

Last August, a story swept across the Internet, racking up over 20,000 social shares thanks to articles on large news sites such as the [Daily Mail](#), [New York Post](#), [Sydney Morning Herald](#), [New York Daily News](#), [Daily Express](#), [Daily Mirror](#), among many others.

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 phone played a ringtone that startled the animal and caused it to run off.

What was that life-saving ringtone? The song "Baby", by Justin Bieber.

"Even bears can't stand Justin Bieber's music," [reported](#) The New York Post. "Finally proof that Justin Bieber IS unbearable," chortled the [Daily Mail](#). The bear vs Bieber story even made it into Seth Myers' monologue for his late-night show on NBC.

There was just one problem: it wasn't true.

The original story about the bear attack, [which was published in Russia's Komsomolskaya Pravda](#), said nothing about a Bieber ringtone. Instead, it reported that the man's phone had a setting that caused it to speak the current time. That's what scared off the bear.

So how did this fake detail get inserted into the story, causing it to go viral? The answer is tucked away in the photo credit that accompanied the photo of the man attacked by the bear: "CEN."

Central European News and its sister outfit Europics are small and (outside certain sections of the media) largely unknown news agencies based in Vienna, Austria. In recent years, CEN has become one of the Western media's primary sources of tantalising and attention-grabbing stories - many of which tend to depict people in India, China and other non-Western countries as ignorant, barbaric, sex-crazed and just plain weird.

CEN's stories and images appeal to news organisations precisely because they fall into the category of "too good to check" - oddball human interest stories that promise a spike of traffic and social media buzz. But the frequency with which we and others found problems with its stories led BuzzFeed News to become increasingly suspicious of CEN's output. We reached out to Emergent, a site that

tracks and confirms or debunks online rumors, in order to look more closely at the agency, its stories, and its role in the online news ecosystem.

What we found was a pattern of behaviour that included 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.

Of course, there were many CEN stories that appeared to be real, and which the agency had picked up from local media and rewritten. But even in some of these cases the original reports that CEN relied upon might lack key verifying details. And CEN also consistently managed to obtain quotes from officials and witnesses that no members of the local media had spoken with or been able to locate. These sources – whether a farmer from a tiny Chinese village, a policeman from India, or an anonymous “wildlife expert” from parts unknown – always spoke in perfect quotes, using the unique idioms of the British tabloids.

Whether it was the story of Bieber and the bear, a Chinese backpacker offering sex in return for help funding her vacation, a man who got a tapeworm after eating sashimi, or a teacher accused of sleeping with her student, the evidence assembled by BuzzFeed News suggests that CEN has built a business out of exaggeration, embellishment and outright fabrication. And news organisations - including BuzzFeed News - bought what CEN had to sell, because they knew that their readers would lap up these lurid tales of faraway people and places.

The result has been to further dilute the journalistic standards which media organisations of all kinds profess to hold dear - and to further dilute the public's trust in what it's reading.

The Man From CEN

In a 2013 op-ed for the UK media trade journal Press Gazette (<http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/content/age-limitless-news-who-can-tell-what-news>), a man called Michael Leidig proudly described the kind of traffic CEN could drive to 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 is the co-founder and owner of CEN. He is also runs a charity called Journalists Without Borders, which claims to provide money to the needy sources featured in stories from CEN and other outlets. It solicits donations on the JWB site via PayPal, which it says it redirects to people featured in the articles who may be in need of medical care or financial support.

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 of the key edits and contributions to Leidig’s Wikipedia page are by a user called “Bylinebandit,” who is also a major contributor to the page for the Austrian Times. Bylinebandit also 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 Michael Leidig.

Leidig started his career in the British regional press, before moving to Austria in 1993. It was there that he and a colleague, Tom Hagler, founded Central European News, which began with a focus on sourcing newsworthy items from Eastern Europe and rewriting them for the London market.

In that Press Gazette op-ed, Leidig painted a picture of a young agency that was earning good revenue and employing “full-time paid correspondents across Europe”. “Having English-speaking staff on the ground in Europe was almost a

licence to print money,” he wrote. His clients apparently included the BBC, Deutsche Welle, Radio Netherlands, as well as major British newspapers. CEN also produced TV footage for clients. A single story such as that of Dr Heinrich Gross, an Austrian doctor who conducted experiments on children for the Nazis, could, wrote Leidig, “be sold a dozen times in various media formats”.

