

ANFRAGE

des Bundesrates Jenewein
Kolleginnen und Kollegen
an den Bundesminister für Justiz

betreffend Verfahren gegen Kurt Gartlehner und Verbindungen zu Microsoft

Seit vielen Jahren beschäftigt sich die europäische Kommission mit der Machtfülle des IT-Giganten Microsoft. Microsoft wurde insgesamt vier Mal verurteilt und erst nach einer Zahlung von mehr als 3 Milliarden US-Dollar von der europäischen Kartellbehörde in Ruhe gelassen.

Seit geraumer Zeit versucht jetzt Microsoft mittels massiver Lobbyingtätigkeit verlorenes Marktterrain gegenüber Mitbewerbern wieder gutzumachen. Wie die New York Times am 16. April 2015 berichtete, hat Microsoft dafür mehr Geld für Lobbyarbeit ausgegeben als jedes europäische Unternehmen und zusätzlich ein ganzes Netzwerk an Lobbygruppen gegründet. Die prominenteste Organisation daraus ist demnach die Initiative für einen wettbewerbsfähigen Online-Marktplatz – genannt Icomp. Icomp führt, lt. New York Times, eine unerbittlichen PR-Kampagne gegen Google und veranstaltet dazu dazu Webseminare, Diskussionsrunden und Pressekonferenzen. Icomp führte sogar eigens eine Studie durch, die die von Google vorgeschlagenen Änderungen zur Beschwichtigung der Regulatoren als Augenwischerei entlarven sollte. Microsoft ist dem Bericht der New York Times zufolge ein Hauptsponsor von Icomp.

Burson-Marsteller, ein PR-Unternehmen, hat lange für Microsoft und Icomp gearbeitet. Nachdem sich Herr Alan Watson, ein Mitglied von Großbritanniens Oberhaus, von Burson-Marsteller im Jahr 2007 zurückgezogen hat, hat er plötzlich eine neue Aufgabe gefunden. Herr Watson ist jetzt der Vorsitzende von Icomp. Herr Watson gibt zu, was andere nur vermuten: "Microsoft ist einer der Hauptförderer."

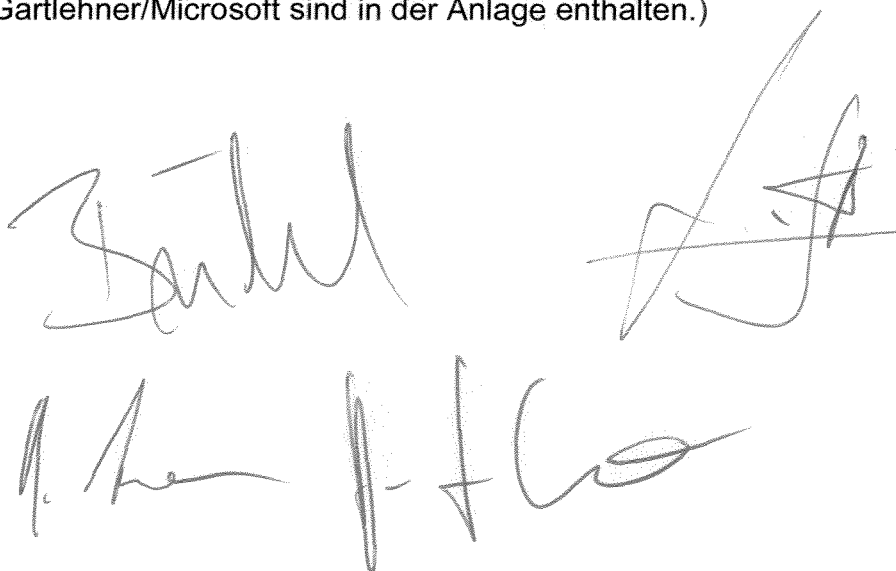
In demselben Jahr, 2007, hat der Burson-Marsteller Vertreter in Österreich, Peter Hohegger, den Technologiesprecher der SPÖ, Kurt Gartlehner für kolportierte 3,600 EUR pro Monat als "Berater" über dessen Firma "Austroconsult" angestellt. Gartlehner hat bislang dazu ausgesagt, dass er PR-Unternehmen Hohegger Informationen über Windfarmenprojekte in Ländern wie etwa Rumänien, Lettland und Ungarn zur Verfügung gestellt hat. Informationen eines britischen Reporters weisen jedoch darauf hin, dass er seine Position als Parlamentarier dazu verwendet hat, um Österreichs Haltung zu Google zu ändern.

Microsofts Marktdominanz hat auch Einfluss auf die Berichterstattung. Kritische Berichte über Microsoft werden auf der internationalen Nachrichtenwebsite BuzzFeed gelöscht. Microsoft ist ein bedeutender Inserent von BuzzFeed.

Vor diesem Hintergrund stellen die unterfertigten Bundesräte an den Bundesminister für Justiz folgende


Anfrage

1. Wie ist der Status der Anklage gegen Kurt Gartlehner?
2. Warum verzögert sich die Anklageerhebung gegen Kurt Gartlehner? Wäre es nicht, in Anbetracht der sehr aktuellen Debatte über die Google in Europa, wichtig jetzt Antworten zu bekommen?
3. Bezüglich welcher Anklagepunkte wird gegen Kurt Gartlehner konkret ermittelt?
4. Wird im Zusammenhang mit der Causa Gartlehner auch gegen andere Personen oder Unternehmen in diesem Fall z.B. Microsoft ermittelt?
5. Ist dem Ministerium bewusst, dass durch die laufende Anklageverschleppung gegen Kurt Gartlehner, und die damit einhergehende Verhinderung der Aufklärung der Einflussnahme von Microsoft, die freie Presse massiven Druck ausgesetzt ist?
(<http://www.geekwire.com/2015/buzzfeed-axed-negative-microsoft-internet-explorer-post-after-buzzfeed-business-exec-complained/>)
6. Ist ~~dem~~ Ihnen bekannt, dass Central European News(CEN), die ein Büro in Wien betreiben, von BuzzFeed beschuldigt worden ist Berichte zu fälschen, nachdem man dort erfahren hat, dass CEN über politische Verbindungen zwischen Kurt Gartlehner und Microsoft berichten wollte? (Details der CEN-BuzzFeed Auseinandersetzung und Dokumentation über die Verbindungen von Gartlehner/Microsoft sind in der Anlage enthalten.)






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Von:  Martin Kratky

Dienstag, 5. Februar 2008 12:41:41 

Thema: Parl. Anfrage Gartlehner

An:  Thomas Lutz <Thomas.Lutz@microsoft.com>

Attachments:  anfrage google.pdf (46K)  antwort_096580.pdf (15K)

Hallo Thomas, hier ist die parlamentarische Anfrage von Kurz Gartlehner und die eher lapidare Antwort des Bartenstein-Ressorts.

Ig, Martin

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Donnerstag, 30. August 2007 13:54:21 

Thema: Google / DoubleClick

An:  gartlehner@ris.at

Sehr geehrter Hr. Gartlehner,

Hier sind wie besprochen einige wichtige Argumente gegen den angekündigten Zusammenschluss von Google und DoubleClick. Vielerorts und auch in unserer Branche bestehen massive Bedenken gegen diesen Deal, der die Rechte der Konsumenten auf Datenschutz ihres persönlichen Lebensbereiches ebenso gefährdet wie die Marktmechanismen für kommerzielle Vermarktung von Online-Werbeflächen. Auch die US-Verbraucherorganisationen haben bei der dortigen Wettbewerbsbehörde ihre Bedenken deponiert. Die europäische Wettbewerbsbehörde (DG Comp) befasst sich dzt. ebenfalls mit der Causa. Für die EU sind folgende Personen wesentliche Ansprechpartner:

- Neelie Kroes, Commissioner
- Franco Frattini, Commissioner
- Viviane Reding, Commissioner
- Juan Antonio Rivière Martí, Consumer Liaison Officer, DG Competition
- Johannes Luebking, DG Competition
- Alain Brun, DG Justice, placeCityLiberty and Security
- Peter Scott, DG Information Society
- Peter Schaar, Chairmen of the Article 29 Working Party
- Peter Hustinx, European Data Protection Supervisor

Angekündigte Übernahme von DoubleClick durch Google

Google (der weltweit größte Anbieter von Online-Suchtechnologie) hat im Frühjahr 2007 angekündigt, DoubleClick (den weltweit größten Vermarkter von Online-Werbeflächen) um 3,1 Mrd. US-\$ zu übernehmen. Daraus ergibt sich eine Reihe schwer wiegender Bedenken: einerseits durch die Entstehung einer quasi-monopolistischen Struktur und die Außerkraftsetzung wichtiger Marktmechanismen, andererseits durch die massive Gefährdung der Datenschutz-Interessen der User („gläserner Konsument“). Im Folgenden werden einige wesentliche Bedenken gegen den Zusammenschluss von Google und DoubleClick angeführt:

Proposed acquisition of DoubleClick by Google

These are the main concerns against the Google / DoubleClick transaction:

1) Dominant market position / Diversity of content and services available

- Google alone currently holds a 90% share of the search market in Germany, nearly a 75% in the U.K., around 82% share in France and 90% in Spain.
- Buying DoubleClick, Google could monopolize the on-line advertising business, restrict competition and raise privacy concerns over control of consumer data.
- Beyond the dominant position in online advertising and the effects that these may have for the undertakings present on those markets, this market power could have a negative impact on the diversity of content available online (broadly meaning content available via PC, mobile, interactive TV).

