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**From:** Alan White [alan.white@buzzfeed.com]  
**Sent:** Monday, April 20, 2015 4:53 PM  
**To:** [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** FAO Michael Leidig

Dear Mr Leidig,

Further to my last commucation of 15 April, I now have two more questions about CEN stories which I'd like to put to you. I'd also like to confirm that you received this email and letter, which I've included in full below. If possible, please could you reply by the deadline set for the original email - Tuesday April 21.

1. In May 2014, a story appeared on sites including *Metro* and *The Huffington Post* (since corrected) which claimed that Chinese teenagers were attempting to alieviate feelings of loneliness by taking cabbages for walks.

The story included quotes from "Chinese psychiatrist Wen Chao" explaining how walking a cabbage on a lead can help reduce feelings of isolation, and from a 17-year-old called Lui Ja Chen, who supposedly said:

"I feel I can transfer my negative thoughts about myself to the cabbage, go for a walk with it and come home feeling better about myself."

However, it would transpire the teens were not walking cabbages because they were lonely; they were walking cabbages as part of an art installation by Chinese artist Han Bing, who has been walking cabbages as part of his art for over a decade. How was CEN able to obtain quotes from multiple people about how walking the cabbages was a psychiatric intervention when that doesn't appear to have been the case?

2. In February CEN sent out a story about a woman named Elena Lenina, who dyed her kitten pink – causing the animal's death from blood poisoning. It was covered by outlets such as *The Daily Mail* and *Metro*. As Gawker's Antiviral diagonal pointed out, the story was false. The kitten was not dead. Lenina was in fact posting pictures of it, very much alive, on social media. How did CEN come to the incorrect conclusion that it had died? Did CEN attempt to do anything to restore the damage to Lenina's reputation?

As per my previous email, I'd like to reiterate how firmly I believe it would be in your interests to submit to an interview and contribute to this story. We do not want to write a takedown of your agency, but a nuanced assessment of the realities of viral news production. It will be very difficult to do this without your input.

Yours sincerely  
Alan White

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Email sent 15 April:

Dear Mr Leidig,

Following my earlier emails of March 30 and April 2, and our previous conversations on the phone, I wanted to confirm that, as a result of our reporting, BuzzFeed News is now preparing to publish an article which proposes to report that your news agency, CEN, is responsible for the circulation of a string of stories that have subsequently been proven false either in part or in their entirety.

As previously stated, I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you in order to give you the fullest possible opportunity to respond to what we at present plan to report. As I have mentioned previously, I understand that you are producing this viral content for sale in order to fund your laudable investigative journalism, such as your report into the issue of child trafficking in Europe, and I am keen to reflect this fact in the article.

To include your response we need to receive it by 5pm (UK time) on Tuesday April 21. In our judgment this is a reasonable time for you to respond, particularly since you have been aware of our planned report for some time.

In the course of our research, we have uncovered numerous substantive inaccuracies and distortions in CEN content which has been sold on to other outlets around the world. We intend to report on this pattern as a matter of legitimate public interest and concern, and would be grateful for your response to the points raised below.

1. In August 2014, CEN sold a story about a man who was apparently saved from a bear attack by a Justin Bieber ringtone on his phone (e.g. "Russian fisherman saved from bear attack when ringtone featuring one of the pop brat's songs scares it away", Daily Mail, 5 August 2014). This was bought by the following outlets around the world: New York Post, Sydney Morning Herald, New York Daily News, Daily Express, Daily Mirror. However, the original story about the bear attack, which was published in Russia's Komsomolskaya Pravda, said nothing about a Bieber ringtone. Instead, it reported that the man's phone had a setting that caused it to speak the current time, and that's what had scared off the bear. Did you or a member of CEN staff insert the false detail about the Justin Bieber ringtone? If so, why? Was it inserted in order to make the story more commercially appealing?

2. In November 2014, there was a story about an Argentinian teacher, apparently named Lucita Sandoval, who was alleged to have featured in a sex tape showing her having sex with a 16-year-old pupil (e.g. "Boy, 16, secretly films sex with teacher then uploads it to WhatsApp", Metro, 3 November 2014). This story was widely picked up in Britain. The Daily Mirror and Metro, the Daily Mail, the New York Daily News and others paired it with an image of the woman posing poolside in her bikini which was credited to CEN. But before it was sold to English language news sites, it had already been debunked by a local paper in Argentina, Nuevo Diario on 22 October. As BuzzFeed News reported at the time, the video didn't show an underage boy; the woman in the video was a teacher, but she wasn't from Santiago del Estero and she doesn't appear to have been called Lucita Sandoval. Some of the sites updated their articles, but some remain inaccurate to this day. Were both the picture and the accompanying copy sold by CEN? Did CEN have the rights to distribute and offer these photographs for sale, and if so from whom did CEN obtain these rights? Did you know that the story had been debunked? If so, why did you apparently help to perpetuate this hoax? If not, do you believe it was negligent of you to disseminate this story without checking its accuracy? And once CEN discovered that the story had been debunked, did you inform those who purchased the story or the images?

