
From: Craig Silverman [silvermancraig@gmail.com]
Sent: 3/26/2015 8:32:54 AM
To: Heidi Blake [heidi.blake@buzzfeed.com]
CC: Tom Phillips [tom.phillips@buzzfeed.com]; Robert Colvile [robert.colvile@buzzfeed.com]; Alan White [alan.white@buzzfeed.com]
Subject: Re: CEN piece

Talk to you folks tomorrow at noon!

On Thursday, March 26, 2015, Heidi Blake <heidi.blake@buzzfeed.com> wrote:

Great. And yup – the debunk is brilliant. Fantastic to have it from the snapper.

Heidi Blake | UK Investigations Editor

BuzzFeed News

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On Thu, Mar 26, 2015 at 12:23 PM, Tom Phillips <tom.phillips@buzzfeed.com <javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','tom.phillips@buzzfeed.com');> > wrote:

works for me too

great stuff on that new debunk craig, I reckon that should go into the story pretty high up – it's one of the most solid ones we have

On Thu, Mar 26, 2015 at 12:20 PM, Robert Colvile <robert.colvile@buzzfeed.com <javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','robert.colvile@buzzfeed.com');> > wrote:

Let's do it, and pipe in Craig via the miracle of the internet.

On 26 March 2015 at 12:14, Alan White <alan.white@buzzfeed.com <javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','alan.white@buzzfeed.com');> > wrote:

Works for me!

On Thu, Mar 26, 2015 at 12:13 PM, Heidi Blake <heidi.blake@buzzfeed.com <javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','heidi.blake@buzzfeed.com');> > wrote:

I could meet tomorrow at 12 for about an hour between interviews if that works for everyone. ?

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On Thu, Mar 26, 2015 at 12:08 PM, Craig Silverman <silvermancraig@gmail.com>
<[javascript:_e\(%7B%7D,'cvml','silvermancraig@gmail.com'\);](mailto:javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','silvermancraig@gmail.com');>)> > wrote:

I'm good to meet tomorrow to discuss next steps. 12 UK time would be better for me in terms of the time difference if possible.

Also, I have a confirmed debunk on this one:
<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/young-women-who-stripped-naked-5391307>

I reached out to the photographer who took the photos (he was identified in the original reports in Russian) and this story has false names for the women, and a false name for the photographer. The details about them losing their jobs and why they did the photos are also false. Basically, the only real things are the pics and the location they were taken.

Now, we know the pics are credited to CEN but I looked at the story is not on the Austrian Times or one of Leidig's other sites as of now. My feeling is that there are two things we can do in terms of showing that they provide the copy for this and other examples we have questions about:

1. Contact the authors of these pieces at the Mirror and Mail etc. and give them a heads up that we have debunked the piece and ask them if they did the reporting or if it came from a wire service. Seems like they would be inclined to tell us in that case.
2. Collect all of our examples where the story is on one of Leidig's sites and in a tab to show that they are almost word for word. If we cannot definitely show that CEN gave the words in every case we can at least show that it is common for them to do so, and it is common for these clients to run them with very few changes. I think it demonstrates a pattern of a behaviour, and it can work if we don't get any response from the authors etc.

FYI I am in Germany as of Sunday, coming back Wednesday. (No time to get to Austria, I'm afraid.) I have time during that trip to keep working on this so if we can formalize the plan of attack tomorrow I'm happy to take on some items.

Also, just to say that I agree with Heidi that the passage Robert added at the end really does a fantastic job of explaining the key context of the piece, and that we should move it up higher. Also, her suggestion for the Leidig approach strategy seems excellent to me. Ideally, we want him to open up rather than stonewall. Thanks!

Best regards,
Craig

On 26 March 2015 at 07:30, Robert Colvile <robert.colvile@buzzfeed.com>
<[javascript:_e\(%7B%7D,'cvml','robert.colvile@buzzfeed.com'\);](mailto:javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','robert.colvile@buzzfeed.com');>)> > wrote:

11/12?