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Titel: **Google / DoubleClick : hochegger | com**



- Negative impact on the selection of online content available to consumers and on privacy - see Commission Notice on Horizontal Mergers (OJ 2004 C 31, pp. 5-18, in particular paragraph 8).
- Google could vertically-leverage (bundle/tie) its keyword search dominance with DoubleClick's leadership in online banner/video display advertising, and with its Google-YouTube dominance in video search. This vertical combination could give Google-DoubleClick clear dominance on the overall market for advertisements provided to the websites of third parties.
- After a merger of Google and DoubleClick, consumers will have no practical ability to choose services other than those served by Google. It will be almost impossible for users to avoid all web sites serving Google/DoubleClick ads, or to simply opt-out of sharing personal data with Google.
- A web site will have to be part of the Google network of content sites if they are to be viable and visible in the commercial market.
- The European Commission has already taken into account the interests of consumers with regard to consumer choice even in culture-related markets, such as in its decision of dateMonth9Day20Year199520 September 1995 in case IV/M.553 - RTL/Veronica /Endemol.

2) Privacy / Violation of users' privacy rights


- Both Google and DoubleClick employ sophisticated technology to gather and mine data about consumers, and most consumers are not aware of when and how these technologies are being used. Both companies collect information about users from different and, in the user's mind, unrelated web activities (such as mail and messaging, electronic payment, user-generated video exchanges, etc.).
- With the acquisition of DoubleClick, Google will combine two largely complementary existing databases. Never before has one single company had the market and technological power to collect and exploit so much information about what a user does on the Internet.
- It can build profiles of consumers from searches, mining data from them as they use web services and applications, and observing and tracking them as they visit sites across the web.
- With DoubleClick's cookie-tracking technologies, and Google's breadth of online services (from mail and messaging, to mapping, electronic payment, office applications, user-generated video and blogging spaces, ...), a particular user's online activities will be tractable on a much more continuous and universal level than ever before.
- Consumers who may have voluntarily agreed to private data to DoubleClick could not have envisaged that this data would be transferred to Google - and vice versa.
- Google's own stated ambitions are to establish integrated on-line profiles of internet users, to enable it to provide customized content, highly targeted advertising, and individualized recommendations for new services and content.
- This will vastly diminish a user's ability to selectively limit their consent to use certain pieces of personal information to specific purposes or at least control access to this information.


Gedruckt von: **Martin Kratky**

Titel: **AW: Google / DoubleClick : hochegger | com**

Von:  Haider Günther Dr. <Guenther.haider@parlament.gv.at> Fr, 16. Nov 2007 10:40:01 



Thema: AW: Google / DoubleClick


An:  **Martin Kratky**



Attachments:  anfrage google.pdf (46K)

Sehr geehrter Herr Mag. Kratky, zur Information Kurt Gartlehner hat eine Anfrage gestellt.
Mit freundlichen Grüßen
Günther Haider

Gedruckt von: Martin Kratky
 Titel: Fwd: Re(2): Google / DoubleClick : hochegger | com

Von:  Martin Kratky
 Thema: Fwd: Re(2): Google / DoubleClick
 An:  gartlehner@ris.at

Dienstag, 30. Oktober 2007 19:11:07 

Attachments:  Guardian article_26.10.07.doc (38K)  118cku2007e logo.pdf (78K)

Sehr geehrter Hr. Gartlehner,

hier die versprochenen Informationen:

- Das Wichtigste ist, dass die EU-Wettbewerbsbehörde DG Comp die Begutachtungsfrist für den DoubleClick Deal um weitere zwei Wochen verlängert hat. Dies ist als Zeichen dafür zu werten, dass die Kommission der Angelegenheit große Aufmerksamkeit widmet. Die Kommission ruft derzeit alle Experten und politisch Verantwortlichen zu Stellungnahmen in diesem Zusammenhang auf, die bis ca. 10. November möglich sind. Dies ist im Moment die wichtigste Plattform, um etwas zu bewegen und das Interesse der Kommission zu sichern.
http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2007/c_230/c_23020071002en00120012.pdf

Im Zusammenhang damit interessant ist u.a. auch ein Brief an Neelie Kroes, den Thilo Weichert / Datenschutz Schleswig-Holstein veröffentlicht hat:

<https://www.datenschutzzentrum.de/suchmaschinen/20070926-doubleclick-google.html>

Einen weiteren Beitrag aus dem Guardian sowie einen Brief der Europäischen Konsumentenschutzorganisation hänge ich Ihnen an.

Weitere aktuelle Fakten:

- Die World Federation of Advertisers hat die EU öffentlich aufgefordert, den DoubleClick Deal genau zu prüfen - siehe dazu
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/oct/26/googlethedia.digitalmedia>
- Diese Woche trifft EU-Kommissarin Neelie Kroes ihre US-Kollegen der Antitrust division zum halbjährlichen Treffen. Wir gehen davon aus, dass der DoubleClick Deal auch hier ein Thema sein wird.

Beste Grüße
 Martin Kratky

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Buzz Bottom Feeders

*An Insider Look At How BuzzFeed
Tried To Destroy A Rival Business.*

By CEN Staff.

Including interviews with Michael Leidig

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For editorial corrections, please write to: medusapub@gmail.com

Dedication.

This book is dedicated to David Leidig.

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Chapter 1

Viral News Goes Viral

"It is a sad fact that often the media do not check up their stories at all, because the stories are so crazy and funny that they really do not care if they are really true. BuzzFeed journalists at least are there to remind these journalists that stories are always about real people, if you spread their pictures, sometimes also their full names, in a fake story, then you convict them of acts of which they may never have been guilty."

- Reporter Filip Struhárik.

Slovak journalist Viktoria Mirajova had until very recently a job she was happy with. The 27-year-old was working as a reporter for a British news agency called Central European News, and she liked the work because it offered her the chance to cover the stories she had always wanted to do.

She got to travel around the country tackling difficult issues ranging from the legacy of the country's Holocaust survivors for the UK *Daily Mail*,¹ through to a legal challenge by Slovakia to reclaim millions of pounds in unemployment benefit for Slovak nationals who once worked in the UK published in the *Guardian*.²

Because the agency she worked for had no advertising sponsors, and existed from selling news to other media, it meant she was free to follow whatever story she wanted, with the only criteria being that the reports were interesting.

It was rewarding for Viktoria because Slovak media has been under the spotlight recently over concerns about the way local oligarchs seem to be buying up titles, and interfering in what was being written. But working for the British agency CEN meant she had no such interferences.

The problem is not one to be underestimated. In fact, in the Slovak media landscape this ownership is of such concern that the US Embassy in the Slovak capital Bratislava only recently warned that

¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2891431/Haunting-images-grave-Chilling-family-photographs-treasured-possessions-left-Jewish-family-sent-Nazi-concentration-camp-discovered-hidden-attic-70-years-later.html>

² <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/sep/26/uk-owes-our-citizens-unpaid-welfare-say-slovakia-and-czech-republic>

freedom of the press in the country was endangered by the increasing concentration of the media in the hands of those who might not always be interested in unbiased reporting.

The US embassy press release even warned as such, saying: "We are concerned about increasing consolidation in the media sector, which has the potential to limit the variety of views expressed. In Slovakia, a small number of major financial conglomerates now control many of the country's media outlets, which potentially threatens the continued development of a truly independent press."

The embassy said it was also worried about apparent attempts by government officials, judges, and other elites to intimidate the press through the threat of civil defamation suits. It said: "The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, the International Press Institute (IPI) of Slovakia, and other observers have voiced concern that the sizable damages which have been awarded to litigants in such cases that could lead to media self-censorship. Political and other elites in Slovakia need to develop a greater appreciation for the critical watchdog role played by a free press in a democracy."

There are of course still places where independent journalism is practised in Slovakia. One example is a newspaper set up by Matus Kostolny, former editor-in-chief of *SME*, Slovakia's leading daily. He walked away from the *SME* job taking more than two dozen journalists with him to publish an independent title, *Dennik N*, which promises to be free from the potential of interference from a wealthy owner. Explaining his motivation for his new project Kostolny told the *euobserver*:³ "These people simply cannot publish truly independent newspapers as they are in a clear conflict of interest."