3. In October 2014, a story appeared about an attractive Chinese woman who was offering to spend a night with men in exchange for them helping her travel around the country (e.g. "This Chinese backpacker is offering sex. The catch? You have to pay for her holiday" Telegraph, 28 October 2014). The New York Daily News and The Daily Telegraph credited their images of the woman to EuroPics, CEN's sister agency. The reality, as reported by Shanghai Daily on 29 October 2014, was that it was a hoax to promote a dating app called Youjia, which the paper said had been banned as a result. After the original story was proven to be a hoax, your Austrian Times site published a story about the debunking. It reported that Chinese officials were "particularly angry about the viral story widely spread on Chinese social media sites and also reported extensively in Chinese media and international media ...." Once CEN discovered that the story had been debunked, did you inform those who purchased the story? Did CEN have the rights to distribute and offer these photographs for sale, and if so from whom did CEN obtain these rights?

4. CEN distributed the images and text for a story about a Chinese man who got a tapeworm from eating too much sashimi (e.g. "A Man In China Apparently Ended Up Riddled With Tapeworm Parasites After Eating Too Much Sashimi", BuzzFeed, 25 September 2014). It originated on the Chinese news site hk.on.cc. Soon after they made the rounds, the debunking site Snopes investigated the story. It found that the X-ray photos of the alleged victim were "similar to those included in a 2014 case report published by the British Medical Journal that dealt with a man who contracted a rare case of disseminated cysticercosis through the consumption of uncooked pork (with no mention of raw fish)". What efforts did CEN make to investigate the provenance of this picture? Again, did CEN have the rights to distribute and offer these photographs for sale, and if so from whom did CEN obtain these rights?

5. In the Croatian Times on November 17 there was a story entitled: "No Kidding - Baby Goat Has Two Heads." It featured this image, credited to EuroPics, of a baby goat supposedly born with two heads in China. The photo originated with the Xinhua News Agency in China five days earlier. At the request of BuzzFeed News, Dr. Neal Krawetz, the creator of FotoForensics photo analysis platform, which is used by law enforcement and others to examine digital images, analysed the image and concluded: "The goat picture that we investigated appears to be a either a digital composite or a series of selective enhancements." What steps did CEN take to verify the provenance of this picture?

6. In a story recently published by the Daily Mirror, ("Young women who stripped naked in snow for 'fun' are sacked from department store", Mirror, 24 March 2015), the claim was made that two Russian women from Khabarovsk, near Vladivostok,

had been fired from their jobs at a department store after they spent an afternoon participating in a nude photo shoot. BuzzFeed News tracked down the images, and found they originated with a Russian news outlet from the area. That piece described how a controversial artistic photoshoot had been taken in the centre of Khabarovsk by a photographer known as Gene Oryx, whose online portfolio includes nudes. The Mirror story credited the images to a “Dimitry Kulishenko, 30” - but online searches for that name return no mentions apart from those inspired by the Mirror. In an email, Oryx confirmed that he was the original photographer and attached an hi-res, uncensored copy of one of the photos to prove his claim. He says he was never contacted by CEN. He also said that the women in the picture do not work in a department store, and that the names listed for them in the CEN/Mirror story are false. Was CEN responsible for this apparently false narrative? If not, what steps did the agency take to verify the photographer’s identity? And again, did CEN have the rights to distribute and offer these photographs for sale, and if so from whom did CEN obtain these rights?

7. In an October report from CEN it was alleged that a Macedonian man chopped off his penis and threw it in the garbage after his girlfriend told him it was inadequate. The story was published on CEN’s sister site the Austrian Times and was apparently sold to the Daily Mirror that same day, October 23. The Austrian Times story and Mirror stories both used a photo of a man lying on a gurney with a bloody crotch, with the Mirror specifically saying it showed the victim. But almost exactly a year earlier the Mirror ran another CEN story about a castration — and used the very same image of the man with the bloody crotch. In that story, which also credited the image to CEN, the man being shown was described as a 26-year-old Chinese man named Yang Hu who allegedly chopped off his own penis due to frustration with his nonexistent love life. How did the same picture end up being reproduced for the both stories?