On 26 March 2015 at 10:55, Alan White <alan.white@buzzfeed.com>
<[javascript:_e\(%7B%7D,'cvml','alan.white@buzzfeed.com'\);](mailto:javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','alan.white@buzzfeed.com');>)> > wrote:

The only real stumbling block is tracking down the original CEN copy. I'm just not entirely sure how to do that - we need a contact on Mirror / Mail who could give it to us - or maybe Lexis Nexis could work? Going to try that in a minute.

We need a gameplan and we need to push it through next week. My problem is I'm working on another investigation and my hands are somewhat tied in terms of how much I do on it because it's a collaboration so duty-bound. Tom also has constraints on his time.

Can we set up a meeting tomorrow and try to come up with a game plan? I'm going to be at a meeting from 2pm, so before would be great.

On Thu, Mar 26, 2015 at 10:01 AM, Robert Colvile <robert.colvile@buzzfeed.com
<javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','robert.colvile@buzzfeed.com');> > wrote:

Yeah, I don't think we need to reinvent the wheel - I think we need to firm up what we've already got, try to track down some actual CEN copy, then aim to tackle Leidig tail end of next week if poss. That sound reasonable?

On 26 March 2015 at 09:58, Heidi Blake <heidi.blake@buzzfeed.com
<javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','heidi.blake@buzzfeed.com');> > wrote:

My own feeling is that the piece is already in really good shape and you could enhance it by getting Leidig to open up & more explicitly addressing the internet-driven paradigm shift in news values without losing the hard-hitting revelatory edge. Whatever the reasoning, cynically churning out semi-fictitious stories is reprehensible and the whole sorry business needs to be exposed. But it would be superb if we could get Leidig to open up and tackle the whole issue as thoughtfully as we can.

Sent from my iPhone

On 26 Mar 2015, at 09:48, Tom Phillips <tom.phillips@buzzfeed.com
<javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','tom.phillips@buzzfeed.com');> > wrote:

Agree with all of this. Think this takes us slightly back towards Alan and I's original conception of the story as a ~thinkpiece~ on the nature of modern online news. It seems like both Leidig and the news sites he supplies have the same thing that a lot of us will recognise: "okay, just get some crap out today to keep the lights on, then we'll do the proper work tomorrow." Repeat every day.

One practical note: Journalism Without Borders isn't registered with the Charities Commission or the equivalent list from the Austrian Finance Ministry, but that's probably because in Austria charities only need to register if they receive donations themselves. But they already say that Helfen Wir (who are registered) handle their donations for them, so that doesn't tell us much... Will try to get hold of some accounts for Helfen Wir.

On 26 Mar 2015 09:36, "Alan White" <alan.white@buzzfeed.com
<javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','alan.white@buzzfeed.com');> > wrote:

First thing I'd say is a development I noticed earlier yesterday is really interesting.

It looks like someone at the Mail has decided to change how they work with CEN.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/peoplesdaily/article-3011117/Stopped-tracks-Good-looking-policeman-China-gets-mobbed-HUNDREDS-female-marathon-runners-stopped-race-snap-selfies-him.html>

They just published this, but it appears to be the second time in two days they've linked out to the primary source.

Maybe things are changing. And this leads to Heidi's point about Leidig, which really hit home. It seems obvious to me that this is just born out of an attitude of "internet news is garbage so let's give them what they want". Really I feel like there's a different piece to come out of this if he plays ball, which is that this is about what happens when there's a seismic shift in an industry's model, in income streams, etc. What I want to write is a piece where he fesses up but says "this is what we're now doing."

Second thing is - thanks all for your feedback. It's all really helpful, and I agree with all of it. However, just feeling slightly overwhelmed in terms of all the stuff to do right now. It certainly seems like our intention of having this live at some point next week was unrealistic.

Perhaps we all need to do a conference call on this?

On Thu, Mar 26, 2015 at 8:38 AM, Heidi Blake <heidi.blake@buzzfeed.com>
<javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','heidi.blake@buzzfeed.com');> > wrote:

?Morning all.

