
From: Heidi Blake [heidi.blake@buzzfeed.com]
Sent: 4/12/2015 10:52:26 PM
To: Alan White [alan.white@buzzfeed.com]
CC: Craig Silverman [silvermancraig@gmail.com]; Luke Lewis [luke.lewis@buzzfeed.com]; Tom Phillips [tom.phillips@buzzfeed.com]
Subject: Re: No surprises letter

Hello from LA!

I've taken a look at the front up letter and my suggested redraft is below. Very happy to discuss the reasoning behind the changes on the phone if you want to give me a call any time during waking hours here! The main point is that I think we need to give him much more detail about the reasons we have deduced that each article or quotation is fake to give him a chance to point out any holes in our workings. My changes are in red and I've added what I think is the requisite amount of detail for the first two examples so you can see what I mean – I'd suggest you do the same for all the other bullet points too.

My advice is also to go to every other outlet that we name in the story as having bought dodgy content from CEN, giving them links to the offending stories and a brief outline of why they're wrong.

Give me a shout if any questions!

Heidi

Dear Mr Leidig,

Following my earlier emails and our previous conversations on the phone, I wanted to notify you that BuzzFeed News is now preparing to publish an article which will report that your news agency, CEN, is responsible for the circulation of a string of stories which 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 into the issue of child trafficking in Europe, and I am keen to reflect this fact in the article. However, in the course of my research I have uncovered numerous substantive inaccuracies and distortions in CEN content which has been sold on to other outlets around the world. I intend to report on this disturbing pattern as a matter of legitimate public interest and concern, and I 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. This was bought by the following outlets around the world: <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2716479/Fisherman-saved-bear-attack-Justin-Bieber-ringtone-went-mauled-scared-bear-away.html>> Daily Mail, <<http://nypost.com/2014/08/05/justin-bieber-saves-man-from-bear-attack/>> New York Post, <<http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life/justin-bieber-ringtone-saves-russian-man-from-bear-attack-20140807-101cpc.html>> Sydney Morning Herald, <<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/justin-bieber-ringtone-saves-man-bear-article-1.1893607>> New York Daily News, <<http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/495861/Man-saved-from-bear-thanks-to-Justin-Bieber>> Daily Express, <<http://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/justin-bieber-scared-grizzly-bear-3995326>> Daily Mirror. But the original story about the bear attack, <<http://www.kp.ru/daily/26263.4/3141355/>> 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 XXX, CEN sold 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. This story was widely picked up in Britain. The <<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/teacher-suspended-after-sex-session-4559316>> Daily Mirror and <<http://metro.co.uk/2014/11/03/boy-16-secretly-films-sex-with-teacher-then-uploads-it-to-whatsapp-4933699/>> Metro, the Daily Mail, the <<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/crime/teacher-suspended-sex-video-student-posted-whatsapp-article-1.1997562>> 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 two weeks before this story was sold to English language news sites, it <<http://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanhatesthis/the-lucita-sandoval-sex-tape>> had already been debunked by a local paper in Argentina, Nuevo Diario. As BuzzFeed News <<http://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanhatesthis/the-lucita-sandoval-sex-tape#.mo4oaXjGgG>> 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 probably wasn't called Lucita Sandoval. Some of the sites updated their articles, but <<http://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/408443/Lucita-Sandoval-sex-tape-teacher-pupil-Argentina>> some remain inaccurate to this day. CEN was a key player in helping propagate this hoax among English language news sites. Did you know that the story had been debunked when you sold it to English language media? If so, why did you help to perpetuate this hoax? If not, do you believe it was negligent of you to disseminate this story without checking its accuracy? Was both the picture and the accompanying copy sold by CEN?

- A Chinese woman apparently 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). We believe that this was a hoax created for the purposes of viral marketing.

- A Chinese man who apparently picked up a tapeworm infection 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). We believe this image showed a picture of cysts caused by eating pork.

- A story about a two-headed goat born in China, which we believe appears to be illustrated with a doctored photo (e.g. "No Kidding - Baby Goat Has Two Heads", Croatian Times, 17 November 2014).