8. This doesn’t appear to be the first time this has happened: it’s the same with a story that an Austrian ski resort, Saalbach-Hinterglemm, had covered its hills in snow that had been set aside and stored at the end of last season (e.g. “Ski Resort Opens With Snow Stored From Last Season”, Austrian Times, 3 December 2014). Again, this appears to have been illustrated with an old photo. The same is true of another story about a woman who caused a car crash in Vienna by sunbathing with her bottom half hanging out of her window (e.g. “Naked woman’s bottom halts traffic as she sunbathes out of third-floor window”, Star, 18 June 2014). The photo dated back to at least 2011, and no such incident had been recorded by the city’s police. CEN appears to have picked up the picture after a reader tried to fool an Austrian newspaper with it. Do you have any explanation for why these photos got redistributed? From where were they sourced?

The article will also raise questions about the veracity of some of the quotes which appear in CEN articles. It will note that CEN often manages to get incredible quotes from sources that no one else could track down or persuade to talk, including the local media in which the original stories were reported. We will highlight the examples detailed below.

9. In the above story about the two-headed goat, the story quotes farmer and goat owner Xu Jinkui at length. It also lists his age as 43; Xinhua says he is closer to 60. It seems a little curious that a Xinhua journalist who claims to have seen the goat in person didn’t get the farmer to talk, but a news agency based in Vienna somehow did, despite the story taking place in a remote rural community a six-hour train ride from Beijing. How did you manage to contact him? Do you have any documentation that shows how the agency did so?

10. As stated earlier, when we spoke to Gene Oryx regarding the aforementioned story about women from Khabarovsk, he said that the names listed for them in the CEN/Mirror story are false and that they did not work for a department store. By implication, that also means the quotes attributed to four different people in the story — one of the women, a “shocked” onlooker, a police spokesman and a spokesman from the department store — are fabricated. Is this true?

11. In a story about a thief in Paraguay who apparently broke into people’s homes by pretending to be a baby (e.g. “Thief, 25, tricked elderly women into thinking he was a lost little boy by wearing a nappy and sucking a lollipop so they would let him into their homes in Paraguay”, Daily Mail, 10 February 2015), there are quotes from a local, Lara Orta Ornelas, 59, who said:

“I am surprised that the police have only just now arrested him. He has been doing this for years and I know the police have had complaints before but it’s incredible that they never realised the baby is actually a fully grown man.”

A Spanish-language report from four days earlier says that the thief pretended to be mentally ill, but no more. Ms Ornelas’s quotes only appear when the story makes its way to the English-speaking media - they don’t appear to be in any of the Spanish-language reports. Did you have a local reporter who spoke to her? Do you have any documentation that shows how the agency obtained these quotes?

12. In January this year a number of news websites — including the Austrian Times — ran a story about an underwear thief who, according to the Mirror, “was forced to walk around a block of flats in Singapore with bras and undies hanging from his neck after residents laid a trap following a spate of kinky thefts” (e.g. “Public shaming: Underwear thief forced to walk around the block wearing the bras he stole”, Metro, 14 Jan 2015). Conspicuous by its absence from any of the original sources was a quote that appeared in the English press from a “police spokesman”, who said

“We don’t condone vigilante activity but in this case it seems to have turned out OK.”

Also missing were quotes from a “local man” Teo Goh, who apparently said:

“We realised he was targeting windows where he knew women lived. He came at around midnight and as soon as he was in the room we grabbed him, forced him to wear the girl’s lingerie and then frog-marched him from door to door making him confess what he had done and to promise he would never do it again.”

Did CEN acquire these quotes itself? If so, how? Do you have any material documenting how the agency obtained them?

13. There’s a quote in a story CEN sold that claimed a wife discovered her husband cheating with her twin sister and then left them naked in a parking lot. (“Spurned wife leaves cheating husband and twin naked in busy car park”, Metro, 16 December 2014). It comes from a witness identified as You Meng, but reads like it’s being spoken by someone interviewed on a London street:

It was so funny. Loads of people were grabbing their phones and I did as well. He was banging his fist on the window and shouting at her, and she just wasn’t playing ball.

While the story was covered by the Chinese-language media, none of the earlier online posts included the names of the man and his wife or their ages, or any quotes from a witness. Yet somehow CEN managed to get names, ages and a quote from the scene, in spite of the distance and language barriers. How did it manage to acquire them? Do you have any material documenting how the agency obtained them?

14. There are also the quotes in the story of an aunt who castrated her young nephew when he interrupted her. That story was reported in Chinese media, and comes with detailed photos of the boy and his parents (“Cruel aunt cuts her three-year-old nephew’s penis off because he burst in on her on the loo and asked to use her phone”, Daily Mail, 17 November 2014).

But the CEN version includes two quotes that we couldn’t find elsewhere. There was this from a “hospital spokesman”:

Unfortunately, the knife was quite blunt and the cut wasn’t clean so although we reattached the boy’s penis, it wasn’t ideal and he had to have further treatment.

And from a “police spokesman”:

The aunt was arrested and admitted attacking the boy because she was angry that he had interrupted her on the toilet.

