

## CEN Memo

### Pattern of Behavior

CEN primarily sources the content it repackages and sells from news outlets in Eastern Europe, Russia, India and from social networks and news sites in China. It almost always seeks out a picture for its content, and often times it's clear that the image itself is what sets off their radar.

They take the image(s), scrub off any watermarks and produce copy to accompany it. In some cases, they take the original information about an image and translate those details into English. In other cases, they fabricate quotes to accompany the basic details of the story, or they will invent a story out of whole cloth to accompany the images.

Their frequent customers include the Daily Mail, Daily Mirror and, of late, Metro U.K. They also often cross-post their stories to Austrian Times or one of their other English-language websites, The Croatian Times, Vienna Times, Salzburg Times, and Romanian Times. Sometimes, the stories go up on these sites prior to appearing on a client's site. Domain registration records list Leidig and Central European News as the owner of the domain. (The administrative contact is KSH Systems Einzelunternehmen, a web development company that is credited with creating the websites and CMS.)

CEN does not solely traffic in fake stories and fabricated quotes. There are examples where it sources a story from local press in Eastern Europe or elsewhere around the world, and faithfully reports the details. However, its accurate work is seamlessly mixed with fabricated quotes, stolen images and examples where it has completely invented events and sources to accompany a striking series of images.

It has built up a business and reputation for finding hilarious and shocking stories from less covered places around the world. At some point, they began to be more brazen about the things they offered to clients. Today, their output regularly features content that is incorrect, fabricated and used without permission. And some of the largest English news websites pay for this content and promote it to drive social shares and traffic.

The result is a constant stream of outrageous and often offensive stories of dubious or false origin that depict people in India, China and other countries as barbaric, bloodthirsty, and sex crazed, among other things.

### Key Findings

We need to list all of the key things here.

#### Confirmed Fake stories:

- Bieber bear attack.
- Woman in KFC.
- Two headed goat.
- Chinese woman offering sex for travel.
- Sashimi tapeworm
- Macedonian man who chopped off penis

#### Unverifiable stories:

- Many of the penis ones

### **Fake images:**

- Goat with two heads. I have quotes from a photo forensics expert.

### **Recycled images:**

- Used the picture of man with bloody crotch in two penis-chopping stories.
- Used an old picture of a pile of snow to illustrate a new story for Austrian Times.

### **Suspect quotes:**

- They manage to get quotes from people in very small Chinese villages. (Tanya, please fill in some examples of people/places from stories you looked at. Are these places in Google maps? Do they have any local media we can find online etc.)
- Quotes are frequently attributed to anonymous spokespeople or to “local TV” without any link or reference.
- Quotes are too perfect. People often speak in paragraphs and use anglicized phrases such as “off sick,” “quite normal,” “stop off,” “massive hoo-ha.”
- They all read like the same person has said/written them.

## **Suspicious/Fabricated quotes**

CEN stories from places like India and China are often characterized by lengthy quotes from an unnamed official, or from a person with a name who is difficult or impossible to track down and verify. These quotes come from people in different parts of the world and yet they invariably sound like they have been spoken by the same person. A British person, like Leidig. Examples below.

### **1. Aunt cuts off toddler’s penis (China)**

A hospital spokesman said: "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.

"However, he has now had three surgeries all of which have been successful and we are confident that his penis will be perfectly OK again in three months."

A police spokesman said: "The aunt was arrested and admitted attacking the boy because she was angry that he had interrupted her on the toilet."

*Red flags: How would CEN get a spokesman for the hospital and from the police? And why no names? The phrase “quite blunt” is also very anglicized, as is the entire sentence that contains it.*

### **2. Woman stays in KFC for a week (China)**

KFC worker Jiang Li Lung:

'We work in shifts here and the restaurant is open 24 hours a day, so we get a lot of people coming through.

'At first no one really noticed her.

'But after a few days I began thinking she looked really familiar.

'Then I realised we had been serving her for the past three days and that she hadn't actually left.

'When we asked her if she was ok, she said she was and just needed time to think.

'And then asked for another box of chicken wings with extra large fries.'

Tan Shen:

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

'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.'