Samantha King worked for CEN for eight months in 1995. Now a journalist and translator based in France, she said they specialized on finding stories that seemed ordinary in Austria but that would be perfect fodder for the U.K. tabloids.

“One of our most popular stories we did was on a [Austrian] law passed on men doing their share of housework,” she said in a phone interview. “In Austria they had a very serious discussion about it.”

King also said they worked with reporters stringers based in Central European countries.

“We had various people in Central European countries who would send through stories to us,” she said. “One of the advantages we had was there wasn’t really anybody else covering that stuff.”

But then the bottom fell out of the business. 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. According to Leidig, it told him “there was no longer value in original content, and that was because of the competition from the internet”.

So Leidig decided to play the online 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 content he knew they couldn’t resist.

Going Viral

Komsomolskaya Pravda published its story about Igor Vorozhbityn, the Russian man who survived the bear attack, on July 31. Five days later, Leidig’s Austrian

Times published the story, with a photo of the fisherman (properly credited to KP) 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. CEN never takes a byline on its stories: they are always credited to in-house reporters. But the emails that the firm sends to its clients every day, with a lengthy list of stories to pick from, offer a package of pictures and text, which is often published virtually unchanged. The copy also often appears on Leidig's sites, making it clear where the stories have originated. In this instance, for example, the Mail's story included the same key quotes and details, and many similar phrases, as the one published on the Austrian Times site.

With the story taking off online, one of the authors of this article attempted to verify its veracity by speaking to Leidig. A woman who answered the phone at the Austrian Times said he was on vacation in Romania. When asked how the agency would find and cover such a story, 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 freelance agent in Russia and follow up. From that point, the Austrian Times/CEN/EuroPics stopped providing information or responding to emails.

It's not just Russia that CEN harvests for copy. Last November, some of the biggest 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. A video of their tryst had made its way to a porn website, turning an already tabloid-ready tale into an irresistible blend of titillation and internet depravity.

Britain's Daily Mirror and Metro, the New York Daily News and others paired the story with an image of the woman posing poolside in her bikini. The photo was credited to CEN. "Teacher suspended after sex session with teen pupil ends up on hardcore porn website," read the Mirror's headline. The Daily Mail – the most trafficked English-language newspaper website in the world – even initially claimed that there would be a criminal investigation, and that this wasn't the first time that the teacher in question had had sexual relations with a student.

But a full two weeks before the English-language media picked up the story, it had already been debunked by a local paper in Argentina, Nuevo Diario. As BuzzFeed News reported at the time, the video didn't show an underage boy. The woman in the video was a teacher, but she wasn't from Santiago del Estero. And she probably wasn't called Lucita Sandoval. (Nuevo Diario did not list the names of those involved, out of respect for their privacy). Some of the sites updated their articles, but some remain inaccurate to this day. CEN was a key player in helping propagate this hoax among English language news sites.

Indeed, though it began as an agency focused on Eastern Europe, CEN increasingly sells stories that are sourced from other parts of the world, such as the Argentinian teacher example. It has a particular focus on sourcing items from Chinese social networks, online bulletin boards, and news websites.

Take the 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. The New York Daily News and The Daily Telegraph credited their images of the woman to EuroPics, CEN's sister agency. 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.

After the story was proven to be a hoax Leidig's Austrian Times published a story about the debunking. It reported that Chinese officials were "particularly angry about the viral story widely spread on Chinese social media sites and also reported extensively in Chinese media and international media"

CEN also distributed the images and text for a story about a Chinese man who got a tapeworm from eating too much sashimi. It originated on the Chinese news site hk.on.cc and then CEN/EuroPics distributed the images far and wide.

Soon after they made the rounds, the debunking site Snopes investigated the story. It 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 News was one of many sites that covered the claim and images when they first appeared. (Our post was updated after the Snopes article appeared.)

CEN has also played a part in circulating hoaxes that have already been debunked. 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. At the request of BuzzFeed News Dr. Neal Krawetz, the creator of [FotoForensics](#) photo analysis platform, which is used by law enforcement and others to examine digital images, analysed the image.

"The goat picture that we investigated appears to be a 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". That means that 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 collection by Vice](#) 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."

The Perfect Quote

Along with the questionable nature of the image, there is an even bigger problem with the goat story. 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 still very thin on quotes. Yet the

Croatian Times story quotes farmer and goat owner Xu Jinkui at length. It also 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."

A Xinhua journalist who claims to have seen the goat in person didn't get the farmer to talk. But a news agency based in Vienna somehow did, despite the story taking place in a remote rural community a six-hour train ride from Beijing.