Again, how did CEN acquire them? Do you have any material documenting how CEN obtained them?

15. Another unnamed police spokesman appeared in a CEN story about an Indian man who allegedly had his penis chopped off by a crowd after he was caught trying to rape a girl (“Angry mob hacks off alleged rapist’s genitals with meat cleaver after dragging him into butchers”, Mirror, 10 October 2014). That story came with many related photos that we were able to find online (including one of the man’s severed penis). But BuzzFeed News could find this quote only on sites that bought the images from CEN:

People cannot take the law into your own hands.

As deplorable as these crimes are, law and order has to be maintained, and not lynch justice.

We ask those men who carried out this attack to hand themselves in before we find them.

The same was true for this quote from local man Aamir Dhawan:

No one went to help the man because they could see his penis on the ground and knew this was punishment for a sex crime.

We have had a lot of intolerable offences against women in this country recently, with girls being raped, hung, and molested, and it’s time it stopped.

This sends out a very strong message to anyone like that - if you do it you will be punished.

How did CEN manage to acquire these quotes? Do you have any material documenting how CEN obtained the quotes?

16. In January pictures surfaced on a since-deleted Chinese Weibo account and then spread to other Chinese sites that described a man whose penis was chopped off twice in the span of a few hours. The version CEN sold to the Daily Mail (e.g. “Wife chopped her husband’s penis off after she discovered he had cheated on her... then cut it off AGAIN after surgeons managed to reattach it in China”, Daily Mail, 13 January 2015) has, at the time of writing, been shared more than 40,000 times. First, it was claimed, the man’s wife caught him cheating and she castrated him. Then, she found him at the hospital and undid the work doctors had done to reattach his member.

The earliest version we could find of the story in Chinese included a quote from the mistress saying that it was fine if he was now infertile, as he already had five children. However, the CEN story has this set of quotes from an anonymous hospital spokesman:

The first we were aware of what happened was when someone came into the reception area to say a naked man was beating up a woman outside the hospital.

Staff rushed out to see what was happening and found the patient with blood streaming down his legs hitting the woman.

He was stopped and the woman was taken in for treatment, and then we discovered she had chopped his penis off again.

The man had lost a lot of blood and was taken in for emergency surgery.

He is now in a stable condition but is extremely emotionally distraught.

Would you be able to provide any more information about this spokesman? How did you manage to get such detailed quotes in such short time?

17. The piece will also raise some questions about your charity Journalism With Borders, which you set up in 2010 with Hannes Urban to provide a way for people to donate money to sources who are featured in CEN’s reporting. When it launched in 2010,

the creation of JWB was written up on your Austrian Times website in two separate articles. One story, focusing on Urban and how he became the founder of an Austrian charity that helps children in South Africa, appears to be largely plagiarised from a 2002 Associated Press story.

The second story about the charity mentions that you were inspired to found it when, in 2002, you were commissioned by The Sunday Telegraph to write about a Romanian woman named Ana Crisan, who had been declared disabled at birth and was taken away from her mother. Crisan's mother was then told that her daughter had died, but you wrote about their reunion for the paper.

As you recounted in 2010, the Telegraph's readers offered to send money to help the family and you eventually drove there with the cash yourself. The 2010 Austrian Times story reports that you do not know what happened to the family after you visited to hand over the money. But there is still a form on the JWB website that invites people to donate money to Crisan's mother. How can you be passing money to a woman whom you admit you have lost touch with? Have you subsequently been in touch with her? If you are not passing it to Crisan's mother, what have you done with the money that has been donated for this purpose? More broadly, how much money has been raised by JWB, and how much has been passed on to the sources?

18. The piece will also point out that many of the key edits and contributions to your Wikipedia page are by a user called "Bylinebandit," who is also a major contributor to the page for the Austrian Times. This user also created the page for Allan Hall, a journalist with whom you co-authored a book. The subject of that book is an Austrian woman who was kidnapped at a young age. Bylinebandit has made repeated edits to her page. Bylinebandit also happens to be the username for a Twitter account you appear to own. Are you the "Bylinebandit" who contributed to your Wikipedia page?

Once again, I want to reiterate that I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you on the telephone or in person in order to give you the fullest possible chance to respond. I am interested in writing a nuanced and balanced piece about the pressures of running an online news organisation in the viral internet age, and I am keen to understand the ways in which CEN helps fund your investigative journalism.

If you don't want to talk, I would be grateful if you could email me your response to the points raised above, along with any other comments you wish to make, by 5pm (UK time) on Tuesday April 21, in order that we can give your reply proper consideration and reflect it fairly in our article.

Yours sincerely,

Alan White

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**Alan White**  
**Breaking News Reporter, BuzzFeed UK**

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[REDACTED]