

The Dystory of Ahmed's Clock

Hal Berghel, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

A 14-year-old student from Irving, Texas, took his "invented" clock to school and touched off a withering blast of media-induced hysteria.

A 14-year-old freshman at a Texas high school was arrested by local police after school administrators reported that an alarm went off inside his pencil box. The pencil box looked ominous, but what was inside was a digital clock with a preset alarm. Although the alarm might have been disquieting, the clock itself was simply a printed circuit board, a large display, some wires, and a battery connector. Horrors!

Ahmed claimed that it was his "invention," and that he brought it to school to impress his teachers—unfortunately,

one of them reported it to school administrators, who alerted the police, who later arrested the boy for creating a "hoax bomb" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=3mW4w0Y10XE). Although no charges were filed, the story went viral, ideologues took sides, and some noteworthy sub-cerebral venting was proffered in lieu of

any semblance of intelligent discussion (see "Sub-Cerebral Venting" sidebar).

DYSTORIA

We need a new word to describe what happened in Ahmed's case: the practice of manufacturing stories to further partisan interests and agendas. I humbly offer this modest addition to our working vocabulary:

Dystory (Anglicized form of *dystorium*). *A fabrication purportedly based on real events, but that*



is actually based on falsehoods, deceptions, misrepresentations, distortions, and misinterpretations to conceal the primary intent to mislead, misdirect, or manipulate an unwary audience.

Unlike tales and fables, dystories are malignant and used by ideologues, zealots, and political partisans to create a serviceable narrative appearing to confirm preconceived cognitive biases and agendas. Dystories are usually camouflaged by the thinnest veneers of truth. Dystoria is the lowest form of storytelling (read: epic nonsense) and so to engage in repeating dystoria is a waste of bandwidth as well as a serious breach of netiquette.

The dystoria of Ahmed's clock illustrates the ease with which nonstories can be manufactured into ideology-supporting culpatory evidence. In this way, the ideological compost is mixed into a narrative slurry that is smeared around an actual event's proximity. It's characteristic of successful dystoria that it be amplifiable by fear-based media due to its (a) relevance to sensitive social or political issues, (b) nonthreatening nature to media interests or controlling elites, (c) "marketable" theme (it's simple, evocative, emotive, violent, and/or frightening), (d) divisive and polarizing nature, (e) appeal to patrons, and, most important, (f) pretense to address a serious (though perhaps nonexistent) problem.

As illustrated by the Ahmed clock dystory, there's rarely a shortage of contributors to the hysteria. As Neil Postman pointed out,¹ we live in a culture that's easily led astray by infotainment. Neither fact-checking nor common sense has any place in dystoria; no, to be useful to ideologues, it must be more like science fiction than journalism.

SUB-CEREBRAL VENTING

Here are some highlights of the many quotable contributions.

- » "Cool clock, Ahmed. Want to bring it to the White House? We should inspire more kids like you to like science. It's what makes America great." —President Barack Obama (www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaXWe5Fs2LI)
- » "Having the skill and ambition to build something cool should lead to applause, not arrest ... if you ever want to come by Facebook, I'd love to meet you. Keep building." —Mark Zuckerberg (www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaXWe5Fs2LI)
- » "This case might be a 'dog whistle' to Islamists." —Glenn Beck (www.mediaite.com/online/beck-ahmed-mohamed-case-might-be-a-dog-whistle-to-islamists)
- » "This was a PR stunt. Someone convinced this kid to bring this device ... that looks like a bomb. I've built briefcase bombs, and that's what they look like. He was a pawn of his father and his sister." —Jim Hanson, executive vice president of The Center for Security Policy (www.mediaite.com/online/beck-ahmed-mohamed-case-might-be-a-dog-whistle-to-islamists)
- » "[Later disclosures suggest] this was a deliberate stunt, a provocation intended to trick the very gullible and leftwing and America-hating into adding their support to The Cause." —Andrew Napolitano, Fox News contributor (<http://twitchy.com/2015/09/23/i-was-wrong-ace-judge-andrew-napolitano-reconsider-case-of-ahmed-clock-boy-mohamed>)

It's noteworthy that two legitimate scholars also weighed in. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins speculated that the event was a hoax ([/www.mediaite.com/online/richard-dawkins-trashes-istandwithahmed-it-looks-like-a-hoax](http://www.mediaite.com/online/richard-dawkins-trashes-istandwithahmed-it-looks-like-a-hoax)), and cybersecurity expert Bruce Schneier said, "We simply have to stop terrorizing ourselves. We just look stupid when we do it" (www.schneier.com/blog/archives/2015/09/child_arrested_.html). Let's hear it for the scholars!