*Red flags: This story has been confirmed false, which means the quotes are fake. The quotes themselves also have two U.K. phrases that would not likely be used by a Chinese woman in her 20s: "stop off" and "off sick."*

### **3. Mistress stripped and beaten in public (China)**

Jun Feng told local TV:

'This type of thing is becoming quite normal.

'Angry wives and girlfriends get their revenge on their cheating men by attacking the other woman.

'People don't tend to get involved because they see it as being an argument of the heart.'

*Red flag: "Quite normal" fits with other "quite" quotes. (Is "argument of the heart" something that would be a phrase in China?)*

### **4. Blundering boyfriend burns down college after trying to impress his girlfriend with elaborate marriage proposal (China)**

Shin Tan:

"He had prepared this big event in secret and had told her to meet him by the sports ground for a romantic walk.

"She had no idea he was planning to propose though, and clearly forgot all about the walk."

Dim Xiong Chien:

"I was feeling a bit surprised that she hadn't shown up, and was completely unaware that the fireworks had set the grass on fire.

"When I found her I said she had to come with me as there was something important I wanted to tell her and show her.

"But as we approached the sports hall we saw all these flames and firemen and I decided to postpone the proposal to another date."

Cong Yen:

"I found out later that he wanted to ask me to marry him.

"Of course, I love him, but my parents have told me to steer clear, saying he can't even ask me to marry him without causing a massive hoo-ha."

College spokesman:

"The hall is covered by insurance and we have yet to make a decision about how to punish this student."

*Red flags: "Sports ground" is a U.K. term. "Steer clear" is also suspect. So too is "massive hoo-ha." Yet another anonymous spokesperson.*

### **5. Wife leaves cheating husband and her twin sister naked in parking lot**

Witness You Meng:

'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.'

*Red flags: "Loads of people" and "playing ball."*

### **6. Wife chops off cheating husband's penis, twice**

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.'

Zhang Hung

'It doesn't matter that he's lost his fertility, he has five children already.'

*Red flags: "Emotionally distraught."*

### **7. Underwear thief caught and punished by women**

Teo Goh:

"We first became suspicious after my wife found one of her bras missing when she woke up in the morning.

"Over the next couple of weeks other residents began noticing lingerie being stolen either from courtyards or balconies and we realised there was a serial thief at work.

"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.

"And then we called the police."

Police spokesman:

"We don't condone vigilante activity but in this case it seems to have turned out OK."

*Red flags: A police spokesman endorses vigilante justice. The witness narrates the entire story in a perfect paragraph. "Frog-marched."*

### **8. Bieber ringtone saves man from bear attack**

Wildlife expert:

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

Igor Vorozhbitsyn:

"I had parked my car and was walking towards the spot I'd marked out when there was a tremendous impact on my back and the bear was on top of me."

"I couldn't believe my luck when the phone went off and he fled.

"I know that sort of ringtone isn't to everyone's taste but my granddaughter loaded it onto my phone for a joke."

*Red flags: Anonymous, random "expert." Victim talks about the ringtone even though that aspect of the article is fabricated. In fact, all of the above quotes do not match the account in the Russian paper that first reported it and had the images CEN took:*  
<http://www.kp.ru/daily/26263.4/3141355/>

### **9. Indian man castrated by crowd after being caught trying to rape woman**

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."

Police spokesman:

"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."

*Red flags: "Intolerable offences" "it's time it stopped." Anonymous police spokesman.*

### **10. Chinese woman tries to sell her son to pay for daughter's medical treatment (China)**

Meng Xiangyan:

"Up until a year ago we had a wonderful family and we thought we had everything we could need with a wonderful little boy and a wonderful little girl who are twins.

"But all that changed when my daughter was diagnosed as suffering from leukemia in August of last year and we spent all of our savings and borrowed everything we could from friends and relatives.

"It still wasn't enough, and now we are hoping to raise cash from the sale of our son."

*Red flags: Speaking in a perfect paragraph.*

### **11. Chinese man tries to kidnap wife**

Liu Hung:

'I am the only one in my family without a girlfriend or wife, and I was fed up of going home and simply getting a hard time.'