- A story alleging that two Russian women from Khabarovsk were fired from their jobs at a department store after they spent an afternoon participating in a nude photo shoot (e.g. "Young women who stripped naked in snow for 'fun' are sacked from department store", Mirror, 24 March 2015). We believe these women did not work for a department store, and that their names and the quotes around them have been fabricated.

- A story about a Macedonian man who cut his own penis off (e.g. "Man cut off manhood and threw it in bin after girlfriend dumped him over small penis", Mirror, 24 March 2015), and another 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), both of which appear to be illustrated with redistributed photos from years-old stories.

- Likewise the 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.

My 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 lines from sources that no one else could track down or persuade to talk, including the local media from which the original stories were lifted. We will highlight the examples detailed below.

- A quote from "Xu Jinkui" in the aforementioned story about the two-headed goat.

- The quotes in the aforementioned story about women from Khabarovsk.

- Quotes from a woman named Lara Orta Ornelas in a story about a thief in Paraguay who apparently broke in to 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). We also believe this story has been exaggerated, and that he was pretending to be mentally ill.

- Quotes from a police spokesman, and a local man called Teo Goh, in a story about an underwear thief who was forced to walk around a block of flats in Singapore with underwear hanging from his neck ("Public shaming: Underwear thief forced to walk around the block wearing the bras he stole", Metro, 14 Jan 2015).

- Quotes from a witness named You Meng in a story about a wife in China who apparently discovered her husband cheating with her twin sister and left them naked in a parking lot ("Spurned wife leaves cheating husband and twin naked in busy car park", Metro, 16 December 2014).

- Quotes in a story about an aunt in China who apparently castrated her nephew after he interrupted her ("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).

- Quotes in a 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).

- Quotes in a story about a man in China whose penis was chopped off twice in the span of a few hours. (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).

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 <<http://austriantimes.at/?id=28556>> story focusing on Urban and how he became the founder of an Austrian charity that helps children in South Africa was almost completely plagiarised from <<http://articles.latimes.com/2002/jun/02/news/adfg-driving>> a 2002 Associated Press story. One of the few paragraphs not copied from the AP story is a quote from you.

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 [LINK]. 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, (<http://www.austriantimes.at/news/General_News/2010-03-09/21410/Media_Insider:_Journalism_Without_Borders> http://www.austriantimes.at/news/General_News/2010-03-09/21410/Media_Insider:_Journalism_Without_Borders) 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? If you are not passing it to Crisan's mother, what have you done with the money that has been donated for this purpose?

Once again, I want to reiterate that I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you on the telephone 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 [two days ahead of planned publication] in order that we can give your reply proper consideration and reflect it fairly in our article.

Heidi Blake

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On Sun, Apr 12, 2015 at 3:56 PM, Alan White <alan.white@buzzfeed.com> wrote:

Thanks Craig. Will add the wikipedia thing, and send to our lawyer tomorrow.

That's correct re Argentinian teacher. Pretty sure Tom has asked his contacts for copy on all the ones you hadn't linked to Leidig sites here <<https://docs.google.com/a/buzzfeed.com/spreadsheets/d/10OQUZBm7ycoHm8BUYJe9Gr7o9rgn5LkbqFCF8BGzuGI/edit#gid=0>> . Tom - any updates on that or was it as far as we got? It feels like a (microscopic) gamble mentioning them at present. One thing I might do this week is just make sure all the quotes are the same in various versions. If they are and news sites haven't linked out to other sites, they must've been bought.

On Sun, Apr 12, 2015 at 7:00 PM, Craig Silverman <silvermancraig@gmail.com> wrote:

The letter looks good by me. Only thing I'd mention I didn't see in there is the suggestion that he edits his own wikipedia page, which I believe is a violation of the site's TOS.

When given the word, I will reach out to the man who Leidig started the charity with. I can also contact the woman who was a co-founder of CEN with him in the 90s. I believe I have her contact info in France.