The nature of the quote fits a pattern. CEN somehow manages to get incredible lines from sources that no one else could track down or persuade to talk, including the local media. And perhaps uniquely in journalism, it is so humble about these exclusive quotes that it is perfectly happy to let its customers put their own reporters' names on them.

In February 2015, for example, the Daily Mail 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, which credit the accompanying pictures of a grown man wearing a nappy to CEN.

All three also 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 from four days earlier says that the thief pretended to be mentally ill, but no more. 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.

Leidig's Croatian Times and Austrian Times also published the story. Those versions share quotes, phrases and other details with the Mail story, demonstrating that CEN provided the story and the images. (More than half of the suspect CEN stories cited in this article had identical or nearly identical versions published on a site owned by Leidig.)

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

For example, the 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 Anglicised phrases. For instance, in January this year a number of news websites — including Leidig's Austrian Times — 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 found a man 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 a "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?

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 is also suspect because, while the story was covered by the Chinese-language media, none of the earlier online posts 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, in spite of the distance and language barriers.

Sometimes, it has proved impossible for BuzzFeed News to verify whether the text of a particular story has been circulated by CEN, as opposed to just the pictures. Since BuzzFeed News is no longer one of CEN’s clients, we have relied on similarities between the copy on Leidig’s sites and other published versions of the story, or on the fact that competing news organisations have produced near-identical stories, featuring matching quotes and details, accompanied by pictures credited to CEN. But sometimes, it is relatively simple to catch them in the act.

Two weeks ago, CEN covered another Russian story. The agency’s copy, purchased and published by the Daily Mirror, claimed that two Russian women from Khabarovsk, near Vladivostok, had been fired from their jobs at a department store after they spent an afternoon participating in a nude photo shoot.

BuzzFeed News tracked down the images, and found they originated with a Russian news outlet from the area. That piece identified the photographer as a Gene Oryx, whose online portfolio includes nudes. The Mirror story credited the

images to a “Dimitry Kulishenko, 30” - but online searches for that name return no mentions apart from those inspired by the *Mirror*.

In an email, Oryx confirmed to BuzzFeed News that he was the original photographer and attached an hi-res, uncensored copy of one of the photos to prove his claim. He also said that the women in the picture do not work in a department store, and that the names listed for them in the CEN/Mirror story are false. By implication, that also means the quotes attributed to four different people in the story — one of the women, a “shocked” onlooker, a police spokesman and a spokesman from the department store — are fabricated.

In other words, CEN took the photos, invented a newsworthy narrative, inserted false names for the women, credited a nonexistent photographer, and fabricated four sets of quotes to fill out the text. Then it sold the story and images. (Oryx says no one from CEN contacted him to license his images for resale.)

The Sausage Machine

Nowhere are CEN’s quotes more perfect or its details sharper than when it comes to one of its signature issues: castration. Since October, CEN has sold and/or published five stories that involve a man either being forcibly castrated, or chopping off his own penis.

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 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.

All of these quotes also appeared in the version of the story published in the Austrian Times.

Another unnamed police spokesman appeared 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 BuzzFeed News could find this quote only on sites that bought the images 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 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.

In January CEN hit the mother lode of foreign castration stories. Pictures 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 writing been shared more than 40,000 times. (It also appears on the Austrian 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 his 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 had five children. But once again, the version sold by CEN went further. 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 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 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.

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 to 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 online stories. Its report 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 recognise 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 appears to have picked up the picture after a reader tried to fool an Austrian newspaper with it.

The agency then wove a fake story about a car crash to accompany the image, and further sexed it up by adding in an over-the-top fabricated quote from someone identified as "Motorist Michael Kienast":

"I was behind two guys who had a fender bender because the motorists in front took their eyes off the road to glance up at the view. The young woman was obviously keen on getting some sun in a place where it doesn't usually shine.

"I heard the guy who was rear-ended shout to the motorist who had hit him: 'Didn't you look where you were supposed to be going?'

"The driver who hit him said: 'Sorry, I was distracted,' and pointed up to the window where the woman was lying. The guy who was hit then said: 'Oh, right, I see what you mean'."

CEN then sold the fabricated text and years-old image to the Daily Mirror, whose story is an almost word-for-word copy of what was on Leidig's Austrian Times.

Completely fabricating quotes and entire storylines for a quirky photoset seems to be something of a CEN speciality. In May 2014, a story appeared on sites including *Metro* and *The Huffington Post* (since corrected) which claimed that Chinese teenagers were attempting to alleviate feelings of loneliness by taking cabbages for walks.

