

NEWS OF THE WEIRD

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If they could only succeed

Software engineers told Fortune magazine in November that they are constructing a filter to eliminate stupid messages to online forums and bulletin boards. Lead researcher Gabriel Ortiz said his team had compiled a database of idiotic comments and that the new software would detect unintelligible remarks and either alert the writer to fix

them or divert the message to the recipient's "junk mail." Easy dumb messages to filter: those with the tacky, immature repetition of a closing consonant, e.g., "That thing is amazingggggg!!!" More difficult: how to treat sarcasm and irony, in that smart writers sometimes deliberately use dumb statements to mock other writers. ■

Can't possibly be true

• Twin sisters Doris McAusland and Dora Bennett are 80 years old, live in Madison, Wis., apparently like and dislike the same foods, met their husbands on the same day, from the same church group, had hysterectomies at the same time, always get their hair done together, and, ever since they were toddlers, have worn identical outfits every day (except for one time that they had different shoes), according to a November CBS News report.

• In October, Taiwan's minister of national defense, Lee Tien-yu, instituted a policy of requiring recruits and their squad leaders to hug each other, which he thought would build mutual respect. According to the ritual, each would place his right hand on the

other's back and left hand on the other's waist, with the leader saying, "Brother, I will take care of you," and the recruit replying, "Squad leader, I respect you." Not surprisingly, Lee was forced to abandon the policy three weeks later, especially after critical officials kept challenging Lee to hug some of his military officers in the same way (which he declined to do).

• In October a police officer in Scranton, Pa., charged Dawn Herb with disorderly conduct after he passed her home and heard her, through an open window, cussing her toilet, which at the time was overflowing and leaking into the kitchen. Herb, and the American Civil Liberties Union, were incredulous. ■

Inexplicable

In October, Beckley, W.Va., police detained a 61-year-old man whom they found at the King Tut Drive-In on a Saturday afternoon, apparently sober, after he had "driven" his four grandchildren, all around age 4, "on a busy street in a 15-foot motorboat pulled

by a lawnmower," according to an Associated Press report. The vehicle was of course unregistered and uninspected, and the children not properly seat-restrained, but the man seemed unaware that he had placed the kids in danger. ■

News that sounds like a joke

• The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency made a special announcement in October that it is once again safe to eat squirrels in New Jersey. (In January, EPA had discovered lead in tissue samples from local squirrels, but later said the lead might have come from defects in the sampling machine.)

• Karl Marx's writings glorifying communism (though Western capitalists regard it as grim and joyless) may well have reflected merely his alienation from society due to a lifelong series of excruciatingly painful boils, according to a recent British Journal of

Dermatology article. In an 1867 letter, Marx wrote, "The bourgeoisie will remember my carbuncles until their dying day."

• As protesters gathered at colleges around the country to criticize federal budget cutbacks that would raise the price of subsidized birth control at student health services, one University of New Mexico student described the imminent horror to Albuquerque's KFRQ-TV: "(Students shouldn't) have to make a choice between their birth control and their cell phone bill or their birth control and their gym membership..." ■

The District of Calamity

• In November, two mid-level bureaucrats in the District of Columbia tax office were charged with stealing \$16 million over three years (since raised by investigators to more than \$20 million) by granting tax "refunds" to phony companies run by their friends and relatives. Authorities said six-figure refund checks were routinely issued to companies no one had ever heard of, yet the scam was not

discovered by supervisors or auditors until an employee of a bank branch located in a grocery store got suspicious.

• A November Washington Post investigation found an almost complete lack of oversight of the often-bountiful "activities funds" of D.C. public schools, which were looted by some administrators and teachers for personal travel, meals and even strip-club tabs. ■

Least competent criminals

Paul Keith, 75, was arrested in Framingham, Mass., in November after he had allegedly driven aggressively into the car stopped in front of him waiting for a traffic light to change. Keith earnestly explained to police

that the other driver had failed to move once the light turned green. "(S)o I drove into the back of him. When the light turns green, you're supposed to go." (Keith demolished the front end of his car.) ■

Update

Armin Meiwes, the German gourmet-cannibal who was convicted in 2004 of killing, filleting and eating an apparently willing victim whom he had met via the Internet, gave his first extensive interview from prison in October to German TV and mentioned in passing that his sautéed morsels "tasted like pork, a little ... bit-

ter, stronger." And in November, a Green Party activist who visits Meiwes' prison told a reporter that Meiwes had been elected by fellow inmates as a discussion leader on environmental, tax and legal issues and was demonstrating his commitment to Green Party principles by eating mostly vegetarian meals. ■

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