*Red flags: "Fed up" and "getting a hard time." This quote is also not in any Chinese reports we could find.*

### **12. Two-headed Goat**

Xu Jinkui:



"They told me to leave it to die, but I couldn't just do that. I asked the vet and he said it wouldn't live long either, but the mother didn't reject it and I gave it a bit of extra milk occasionally and instead of dying, it seemed to do pretty well."

"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."

*Red flags: the pic is fake so the quotes are fake, too. In the quotes we see the phrase "Straight away" and a source speaking in perfect paragraphs.*

## CEN on the Record

In August I tried repeatedly to speak to Leidig. I initially called and asked to speak to David Rogers, who was listed on the site as its ombudsman, and also its primary sales contact. The British woman who answered said he was not in the office. I then asked her about the Bieber story.

"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 said.

From that point on she did not offer any additional information. She told me Leidig was on vacation in Hungary and would not respond.

## Michael Leidig



Michael Leidig is the owner of CEN, EuroPics and a group of English language websites where CEN's stories often appear. He may own other entities. He is also the former and perhaps current vice-chairman of the National Association of Press Agencies, an organization that represents small photo and news agencies, primarily in the U.K.

Leidig's Wikipedia page is surprisingly detailed for someone who is not a well-known journalist. It has also been flagged by editors lacking citations in every section. It details his companies, his books, his work as a journalist,

and his advocacy efforts to get news agencies paid for their work:

*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 link in that passage goes to an article on the Austrian Times, which of course Leidig owns and operates. (Would an outside person really be familiar enough with that site and with Leidig's efforts to place it in a Wikipedia entry?)

Leidig earned coverage for his efforts in October 2011 when he claimed that The Huffington Post had infringed on stories CEN had sold to clients. One was about a former Playboy model named Nives Celsius signing with a Croatian soccer team, and the other focused on a U.K. pop star, according to the Press Gazette, a trade journal covering publishing and journalism in the U.K.

Leidig has also published at least two op-eds in the Press Gazette. In 2013, he wrote about his "five-month investigation into Bernie Madoff's missing billions, a story no newsdesk wants to run." That turned into a book that he says is based on "hundreds of highly confidential documents that showed the inner workings of a major European bank and widespread evidence of corruption" related to Bernis Madoff's Ponzi scheme. these documents were allegedly given to him by an anonymous source who contacted him one night at midnight.

Regarding his complaint against Huffington Post, the Press Gazette reported that "HuffPo covered both stories, linking to the original articles, but according to CEN this meant it had used the agency's copy without credit or consent."

Leidig went so far as to invoice HuffPost for the articles. He then declared victory when he received a cheque.

'They seem to think that because they take the hard work of the real news community and shuffle the worlds [sic] around, that they are somehow in the news business,' he was quoted as saying. "They can huff and puff all they like as long as they pay – maybe then they'll appreciate fully the tough economic world we all have to live in."

But it turns out some of what was presented in the Press Gazette story was either not true or lacking key context.

The site reported that CEN had sold its Playboy model story to the Croatian Times. Except that site is owned by Leidig. Can it really then be called a customer? It also noted that Leidig's claim "received support from the National Association of Press Agencies (NAPA)." It did not note that Leidig is a member of its executive.

Then there's Leidig's claim that HuffPost capitulated and paid the invoice he sent for stealing his work. After the original version of the story was published, the site's then-VP of communications, Mario Ruiz, reached out to the Press Gazette with an important clarification.

'In the case of the specific invoices in question, it appears that these invoices from CEN, an established photo licensing vendor in our system, involved a standard photo license fee, and were treated as we treat standard photo license invoices,' Ruiz told the site, noting that the payment reflected a "paperwork error, not a change in policy".

Leidig also boasted of taking down another copyright scofflaw a year later. Austrian Times published what was presented as a news story about CEN getting Google to disable AdSense ads on a site that he said was illegally reprinting whole articles from the Austrian Times.

Leasing said that they “found hundreds of unauthorised usages of material that we had written and published. Most interesting was a Romanian website <http://www.austria.com.ro/> populated entirely by content lifted from the Austrian Times.”

Leidig then reached out to Google and successfully had the sites banned from its online advertising program. The story of his success noted, incorrectly, that Leidig had “last year won a copyright battle with the Huffington Post.” HuffPost, of course, said he was paid in error and denied any wrongdoing.

