CEN-watermarked images to determine their source, and to identify, if possible, the originating source of quotes and the overall story. For stories that CEN claimed originated in China, of which there were many, we collaborated with native-speaking BuzzFeed colleagues to better understand the context and information. [BORING CUT ALL OF THIS.]

What we found was a pattern of behavior that includes a mixture of false stories, unrelated or Photoshopped images, highly suspicious quotes and sources, and/or the insertion of fake details into otherwise accurate stories.

There were also many CEN stories that appeared to be real, and which the agency had picked up from local media and ~~rewritten~~ ~~done a typical rewrite of~~. But even in these cases the originating reports that CEN relied upon might lack key verifying details. ~~If a local tabloid in an Eastern European country reported something outrageous, for example, CEN would be there to rewrite and resell it.~~

Comment [12]: This line may be problematic because, in truth, some may say, Well BuzzFeed would also write up that story if it came from local media. Just flagging it.

One of the most common red flags we identified in CEN stories was that it consistently managed ~~s~~ to obtain quotes from officials and witnesses that no local media had spoken with, or had been able to locate. Somehow, this small agency in Vienna is apparently doing better newsgathering than local media in India, China, and elsewhere.

Notably, these suspect officials and witnesses quoted in CEN stories – whether they are a farmer from a tiny Chinese village, a policeman from India, or an anonymous “wildlife expert” from parts unknown – always speak in perfect quotes using UK slang, and the unique idioms of British tabloid newspaper journalism.

The owner of CEN is a British journalist named Michael Leidig.

The Man From CEN

Leidig ~~refused repeated attempts to speak by phone~~ and he did not reply to a detailed email that contained questions about specific CEN stories, and about a charity he runs that claims to provide money to the needy sources featured in CEN’s stories. (The charity, Journalism Without Borders, solicits donations on the site via PayPal and says it redirects this money to people featured in articles who may be in need of medical care or financial support.)

Comment [13]: Let's revisit this obv

But Leidig has a body of work that offers a look into his approach and business. In a 2013 op-ed for media trade journal Press Gazette, Leidig described CEN’s content and proudly mentioned the kind of traffic it can drive for large websites:

Most of our regular content is also for the tabloid market. Not the celebrity stuff, but the quirky bizarre news designed to get people talking – today they call it viral news.

Our content is often frequently in the Most Read section on the Mail Online.

Leidig’s lengthy and frequently updated Wikipedia page describes someone who cares about accountability and the importance of crediting original sources:

Leidig is also a campaigner for greater support for journalism which he describes as the “coalface of democracy.” He has campaigned in favour of more responsibility from search engines like Google to give credit to original source material and also

for payment for originators of news, arguing that if the journalists all go out of business nobody will provide the content worth having.

The sole link in the above passage goes to a story on the Austrian Times — a website owned by Leidig.

Many key edits and contributions to Leidig's laudatory Wikipedia page are by a user, "Bylinebandit," who is also a major contributor to the page for the Austrian Times, and who created the page for Allan Hall, a journalist with whom Leidig co-authored a book. The subject of that book is an Austrian woman who was kidnapped at a young age. Bylinebandit has made repeated edits to her page.

Bylinebandit also happens to be the username for a Twitter account belonging to none other than Michael Leidig.

Leidig's (most likely) self-maintained Wikipedia page is correct that he has at times been outspoken about what he sees as content theft and the destruction of his business at the hands of Google and the Internet.

| ~~He contributed an op-ed to the media trade publication~~ Press Gazette in 2013 decrying how Google and the Internet ruined the economics for smaller news agencies like CEN. "Having English speaking staff on the ground in Europe was almost a licence to print money" back in 1993 when he started CEN with two partners, according to Leidig.

| "There has never been a better time to be a journalist, if it's your hobby," he wrote in the Press Gazette. "If you hope to make a living out of it, then I can't remember it being worse."

| In 2011 he earned coverage in ~~the same publication~~ Press Gazette when he claimed to have forced the Huffington Post to compensate him for viral stories he says it stole from him. That story was subsequently updated when a Huffington Post executive explained that it had mistakenly paid the invoice Leidig sent for the alleged theft. They thought it was a normal invoice for a photo bought from CEN/Europics, rather than payment for having aggregated a story that CEN itself had taken from another source.

