

Lessons from the 'fabricated' 3d Printer Gun Story

The 'fabricated' 3D printer gun story is a parable of the good and bad of contemporary journalism. Some of the issues it raises are timeless. We all make mistakes. Journalism is by its nature imperfect. But what matters is admitting and correcting them – quickly and completely.

[see end of article for an Update]

The story that Greater Manchester Police had seized a 3D printer with parts that could have been 'parts of a gun' was running fairly high on the BBC and elsewhere in the morning. It was a classic scare story about how new technology is creating novel threats to public safety.

But it's not true. The 'parts' identified by the police as potential weapons turn out to be spare parts for a 3D printer. The best version of how this turned out to be untrue is on [tech blog Gigaom](#).

Gigaom were alerted by this comment on their blog post and they immediately corrected the piece:



nuno gato

Friday, October 25 2013

If the police thinks that the part on the photo is a trigger just search mk8 on [thingiverse.com](#) and you will see that it's a upgrade part for a printer. I really dont get this media/police fascination relating 3d printers with guns... it's a tool to make 3d parts, not guns. If I have a milling machine maybe will be related also with making guns as with that one I can make real metal guns instead of plastig guns that are not usefull and van explode in the hands of who will use it.

It took the GMP hours to issue [a fresh statement](#) which reluctantly conceded that the parts were probably not weaponry although they clung to the idea that this was a good way to open up a 'wider debate'.

It also took a while for the news organisations to change their lines. Despite lots of tweets by people pointing out the mistake to BBC journalists, the BBC's lunchtime radio news was still running the original line.

But meanwhile the BBC's North of England correspondent Judith Moritz was on the case and had actually got out and about and interviewed the person arrested in connection with the seizure. As her twitter stream shows, she was carefully demolishing the GMP story:

25 October 2013 Last updated at 14:16



3D printer 'gun parts' found in Manchester raid



A suspected plastic magazine, trigger and a 3D printer were found during the raid in Wythenshawe on Thursday

A 3D printer and suspected "homemade" gun components seized during police raids in Manchester are being examined.

Related Stories

-  **Judith Moritz** @JudithMoritz 24m
This is similar to part seized. Police say it could be a gun trigger. But owner says it's a printer part. pic.twitter.com/i4pTbQGkKD
Details
-
-  **Judith Moritz** @JudithMoritz 35m
After we told @gmpolice about our interview, a new statement: "we cannot categorically say we have recovered the component parts for a 3D gun"
Details
-
-  **Judith Moritz** @JudithMoritz 38m
More on the 3D gun parts story on @BBCNews at One, including exclusive TV interview with the arrested man.
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-  **Judith Moritz** @JudithMoritz 39m
I have done exclusive TV interview with the man arrested by @gmpolice who says that in fact the parts are components of the printer itself
Details
-
-  **Judith Moritz** @JudithMoritz 40m
This morning the discovery was billed as "a really significant discovery for Greater Manchester Police" ...
Details

So is this just a little Friday morning mix-up that's now been sorted out or does it tell us anything about journalism?

Well, I hardly think it's a major scandal but it is worth taking seriously because:

- someone got arrested [and, who knows, there may be other elements to this story beyond the fake parts]
- there might be some kind of agenda behind this – are the authorities like the police seeking tougher regulation of 3D printers?
- we can learn from it for better journalism

So what does it tell us about journalism?

1. You can learn a lot from social media and especially from people commenting on websites and on your own twitter feed – there are a lot of experts out there who can help verify stories. They might appear a bit snarky when they correct you, but they are only trying to help.
2. You should never rely on one source – especially the police – on any story. Especially one that involves expert knowledge such as technology without checking with other experts
3. Correct fast and thoroughly. If GMP have made an honest mistake they should just say so and do a quick U-turn. They will gain credibility in the long-run. Likewise, it would be good if the media organisations ran proper corrections and reworked the whole story, rather than try to finesse this as just another element to the original story.
4. Sometimes good old fashioned reporting works, too. Judith Moritz went out and talked to someone involved. Simple.

It seems that thanks to Judith's efforts the BBC is now running a completely different version of the story:

Of course, with the Internet the fake story will probably now survive on a whole load of platforms that won't have noticed the updates. I wonder, for example, if France's TF1 will change this rather dramatic version on their website?:

Royaume-Uni : la police sur les traces d'un pistolet fabriqué à l'imprimante 3D

Edité par A.B. avec AFP

le 25 octobre 2013 à 14h07 , mis à jour le 25 octobre 2013 à 14h10.

TEMPS DE LECTURE
🕒 3min



Image d'archives / Crédits : TF1

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65

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EUROPE

La police britannique pense avoir débusqué pour la première fois au Royaume-Uni des pièces d'un pistolet "fait maison" à l'imprimante 3D, une technique dévoilée au printemps aux Etats-Unis et qui inquiète les autorités.

And as always with social media, some smart alec gets a laugh out of other's slip ups:



Chris Lake
@lakey



Follow

@CharlieBeckett @patr I guess this is a gun too? pic.twitter.com/SnNE6CpgSG

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UPDATE:

The [BBC website](#) version at 6pm was sticking with the hybrid version which carries the GMP investigation plus the arrested man's denial. It now has a comment from a science reporter. But all the facts they report seem to show that there is no basis for the story. You can report a hypothesis (3D printers can make guns so criminals might start printing guns) but why tie that to this case where it is almost certainly not true? It seems that they couldn't accept that this is simply not a story. However, BBC reporter Judith Moritz was much better at turning the narrative around with her BBC Radio package which effectively said that GMP had got it all wrong.

[Screen Shot 2013-10-25 at 17.58.46](#)

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