In the end, primitive tribalism won, and a deafening noise emanated from the major media echo chamber for several days.

DYSTORIA UNLOADED

Ahmed's clock story is only useful to ideologues if it serves their xenophobic and fear-mongering interests. To that end, this boy's "invention" can't be thought of as hype or the attention-getting expression of a teenager with an attitude. Rather, it must become a "half-bomb"; at the level of primitive visual aids, a sophisticated digital circuit becomes a "hoax bomb" or

"half-bomb" because the only practical difference between them is intent of use, pure and simple. No reasonable person would find a digital alarm clock to be threatening as such. Technology is ideologically neutral, after all. That said, technology neophytes are easily influenced by alleged "experts," so if an alleged expert is deceptive or ill-informed, the deception or ignorance is easily passed on to the unprepared

audience. To ideologically charge an otherwise neutral technology, the most common tactic is to relabel it. By linguistically transmuting Ahmed's harmless clock circuit into a half-bomb, it fits nicely within a right-wing narrative. Wave the magic ideological wand and an alarm clock becomes a detached potential WMD.

The story went viral, ideologues took sides, and some noteworthy sub-cerebral venting was proffered in lieu of semblance of intelligent discussion.

Of course, the segue from “wake up” to “blow up” went largely unnoticed because of the public's immense tolerance for deception. The fact is that with a little verbal sleight-of-hand, virtually any digital circuit can “look like” a bomb timer to the unfamiliar. For that matter, so can all analog circuits, mechanical chronometers and watches, toasters, camera movements, hour glasses, record players, electric motors, computers, video games, CD and DVD players, home alarm systems, microwaves, door bells, cell phones, and virtually anything connected to the Internet. Given a little deception and persuasion, every engineering and manufacturing facility in the world can be shown to be a “half-bomb” lab, and every smartphone user a potential terrorist. This nonsense should have been immediately exposed for what it was.

Ahmed's “invention” (“detached digital clock circuit” is more accurate) was the innards of a Micronta 63-765A digital clock sold by Radio Shack in the 1980s (<http://blogs.artvoice.com/techvoice/2015/09/17/reverse-engineering-ahmed-mohameds-clock-and-ourselves>). As near as I can tell, the innovation involved nothing more than the successful deployment of a screwdriver—some of Henry Phillips's design, I suspect. To make much of such invention claims,

one has to ignore a few millennia of observation of the minds of 14-year-olds.

Here's a real shocker for Ahmed's clock dystorians: 14-year-olds aren't above self-promotion, hyperbole, boasting, and drawing attention to themselves. It's all about teenage brand building! Don't expect them to read the Texas Penal Code before they

come to school (www.breitbart.com/big-government/2015/09/18/real-story-istandwithahmed). Kids that age push the envelope, particularly boys, and most certainly in Texas. Can we really expect them to be more honest, humble, and circumspect than politicians? (Remember the dystoria around Iraqi WMDs or the multitude of family farms lost due to the “death tax”?) I will note in passing that the week after this story broke, the eBay bid price for these used Micronta alarm clocks jumped from 1 cent to US\$152.50 (www.ebay.com/itm/Micronta-Vintage-Digital-Alarm-Clock-with-Large-Red-Display-63-765A-/271992316574?hash=item3f5401629e). We shouldn't overlook the humor in this.

And, lest you think I am laying all the blame on the fear-mongers for this absurdity, read on. The “this is one more instance of cultural xenophobia” camp is equally to blame for both their technical ignorance and their rush to judgment. Where the fear-mongers found a potential WMD in the disemboweled Micronta, the anti-xenophobes gladly found inspiring innovation, creativity, and life lessons. This charming characterization is overblown and completely absurd.

THE REAL STORY

Three groups in particular had the expertise to contribute something of

value to the Ahmed clock dystory, all of which were ignored by mainstream media: developmental psychologists, school counselors, and computer scientists and engineers.

The developmental psychologists and counselors could have identified this as the typical behavior of teenagers: kid-prankster stuff, jerking adults' chains, and pulling a fast one here and there. Had they been heard, these professionals would have told us to take a deep breath, rely on facts presented by those with scholarly credentials, and interpret everything in the context of child development stages. Teenagers do such things. Let's move on.

For their part, computer scientists and engineers could have pointed out the obvious. This, after all, is a dismantled digital clock, and interpreting it as a “detached, potential bomb-making component” is a literary, artistic, or ideological interpretation and not a scientific one, and certainly not one based on fact.