A year later, in 2012, Leidig boasted of shutting down a website that he said was stealing content from his site Croatian Times, which itself is often home to dubious images and material.

It seems at some point Leidig decided that if the Internet was going to put his agency's business on the rocks he may as well play the game and give the Internet what it wants — regardless of whether it's true or not.

What We Found

| In August, a story swept across the Internet, racking up social shares and articles on all manner of news sites [WHICH ONES]. The premise was simple and irresistible. A

Russian man on a fishing trip was attacked by a bear. As it mauled him, the man's cellphone played a ringtone that startled the bear and caused it to run off.

That lifesaving ringtone? The song "Baby" by Justin Bieber.

"Even bears can't stand Justin Bieber's music," reported The New York Post.

The Daily Mail's headline took a similar tack: "Finally, proof that Justin Bieber IS unbearable: Russian fisherman saved from bear attack when ringtone featuring one of the pop brat's songs scares it away."

(BuzzFeed did not cover the story.)

The Bear versus Bieber story even made it into Seth Myer's monologue for his late night show on NBC.

The problem is the original story about the bear attack, which was published in Russia's Komsomolskaya Pravda, said nothing about a Bieber ringtone. It reported that the man's phone had has a setting that causes it to speak out the current time. And that's That's what scared off the bear.

Comment [14]: link?

Five days later, Leidig's Austrian Times published a story with a photo of the fisherman credited to Komsomolskaya Pravda and the new detail about Justin Bieber. That same day, CEN sold the story and images to the Daily Mail, whose story credits the images taken from Pravda to Leidig's agency.

At the time, one of the authors of this article investigated the source of the Bieber claim and attempted to speak with Leidig. A woman who answered the phone said he was on vacation in Romania. When asked how they would report a story such as the bear attack she said, "A lot of stories are found on the wire or in local media but also from local interviews on the ground, or we speak to the reporters who wrote them; we speak to police to get things confirmed."

She promised to check with the company's stringer in Russia and follow up. From that point, people at CEN/EuroPics stopped providing information or responding to emails. Leidig never responded to a detailed email with questions about the story.

Since that first incident late in the summer, CEN has sold (or published on its sister websites) many other stories that carry quotes and details that cannot be confirmed elsewhere. They have also been a point of redistribution for hoaxes and other stories that are supported by nothing more than a single post on a foreign social network.

Our examination of more than 20 CEN stories found examples such as the Bieber story that appear to be partly or completely fabricated, as well as many stories where the quotes CEN publishes strain credibility believability.

CEN was for example a distributor of the false story claiming that an attractive Chinese woman was offering to spend a night with men in exchange for them helping her travel around the country. Stories from the *New York Daily News* and *The Daily Telegraph* credited images of the woman to EuroPics, CEN's sister agency. In fact, it was a publicity stunt for a mobile app company. The reality, as reported by *Shanghai Daily*, was that it was a hoax to promote a dating app called Youjia, which the paper said had been banned as a result.

CEN also distributed the story of a Chinese man who supposedly got a tapeworm from eating too much sashimi. It originated on Chinese news site *hk.on.cc*. Stories from the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, and *Daily Express* all used the images, and likely perhaps copy, supplied by CEN/EuroPics. Soon after the story made the rounds, Snopes investigated.

Comment [15]: We bought that copy so if it looks like ours then they did!

The site they found that the x-ray photos of the alleged victim were "similar to those included in a 2014 case report published by the *British Medical Journal* that dealt with a man who contracted a rare case of disseminated cysticercosis through the consumption of uncooked pork (with no mention of raw fish) ..."

BuzzFeed was one of many sites that covered the claim and images when they first appeared. Our post was updated after the Snopes article appeared.