Screenshotting is great. (Make sure to get the charity site, too.) Note that for CEN articles on sites such as the Mirror, Mail, Metro, Austrian Times, once they are in the Emergent database we capture the original text and any subsequent changes. So if these sites go in and begin making changes or deletions we will know exactly what they did and be able to peg the time it was done within a few hours. One thing I will do it make sure we have the CEN client articles in the database. Then I can watch the changes queue to see if anything happens.

Alan, you mention you'd like to lead with the Argentinian teacher story. I believe the missing element of that is that we do not have conclusive proof that CEN sold words and pics. We see the photo credit on a couple of sites (maybe more) but do not know if they were selling the story, too. Any way to have people who are CEN clients look in archives to see if CEN sent out the text?

Let me know if there's anything else I can do.

Best regards,
Craig

On 12 April 2015 at 11:35, Luke Lewis <luke.lewis@buzzfeed.com> wrote:

Yes, that sounds sensible.

On 12 Apr 2015 4:32 pm, "Tom Phillips" <tom.phillips@buzzfeed.com> wrote:

Just to follow up on the initial stuff here: I am spending today making sure we have screenshots of every single thing we might be mentioning. I've got all the big ones already, but I'm going to go through both the article and the no surprises letter line-by-line and make sure we have everything.

Question: I'm making sure to get the headline and pics (with CEN/Europics) credit in each one, but do we want full-length, full article screenshots too? Just to prove that they didn't drop a "hahahaha this article's obviously lies" line at the end? (I mean, a screenshot isn't exactly proof of that, so...)

On Sun, Apr 12, 2015 at 4:06 PM, Alan White <alan.white@buzzfeed.com> wrote:

Purely personal safety. We're telling him we're about to destroy a business that took him over a decade to build along with his entire professional credibility. You just do not know how a person will react to being put in that situation, nor who he knows out there. If that sounds over cautious so be it, I've ended up in a bad situation before when I thought there was no risk at all.

On 12 Apr 2015, at 15:07, Luke Lewis <luke.lewis@buzzfeed.com> wrote:

Thanks Alan, letter looks solid to me. What are the arguments against going to speak to him in person?

On 12 Apr 2015 1:01 pm, "Alan White" <alan.white@buzzfeed.com> wrote:

Hello all,

Front up letter below.

- Mark Stephens (and Allison?) should look this over so - if Heidi/Tom/Craig can double check first then I send this to him late tomorrow, Stephens can look it over and I can then send it to Leidig on Tuesday.

- So Craig, Tom, Heidi - above all, have I missed anything from the piece here which could be alleged to be defamatory? What else do I need to put to him?

- Reminder that Schoofs advises it's sent in multiple ways - email, courier, physical letter etc. Let's get that side of things organised. As we're doing this, I've not hyperlinked to stories in this email.

Leidig will then be given five days to reply. In that time we need to be:

- Double checking that we have screenshotted EVERYTHING pertaining to this story. EVERYTHING. Because if alarms go off at Daily Mail/Mirror etc once he gets this communication, they could try to start updating/amending. Which in itself is a story. Tom - can you double check? Go through line by line etc. Have we got the charity form for e.g.?

- I want to lead with Lucita Sandoval rather than Bieber bear. Is there anything we can do to make this happen?

- Approaching the Mirror and the Mail press offices. Who else?

- Talk to BuzzFeed News reporters about updating their posts.

- And we need to get our updates on these stories in order. <<http://www.buzzfeed.com/alanwhite/a-man-in-china-apparently-ended-up-riddled-with-tapeworm-par#.i1KDjAq7n>> Here's what Tapeworm sashimi looks like at present, for e.g.

- Craig needs to approach his final set of contacts.

- We need to approach the charities regulator in Austria don't we? Who can take this on?

- ABOVE ALL - Have we got anything at all even a TINY bit wrong? Because if there's a tiny detail that's out of place it will be bad, more than one and it's a disaster and you can bet Gawker and friends will let us know about it. Is there a way we can fact check the claims in this piece one more time? Is there anything more we can do on verifying the source of copy where we don't have that verification?

