Michael Leidig

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Michael Leidig is a British journalist based in Vienna, Austria, who since 1986 has worked as a foreign correspondent, publisher, author, editor, photographer and broadcaster. He has worked for local (Austrian) as well as international media in print and broadcast.

Early career

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After working as the picture editor at his student newspaper at the University of Hull in 1984, he was offered a two-year journalist apprenticeship on the *Chatham News* in Kent, England. His career almost ended when he was fired by the editor Gerald Hinks for spelling a street name wrong, but was then reinstated after producing a picture of a street sign where the council had also spelt the name wrongly. After qualifying he became night shift editor on the Cardiff-based Welsh daily newspaper the *Western Mail*, eventually becoming editions editor and number two on the news desk before leaving to join the newly formed news agency Wales News, working weekends as a reporter at the local TV station HTV and evenings as a sub editor for Welsh newspapers Media Wales. In December 1993 he was offered a news-reading job at the ORF's English language national radio station Blue Danube Radio in the Austrian capital Vienna. He created the station's first editorial style guide, influenced heavily by the BBC guide that news should "Inform, Educate and Entertain". He was a founder member of the Keep Blue Danube Radio campaign, and although later offered a place in the new editorial team at FM4 only worked there for a short while before leaving to restart his print career by founding the news agency **Central European News**.

Career highlights

While working as a reporter for Wales News he had a tip-off from police that judge John Prosser sitting at Cardiff Crown Court had asked for a social worker report in the case of a 15-year-old rapist convicted by a jury. The request indicated he was considering a non-custodial sentence and Leidig was the only reporter in court when the boy was freed on the condition he pay for his victim to go for a "good holiday". The story ran on the front pages of UK national papers for seven days before it was raised in Parliament and then sent to the Court of Appeal of England and Wales,[1] where the verdict was overturned.

In Vienna when attending a medical congress he was tipped off about allegations that the Austrian doctor Heinrich Gross had been involved in euthanasia of children. After gaining access to the cellar where the body parts of the child victims were still being kept by Dr Gross he wrote a series of articles for the *Daily Telegraph*,[2] *The Sunday Times Magazine*,[citation needed] *Daily Mail*[citation needed] and BBC[3] which culminated in a documentary that took two years to make for *ABC Nightline*. After the TV report Austrian officials reopened the case and although Gross was stripped of his honours and his victims were finally buried, Dr Gross was ruled as unfit to stand trial and was not prosecuted.[4]

Agency work

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He started an agency in Austria, believing that the EU's eastern expansion and the city's geographical location were good reasons for the choice. In its first week of operation Central European News sold an exclusive story to the *Sunday Times* and a week later had a second exclusive in the *Sunday Telegraph*. Leidig was for several years a correspondent for the Sunday and Daily Telegraph, but his agency also still writes regularly for the Times, Sunday Times, *The Guardian* and *The Observer*. CEN also files a daily feed to the tabloid and middle market media including the *Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and *Daily Mirror* and also sells to non-British publications, providing editorial content, pictures and other services direct to such publications as the *Wiener Zeitung* and *Die Presse* (Austria) Belfast Telegraph (Northern Ireland), Irish Times (Ireland), Scotsman (Scotland), Telegraaf (Netherlands), Berliner Zeitung, Spiegel and Bild (Germany), Dagbladet (Norway), El Mundo (Spain), Aftonbladet and Expressen (Sweden), Fakt (Poland), the New York Post (US), South China Morning Post, (Hong Kong) and India Today. The agency and its picture arm Europics also has syndication partnerships with Action Press in Germany, Austral Press in Australia, Mainstream Data in the US and All Over Press in Scandinavia. Its news items are also filed directly to news databases such as Lexis Nexus, Factiva and APA De Facto, and is a direct provider of news to specialist publications including Railway Gazette, Auto Express, Broadcast Magazine, Business Week, Caterer and Hotelkeeper, Catholic Herald, Flight International, Food and Beverage International, Grocer, Marie Claire and the Reader's Digest (International), PR Week, Fishing Magazine and the Times Higher Education Supplement. CEN also does TV and radio news, producing five-minute news items for Associated Press Television, radio reports for Global Radio News in London and several 30-minute and one hour documentaries that were sold internationally. Broadcasters CEN has worked for include ABC, BBC, CBS, CBC, Channel 4, Channel 5, CNN, Deutsche Welle, Radio Netherlands, Vatican Radio and the ORF. Online clients include AOL, the Huffington Post, MSNBC, Sky News, Yahoo, and Ananova as well as the web pages of national and international broadcasters and print publications such as the Daily Mail.

Career as an author

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His book *Top 10 Vienna* was a best seller for DK Verlag but his first non-fiction book about the Natascha Kampusch case which was controversially sold to Hodder & Stoughton, which resulted in allegations that interviews had been falsified by a PR agent for the Kampusch family. The case attracted widespread media attention in Austria and internationally[5] and Leidig eventually won a full apology and costs after an Austrian court ruled that the slur had been "a deliberate attempt to damage sales of the book."[6] His subsequent books were written under a pseudonym with only the agency CEN credited inside.

Campaigning journalism

Leidig is the vice-chairman of the National Association of Press Agencies where he is also responsible for special projects, setting up the NAPA legal aid programme and a national media news directory to help support journalistic work.

In 2008 he met Austrian charity worker Hannes Urban and together the two established the Austrian charity project Journalism Without Borders, designed to " give publishers the opportunity to raise money without any risk, journalists the chance to help those they meet on a daily basis, and the readers and viewers the opportunity to help directly people whose stories have left them moved". There is complete separation between the editorial and fundraising with none of the money raised being used for editorial, and with the fund raising side unable to have any say in what editorial content is selected.

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[7] 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. He started the Journalists and Photographers Rights Society[8][failed verification] to try to help enforce copyright on the web. The agency has won several legal cases such as a battle with *Hello* magazine[9] and the *Huffington Post*.[10]

His work campaigning for payment for journalistic work has led to him being branded an internet troll[by whom?], although he says he has never demanded more than standard rates for published work.[citation needed] He argues that journalism is a career like any other and when work created by professionals is used – it should be paid for – but at reasonable amounts. He highlighted the case of an agency exclusive that they had for three days that they eventually sold and were paid for by three UK newspapers including the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun*. The story ended up being republished more than 7,000 times on Google registered news sites alone – but CEN was paid only by the three that used the version first.[citation needed] But he also takes on unpaid assignments such as the case of a British woman and her difficulties raising a disabled son.[11]

Publishing career

In 1997 he was asked to be the editorial director for a new English language weekly newspaper the *Vienna Reporter*, which was part of the Vienna-based *Gastro Verlag*, but the paper went monthly and then folded after just over a year because of financial problems with the parent company.[citation needed] He was later asked to be editor of a daily Austrian English language newspaper *Austria Today* that eventually became weekly, and now exists as an online paper and subscription newsletter for Vienna based foreign embassies and businessmen. The agency also supported English language news by writing a daily English news section for *Die Presse* for several years, and later taking over the layout, editorial selection and writing of a page a day in the *Wiener Zeitung*. Following this, CEN launched an online news wire project including eight online news sites and several spin off news projects like an English food guide with Austrian chef Bernie Rieder.[12]

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