~~In October 2014, the internet blew up with rumours that an attractive 19-year-old Chinese woman called Ju Peng was planning to fund her travels by spending a night with a different man in every city. As well as the likes of Metro, Elite Daily and the Mailonline, even the Telegraph published the story, reporting that she had "posted an advert on social media site Weibo looking for 'temporary boyfriends' who must be 'good looking, under 30, taller than 1.75 metres and, of course, rich.'" The Telegraph and Metro subsequently published follow-ups explaining the truth.~~

Though it began as an agency focused on Eastern Europe, CEN increasingly sells stories that are sourced from Chinese social networks, online bulletin boards, and news websites. One such story was published in *Leidig's Croatian Times* on November 17: "No Kidding - Baby Goat Has Two Heads." It featured this image, credited to EuroPics, of a baby goat supposedly born with two heads in China:



In fact, the photo originated with the Xinhua News Agency in China five days earlier. Dr. Neal Krawetz, the creator of FotoForensics photo analysis platform, which is used by

law enforcement and others to examine digital images, analyzed the image at our request.

“The goat picture that we investigated appears to be either a digital composite or a series of selective enhancements,” he concluded.

Dr. Krawetz found that the two men, the hand in the bottom left and the two goat heads each show up as “distinct regions under a variety of analysis methods.” It’s possible they’ve been put together, or enhanced, to create the image.

“It is not uncommon to see photos from China that have been significantly altered,” he said, pointing to this Vice collection of photos of Chinese officials that have clearly been Photoshopped. “Even if there is a two-headed goat in China, it does not mean that these are undoctored pictures of the goat.”

Along with the questionable nature of the image, there is an even bigger problem with the story that accompanied it on Leidig’s site. The original Xinhua story about the goat contains very little text or information. A follow up article from the next day credited to the same agency and reporter offers more detail, but is very thin on quotes.

Yet the Croatian Times story quotes farmer and goat owner Xu Jinkui at length. It also incorrectly lists his age as 43; Xinhua says he is closer to 60.

Here’s a quote attributed to Jinkui:

It is currently 30cm tall and 40cm long and doesn’t seem to show anything obvious in terms of behaviour problems as a result of its disability, although anyone that comes here can see straight away that it’s a mutant. I have had a lot of visitors, and some pretty big cash offers as people realise it’s probably going to live longer, but I’m not interested in selling it. Maybe later, but for now it’s fun to have around.

Somehow, the Xinhua journalist who who reported -that he saw the goat in person didn’t manage to get this quote. But the agency based in Vienna did, in spite of this news occurring in a county of roughly 250,000 people that is a six-hour train ride from Beijing. And on top of that, this 60 year-old Chinese farmer uses phrases such as “straight away.”

The above quote fits a pattern that we identified in CEN stories. The agency somehow manages to get incredible quotes from sources that no one else could, including the local media where a report originated.

In February 2015 MailOnline reported that a 25-year-old thief in “the south American city [sic] of Paraguay” had “conned his way into the homes of dozens of elderly women by dressing in nappies and sucking a lollipop”. The story was also in the *Star* and in the *Mirror*. All of them carried quotes from a local, Lara Orta Ornelas, 59, who said: “I am

surprised that the police have only just now arrested him. He has been doing this for years and I know the police have had complaints before but it's incredible that they never realised the baby is actually a fully grown man."

A Spanish language report four days earlier, however, only says that the thief pretended to be mentally ill. Ms Ornelas's quotes only appear when the story makes its way to the English-speaking media - they don't appear to be in any of the Spanish-language reports.

Many CEN quotes also come from anonymous "officials" and include phrases that one would expect to hear from someone who grew up in the U.K.

For example, the CEN Bieber/bear story included this quote from an anonymous "wildlife expert" who was presented without any affiliation or location:

Sometimes a sharp shock can stop an angry bear in its tracks and that ringtone would be a very unexpected sound for a bear.

As with the goat farmer, CEN often quotes named people who speak in perfect paragraphs and use Anglicized phrases. For instance, in January this year a number of news websites ran a story about an underwear thief who, according to the Mirror "was forced to walk around a block of flats in Singapore with bras and undies hanging from his neck after residents laid a trap following a spate of kinky thefts."