I've gone through the copy and added comments and suggestions throughout. A few general points:

- 1) I love it. It's funny and disturbing and it shines a light on something really grubby lurking in the shadows of internet culture which we're all partially culpable for creating. It's also v. well written and zips along beautifully.
- 2) At the moment I'm worried about the suggestion that news editors have commissioned/published CEN copy despite knowing it was questionable (see detailed comments in the doc). I think you should try to talk to as many Fleet St news desk flunkies as you can (let's pool contacts) to find out whether concerns about CEN are really widespread. It would also bolster your case against Leidig. Some of the language could also be tweaked to avoid making an inferential allegation we can't justify across the board – I've made suggestions.
- 3) The 'sausage factory' conclusion Rob added seems to me to get to the heart of the piece. This is really the nutgraph and I'd suggest making this point closer to the top. The nub is that the internet has created such voracious demand for wildly wacky content that news organisations can't churn it out fast enough – and that's what's fuelling Leidig's business. Properly researched content based on hard fact just isn't rewarded in the same way – because fact is less fun than fiction. So there's an opportunity to hold up a mirror to that internet culture and jog readers into examining their own consumption of internet news & its consequences.
- 4) Leidig is interesting because in my few dealings with him I've formed the impression that he's actually incredibly passionate about the investigative journalism he does. He has been beaver away on his child trafficking investigation for literally years without getting paid for it and he's always offering to team up for free – as you can see from his email to me. I would guess that he justifies churning out nonsense content for CEN to himself because it drums up cash to fund serious investigative journalism which is almost always difficult, costly and unprofitable. If that is what he's up to it speaks to the wider point – that the internet often rewards nonsense and shuns serious journalism. I think it's really important that we speak to him if we possibly can (rather than just fronting him up with a hostile letter) to try to understand what his game is. I'm wondering whether with the right approach you could persuade him to do a sit-down interview with Alan in Vienna (or on the phone, but face-to-face is better and more fun for Alan). You could approach him in the first instance to say that you're putting together a longform piece about the way the internet rewards wacky stuff over serious news and will be writing about CEN as part of it. You're interested in speaking to him because his journalism bridges the divide – he does both the silly stuff and also serious investigations. If you get him to open up he might well explain to you what his reasons are for churning this stuff out unchecked in a way that would actually make this piece more nuanced and even more interesting, for my money. During the chat (towards the end if I were you) you could put to him the many examples of sloppy/dishonest journalism and see how he responds. Maybe he'll hold his hands up – you never know.
- 5) Whether you have a softer chat with him or not, you obviously need to put every allegation in the article into a detailed letter (including every instance of alleged fabrication, the stuff about JWB, etc) which I'd send him at least a week in advance of publication to give him fair chance to respond. Getting the front-up letter right is crucial to copper-bottoming our responsible journalism defence. You might have written millions of these letters before but if it'd help I can dig out a few examples of the ones I've sent on big investigations in the past.

That's all folks. Great stuff! And happy to discuss – have some interviews to do this morning but will be in the office this afternoon.

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On Wed, Mar 25, 2015 at 7:30 PM, Alan White <alan.white@buzzfeed.com
<javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','alan.white@buzzfeed.com');> > wrote:

Thanks so much for this Robert.

Just on the general points....

- The issue of CEN supplying copy, including the initial story on the Argentine sex tape. This is the real issue and I don't entirely know how to resolve, because there's no easy way to get the raw copy. Of course we can be 99% sure that all these dodgy quotes that appear on most of the stories from China etc come from CEN. As Rob says, if we can track them back to Austrian Times, that gives us something. We can also point out that the same quotes appears here, here and here, etc, so where else could they originate?

I know they gave us copy on two stories - sashimi tapeworm and pavement swastika (which we didn't write up). I don't have the emails any more as it was 2013, but Matt Tucker may. On the Argentine Sex Tape scandal, we may have to go one of the hacks who wrote it up to verify as part of our approaching phase.

- On the coverage of the teacher - craig has some contacts and can dig.

- Screenshotting stories - no, I'll do that this week.

- Hannes Urban and Lucy Tipler et al - sent through in a second doc. Once legal are happy we'll be approaching them and other ex-employees, and Leidig.