The story included quotes from "Chinese psychiatrist Wen Chao" explaining how walking a cabbage on a lead can help reduce feelings of isolation, and from a 17-year-old called Lui Ja Chen, who supposedly said:

"I feel I can transfer my negative thoughts about myself to the cabbage, go for a walk with it and come home feeling better about myself."

The pictures were credited to CEN, and the same quotes appeared on the Austrian Times.

Unsurprisingly, *Kotaku* was able to quickly debunk the story, as did BuzzFeed and the *Wall Street Journal*. The teens were not walking cabbages because they were lonely; they were walking cabbages as part of an art event at a music festival by Chinese artist Han Bing (who has been walking cabbages as part of his art for over a decade). How were CEN able to get quotes from multiple people about how walking the cabbages was a psychiatric intervention for lonely teens when, er, it wasn't?

CEN's stories that fabricate a storyline around a compelling image can have real-world consequences, as with the case of "Lucita Sandoval". Another example of this was the CEN story about a woman named Elena Lenina, who dyed her kitten pink – causing the animal's death from blood poisoning. This was covered by outlets such as *The Daily Mail* and *Metro*. But as Gawker's Antiviral diagonal pointed out, the story was false. The kitten was not dead. Lenina was in fact posting pictures of it, very much alive, on social media.

As with the Sandoval case, this appears to be a situation where CEN happily sold a false (and defamatory) story about a real person, with little regard for the consequences that person would face when the story went viral.

Recycling images without any kind of disclosure (not to mention fabricating quotes and details) isn't exactly new behaviour 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.

BuzzFeed News and Emergent have now studied more than 20 CEN stories in as great a depth as we can. We have found stories that appear to be partly or completely fabricated. We have found stories that carry quotes and details that cannot be confirmed elsewhere. And we have found that the agency has been a point of redistribution for hoaxes, and for stories that are supported by nothing more than a single post on a foreign social network.

A Viral News Charity?

But the problems with CEN's output go deeper than just its journalism. In 2010, Michael 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's reporting. For example, on the agency's 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, JWB received coverage from The Guardian.

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 plagiarised from a 2002 Associated Press story about Urban. One of the few paragraphs not copied from the AP story is a quote from Leidig.

The other story about the charity mentions Leidig's inspiration for starting the effort. In 2002, he was commissioned by The Sunday Telegraph to write 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. As he recounted in 2010, (http://www.austriantimes.at/news/General_News/2010-03-09/21410/Media_Insider:_Journalism_Without_Borders) the Telegraph's readers offered to send money to help the family, which was incredibly poor. Leidig claims he eventually drove there with the cash himself, yet was apparently struck by how cumbersome a process it had been to get them the money - and by the fact that none of the dozens of other media outlets who had covered the story had offered assistance.

"As to Ana Crisan and her mother," the Austrian Times story from 2010 reports, "Leidig admits he does not know what happened after he visited them with money from Telegraph readers." Yet on JWB's website, there is a form that invites people to donate money to Crisan's mother. How can Leidig be passing money to a woman whom an article published on his own website, and quite possibly written by him, admits he has lost touch with?

Journalism Without borders is not a registered charity with the Austrian Finance Ministry, nor is it registered in the U.K. When it launched, it forged an alliance with Helfen Wir to enable that charity to administer donations on its behalf.

But JWB's own website reports that it is no longer connected to Helfen Wir. "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," according to its About page.

That same page thanks Helfen Wir for "agreeing to accept and administer the funds as the project learned to stand on its own."

If Helfen Wir is no longer accepting and administering the funds, that means the unregistered JWB is. As with our other queries, Leidig did not respond to questions about JWB, its charitable status, and how it delivers funds to the people it promotes on its website. Emails and phone calls to Helfen Wir also went unanswered, and its Facebook page has not been updated since 2013.

Who can tell?

The questionable nature of CEN's content has become something of an open secret among online news and picture desk editors.

BuzzFeed News spoke to staffers from multiple British news organisations, all of whom expressed scepticism about the agency's output (none were willing to be quoted on the record). One person, who works on the picture desk of a major British publisher and requested anonymity on the grounds that their "bosses would kill them", described CEN as "utter fucking shit".

This picture editor described two red flags that make them question CEN content: "They don't have a single staff photographer. All of their pictures are 'collects' - and I use the term loosely, because every time I have enquired with them where the pictures are from, I've got quite vague answers. Secondly, all of their collects are of really bad quality... It makes me think their stuff is just grabbed from other websites, or taken a really long time ago."