Our investigations led us to this Chinese-language news post with watermarks from this Weibo account. The post is from a girl named "Yeeyee" (from Singapore). In her brief account she writes that on 1 November at around 2am she caught this guy in her house stealing her undergarments. She then "caught him" and wanted to "shame him". There also appears to be a video of the incident.

Conspicuous by its absence from any of the original sources was a quote that appeared in the English press from a "police spokesman", who said "We don't condone vigilante activity but in this case it seems to have turned out OK." Also missing were quotes from "local man" Teo Goh, who apparently said: "We realised he was targeting windows where he knew women lived. He came at around midnight and as soon as he was in the room we grabbed him, forced him to wear the girl's lingerie and then frog-marched him from door to door making him confess what he had done and to promise he would never do it again." How did CEN acquire them?

Here's a lengthy quote CEN claims to have gotten from a young Chinese woman who allegedly spent several days in a Chinese KFC location after being dumped by her boyfriend:

~~I was walking around feeling miserable and decided to stop off at the KFC at the train station.~~

Formatted: Line spacing: Multiple 1.15 li

Comment [16]: I like this one, but let's get a fact checker of some sort to take one more look.

Comment [17]: I went with this one instead of KFC girl as we have a bit more working to show.

~~I hadn't planned on staying there long, I just wanted some chicken wings.
But once I got in there and started eating I decided I needed time to think.
I didn't want to go back to my apartment because it was full of memories of him.
So I stayed.
I had already told work I was off sick, so phoned them and said I was leaving.
And I was getting sick of the taste of chicken so there was no point in staying
there anymore.~~

Comment [18]: I actually think the quotes from KFC woman are legit! I think the language has been made more florid, but the substance is broadly as it appeared in China.

~~Is CEN rewriting quotes to include phrases such as "stop off" and "off sick" for its clients, or is it making them up out of whole cloth?~~

There's also this quote from a story CEN sold that claimed a wife discovered her husband cheating with her twin sister and then left them naked in a parking lot. It comes from a witness identified as You Meng, but reads like it's being spoken by someone interviewed on a London street:

It was so funny. Loads of people were grabbing their phones and I did as well.
He was banging his fist on the window and shouting at her, and she just wasn't playing ball.

That story, which CEN sold to Metro U.K. and subsequently spread far and wide, is also suspect because none of the earlier online posts in Chinese included the names of the man and his wife or their ages. Or any quotes from a witness. Yet somehow CEN managed to get names, ages and a quote from the scene.

Comment [19]: Just want to check - re names of man and wife etc, was that your finding Craig? I didn't look into it too much.

There are many examples of too-perfect quotes and unique details that CEN is managing to get in spite of distance and language barriers. This is particularly true when it comes to one of CEN's signature stories: castration. Just since the fall, CEN has sold and/or published seven stories that involve a man either being forcibly castrated, or chopping off his own penis.

Comment [20]: need to anglicise - since late last year?

Take for example the story of an aunt who castrated her young nephew when he interrupted her. That story was reported in Chinese media, and comes with detailed photos of the boy and his parents.

But the CEN version includes two quotes that we couldn't find aren't found elsewhere. There was this from a "hospital spokesman":

Unfortunately, the knife was quite blunt and the cut wasn't clean so although we reattached the boy's penis, it wasn't ideal and he had to have further treatment.

And from a "police spokesman":

The aunt was arrested and admitted attacking the boy because she was angry that he had interrupted her on the toilet.

Another unnamed police spokesman gave a suspect quote in a CEN story about an Indian man who allegedly had his penis chopped off by a crowd after he was caught trying to rape a girl. That story came with many related photos that we were able to find online (including one of the man's severed penis). But we could only find this police quote from CEN:

People cannot take the law into your own hands.
As deplorable as these crimes are, law and order has to be maintained, and not lynch justice.
We ask those men who carried out this attack to hand themselves in before we find them.