## Journalism Without Borders

In 2010 Leidig and Austrian charity worker (and taxi driver) Hannes Urban created what is claimed to be a charity, Journalism Without Borders. It aims to provide a way for people to donate money to sources who are featured in 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 medial and other costs. When it launched in 2010, it got coverage in the Guardian: <http://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2010/mar/09/charities-news-agencies>

There are many questionable elements about this charity and its relationships with Urban’s charity, Helfen Wir. I am not ready to declare it yet, it looks like it could quite possibly be a scam. Some issues:

- The 2010 Austrian Times article about Urban and his partnership with Leidig for JWB is significantly plagiarized from a 2002 AP piece published in the LA Times: <http://articles.latimes.com/2002/jun/02/news/adfg-driving>.
- The JWB website says that “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.” This makes it sound as if it is no longer affiliated with Helfen Wir, though that charity is mentioned on the site in several places, and its logo is prominently displayed. How is it possible this charity has its own team? And is it actually registered as its own charity? Did Leidig and Urban have a falling out?
- The donation form on the JWB site is just a PayPal link. This is seriously dodgy. Where does the money go? Could we give a small donation and see what comes back?
- Some of the stories listed on the site as options for people to donate to don’t seem to have been covered by any English language media. For example: <http://journalismwithoutborders.com/a-details-running/article/woman-23-breathes-using-modified-foot-pump-to-inflate-lungs.html> Those pics are all over Chinese sites, but nothing comes up in English except for the JWB site. Is it really possible that Leidig has connected with her and her family and has a way to get money to them? And is this story about her even real? (I didn’t look at all the Chinese language links yet.)
- The site has a few commentaries from Leidig that go after Google News: <http://journalismwithoutborders.com/mn-details-running/article/news-agency-chief-why-google-news-doesnt-work.html> Or the online world of news: <http://journalismwithoutborders.com/mn-details-running/article/in-the-age-of-limitless-news-who-can-tell-what-is-new.html> The latter is really interesting in that it lays out a bit of his mindset and offers possible motivation for why he started making shit up. It originally appeared in the Press Gazette.

- There is an Investigations tab on the site that has a bunch of articles that don't seem to have anything to do with the charity: <http://journalismwithoutborders.com/investigations.html> Are they there to help drive traffic to the site to convert donations?
- The JWB site says that “foreign desk manager at the Sunday Telegraph Lucy Wolseley (now Tipler)” was the inspiration for the charity when she raised funds for the subject of a story that Leidig himself had written: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/romania/1434402/Back-from-the-grave.html> So she is a person to speak to. Alarming, the Telegraph story has no image, but the JWB page has two of the woman and her daughter from the story, and solicits donations: <http://journalismwithoutborders.com/imprint.html>. How is it possible he is still collecting money for a family he wrote about in 2003? This is super shady. And the pics come up with nothing in the reverse image search.

One really great benefit of this site is that it points to people that Leidig claims he set up CEN with in 1993: “Tom Hagler from the BBC World Service and an ex-Daily Express journalist named Samantha King.”

I found an online resume for King that seems to confirm her involvement and that offers contact info for her, in France. Hagler appears to be back working for the BBC.

## When CEN Went Bad

At one point CEN seemed to be pretty legitimate and had Hagler and others on staff. They used to write for Radio Free Europe:  
<http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1086367.html>

And be interviewed as part of Nightline segments:  
<http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/siteindex/1997-Specials/special-1997-05-14-ABC-1.html>

But it seems as though they were hammered by the Internet. Pieces that they could sell to multiple outlets now only got sold once and then aggregated by others. This seems to have set Leidig on a course of objecting to Google and penning pieces like this one for the Press Gazette in 2013: <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/content/age-limitless-news-who-can-tell-what-new>

That piece talks about how in 1993 having an “English speaking staff on the ground in Europe was almost a licence to print money back then.” But now:

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

But the newspapers and the magazines are not to blame. They are in the same boat as the rest of us.

The real problem is the internet and search engines like Google, in particular, that do not value content.

So his business has been suffering. I bet he's had to get rid of a lot or all of those English speaking journalists.

This seems to give us a bit of perspective on why CEN does what it does. And since we probably won't get Leidig to say much, it helps provide some context and insight into his thinking.