So it was a surprise to Viktoria to find *Dennik N* calling for a boycott of her agency and its content. The reporter that wrote it, Filip Struhárik, knew her, although it is unclear whether he knew she worked for CEN, and even if he did not know she worked for CEN it would have been an easy matter for him to call CEN in Vienna, a city which is a 30 minute drive away from the Slovak capital Bratislava. Instead, he had simply written the story that said most of her agency's content consisted of fakes and lies, and was not to be trusted. And to prove the point of how insidiously the agency's viral lies had infected Slovak media, his article then named and posted links to those Slovak publications who had used CEN-sourced content to really drive the message home.

When Viktoria read the story, she had logged onto Facebook where they shared friends and using her own name and Facebook profile bravely declared under the link to his article: "*I work at CEN, and you don't know what you're talking about. Only people that work here can tell you how it really is.*"

³ <https://euobserver.com/beyond-brussels/127186>

Those were brave words for a young journalist starting out in her career prepared to put her name alongside a company that according to one of the most respected Slovak news publication was a factory for producing fake news and lies.

The article⁴ that was published on the newspapers online portal *Dennikn.sk* by Filip pointed out that the CEN stories were '*incredible and headline grabbing*' for one reason - because they were '*entirely fictitious*'. He quoted as the source of his information an online report published a few days earlier by another site, *BuzzFeed.com*, which he said had analysed 41 articles from Central European News.

Filip faithfully reported what *BuzzFeed* said for his readers by translating it into Slovak, and added that, incredible though it may seem, 11 of the stories that *BuzzFeed* looked at were '*complete fakes*', 8 more were '*suspect*' because they added extra detail that had not been reported in other online media, and 13 others could not be verified. In fact, he said, only nine were '*mostly true*'.

Since it was founded in November 2014, *Dennik N* has published several stories about local and world media and in particular targeting the tabloid media, branding for example in March 2015 the UK phone hacking scandal as an example of one of the worst excesses of tabloid journalism.

So the story about CEN lifted from *BuzzFeed* was a classic story for *Dennik N*, which prides itself on quality journalism. It pledges to be '*bez bulváru*', which means literally '*without tabloid*' or '*without gossip*'.⁵

The Slovaks of course were far from alone in repeating claims from the *BuzzFeed* article, which was an investigation that influential *onlinejournalismblog.com* described as '*one of the best examples of debunking you're likely to see all year*'. And while *Dennik N* is Slovakian, it was not a story that was only reported in Slovakia.

Across the border, for example, in the neighbouring Czech Republic, another quality publication, a weekly magazine that also has an online portal called *respekt.ihned.cz*, repeated the *Dennik N* story, not apparently after reading the *BuzzFeed* original, but instead attributing much of what they had found to the report by Filip Struharik.

Under a dramatic headline trumpeting how the sensational made up stories from Central European News had even managed to be published in major Czech newspapers, they also took great delight in

⁴ <https://dennikn.sk/114722/spravodajska-agentura-vydava-vymyslene-spravy-nachytali-sa-aj-slovenske-media/>

⁵ Despite claiming to be without tabloid, in March 2015 the newspaper was criticized for its story revealing that the current Slovak PM's assistant posed naked for men's magazines in past.

listing those publications and providing links. Again, these were mostly tabloid rivals of *respekt* in the Czech newspaper marketplace.

But the *BuzzFeed* article was not just being repeated in Eastern Europe, it also turned up in all the other corners of the globe. In Asia it was seen in local media and blogs, including big blogs like *Beijingcream.com* that repeated what was written by *BuzzFeed* to its readers in a more conversational form.

Anonymous author RFH wrote: *"If you've read a story about China in the last couple of years that seemed just too good to be true – that smelled, in fact, a lot more like horse manure – it probably came from the Augean stables of Central European News (CEN), a Vienna-based 'news agency' whose bluff just got called in exhaustive length by BuzzFeed UK investigative reporters.*

"Although their offices and staff are in Austria, CEN's scope is worldwide, with stories from Russia, Argentina, India, Macedonia and the PRC, where it regularly elbows Xinhua (A Chinese news agency) aside to publish the least likely version of events."

RFH then repeats a lot of the *BuzzFeed* examples of the agency's viral 'fakes' before adding: *"CEN is run by Michael Leidig, journalism's answer to Grant Shapps,⁶ an Internet spiv who's his own greatest online cheerleader. Like Shapps, Leidig has a 'frequently updated' Wikipedia entry (sources include the Austria Times, owned by Leidig) and enthusiastically doctored edited by a user called Bylinebandit, who has the same handle as the Twitter account of one 'Michael Leidig'."*

The *BuzzFeed* story was not only repeated on blogs, newspapers and magazines, it also ended up on radio and television news. In Germany, a live radio broadcast also available for online consumption was streamed by *dradiowissen.de* together with a print version⁷ reproduced in German of the *BuzzFeed* story.

The company's own online science and technology expert Michael Gessat was happy to add extra details to put the story in context, telling listeners: *"The German version of BuzzFeed may have only cheap tabloid news, but the American version (sic)⁸ is different, it includes serious news and also so-called 'big stories', and these really are indeed good stories, with all the classical journalistic research you would want to see included when they publish the finished works.*

*"And this new 'big story' that they have now published under the title 'The King of Bullsh*t News' (laughs) includes a fact-check of material.*

⁶ Grant Shapps is a British Conservative Party politician. In 2012 The Guardian reported that Shapps' Wikipedia article had been edited from his office, to remove embarrassing information multiple times and on one occasion to correct an error.

⁷ <http://dradiowissen.de/beitrag/clickbait-buzzfeed-macht-den-faktencheck>

⁸ The story on CEN was actually published by the UK version of *BuzzFeed*.

The material was all produced by an agency that is well known in the branch, it is extremely successful, and is called Central European News, or CEN. In fact, even BuzzFeed was one of its customers in the past."

Online expert Gessat continues: "*The person behind it is a colourful character called Michael Leidig, he was born in Vienna⁹ and has a very peculiar Wikipedia entry where he self-promotes himself.*"

He then concludes: "*Obviously, you can see that the self-promotion is a success, as he brings in the money and he markets himself well. After all, you can see he sells his stories everywhere.*"

Those who were not sitting in the CEN offices when the *BuzzFeed* story broke might be surprised to know that all this huge volume of repetition of the original *BuzzFeed* report, usually accompanied by reminders that journalists check their stories, went ahead without any checks – or at least without any that involved CEN. Not did the checks involve CEN staff who were known to the critics but not contacted for their side of the story.

But that's surely fair enough as, in the minds of most that read the *BuzzFeed* report, CEN had clearly been doing the same thing for years - either making up stories completely or stealing them from others and passing them on without checking.

So it would be naive to think that anybody really cared that none of the reporters in the examples outlined above that repeated the *BuzzFeed* claims, or indeed any of the many others that also rushed to recycle *BuzzFeed's* 'big story', asked CEN for their side.

As any 'tabloid' journalist who finds themselves under the media spotlight knows, this is seen simply by most people as divine justice. It's a taste of their own medicine - a chance to see how they like it for a change.

Across the globe the story was shared and spread, and more detail was added, somebody logged on to Michael Leidig's Wikipedia entry within an hour of the *BuzzFeed* story going online to point out that he had been accused of faking news. The French news website *Atlantico*¹⁰ added that after the market for quality news dried up, the agency and Leidig had switched successfully from working for the *BBC* to generating fake news.

And all of this was happening with nobody picking up the phone to ask if it was true. Of all the many repeats of the *BuzzFeed* allegations, only the German radio report mentioned the much less interesting

⁹ He is actually British and was born in London.

¹⁰ <http://www.atlantico.fr/decryptage/etrange-agence-presse-qui-alimente-medias-europeens-histoires-insolites-que-avez-surement-lues-et-dont-on-oublie-preciser-qu-2118751.html#aYq25VH0cwr2pQij.99>

report in the British *Press Gazette*,¹¹ a UK media trade publication that had been published several hours before the *BuzzFeed* report went live, pointing out that Central European News staff feared that they were going to be the target of an attempt to discredit them by *BuzzFeed*.

The *Press Gazette* report said a legal letter had been sent to *BuzzFeed*. That letter had been a reaction to a communication sent by a *BuzzFeed* journalist to several of the UK's biggest news organisations asking them if they were aware that CEN fabricated stories, and giving examples.

The letter from the lawyer for CEN noted: "*CEN is BuzzFeed's main competitor for viral news content in the UK market. Our client is not therefore prepared to engage with BuzzFeed about the detail of any of your questions as to do so would involve giving information about its sources and practices to a competitor.*"

Those writing their follow ups could not have missed it, as in most of the Google search queries using combinations of the words 'Leidig', 'CEN', its picture division 'Europics' and 'BuzzFeed', the *Press Gazette* report was the top item.¹²

But for those looking for a 'big story' it seems the *Press Gazette* story was not what they wanted to hear. Like CEN's news output, apparently debunked by the *BuzzFeed* news team in their extensive analysis covering almost seven thousand words, was it really important that the *BuzzFeed* article was correct? It was a good headline, a great exclusive generating thousands of hits and of course further boosting *BuzzFeed*'s reputation for its fledgling investigative news service.