The same was true for this perfect quote from local man Aamir Dhawan:

No one went to help the man because they could see his penis on the ground and knew this was punishment for a sex crime.
We have had a lot of intolerable offences against women in this country recently, with girls being raped, hung, and molested, and it's time it stopped.
This sends out a very strong message to anyone like that - if you do it you will be punished.

| That's quite the articulate article and well-formed thought for someone being quickly approached by a reporter. (CEN's stories never carry a byline; its clients often place their own journalist's bylines on them.)

| In January CEN hit the mother lode of foreign castration stories. Pictures first surfaced on a since-deleted Chinese Weibo account and then spread to other Chinese sites that described a man whose penis was chopped off *twice* in the span of a few hours. The version CEN sold to the Daily Mail has, at the time of -as of this writing been shared more than 40,000 times.

First, it was claimed, the man's wife caught him cheating and she castrated him. Then, she found him at the hospital and undid the work doctors had done to reattach him member.

The earliest version we could find of the story in Chinese included a quote from the mistress saying that it was fine if he was now infertile, as he already has five kids. But once again the version sold by CEN went father. In addition to that quote, it also offered a veritable monologue from an anonymous hospital spokesman:

The first we were aware of what happened was when someone came into the reception area to say a naked man was beating up a woman outside the hospital. Staff rushed out to see what was happening and found the patient with blood streaming down his legs hitting the woman.
He was stopped and the woman was taken in for treatment, and then we discovered she had chopped his penis off again.

The man had lost a lot of blood and was taken in for emergency surgery.
He is now in a stable condition but is extremely emotionally distraught.

A final, questionable castration story element of note came in an October report from CEN that a Macedonian man chopped off his penis and threw it in the trash after his girlfriend told him it was inadequate.

The story was published on CEN's sister site the [Austrian Times](#) and was also [apparently sold to the Daily Mirror that same day](#), October 23. The Austrian Times story and Mirror stories both used a photo of a man lying on a gurney with a bloody crotch, with the Mirror specifically saying it showed the victim.

It doesn't.

Almost [exactly a year earlier](#) the Mirror ran another CEN story about a castration — and used the very same image of the man with the bloody crotch.

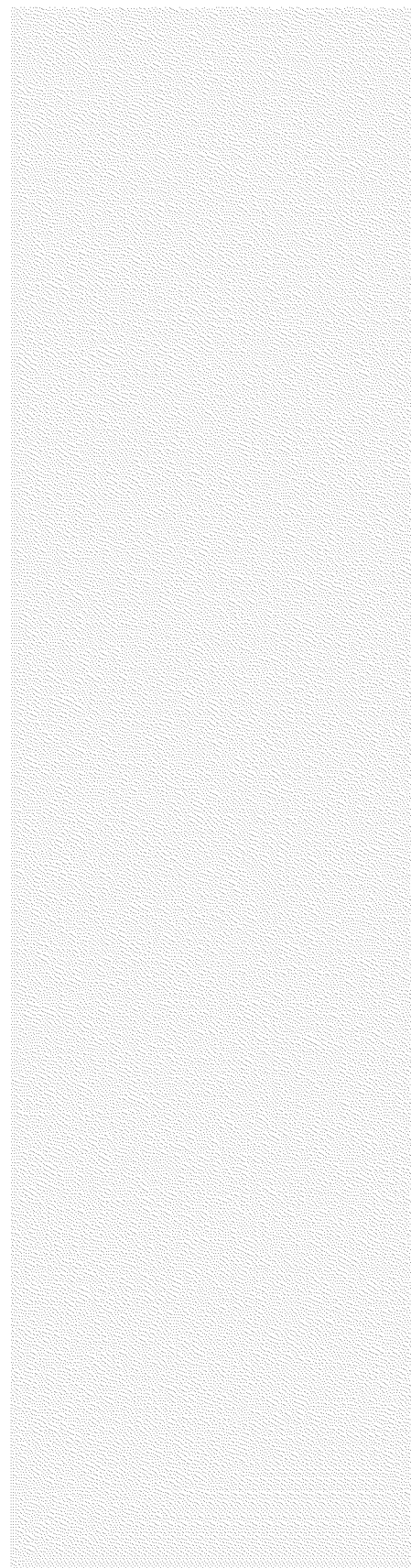
In that story, which also credited the image to CEN, the man being shown was described as a 26 year-old Chinese man named Yang Hu who allegedly chopped off his own penis due to frustration with his nonexistent love life. (That story also included the remarkable claim that Hu biked to the local hospital to try and get treatment, only to be told to go back home and get his penis so they could try and reattach it.)

