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Letter to the Editor

Paraphilias and the press: Do not always believe what you read!

Dear Editor,

As someone who has been publishing papers on unusual fetishes and paraphilias over the past few years such as eproctophilia (sexual arousal from flatulence) and dacryphilia (sexual arousal from crying),^{1–5} I was interested to read the recent review on fetishism by Ventriglio et al.⁶ As the main ‘hook’ for their paper, the very first paragraph of the paper by Ventriglio et al asserted that “Cases who are sexually turned on by inanimate objects may fall foul of the law in a number of ways. In the UK, in early October 2015, a man was arrested for having had sex with 450 tractors. According to the news report, he was found to have over 5000 tractor images on his laptop. He had a special desire for John Deere and Massey Ferguson tractors, particularly the green ones. He was into axle grease, which apparently turned him on sexually. He was placed on the Sexual Offenders' Register” (p.1).

Arguably, this opening anecdote was potentially a great way to open the paper and gain the readers' interest, but the authors did not check their sources because the report they cited from the UK newspaper (*The Daily Star*)⁷ was a hoax. The source of the story in *The Daily Star* report was a story first published in a local British paper, the *Suffolk Gazette*.⁸ The ‘author’ of the *Suffolk Gazette* story was written by ‘Hugh Dunnett, Crime Correspondent’. ‘Hugh Dunnett’ is quite clearly a play on words for ‘whodunit’ which should have alerted any reader to potentially suspicious content. Ventriglio et al may argue that they never tried to trace the original source of the story purely relying on the content of *The Daily Star* report, but if the authors had read down to the bottom of the news story they cited, they would have found that the story was highlighted as a spoof by the newspaper article they actually cited. More specifically, *The Daily Star* article went on to say:

“[This] is where the story becomes stupid – well even more stupid. And the clever spoof has been fooling people around the world. The original hoax story has been shared thousands of times online ... but not many people saw through the ridiculousness. It continues that police officers later raided his home and discovered a stash of more than 5,000 indecent images of tractors on his laptop. He was reportedly released without charge but banned from the countryside and forced to sign the sex offenders' register. Being banned from the

countryside seems like quite a harsh punishment for a bit of tractor fun? But some bizarre quotes from the police seemed to give the game away a bit. A police spokesman reported that the man was not allowed within one mile of any farm and so he had to live and remain in the middle of Ipswich to comply with that. However, the police were watching him because they were worried about the safety of several street-cleaning machines. And another policeman added: “He'll also need to keep away from the town's gardens – if he takes a fancy to a lawn mower he might find he loses more than just his liberty.” Wow, if only it was real – what a story” (p.1).

If the authors wanted to highlight cases of individuals having sexual (paraphilic) relationships with inanimate objects, there are a number in the scientific literature. For instance, a case study by De Silva et al.⁹ involved an unusual sexual deviation in a young 20-year-old British man (‘George’) who had little social interaction and was incredibly shy. De Silva et al reported that his main sexual interest and excitement was from cars—particularly Austin Metro cars. George's family belonged to a strict religious sect who strongly disapproved of any sexual involvement by their son with women. Things changed for George when his parents bought an Austin Metro car. George began masturbating inside the car and then masturbating outside the car while crouching down next to the car's exhaust pipe. So that he could not be caught masturbating, he would go to great lengths to find deserted places to engage in his sexual activity with the car. George used to become very sexually excited when the car's exhaust pipe was running and pumping out car fumes. The authors also speculated there may have been an increase in George's arousal due to a reduction of oxygen intake and related asphyxiation. This was possibly seen as a mild form of hypoxiphilia (sexual arousal from reduced oxygen supply).

Alternatively, Ventriglio et al could have actually made reference to a case reported in the scientific literature of a man who did indeed have a romantic and sexual relationship with a tractor. A paper by Dietz et al.¹⁰ reported two case studies of men who used “the hydraulic shovels on tractors to suspend themselves for masochistic sexual stimulation” (p.359). One of the two men actually developed a romantic attachment to his tractor and went as far as giving his tractor a name and writing poetry about it. Unfortunately, the man “died

accidentally while intentionally asphyxiating himself through suspension by the neck, leaving clues that he enjoyed perceptual distortions during asphyxiation” (p.359). More generally, the cases described by De Silva et al, and Dietz et al, are now referred to as objectophiles and are among the 40 or so objectophiles identified worldwide by Marsh¹¹ in her pioneering research on ‘objectum sexuality’.

The underlying issue in writing this letter is that scholars and researchers should (i) not believe everything they read in newspapers as facts, (ii) try to verify the source of information from non–peer-reviewed sources, and (iii) should try to use examples from the peer-reviewed scientific literature to highlight relevant case studies rather than resort to the print media.

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Reply

1. We thank the readers for bringing the issue of hoax stories.

2. The issue of sexuality has always raised curiosity, suspense and creates an interesting background for creation of stories, real or many times imagined. Human mind always catches on to these stories, and even if they are untrue, tend to like and believe such issues. And many a times, the half-baked knowledge obtained from such information leads to self-doubt and various kinds of psychosexual disorders.

3. The purpose of putting this paper news, though turned to be a hoax later, was to sensitise the readers about the curiosity it can generate. Hence the proper reference to it was given, and anybody who accessed it, would have definitely understood that it was hoax but the interest such news can create.

4. We undoubtedly and fully agree with the views of esteemed reader that source of any information need to be verified. We were aware of the fallacy of this news item and hence proper reference has been given. Hence, adequate peer reviewed case reports and articles have been quoted in the article throughout. Aim was to sensitise and not to sensationalise.

5. The constructive suggestion of the reader has been taken into consideration with great respect.

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