And if it is not true, who cares? The alternative is that you have two tabloid, gutter raking news teams battling it out, and if one or both vanish - the world will be a better place, won't it?

In the world of social media of course, these do not need to be rhetorical questions. Looking through the comments on the dozens of articles repeating the *BuzzFeed* allegation, both can be answered.

In the hundreds of remarks and comments under the articles published worldwide repeating the *BuzzFeed* allegations, there was not one in any language that CEN staff found that asked their local media the question: "Did you check yourselves?"

Clearly those who feel good about reading a story on the exposure of a corrupt tabloid news agency caught in the act of faking stories don't

¹¹ <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/buzzfeed-investigation-emails-harm-business-competitor-online-news-provider>

¹² Only Google can explain why their algorithm that rates news would give a small trade publication based in the UK more prominence than a news web site described as one of the 'white hot properties' on the market. And as they don't talk about how that works, it is unlikely there will be any answer soon.

feel the need to ask themselves the question as to whether it's actually true or whether their own news supplier had done any additional checking. After all, the details were all there in the *BuzzFeed* report. If it was a lie, then CEN should sue and prove it.

And if it wasn't true, is there any sympathy from the public? As almost nobody got to read the CEN side of the argument, which was only lightly touched on by the *Press Gazette*, it is a difficult question to answer directly.

But looking at the comments under articles about the collapse of the cases against British tabloid newspapers in the now discredited plethora of probes into tabloid media, it might offer an insight into what the public think.

The UK police force's Operation Weeting (Cost: 19.2m GBP) looked into allegations of phone hacking in the now closed *News of the World*. Another probe, Operation Elveden (Cost: 11.3m GBP), was an investigation into allegations of inappropriate payments to the police by those involved with phone hacking, and Operation Tuleta (Cost: 3m GBP) was an investigation into alleged computer hacking again for the *News of the World*.

This year, one after another of the reporters charged and put on trial on allegations of corruption have been freed after juries that listened to the evidence repeatedly returned not guilty verdicts. But the comments under those pages gives you a sense of what people think about tabloid reporters or tabloid media when one or the other also ends up under their spotlight.

Most comments were along the lines of online user Paul O., who wrote under an article in the *Press Gazette* detailing former Sun managing editor Graham Dudman's 1,176-day ordeal. Like many other tabloid newspaper staff Dudman was dragged from his bed at dawn in front of his wife and children and locked up as part of the probe into alleged abuses by the tabloid press.

Commentator Paul O. was initially sympathetic, writing: *"I have absolute sympathy for this man. No ifs, no buts."*

But he then adds: *"However, on a wider context, he represents an industry which revels in people being arrested, drawing as much attention to it as possible and seemingly attempting to humiliate at every turn. In a sense, the newspapers have had a taste of what many others have had to endure, namely their name being dragged through the mud for a cheap headline."*

So if what *BuzzFeed* claimed was true, CEN and its editorial director and owner Michael Leidig have, according to the public, got what they deserved. And even if they were not guilty, just by virtue of the fact that they are apparently producing tabloid news about green puppies and pink kittens, they are fair game if they end up in the headlines.

This month was the 20th anniversary of CEN, in fact the anniversary coincided with the publication of the *BuzzFeed* report. On that date back in 1995, two decades ago, CEN had sold its first investigation as an exclusive to a quality UK Sunday newspaper about how far right extremists were using the Thule network, a neo-Nazi data-sharing group, to organise on the web.

But that, or indeed the many investigations since, seem to count for nothing in persuading those leaping to repeat the *BuzzFeed* allegations with absolutely no additional research, and to praise them for their exposé.

But what if one of those quality journalists, media watchers, bloggers or online experts had actually stopped in the act of writing, and had picked up the phone and asked to speak to CEN staff like Viktoria or Michael Leidig about the claims, or indeed CEN staff in Asia, or South America, or any of the other places where it has full time reporters, what would they have found out? Would it have changed anything applying a bit of journalism to what was known?

Let us just for a moment assume that what should have happened - a call to check the facts - had actually taken place. Might they have found, like so many journalists who have attempted to dig deeper on any news items, that when you scratch the surface there are layers upon layers of complexity underneath, and things that seemed simple at the start have a habit of getting very complicated very quickly.

As the quote from the article by Filip Struhárik from Slovakia goes: *"It is a sad fact that often the media do not check up their stories at all, because the stories are so crazy and funny that they really do not care if they are really true. BuzzFeed journalists at least are there to remind these journalists that stories are always about real people, if you spread their pictures, sometimes also their full names, in a fake story, then you convict them of acts of which they may never have been guilty."*

This then is the story that Filip might have had, if he had followed his own advice.

* * *

Chapter 2

Debunking the Debunking

“Business was good initially for CEN, with news picked up by the likes of the BBC, but later things were to go badly wrong. So to save his company, Leidig transformed the news agency, spreading its news gathering net from central Europe to the Asian and Latin American market. And although initially CEN was a reliable company, in its new incarnation it was significantly less so. Its pictures are rarely checked and often out of date by the time they are published. The same goes for the information provided with them which is, most of the time, exaggerated or made up.”

- French news portal 'atlantico'.

When a journalist or media group gets a complaint about a story, it would be fair to say that much of the time it is a complaint made by those who were featured in the article, or at the least those linked to them. They might feel that it was inaccurate, or biased – but the main point is that it is usually a complaint from those who the story was focused on.

But the *BuzzFeed* story listing complaints about CEN material was not from those who the agency had written about, none of whom had complained to CEN. Instead, it was a complaint about CEN reports by a direct competitor in the marketplace for the provision of viral news.

Under normal circumstances a complaint is investigated, and ruled valid or rejected. However, in any defence against the *BuzzFeed* allegations there is a problem that does not usually arise.

The reason is that all complaints to media organs are treated seriously, and need to be answered in depth, and that involves revealing where material was gathered and how. And because the *BuzzFeed* allegations are so extensive and cover so many stories in so many geographical areas, any reply will end up giving *BuzzFeed* vital market research in how CEN, a rival for viral news, operates. It will let them know whether CEN has staff on the ground or simply copies from the Internet, it will tell them what additional research is done on a story sourced from the internet, and give them an idea what sources are being used and from where.

Answering the *BuzzFeed* allegations is done in detail below, there is no alternative if CEN is to continue to operate as a news provider, but it comes at a cost of giving away an approach to news gathering that is

unique to the agency itself. Every news gathering unit, whether it is a single freelancer with good contacts in a small geographical area, or a large editorial team on a Fleet Street¹³ newspaper will have their own sources, their own contacts and their own way of doing things. At CEN where the agency has slowly over 20 years expanded to generate a daily news feed that at some stage has touched on most countries, the ways of operating and gathering news are all unique and change depending on the geographical region - and the strengths of the staff operating in the area. So every answer in defence of content given will end up helping a rival like *BuzzFeed* to copy what the agency does in gathering news, and to do it themselves.

It also means putting reporters at risk who are often on the ground in countries where officials don't even know they are there, and where under local laws they need to be registered. These countries do not appreciate negative stories regardless of whether it's tabloid or quality, and a look at just one of the stories¹⁴ by CEN that was highlighted in the *BuzzFeed* article illustrates exactly that. It was a carefully constructed public relations stunt by a group of Chinese businessmen, repeated in all mainstream Chinese TV and newspapers, and when officials found out what the men had done, they arrested them, and they did not just fine them, they pulled the plug on the multi-million pound business the PR stunt had been designed to boost. As far as the Chinese officials were concerned, the action had damaged the reputation of the country, and damaged the Chinese image abroad by lying to the local and foreign media.

And likewise in Russia, authorities have introduced laws so that even bloggers whose online presence draws more than 3,000 daily readers are required to register, disclose personal information and submit to the same regulations as mass media.

Anyone who doubts that Russia is not using this law to clamp down on a free press only needs to look at the number of prominent independent online news web sites that have been blocked or closed since they went live.

The Ukrainian conflict is a frequent subject for CEN, with stories from both sides of the fence from more than one contributor, but if a blogger with 3,000 readers is subject to censorship, then a correspondent for a global news feed would certainly need to be registered.

¹³ Fleet Street is a street in the City of London named after the River Fleet, London's largest underground river. It was the home of British national newspapers until the 1980s even though the last major British news office, Reuters, left in 2005. The term Fleet Street continues to be used as a metonym for the British national press.

¹⁴ <http://elitedaily.com/news/world/woman-goes-sex-tour-plans-sleep-men-every-city-visits-photos/815685/>

And that would definitely be the case if it was realised that the tabloid feed is only a part of the journalism that CEN offers.