The presentation of the old castration photo as new was revealed in 2014 by [Metro Sweden's Viral Examiner column](#), which looks into suspect viral stories. Their report also found that the Macedonian castration story likely originated with a local TV report that consisted of reenactments and stock footage, and that also used the old image. Either CEN didn't recognize that it was a photo they had previously distributed, or they knowingly sold and published an old image as new.

Earlier that year, Viral Examiner found another fake story, which had appeared in the [Metro](#), [Mirror](#), [Huffington Post](#), [Daily Star](#), [Jezebel](#) and more. A woman had apparently caused a car crash in Vienna by sunbathing with her bottom half hanging out of her window. But the photo dated back to at least 2011, and no such incident had been recorded by the city's police. CEN seemed to have picked up the picture after a reader fooled an Austrian newspaper with it.

Recycling images without any kind of disclosure isn't exactly new behavior for CEN or its Austrian Times website. Two months after the Macedonian castration story, the Austrian Times [reported](#) that an Austrian ski resort, Saalbach-Hinterglemm, had covered its hills in snow that had been set aside and stored at the end of last season. The story's main image showed a mass of snow. That picture is at least four years old, and was [first published in a story about the same topic](#), by OE24.at.

—gotta add some wrap up stuff—



BuzzFeed, it must be acknowledged, has over the years, either used CEN images and pictures or followed on reports that originated with CEN. We covered its story about a Chinese man who supposedly set fire to his college when he tried to impress his girlfriend with fireworks. We covered the sashimi tapeworm story, this story about a swastika in a German pavement and this story about a frozen waterfall in China. And we have at time also been fooled by hoaxes unrelated to CEN that our coverage helped spread, such as when TV producer Elan Gale tweeted out an invented exchange between himself and a woman on an airplane. The stories that we used and have been unable to verify have all been added to Emergent and we will update them if fresh information comes in.

Comment [21]: This needs work but we should have something like this.

A Viral News Charity?

In 2010 Leidig and Austrian charity worker (and taxi driver) Hannes Urban announced they had collaborated to found a new charity, Journalism Without Borders.

It aims to provide a way for people to donate money to sources who are featured in CEN reporting. For example, on the site there is a story about a Indian girl who was born with multiple legs. JWB solicits donations to help her and her family with medical and other costs. When it launched in 2010, JWB received coverage from The Guardian.

Comment [22]: Feels like we should do the groundwork on this, as there could be, like, actual fraud here; is it registered either in the UK or Austria? (No results from UK Charity Commission, and I can't find anything on Austrian Finance Ministry site https://service.bmf.gv.at/Service/allg/spenden/show_mast.asp.) Urban's charity, Helfen Wir, is registered – can we look into them? Get a colleague from the Berlin office to help maybe?

The creation of JWB was also written up on Leidig's Austrian Times in two separate articles. One story focused on Urban, Leidig's partner, and how he became the founder of an Austrian charity that helps children in South Africa. That article is almost completely plagiarized from a 2002 Associated Press story about Urban. One of the few paragraphs not copied from the AP story is a quote from Leidig.

Comment [23]: My reading of it is that it was started under the wing of Helfen Wir, and therefore may not have been registered on its own. But the connection between the two seems to have been severed according to the JWB site: "In 2014, the decision was made to create a dedicated financial team of volunteers working solely for Journalism Without Borders rather than as part of another charity." So it should be registered, yes? I wanted to speak with the founder of Helfen Wir to get his take on this. I feel there may be something there. But if you have someone who can speak German let's go for it.