- And finally, to reiterate: once we send this letter, I will not be going to Vienna to interview him and strongly advise even against two people doing it. I know Nick Davies, for example, abides by this rule, and I've made mistakes in the past I won't again regarding this. As far as I'm concerned - but others may vary - it's telephone or nothing.

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Dear Mr Leidig,

Further to my emails and our previous conversations on the phone, I'd like to give you a full account of the piece I'm working on. It's a collaboration between the Canadian journalist Craig Silverman and our editorial director Tom Phillips. It looks at the business of "viral" news. As a result of interviews with people working in media, as well as observing debunks and corrections play out online, we felt we had legitimate reasons to investigate some of CEN's stories.

As a result, the most serious suspicion we have is:

CEN is responsible for the circulation of a number of stories which subsequently appear to have been proven false or have had significant details exaggerated. These include:

- 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). We understand this man was not saved by a Justin Bieber ringtone on his phone.
- The story of an Argentinian teacher, apparently named Lucita Sandoval, who was alleged to have had sex with a 16-year-old pupil, the resulting sex tape creating a scandal (e.g. "Boy, 16, secretly films sex with teacher then uploads it to WhatsApp", Metro, 3 November 2014). We believe that this tape did not show a woman having sex with an underage pupil, as originally alleged.
- A Chinese woman apparently 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). We believe that this was a hoax created for the purposes of viral marketing.
- A Chinese man who apparently picked up a tapeworm infection 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). We believe this image showed a picture of cysts caused by eating pork.
- A story about a two-headed goat born in China, which we believe appears to be illustrated with a doctored photo (e.g. "No Kidding - Baby Goat Has Two Heads", Croatian Times, 17 November 2014).
- A story alleging that two Russian women from Khabarovsk were fired from their jobs at a department store after they spent an afternoon participating in a nude photo shoot (e.g. "Young women who stripped naked in snow for 'fun' are sacked from department store", Mirror, 24 March 2015). We believe these women did not work for a department store, and that their names and the quotes around them have been fabricated.
- A story about a Macedonian man who cut his own penis off (e.g. "Man cut off manhood and threw it in bin after girlfriend dumped him over small penis", Mirror, 24 March 2015), and another 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), both of which appear to be illustrated with redistributed photos from years-old stories.
- Likewise the 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.

We also have concerns about the provenance of the quotes used in some CEN stories. They include:

- A quote from "Xu Jinkui" in the aforementioned story about the two-headed goat.
- The quotes in the aforementioned story about women from Khabarovsk.
- Quotes from a woman named Lara Orta Ornelas in a story about a thief in Paraguay who apparently broke in to 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). We also believe this story has been exaggerated, and that he was pretending to be mentally ill.
- Quotes from a police spokesman, and a local man called Teo Goh, in a story about an underwear thief who was forced to walk around a block of flats in Singapore with underwear hanging from his neck ("Public shaming: Underwear thief forced to walk around the block wearing the bras he stole", Metro, 14 Jan 2015).
- Quotes from a witness named You Meng in a story about a wife in China who apparently discovered her husband cheating with her twin sister and left them naked in a parking lo ("Spurned wife leaves cheating husband and twin naked in busy car park", Metro, 16 December 2014).
- Quotes in a story about an aunt in China who apparently castrated her nephew after he interrupted her ("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).
- Quotes in a 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).
- Quotes in a story about a man in China whose penis was chopped off twice in the span of a few hours. (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).

The piece will also raise some questions about your charity Journalism With Borders, one being how the charity can invite people to donate to Ana Crisan and her mother when in a 2010 article on your website you were reported as saying that you didn't know what had happened to them.

As you can perhaps tell, the story at present looks rather critical of your organisation. However, as per my previous approaches, we want this piece to be a balanced, nuanced look at the struggles of creating news in the digital age. It will be harder to write without your input and a telephone interview would make this much easier to achieve. Should you wish to contribute, please email alan.white@buzzfeed.com, tom.phillips@buzzfeed.com and silvermancraig@gmail.com so we can discuss how this can happen.

Yours sincerely,

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