The *BuzzFeed* report neglected to mention that their new head of investigations, Heidi Blake, had spent months working with CEN on the trafficking of children. It meant she was well aware of the agency's work on more quality journalism. *BuzzFeed* even referred to it in their questions filed to CEN, although by the time the report had been published it had been conveniently forgotten. *BuzzFeed* reporter Alan White, when he first contacted CEN, said that trafficking as well as other investigative stories were to be at the heart of the report. He said: "*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.*"

BuzzFeed also failed to mention in their look at CEN's 'laudable investigative journalism' that another major story was absent in their report, when it finally appeared for the public, and that Heidi Blake had been offered a new story from CEN on corruption involving Microsoft.

If that information were to be added to the equation, then however one views the *BuzzFeed* report, it can not be anything other than a mistake in priorities when *BuzzFeed* and its investigations team rejects what was already months of work on human trafficking on the one hand and corruption at a big multinational on the other, and instead starts a debate on whether teenagers were walking cabbages because they were lonely, or whether a pink kitten was still alive or not.

BuzzFeed may have not wanted either of the serious investigations for whatever reason, and it is their choice to select their editorial direction, but their story on CEN has also decimated the chance for CEN to return to stories like the human trafficking investigation or big business corruption.

It has forced the agency to drop those items. Furthermore, this not only concerns trafficking and political corruption, but also a probe into arms smuggling, an exclusive on a trade embargo being circumvented, a report on the funding for extremists, and abuse in children's homes that were all months of work and were due to be published this year.

They are all effectively dead projects, and instead CEN's time and resources need to be devoted to answering the *BuzzFeed* allegations - despite the unwelcome spotlight on agency reporters.

This chapter therefore, although perhaps not interesting for anyone other than a media professional, explains how each of those stories came to be chosen by CEN, and published.

Lonely Cabbages

One of the most repeated of the *BuzzFeed* allegations, among the many recyclers of its 'big story' on CEN, concerns the lonely cabbage walkers of China. On 2 May, 2014, CEN wrote a story talking about how people had been spotted walking cabbages on a lead, and saying it was a way to get out and meet people.

It was indeed one of the questions *BuzzFeed* 'big story' reporter Alan White asked about in an email of questions to CEN, and then later repeated to the agency's clients. He wrote: "*In May 2014, a story appeared on sites including Metro¹⁵ and The Huffington Post¹⁶ (since corrected) which claimed that Chinese teenagers were attempting to alleviate 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 lonely¹⁷; 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?"

When Alan White and his colleagues wrote their article about CEN the lonely cabbage walkers featured prominently as one of the alleged CEN fakes, and proud of not falling for it, the *BuzzFeed* team pointed out that the 'story was quickly debunked' by *BuzzFeed*¹⁸ (and others).

In fact *BuzzFeed* had been writing its 'quick' debunking story on 7 May, so that was five days later, where *BuzzFeed* readers were able to 'decide for themselves' what it was all about, although not going all the way as to say it was a hoax as they later claimed.

Instead, under the headline: "*Beijing Hipsters Walk Cabbages On Leashes,*" they had merely added the sub headline: "*Beijing performance art or Portlandia sketch? You decide.*"

¹⁵ <http://metro.co.uk/2014/05/02/chinese-teens-taking-cabbages-for-walks-to-get-over-loneliness-4716551/>

¹⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/02/cabbages-for-walks_n_5254589.html

¹⁷ <http://kotaku.com/no-chinas-depressed-youth-do-not-keep-cabbages-as-pets-1571750423>

¹⁸ <http://www.buzzfeed.com/kevintang/beijing-hipsters-walk-cabbages-on-leashes#fqBpgornL5>

It was not actually a debunking – not until *BuzzFeed* came to do its own report on CEN fakes and the cabbages were wheeled in again, this time reinvented as a prime example of CEN fakery, and with *BuzzFeed* adding sanctimoniously that although such CEN fakes may seem harmless, they were in fact like a cancer on the web. They wrote: *“Misleading stories built around a compelling image can have real-world consequences.”*

It overlooked, conveniently, that *BuzzFeed* was one of the publications to get traffic from the story globally without paying for it, starting on 7 May with their ‘you decide’ article. But was it really invented by CEN staff as they claim?

As far as the agency strategy is concerned, when looking at the web as a source of news, there is no point in simply sending back out the same story that has appeared somewhere else. If CEN were publishing its own news then yes, maybe it might bring clicks, but as an agency supplying original content it needs exclusives - otherwise clients might just as well take their news from the web themselves.

But that does not mean making it up. To take a small example of a story this week out of Asia. It was a small item that revealed that police were looking for a British man that had staged a burglary. It was a story not destined to go round the world. But ‘Brits abroad’ stories are standard fare to a UK news agency based overseas, and so it is worth an extra call. That call revealed that the British man had been on the run for three months. Usually a 6ft British man might stand out in a country of much smaller Asians, but not so according to police, because ‘all European look the same to us’. And that was the line, “Police chief says they can’t catch on-the-run Brit because all whites look the same.” It is an example of developing a story with journalism to create a story that would not make a paragraph without it. And it is what CEN does all the time.

In the Internet age where you can so easily search for material it is unlikely that anything published is not read at some stage by someone involved, so how realistic is it to believe that it’s possible to continually fake 25 percent of the story output and embellish another 50 percent for 20 years without anybody – apart from *BuzzFeed* - noticing?

In fact CEN stories on big UK media sites are often reported back in the country of origin, translated into the local language and in turn becoming news there once again simply because the story has now gone international. If they were fake, surely someone would notice?

But there is a big difference between going the extra mile to make a story work and making it up. *BuzzFeed* says CEN makes it up, CEN calls it good journalism, and as *BuzzFeed* would say: “You decide?”

The CEN story on the cabbage walkers started as follows: *“After Cabbage Patch Kids come, simply - the cabbages. Lonely teenagers in China who feel life is pointless and who struggle to find friends have*

taken to befriending the lowly vegetables as the perfect, undemanding companions. And the sight of them out 'walking' the cabbages in a bid to battle loneliness is the latest way of meeting someone new - as cabbage walkers use their weird pets as a way to start up conversations with each other."

When this story was first put forward in the morning news meeting by CEN's Beijing desk however, it was little more than a picture caption; there was no mention of the artist in what the CEN China office could find in local media, or the artistic project that gave birth to it. However, it was a story that had a good image and begged for research.

That was carried out by staff based in China, because sitting in London doing searches, even for someone that speaks Chinese, will not generate the same results. What is seen in China online is simply not the same as what is allowed to be seen outside.

CEN keeps a log that shows what links were used to get the basic story. The link¹⁹ that originated the cabbage story was one of the many that CEN staff saved as they researched the cabbage walking, and it clearly mentions the loneliness element from March 25, 2014. The CEN story about lonely cabbage walkers therefore actually appeared a full NINE days before CEN supposedly made it up.

For those that don't speak Chinese, the report refers to the reasons for and the therapy of cabbage walking. All this in an article written well before the CEN item. The Chinese report from March 25 says: *"According to people, modern life is full of pressure, and there is no one to talk to. People are getting quite lonely. A person walking a cabbage is actually walking himself. Such a person considers himself like a cabbage which is lonely, unnoticeable and is likely to be discarded any time."*

In the middle of the second paragraph, the same Chinese author, again on the March 25 report, adds: *"I looked up some information about the group of people walking cabbages - these young people walking cabbages in the cities in the daytime. Most of them are under great psychological stress and don't have many friends. They are lonely to a point where cabbages are their only companions. And the reason why choose cabbages is because these people feel that they're just as ordinary as cabbages, which require no special care and can be discarded in the trash on their way home."*

That was information available with digging of course in China on social media platforms, and the March 25 report and the subsequent debate proves categorically that CEN did NOT invent the angle that teens were walking the cabbages as a way of tackling loneliness. In fact, it was already one of the ideas out there when the agency started to investigate.

¹⁹ http://www.hmr.com.cn/test/hmr/html/2014-03/25/content_13_3.htm

Yes CEN were responsible for it going viral, yes, the CEN reporter was able to search the same sort of material that the original Chinese author refers to online about people walking cabbages and why, and to put it together in a process known as journalism, but it was not made up.

On the basis of that information, a psychiatrist was contacted. No, he had never heard of the trend, but after the details were explained and links to forums and stories were sent, he was happy to comment. Again, journalism provided not just the cabbage walkers later quoted, but also the quotes from an expert.

But what about the *BuzzFeed* allegation that the artist who came up with the idea of 'cabbage walking', Han Bing, had apparently rejected that the project was about loneliness? Han Bing was, after all, clearly the man behind the cabbage walking at the Beijing music festival. He used to walk cabbages a decade ago, but not until the music festival was the 'art expression' he created copied by so many when the CEN story went round the world.

He did not however reject that it was anything to do with loneliness as *BuzzFeed* claimed. What he actually said was that, as with all art works, his cabbage walking was open to interpretation. Yes, he had been doing it for years – although it was only after the music festival that it started to go viral when CEN reported one interpretation that was already out there - and put it on the global map.

And did the artist really say that the cabbage walking was NOT about loneliness? The answer is no, he did not.