Had either of these two groups been given a voice early enough and covered widely by the mass media, the entire affair would have been seen for the nonevent it was. For both groups, there was no penalty for speaking out: no granting agencies affected, no security clearances involved, no corporate interests who might take issue. There was nothing to fear except hate mail from fringe groups, but that's the cost of being a citizen these days. Absent such voices of reason, this nonstory degenerated into a culture war (www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/09/21/muslim-clock-kid-biased-liberals-love-him-bizarre-conservatives-hate-him).

What's worse is the school's reaction. What are the employment qualifications for teachers in Irving, Texas? Even if we concede to them a lack of curiosity sufficient to disassemble a digital appliance, a modicum of common sense would have gone a long way. The claim that clock parts look like a bomb trigger is more than just a hasty conclusion, it's an assault on common

sense. And where were the industrial-arts teachers? Or, for that matter, the maintenance crew? Any one of them should have been able to sort things out without overreaction. Could it be that not one adult in a position of authority in this school could identify a digital clock circuit? If that's true, we need to de-emphasize Common Core and focus on common sense. On the other hand, it may be that Ahmed's hubris and hyperbole fooled no one. In that case it would appear that the school administration's problem was an inability to deal with 14-year-old non-conformists who like to see what they can get away with. Neither case speaks well for the school's reaction.

Furthermore, this 14-year-old student had neither parents nor legal representation present during his interrogation. The courts have weighed in on this: children aren't mini-adults and are too easily intimidated to be interrogated without representation.² Given what we know about the minds of 14-year-olds, we must assume occasional lapses in judgment, lack of impulse control, a penchant to call attention to oneself, and the ability to be intimidated by adults in positions of authority. Our society expects adults to protect legal minors because of such tendencies. There's a reason why 14-year-olds aren't considered legal adults, and why they aren't allowed to consume alcohol or vote.

Some ideologues made much of the student's parents preventing the school from releasing identifying information on advice of counsel, but that's standard operating procedure for attorneys. It's consistent with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the federal law governing student information (www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html), which requires a court order to force the school to release student information. No story there either.

Pamela Geller, co-founder of Stop Islamization of America, proclaimed that "we can't keep worrying about being called Islamophobic" ([## ORIGIN DYSTORY](http://www</p></div><div data-bbox=)


What I'm calling dystoria is actually part of a broader framework of overt and covert coercion that's been used to mislead, confuse, manipulate, deceive, politicize, create hysteria, and so forth for all of recorded history. What's new is that in the past century, scholars have started to analyze and write about it. The 20th century essentially began with the appearance of Walter Lippmann's book *Public Opinion* in 1922, and Edward Bernays's book *Propaganda* in 1928. Whereas works of fiction by Aldous Huxley and George Orwell deal plainly with dystory, the best nonfiction includes Edward Herman's and Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*, Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, and Glenn Smith's *The Politics of Deceit*. A good explanation of how ideology can undercut trust in science can be found in Chris Mooney's *The Republican War on Science*.

.mediaite.com/online/pam-geller-on-ahmed-mohamed-we-cant-keep-worrying-about-being-called-islamophobic). The far greater concern is being labeled factophobic: possessing an illogical and possibly subconscious fear of truth.

This dystory—a fabricated non-event shrouded in falsehoods, misrepresentations, and ignorance—gave ideologues a fulcrum to leverage their political agenda. All involved are blameworthy. Exposing this fraud didn't require a Thomas Paine- or Samuel Adams-like fervor, nor a spine-straightening defense of truth-to-power, but just a little common sense and an unwillingness to participate in rule-by-absurdity.

Those in the best position to detect such absurdities are the scholars; they're prepared by education and training to explain the facts carefully and with precision for the greater public good. As Noam Chomsky wrote 50 years ago, though in a different context, "It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and expose lies."³

This dystory reminds us how dangerous it is to let tribalists craft the public narrative. Scholars must aggressively reclaim the public dialogue

from the untrustworthy, deceptive, and mischievous dystorians among us (see the "Origin Dystory" sidebar for a historical perspective).

REFERENCES

1. N. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* [Anniversary Edition], Penguin, 2005.
2. J.D.B. v North Carolina, US Supreme Court, No. 9-11121, 16 June 2011.
3. N. Chomsky, "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," *The New York Review of Books*, 23 Feb. 1967; www.chomsky.info/articles/19670223.htm.

HAL BERGHEL is an ACM and IEEE Fellow and a professor of computer science at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Contact him at hlb@computer.org.



Selected CS articles and columns are also available for free at <http://ComputingNow.computer.org>.