The other story about the charity mentions Leidig's inspiration for starting the effort. In 2002 he wrote a story for the Sunday Telegraph about a Romanian woman named Ana Crisan, who had been declared disabled at birth and was taken away from her mother. Crisan's mother was then told that her daughter had died. Leidig wrote about their reunion for the paper. He was inspired when a colleague at the paper worked to raise money to help the family, which was incredibly poor. Leidig said he brought the money to the family.

"As to Ana Crisan and her mother," the Austrian Times story reports, "Leidig admits he does not know what happened after he visited them with money from Telegraph readers."

That was back in 2002. Yet on JWB's current website there is a form that invites people to donate money to Crisan's mother. How can Leidig be passing money to the woman when in an article published on his own website (and likely written by him) he said he'd lost touch with her?

—quotes from Hannes Urban and Telegraph editor Lucy Tipler TK—

CEN Gone Bad

As its name suggests, CEN first began with a focus on sourcing newsworthy items from local media in Eastern Europe and rewriting those for English language markets. Leidig's 2013 op-ed for Press Gazette painted a picture of a young agency in the 90s that was earning good revenue and employing "full-time paid correspondents across Europe."

He wrote of supplying text and images and audio to clients including BBC, Deutsche Welle, Radio Netherlands, as well as major British newspapers. CEN also produced TV footage for clients.

Indeed, one of Leidig's two original partners in CEN, BBC journalist Tom Hagler, had a regular byline with Radio Free Europe that identified him as being affiliated with the agency. Nightline interviewed Hagler and another CEN reporter for a 1997 segment about an Austrian doctor, Dr Heinrich Gross, who had conducted experiments on children for the Nazis.

"A single story like the case of Dr Heinrich Gross could be sold a dozen times in various media formats," Leidig wrote.

—quotes from original CEN partners Tom Hagler and Samantha King TK, and maybe from some recent correspondents I found online. —

But then the bottom fell out. Leidig wrote that CEN's income "fell by 80 per cent" after 9/11, and it seemingly never recovered. A steady gig he had with the Telegraph that paid him £500 a month plus fees for the articles he produced was ended by the paper. The reason? The Internet.

Leidig wrote that the paper told him "there was no longer value in original content, and that was because of the competition from the internet."

Leidig decided to play the Internet game as he saw it. He launched websites such as the Austrian Times and Croatian Times. He cast his net far afield to China and India and Latin America, scouring for images and posts on social networks that he could weave a story around in order to hit up old clients with a new kind of viral content he knew they couldn't resist.

"With hundreds of thousands of new items a day who can tell what is new anymore?" Leidig wrote.

Or, for that matter, what's real.

Comment [24]: I just wonder about the structure? Should this stuff go higher up in the "man from CEN" bit? Or does that delay the good stuff too much?

Note: BuzzFeed, it must be acknowledged, has either used CEN images and pictures or followed on reports that originated with CEN.

Comment [25]: Lets just do a complete sweep of the site and put them all at the end?

We covered its story about a Chinese man who supposedly set fire to his college when he tried to impress his girlfriend with fireworks. We covered the sashimi tapeworm story, this story about a swastika in a German pavement and this story about a frozen waterfall in China. And we have at time also been fooled by hoaxes unrelated to CEN that our coverage helped spread, such as when TV producer Elan Gale tweeted out an invented exchange between himself and a woman on an airplane. The stories that we used and have been unable to verify have all been added to Emergent and we will update them if fresh information comes in.

Comment [26]: This needs work but we should have something like this.

NOT SURE WHERE THIS GOES OR IF IT WORKS

Why It Matters

CEN's stories about China in particular perpetuate the worst stereotypes of that country, portraying Chinese people as in turns barbaric, ignorant, uncouth and bloodthirsty. With each fabricated story or quote, CEN is profiting from propagating ethnic and national stereotypes, and from fooling readers and news organizations.

Comment [27]: Probably a bit unfair. There are unremarkable stories like woman in KFC, sceptic tank etc - it's typical trashy tabloid news, and I think you could probably claim much the same about UK tabloids covering the UK tbh.