Interviewed in the *New York Times*²⁰ he said: "It's not me who should interpret the meaning of cabbage walking. I'm playing a game. I'm the player in this game, but I cannot control the game anymore. It's your job to interpret the meaning of it."

And he added: "I have been walking cabbages for about 10 years. Many people ask me why, but I don't usually answer. At the beginning they treated me like a psychopath. Now the young people accept it. Sometimes they even choose to walk cabbages themselves. They upload the cabbage walking pictures online and show them to me."

Interviewed on *China Real Time*²¹ on May 7 after the CEN story was published Han Bing was asked what his original intention was when he photographed himself with the cabbage back in 2000.

He said: "Originally, I intended for walking the cabbage to have no meaning. I was only trying to encourage freedom, and to get people to question their daily activities. There's a knot in everyone's head, and I want to untie that knot. A lot of people come up to me asking what I'm

²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUDYmkWRipg>

²¹ <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/05/07/performing-with-produce-the-man-behind-chinas-cabbage-walkers/>

trying to accomplish, but when I'm walking my cabbage, I don't want to talk. Just doing what I'm doing is enough. I've walked other objects too, including turnips and bricks. It doesn't matter what I'm walking. The point is to inspire people to think about that action. I want them to think about how daily routines are formed. For example, people carry bags to work and through doing so every day, a routine is formed."

Asked what he thought about the fact that youths at a concert had interpreted the cabbage walking as a way to dispel loneliness he said: "Some of their comments were different than my original thinking, but I'm not too concerned about that. Each person can have their own interpretation."

And he said that the lack of free thinking was the biggest problem in Chinese society today, adding: "More young people can understand cabbage-walking today than when I first started, although there's still not enough independent thought."

For agency boss Michael Leidig it was simply a typical CEN story where journalism was used to make the story work. He said: "The cabbages story is a great illustration of one of the things we are fascinated with here and for which tabloid journalism is perfect, the 'Zeitgeist' type of news, which is capturing the spirit of the age. Stories like this are fantastic because they open up the Internet for discussion on so many angles, and indeed there were later dozens of copycat stories with more cabbages being walked, as well as other objects that were bizarrely taken around town on a leash. It was one of the hot subjects of the summer and it was one that we correctly identified and put on the map for the world to see."

"When our agency looked at the story notes after the allegations it was a fake we found we had a copy there in black and white, it was already there in Chinese for anyone else to see with the initiative to develop the story. And even the artist agreed that the story was correct."

Although a handful of Western media referred to quotes from an article or interview with the artist that they said implied the story was not true, in China there was no similar debate because the story was regarded as correct. It was one of the number-one discussions, being republished in hundreds of news websites and repeated on TV and radio reports. There were even surveys carried out on the street asking people what they felt about cabbage walking as a cure for loneliness. Not a single person mentioned it being fake.

In follow-up stories female models were used to walk crabs outside a seafood restaurant, in Nanning city it was tomatoes in a similar stunt²² - all inspired by the cabbage walkers. One of the girls asked why they

²² www.gx.xinhuanet.com/dtzn/nanning/2015-04/22/c_1115054903.html

were walking tomatoes, and replied it was to “summon the working class, and white collar workers, to forget their social role and walk tomatoes to relieve stress.”

If it was a fake, one wonders why the people in China did not know anything about it, or indeed why cabbage walking was then one of the most popular subjects of that summer on local social media.

So from moving from a situation where the story was made up by CEN, we come to a point where the artist had deliberately given no meaning to allow people to interpret it themselves, and had even mentioned loneliness, we then find that Chinese media had reported this interpretation, and that CEN had reported this. It is clear that CEN was pivotal in the role of making a small local debate become global, but that does not mean that it was made up, or that the research was invented.

The notes attached to the story in the CEN database show that all the checks one would expect were carried out. Apart from *BuzzFeed*, CEN never had a complaint from anybody about the story being untrue, despite the fact that it was debated on some western online sites.

And as a footnote, there has been a lot of debate lately about the subject of plagiarism on the internet, websites have been accused of stealing from other websites, but in reality attribution is almost impossible because it comes down to the question of where did the story really break first? As an example, one only needs to look at all the stories on *BuzzFeed* that originated with CEN who had sold them to other media, from where they were copied by *BuzzFeed*. It would also be valid to take that a stage further, and ask where CEN got them.

There were thousands of follow up stories to the cabbage report, *BuzzFeed* was among the news sites that attracted readers by getting in on the debate, but unlike the papers it criticised for publishing what was clearly one of the hot topics of the year, they paid nothing towards it.

Pink Kittens

When *BuzzFeed* launched its attack on CEN they spoke a lot about the ‘innocent’ victims of the agency’s lies. As mentioned above they also wrote: “*Misleading stories built around a compelling image can have real-world consequences.*” The one case they found to illustrate this point was the story of a woman named Elena Lenina from Russia, who dyed her kitten pink – allegedly causing the animal’s death from blood poisoning.

For those who have not heard of her Elena Lenina, she is a colourful character, often appearing in Russian news as a singer, model, actress and author who thrives on controversy. She has posed nude for magazines, refuses to wear a seatbelt because her breasts were too

big, and is famous for her many hairstyles.²³ She even recently turned up at Cannes with what was voted the most impressive hairdo,²⁴ but it is not the first time that she has sought to grab the headlines. In her bid to push the fashion boundaries, she has also previously turned up with a poisonous spider in a glass ball woven into hair.²⁵ She also once had a man as a pet slave kept on a leash,²⁶ and after that her next fashion statement was to have a pink kitten to match her pink outfit. And it was this story that put her on the international stage in February this year when CEN reported that she had dyed the kitten pink as a fashion accessory, and that as a result it had died of toxic shock.

Alan White summed up the *BuzzFeed* justification that the pink kitten had real world consequences in his email enquiry, saying: *"It was covered by outlets such as The Daily Mail²⁷ and Metro²⁸. . . 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?"*

He adds: *"As per my previous email, I'd like to reiterate how firmly I believe it would be in your interest 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."*

And in the final article they later wrote Alan and his *BuzzFeed* colleagues had added: *"As with the Sandoval case, this appears to be a situation where CEN sold a false (and potentially defamatory) story about a real person with little regard for the consequences that person would face when the story went viral. Nor has there been any apparent attempt to correct the story since it was proved to be false."*

On the face of it, this is another damning indictment of the agency and its reckless treatment of the people it puts under the spotlight. But again, is it true?

Before answering, it's important to understand that agencies act as news gatherers for the clients they serve. There is nothing unusual about an agency story being republished by a media client with little additional checking because the agency and the client have a

²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWeDm3VuW9E>

²⁴ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-3083765/Elena-Lenina-sports-outlandish-rocks-oversized-mounds-hair-Irrational-Man-premiere-Cannes.html>

²⁵ <http://static.iton.tv/images/iton/0937-1.jpg>

²⁶ <http://static.iton.tv/images/iton/0937-2.jpg>

²⁷ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2973430/Elena-Lenina-paints-cat-pink-party-cat-later-DEAD-toxic-blood-poisoning.html>

²⁸ <http://metro.co.uk/2015/03/01/cat-dies-after-being-dyed-by-pink-obsessed-owner-5084356/>

relationship where the agency guarantees the quality of the work. If that wasn't the case, the agency would have no business. Reputation, as already mentioned, is everything. There are examples of agencies who have ignored this responsibility and have had embarrassing high-profile errors that resulted in their copy simply not being used. As a result, when an agency gets a request for a correction, they treat it very seriously indeed.

The main problem is that to issue a correction is to admit a mistake was made, and that makes clients nervous. To illustrate the point with an example, one of the ways CEN carries out investigations is by publishing books, sometimes selling them to publishing houses and sometimes self-publishing. One of those projects was a book about the kidnapped Austrian girl Natasha Kampusch. It was sold to the mainstream publishing house Hodder and it was predicted to be a million seller. It was co-written by Michael Leidig from CEN and the freelance journalist Allan Hall. The latter had arranged for a tour around Europe to promote it. More than two dozen exclusive press interviews had been arranged, but all had to be cancelled when news agency *Associated Press* ran a story²⁹ to say that the book was based on made up interviews. A book that on the first day had climbed into the top hundred quickly vanished from sight on the Amazon ranks.

Leidig said: "We published our story in 2006, and *'The Girl in the Cellar'* immediately hit the Amazon Top 40 list, before a libellous press release was sent out by Rupert Leutgeb, PR advisor to the girl's father, and was picked up by the international news agency the *Associated Press*.

"The release, alleging that the book contained fake interviews with Natascha's father was then made available to AP's media subscribers across the world. It ended up being published in media as far afield as the *International Herald Tribune* in the US through to *Pravda* in Russia, on news databases like *LexisNexis* and Germany's most prominent news magazine *Stern*. I called them and asked for a correction but they refused."

In order to take legal action against *Associated Press* and force a rare correction to its content, Leidig had to take the man that issued the press release to court.

