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JANUARY 26, 2007

THE BBC AND THE 'HARMLESS' HEAT-RAY

General Mann: "That skeleton beam must be what they used to wipe out the French cities."

Dr. Forrester: "It neutralizes mesons somehow. They're the atomic glue holding matter together. Cut across their lines of magnetic force and any object will simply cease to exist! Take my word for it, general, this type of defense is useless against that kind of power! You'd better let Washington know, fast!" (The War Of The Worlds, 1953, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0046534/quotes>)

"Too Painful To Bear" But "Harmless"

The above quotes from the 1953 film The War Of The Worlds pretty much sum up what 'heat-rays' meant to us up until very recently - blistering beams of Martian light that were often seen reducing earthlings to dust during our childhood years. It goes against the grain, then, for us to conceive of such a thing as a harmless 'heat-ray'. And yet this is precisely what the BBC has claimed of the new American Active Denial System (ADS).

This was brought to our attention in a January 25 email from Richard Moyes, Policy and Research Manager at Landmine Action:

"Dear editors,
I thought you might be interested in this confirmation from the BBC that the US's 'active denial system' directed energy weapon is 'actually harmless'... despite those experiencing it finding the feeling 'too painful to bear.'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/6297149.stm>

Richard Moyes"

We checked Moyes's description of the BBC online article by James Westhead. The article, which read like a Pentagon press release, was dominated by the views of military spokespeople and lacked a single

word of challenge or dissent from anyone else. We posted Moyes's email on our message board only to discover that, as so often, our posters had already seen the article. One of them, Antony, asked:

"What happens if you can't dive for cover? What if you are in an open area, if you are pregnant and can only hobble for cover, what about wheel chair users, babies strapped in buggies...? I could go on. We need further tests. I suggest we take James Westhead and tie him to a tree then fire the 'harmless' gun at him and document the effect of sustained exposure."

We emailed Westhead:

"Dear James
In today's article, 'US military unveils heat-ray gun,' you state that the heat-ray weapon is 'harmless'. But you then go on to report the effects as being 'too painful to bear'. How do you define the word 'harm'?
Best wishes
David Edwards"

We then posted our email on the message board, where Christopher Shaw commented:

"Thanks. I also have just sent him a very polite email. On an emotional, rather than rational level, just the look of that thing, it's shape, colour etc screams inhumanity, and I think stands as a visual metaphor for the catastrophe that is technological progress."

And then a curt response from James Westhead landed in our inbox:

"My report said 'military officials claim its harmless'
Best james
James Westhead
BBC NEWS"

We responded:

"Thanks, James. This is what currently appears on the BBC website:

"The weapon - called the Active Denial System - projects an invisible high energy beam that produces a sudden burning feeling, but is harmless. Military officials believe the gun could be used as a non-lethal way of making enemies surrender their weapons.'

Best wishes

David"

Westhead seemed more circumspect in his next response:

“Thank you for that. I suspect my online colleagues have used - or misused - my original radio report which attributed that claim and edited it out.

Thanks for letting me know. I shall take it up with them now.

Cheers

James

James Westhead

BBC NEWS”

We replied:

“Thanks, James. Good luck in sorting it out.

Best wishes

David”

We then received a final, clarifying message from Westhead:

“David

As I suspected

My radio report clearly attributed the 'harmless' claim to military officials. Unfortunately BBC online when they initially put a version on their website edited out the 'officials claim' line. They say they had already corrected this when I called them. They apologise for the confusion. For my part, I am grateful to you for drawing my attention to it.

Best wishes,

James westhead”

On our message board, Gabriele quickly spotted that the article had indeed been amended:

“‘but is harmless’ becomes ‘but is said to be harmless’ - But WHO said THAT?”

Good question. The article no longer declared the weapon "harmless". Instead, it referred to "Military officials, who say the gun is harmless..." No challenge to this view was included. A later section reinforced the bias: "it penetrates the skin only to a tiny depth - enough to cause discomfort but no lasting harm, according to the military".

Westhead's piece (although his name had now disappeared) also included this disturbing comment:

"The weapon could potentially be used for dispersing

hostile crowds in conflict zones such as Iraq or Afghanistan."

Why not also in Britain and America, if the weapon is "harmless"?

Useful Questions And Their Significance

In the meantime, Richard Moyes of Landmine Action had sent us "questions (with explanations of their significance) [that] could be usefully asked regarding the heat-ray weapon". The questions were posed by Juergen Altmann, a physicist from the university of Dortmund specialising in unconventional weapon technologies:

"What is the beam power (in watts or kilowatts)?

Beam power is one of the most basic parameters, it seems that it has not been made public so far.

"What is the intensity (in kW/m² or W/cm²) at e.g. 30, 100, 300, 700 m?