"I do not trust a single bit of what they send us."

They added that they have "raised the issue several times" with the news desk, but that CEN's stories "bring in clicks, so no one seems to care that much".

An editor at The Guardian, who previously worked for The Sun, recently indicated his familiarity with its handiwork:



Chris King
@chriskking

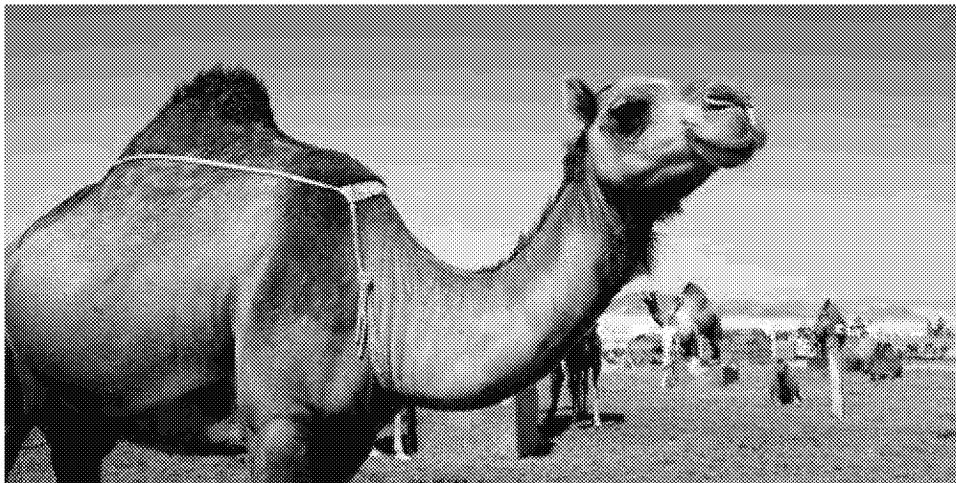


 Follow

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...

[Have emailed him for more info; will update if he gets back to me. We should also work to get some of the picture desk quotes in here to build this section out]

New York Times technology columnist Farhad Manjoo also took note of a CEN story [that had made its way into The New York Post](#):



Farhad Manjoo
@fmanjoo



Following

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

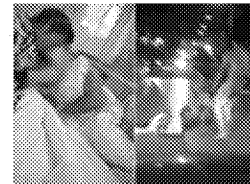
nypost.com/2015/01/13/wif...



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](#)

Majoo said in an email that the attribution of such an outrageous story to a small, unknown agency struck him as questionable behavior.

"I see this happen often in tabloids like the Post or Daily Mail or Yahoo or other news sites - references to foreign news services (often in the developing world) whose credibility we have no way of assessing," he said. "It's just sort of an obvious signifier of the publication thinking that the story is too good to check, that it doesn't really matter if it's true because it's so strange."

This might be a comforting argument. But the consequence is that real people - an Argentinian teacher, a Russian photo model - are having their lives distorted and paraded before the world. And it also blurs the line between truth and fiction in a way that undermines the integrity of the news media as a whole.

In that Press Gazette article, Michael Leidig lamented what the internet had done to the economics of newsgathering. "There has never been a better time to be a journalist, if it's your hobby," he wrote. "If you hope to make a living out of it, then I can't remember it being worse."

He added: "With hundreds of thousands of new items a day, who can tell what is new anymore?"

Or, for that matter, what is real.

Note: BuzzFeed News has, as mentioned in this piece, previously used images from CEN, or followed up reports that originated with the agency. It is now our policy not to do so.

The following is a list of all those stories, as far as we are able to determine:

[HEADLINES WILL BE AS LINKS, IN STANDARD BUZZFEED FORMAT]

- Chinese man who supposedly set fire to his college when he tried to impress his girlfriend with fireworks
- The sashimi tapeworm story
- [This](#) story about a swastika in a German pavement
- [this](#) story about a frozen waterfall in China
- Bieber and the bear

[WILL CHECK THOROUGHLY FOR MORE]

- A list of those stories we have been unable to verify has been added to Emergent [\[LINK\]](#) and we will update them if fresh information comes in. For more information on BuzzFeed News' sourcing policy, see our Editorial Standards and Ethics Guide (<http://www.buzzfeed.com/shani/the-buzzfeed-editorial-standards-and-ethics-guide>)
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