Leidig said: "Neither I or my publisher or my news agency ever had a single call to check the story. They (AP) dropped it in the pond and the ripple went out.

"The man who made the allegations was also an author, was planning his own book and simply wanted to ruin the chances that the one CEN

²⁹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/expatnews/7980982/Court-victory-for-British-journalist-accused-of-forging-interviews.html>

had written would be a success. Unfortunately, that is exactly what he did."

Accepting the evidence of the taped interviews, the Austrian High Court ruled in favour of Leidig after a three-year legal battle and ordered the PR advisor to fund the cost of organising retractions in all the publications that carried the untrue allegations. Leutgeb then declared himself bankrupt.

AP however avoided the charge of libel because the case needed to be brought within a year of the article's publication, which elapsed while Leidig was trying to clear his name in the Austrian court. According to Leidig, many of the original repeats of the *Associated Press* story are still live and online.

The experience underscored for CEN first-hand the importance of getting the story right, and not publishing something without checking. Even if only tackled in terms of self-preservation, no agency that makes up stories about people poisoning kittens is going to last very long.

So without knowing anything about the kitten story, does it really seem as if Central European News would open up clients who are among the biggest online publishers in the world to a libel action with a story that was clearly not true and about a Russian celebrity with the money to take the matter to court? The answer to anyone in the business is no. It just is not worth it, considering what it might cost.

So when the story was sent, it was clearly one that was not made up by the agency and was believed to be true according to all the checks that were made, and was also widely reported as true in local Russian media^{30 31 32 33 34 35}.

In fact there were over 50 major news providers in Russia with news about the dead pink kitten – so not just something that CEN had invented.

However, the fact it was already being widely reported in local media was not the only check. As usual and in particular because it was a potentially libellous story, calls were made to animal rights organisations and some local media contacts which confirmed it was correct, and an attempt was made to contact the woman involved.

³⁰ <http://super.ru/news/113355> – published prior to the CEN story
<http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2384476> – this is web of Russian state TV channel and news program.

³¹ <http://www.mk.ru/social/2015/02/26/lene-leninoy-vmenyayut-v-vinu-smert-pokrashennogo-v-rozovyy-cvet-kotenka.html>

³² <http://www.wday.ru/stil-zhizny/novosty/perekrashennyiy-v-rozovyy-tsvet-kotenok-leninoy-umer/>

³³ <http://rusnovosti.ru/posts/365288>

³⁴ <http://www.ruscour.ru/themes/0/00/67/6745.shtml>

³⁵ <http://myinforms.com/ru/a/6927609-kotenok-pisatelnicy-leny-leninoy-pokrashennyj-v-rozovyyj-umer-ot-intoksikacii/>

The result on May 27 was the CEN story "Pretty in Pink Kitten Dies from Toxic Shock".

The story reproduced here in full was as follows:

"Russian author Lena Lenina is under fire from animal rights activists after having her cat dyed pink shortly before it died of toxic poisoning.

"According to local media, the pink colour had poisoned the young cat after she had made it the main attraction at a pretty in pink party last September in which all of the guests had to wear pink.

"Eyewitnesses told local media that the animal, which at that stage in September was a young kitten, had been hysterical the whole evening and was constantly trying to get out of her hands.

"She was massively criticised for the stunt but rejected the criticism, saying that she had been told by her vet that it was actually beneficial. She said: 'The pink colour was especially chosen for its healing properties and also strengthens the cat's hair. My vet told me it was a beneficial addition to him'.

"But as soon as the media fuss died down she quickly lost interest in the kitten, which remained pink and continued to lick at its pink fur, apparently causing it to ingest some colour from which animal-rights activists say it later died.

"The vet that examined the cat when it was taken ill and where it later died already reported that the cat had died from being poisoned by a toxic substance. Among those that criticised her was artist Yuri Kuklachev who described the stunt as pointless and unnecessarily cruel.

"And there is now an online petition demanding the local governor police to investigate the right animal cruelty charges. The petition gathered several thousand signatures but at the moment there has not been an official response from the local government."

For Elena Lenina, who wove live spiders into her hair and walked naked men on a leash, the story was starting to get out of control, there was growing pressure demanding not only an investigation, but calls for her to go to jail. She admitted that she was horrified after realising that 30,000 people had signed the petition demanding just that, and was forced into a response, threatening to sue the organisers of the petition and claiming the allegations were unfounded. But was that just PR?

She claims that she tracked down the cat which she had given away after using it as a fashion accessory, and had then posted the pictures on Twitter³⁶ showing it was alive and well.

³⁶ <https://twitter.com/ElenaLenina/status/572014421276532736/photo/1>

Her spokesman said: "We hope that everybody who published the original false allegation is going to be happy now to publish my clients claim that it is in fact alive and well and pretty healthy in pink."

Because CEN have staff on the ground, the agency quickly picked up the star's denials, and an alert was flagged with the CEN desk of a potential problem.

So what happened? In their questioning about the pink kitten story *BuzzFeed's* Alan White wrote: "Did CEN attempt to do anything to restore the damage to Lenina's reputation?"

The problem with the question is that it assumes, as a given, that the story was wrong, and implies that perhaps CEN might have not tried to correct its story in order to hide the fact. But that is not how agencies work. In fact, it is quite the opposite. If a story that was sent to a media group by a freelancer or agency is already being widely reported in other media, nothing was made up or embellished on that original content, and checks were made, there is absolutely no reason for it to be kept secret.

And in this case it is not even a correction, all that is happening is that the woman who is being accused is saying that the cat is alive, which makes it a follow up. That means that it is classified as a second story that can be sold on, and adds a new twist to the story already dominating social media feeds.

This was therefore the story that CEN sent out on 4 March that was headlined: "Pretty In Pink Kitten Is Still Alive Claims Star."

It then went on:

"Russian author Lena Lenina has accused animal-rights activists of organising against her by claiming that the pink cat they said she had poisoned is actually alive and well.

"The activists said that the cat that Lena had died pink as a fashion accessory and displayed during a party in September last year had later died of toxic shock from licking the pink dye on its fur.

"Eyewitnesses told local media that the animal, which at that stage in September was a young kitten, had been hysterical the whole evening and was constantly trying to get out of her hands.

"At the time she had also rejected criticism of her decision to die it pink, saying she had been told by her vet that it was actually beneficial. She said: 'The pink colour was especially chosen for its healing properties and also strengthens the cat's hair. My vet told me it was a beneficial addition for him'.

"But the animal activists said that as soon as the media fuss died down she quickly lost interest in the kitten, which remained pink. According to the activists, it had continued to lick at its pink fur, apparently causing it to ingest some colour chemicals that led to its

death. Among those that criticised her was artist Yuri Kuklachev who described the stunt as pointless and unnecessarily cruel.

“And there was even an online petition demanding the local governor of police investigate the animal cruelty charges. The petition gathered several thousand signatures but there has not been an official response from the local government.

“But now Lena has posted pictures online showing a white cat, called Nana, with some remnants of pink hair dye on its back which she claims is the grown-up kitten.

“She said that she was horrified when she realised that 30,000 people had signed a petition demanding that she goes to jail and is threatening to sue the organisers claiming the allegations were unfounded.

“Her spokesman said: ‘We hope that everybody who published the original false allegation is going to be happy now to publish my clients claim that it is in fact alive and well and pretty healthy in pink’.

This update, offering the other side to the story, was sent out even though at no stage did either CEN or any of its clients receive a complaint from Elena Lenina asking for a correction or clarification, and in that sense the sending out of the follow-up story, despite the *BuzzFeed* assertion, was, if anything, overcautious. It was simply decided that as she was now saying something, this should be reported, and it was passed on accordingly to notify the clients of the agency.

BuzzFeed may have implied that the agency did nothing to ‘restore’ the woman’s reputation, but in fact the agency had gone out of its way to publish her side of the story, even though there was a lack of concrete evidence that she had anything to complain about. *BuzzFeed*, in its eagerness to look for negative news about CEN, might have wanted to believe that the story was made up, and wanted to take what she said on face value, but in what was provided from Elena Lenina, there was actually no evidence to back up her claims that the kitten had survived.

She had posted pictures online showing off what she said was the cat – and said she planned to sue the media that said it had died. But she never took any legal action or contacted the media in question.

And in the court of public opinion in her native Russia, it was clear that unlike *BuzzFeed*, many people in her homeland disputed the fact that the pictures she showed were of the cat in question.

Here are just a few of the reactions:

Emanuela Marmioli @ManuMarmi March 1 @ElenaLenina it's not the same cat

angelae10 @angelatakoda Mar 3 @ElenaLenina your cat died a horrific dead

makeuprainbow @Makeuprainbow Mar 3 @ElenaLenina Isn't the same cat!!!Are you f...king kidding us?? You are a woman of the worst kind!!!