- Size of CEN - this is tricky as based in Austria, not sure we could find Companies House records. Our suspicion is it's just Leidig plus some people working remotely looking at Weibo etc. Heidi might have some ideas.

On Wed, Mar 25, 2015 at 6:31 PM, Craig Silverman <silvermancraig@gmail.com
<javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','silvermancraig@gmail.com');> > wrote:

Hi all,

Thank you Robert for the edits and feedback. I'll go through the new version soon.

I will look at that lead anecdote to nail down the CEN involvement. I also now have a connection to a correspondent for La Nacion who works in the region of Argentina where the woman is from. I'm hoping we can get a quote from her about the impact of the false claim about her.

I'll get back into the story in about two hours from now and will add in that info and respond to any comments etc. I also have a new quote from Farhad Manjoo to insert re: CEN.

Best regards,
Craig

On Wednesday, March 25, 2015, Heidi Blake <heidi.blake@buzzfeed.com
<javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','heidi.blake@buzzfeed.com');> > wrote:

I will read and get back with comments by the morrow!

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On Wed, Mar 25, 2015 at 6:06 PM, Robert Colvile <robert.colvile@buzzfeed.com> wrote:

Hi guys,

Have now been through with as fine a tooth comb as I can manage, though would still appreciate Heidi taking a look. Have also restructured, including losing the scene-setting summary of findings as think it underplays total conclusion - see what you think (pasted below for reference).

Have marked various places where more work needed, or have queries, or others did. Some big points on that...

- As per Tom's mark, am galactically unhappy leading this off with a story where we can't actually verify that CEN supplied the words as well as the images - undermines us from the start. Can we move heaven and earth to find out, even if it means appealing to friendly souls at the publications who ended up using it? Otherwise we need to go in with Bieber and the bear then put that lower down.

- More generally, how are we sure that these stories are by CEN? What evidence do we have? Subscription to their feed, or just the similarity of the text? Need to state clearly and explicitly in each case.

- On the coverage of the teacher, we need to see the examples of use and link to them. Would also be great to make an effort to find her and to clear up the chronology - have tried to do so but need it to be watertight.

- Have we got all the stories/sites being linked to snapshotted and saved? Assume so but need to do if not in case they change/are moved.

- There's a mention of Hannes Urban and Lucy Tipler quotes, plus some more to come - would be great to include. More generally, any quotes from former staffers are absolute gold. Can we identify anyone who might be willing to talk? Assume you've done but thought I should flag...

- Similarly, how big is CEN? How many employees, how much revenue? We don't need to get forensic but we should be at least able to get the rough statements from 192 or similar, otherwise we're relying on their own account of their business trajectory from the Press Gazette piece. Same with Journalism Without Borders - is it registered with the Charities Commission or Austrian equivalent?

- Also felt it needed a slightly wider conclusion - wrote one in but up for negotiation.

Hope that all makes sense. This is so close to being a fantastic piece, but we absolutely need to stick the landing...

Rob

PS Shortened version of the summary below for collective record

Since the summer of 2014, CEN has been the source, or a key distributor, of stories about:

- * A Russian bear being scared off by a Justin Bieber ringtone.
- * A Chinese backpacker offering sex in return for helping to fund her vacation.
- * A woman who inadvertently caused a car crash while sunbathing.
- * A Chinese man who got a tapeworm after eating sashimi.
- * A two-headed goat born in China.

These were respectively false; a marketing stunt; unprovable, and accompanied by a picture that was three years old; circulated alongside completely unrelated images that appear to have originated in the British Medical Journal; and based on a picture that a forensics expert appears to have been altered, and for which a CEN-affiliated website supplied quotes that are most likely fabricated.

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Robert Colvile | News Director

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<<http://www.niemanlab.org/2014/02/are-quizzes-the-new-lists-what-buzzfeeds-latest-viral-success-means-for-publishing/>> Are Quizzes The New Lists?

<http://adage.com/article/digital/buzzfeed-cat-videos-a-level/292133/?utm_source=Digital&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed:+AdvertisingAge/Digital%20> BuzzFeed Is About To Take Branded Cat Videos To A Whole New Level

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