Intensity is decisive for the rate of heating (how many seconds until pain sets in, until pain is at maximum, until burns of 2nd, 3rd degree develop). It seems that this distance-dependent quantity has not been made public so far.

After which time (a few seconds) are the pain threshold (skin temperature about 44°C) and the maximum pain (skin temperature about 54°C) reached (at some typical distance, e.g. 300 m)?

Context obvious.

"What happens to skin at double, triple, quadruple this time?

Medical literature suggests 2nd, 3rd degree burns if heating is continued beyond pain-maximum point. ADS [Active Denial System] data sheets etc. speak only of first phase.

"How are second- /third-degree burns (potentially life-threatening if more than 20% of body area affected) prevented?

Context obvious, this has not been discussed in ADS data sheets etc.

"For subjects exposed from a distance, how do they know where to flee from the beam?

Escape from beam or behind a screen was used in the voluntary-human-subject experiments with ADS. In actual use, there would not be a screen, and if the beam is wider than the body it is not clear how a subject would know where the beam margin is.

“What happens in situations when people cannot flee (e.g. in the first rows of a dense crowd)?

Context obvious.

“For protection of the cornea of the eye, is the blink reflex a mechanism that one can rely on with the great majority of the people?

Experiments in Germany have shown that the blink reflex caused by bright light cannot be relied upon as a protection against laser irradiation - with lasers of class II (stronger than laser pointers), it occurs only with about 20% of the people exposed. It is unclear whether the blink reflex caused by rapid heating of the cornea is more reliable and will occur with nearly all people.”

It is to his credit that Westhead was willing to respond to criticism and even to chase down the ‘error’. But Juergen Altmann’s questions completely expose the BBC’s version of serious journalism. Mainstream journalists should be asking exactly these questions, investigating exactly these in depth issues in great detail. But this so rarely happens. It is so much easier, so much more conducive to comfortable career development, to accept the official position that the new heat-ray weapon is “said to be harmless”.

A final word from Antony writing on the powerful resource that our message board has become:

“Apart from the lethality of these ‘non lethal weapons’ (see www.alternet.org/rights/44455/) and the fact that by inflicting pain they constitute torture as a summary form of justice (see [www.nopepperspray.org/nov97 - editorials-torture.htm](http://www.nopepperspray.org/nov97-editorials-torture.htm)), what bugs me about this whole ‘non-lethal’ thing is the massive increase in state power it holds.

“Right now the state can do very little if a determined group of non-violent citizens choose to resist state control of their lives. Can you imagine Greenham common, the miners strike, Iraq war, road building and arms sales protests in 5 years time?

“Should we be surprised to find ourselves hearing the following bellowed at us through a loud hailer:

“‘Get back to work/watching telly or you will be zapped under powers delegated to ‘Securicor Citizens Defense PLC’ granted to us through the standing ‘Reid executive order’ which in turn is authorized by the 2011 prevention of domestic terrorism act.’?”

For us this was an inspiring example of how a small band of activists

with very different skills, talents and interests could combine to challenge and change the mainstream media. To be sure this was a tiny success by a tiny number of people. But the effort was also small - and we are millions.

SUGGESTED ACTION

The goal of Media Lens is to promote rationality, compassion and respect for others. In writing letters to journalists, we strongly urge readers to maintain a polite, non-aggressive and non-abusive tone.

Ask the journalists below why they are not investigating the serious questions raised by Juergen Altmann and others. Why are they so casually declaring the American heat-ray “harmless” and quoting “[US] military officials, who say the gun is harmless”? Why is not a word of challenge or dissent included in the BBC online article? (See here: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/6297149.stm>)

Write to James Westhead

Email: james.westhead@bbc.co.uk

Write to Steve Herrmann, head of BBC news online

Email: steve.herrmann@bbc.co.uk

Write to Helen Boaden, head of BBC news

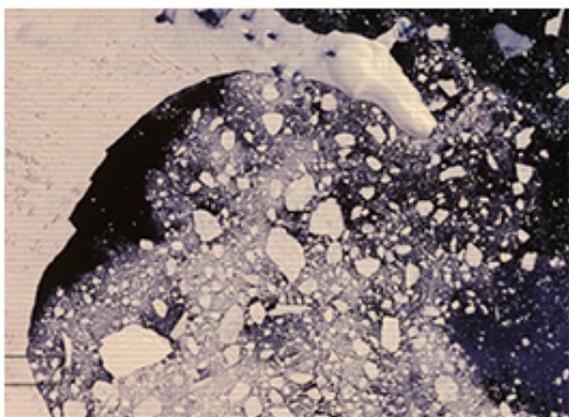
Email: helenboaden.complaints@bbc.co.uk

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