Terezitah @TerezitahS2 Mar 3 @ElenaLenina Obviously it's not the same cat. I really hope you die by ingesting cyanide, something like the death of the cat you killed. Bitch

The alleged cruelty to the cat therefore aroused heated passion, and debate, and it's exactly what a good tabloid story is designed to do. Can animals be fashion accessories? How far can you go in treating them like that? What rights does an owner have over their pet and where are the boundaries?

As Michael Leidig said: "We don't choose the topics that go viral, they choose themselves. This was already setting the agenda in Russia, so we did not make it up, all we did was put it on the international stage."

With regards to the hate campaign against Elena, it was already there and very present in her home country, where the real impact was being felt. The international coverage played little to no role in that, but more importantly, if she really had a complaint, she could have at least registered it by calling CEN or its clients.

When CEN sent out an update printing her side of the story, media clients called and asked if the first story was wrong. The CEN reply was that Elena said it was, but that there was no proof other than what she was saying and the pictures that she claimed to be of the same cat.

The end decision from those conversations was that unless she called to complain, it was not worth a follow up. She never called, and therefore her side of the story was in most cases never published.

Some media did take the logical step, opening it up to debate as to whether the kitten was still alive and not, like *BuzzFeed*, simply swallowing without question what they were spoon-fed by the kitten's former owner.

One of those that benefitted from using it as a debate was the US-based *examiner.com* that correctly realised it was also a good idea to put the question out to the public.

Under the headline: *“Actress Lena Lenina says dyed pink cat is alive and well? You decide...”*³⁷ the article then went on to outline the arguments for and against. It said:

“Lena has demanded an apology from the Daily Mail and the Metro, and has threatened to sue, claiming defamation of character.

“How do we even know this is the same cat? The only way we could know this for sure would be through a DNA test, which isn't likely to happen because the dead cat would be long gone, and it would be fruitless to do a test on a cat Lena 'says' is the same cat.

“Another thing we have to look at is the size of the cat. The cat in the newly released photos is much larger. A kitten from last year may have grown some, but would it have grown that much?

“It would be easy for Lena to have 'faked' a new cat in the pink. The cat in the photo above could have been dyed, then most of the dye washed off. Take a good look at the above photo. Why is only the bottom half of the cat pink?

“This article by Nutrimaxorganic on hair dyes states the following: 'Para-phenylenediamine': Japan Poison Information Center notes that almost all hair colour contains para-phenylenediamine, lethal dose of this is 10g, it is easily absorbed from skin and lung. This chemical is harmful if swallowed, inhaled, or absorbed through the skin. This is reason why the user should wear gloves and goggles to protect themselves. However, the scalp is also skin, therefore, the chemical still get absorbed into the interstitial fluid and bloodstream'.

“So even if this poor kitten hadn't licked off the dye, the dye could still have proved fatal when absorbed through the skin.

“As for Lena, she says no contact was ever made by news media, and it turns out the pink cat scandal had already blown over in Russia after Lena went on local TV to prove she didn't kill her cat.

“A petition online started by animal rights activist to press animal cruelty charges against Lena gathered more than 30,000 signatures. Now it appears there isn't a dead cat for any charges to be filed against Lena.

“News reporters can apologize for the story, but it's doubtful any would find much sympathy for Lena, who thanks to the pink cat story, has reached worldwide fame.

“We also can't apologize for the stupidity of wanting to dye (what's supposed to be a beloved pet) pink to match an outfit to attend a social gathering.”

³⁷ <http://www.examiner.com/article/actress-lena-lenina-says-dyed-pink-cat-is-alive-and-well-you-decide>

The debate was mirrored in Russian media and there remained a lot of doubt, with most claiming it was a cover up from the actress.

So in summary CEN did not make the story up, it was widely out already in Russian media. As soon as there was doubt, CEN put out a follow up response to the story with the claims made by the actress, and with no complaint from Elena to either the agency or any of its customers – it seemed that there was very little need to argue either way that the animal was indeed still alive.

Elena clearly did not see the need to take it further, and why would she need to? As the examiner wrote she was a woman *'who thanks to the pink cat story, has reached worldwide fame'*. So one wonders, if that is the case, why have *BuzzFeed* been so keen to champion her cause?

Sex Tape Teacher

Another of the *BuzzFeed* claims, similarly lacking in any evidence that CEN had got it wrong or made it up, was about a sex tape with a teacher and a pupil.

Under the headline: *"Schoolboys Porn Tape Lands Teacher In Trouble"*, the story started off: *"A female Argentinian teacher who had sex with a 16-year-old pupil is facing the sack after the student secretly took a video of himself after getting her to turn round."*

In the video, the 16-year-old boy who was wearing a soccer shirt is seen smiling enthusiastically and giving the camera the thumbs up symbol before panning around to show he is having sex with the curvaceous Lucita Sandoval, 26.

Later on it seems as if the teacher realises the boy has been filming her but she is too carried away to do anything about it and afterwards he had told her he had deleted it. But that was not true and instead he had shown it to pals."

CEN never received a complaint about the story from a media client or from those that were involved in the story, and the first indication that there was even a problem was when Alan White wrote a question to CEN and its clients. He said: *"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?

Again, however, the problem with the *BuzzFeed* question here from Mr White, that on the face of it seems damning, is that once again there is still nothing that they have in their hands to indicate that the original story was a fake, other of course than more online research done by someone else. In their desire to rubbish the CEN story, they enthusiastically latched onto another online report saying it was a fake, but in fact neither they nor the other reporters or indeed anyone else has been able to prove it.

This story was published in a wide range of publications throughout the Hispanic speaking world. If it was such an obvious fake, then why are these reports still online?^{38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49}

With regards to the video being 'debunked' from local newspaper *Nuevo Diario* in Argentina, the only reason why the newspaper claims the story was a fake is because a reader said a video with a similar

³⁸ Argentina: <http://www.diarioveloz.com/notas/134390-las-fotos-hot-lucita-sandoval-la-profesora-que-se-filmo-teniendo-sexo-un-alumno>

³⁹ Argentina: <http://ar.noticias.com/actualidad/video-de-una-maestra-que-tuvo-relaciones-con-5-alumnos.html>

⁴⁰ Argentina:

http://www.novargentina.com/nota.asp?n=2014_11_10&id=39674&id_tiponota=10

⁴¹ Argentina: <http://www.diariouno.com.ar/policiales/Una-profesora-de-Lengua-se-grabo-teniendo-sexo-con-un-alumno-de-Santiago-del-Estero-20141030-0139.html>

⁴² Mexico: <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/global/2014/10/29/989578>

⁴³ Mexico: <http://envivohq.com.mx/2014/10/31/la-maestra-que-tuvo-sexo-con-alumno-de-16-anos/>

⁴⁴ Mexico: <https://eldia.com.mx/2014/11/04/lucita-sandoval-llega-facebook.html>

⁴⁵ Honduras: <http://www.elheraldo.hn/mundo/773416-217/maestra-tuvo-sexo-con-su-alumno-y-grab%C3%B3-un-video>

⁴⁶ Mexico: <https://eldia.com.mx/2014/11/04/lucita-sandoval-llega-facebook.html>

⁴⁷ Peru: <http://peru.com/actualidad/internacionales/lucita-sandoval-verdad-maestra-grabada-su-alumno-noticia-340817>

⁴⁸ Argentina: <http://ar.noticias.com/actualidad/video-de-una-maestra-que-tuvo-relaciones-con-5-alumnos.html>

⁴⁹ Peru: <http://peru.com/actualidad/internacionales/lucita-sandoval-verdad-maestra-grabada-su-alumno-noticia-340817>

woman but a different name was found on a porn website and this video had been uploaded months earlier.⁵⁰ The *Nuevo Diario*⁵¹ reader was also Facebook friends with a woman who they said appears to be the star of the video, and alerted the paper to her profile.

No names were provided, and the fact that this different person 'appears' to be the same person does not mean that she is the same person.

As the above examples show, the woman was and still is named in the local press as Lucita Sandoval and the geography that is given by CEN is also the same that is provided by the local media when they broke the story, and it remains the same in the story that is still online.

It is true that some local papers speculated that it might be fake – but ironically with no more weight to their arguments than from those who were still claiming that it was true. In fact what is abundantly clear is that this is not only something that has not been proven to be false, but more importantly, most of these speculations including that on *BuzzFeed*⁵² came about after CEN published its story.

For example, the allegation of the story being untrue was made on the 23rd October⁵³ and not on the 22nd as *BuzzFeed* claimed in an email addressed to CEN. The reality is that nobody has spoken to the girl named, or the girl in the photographs if it is the same person, or indeed any other person that has anything to do with the story to prove it is a hoax.

Again, as with the other *BuzzFeed* allegations there had been no complaint from those the story was about to either CEN or its clients, and in this case the first time the agency even heard it was an alleged hoax, was when the *BuzzFeed* questions arrived. Yet given that it was and still is so widely reported in Spanish language media, is there any reason to doubt it? CEN gave the woman the chance to reply by tracking her on social media. Although there were many profiles, many of them probably fake, but if even one were to be real, she had the chance to reply.

As anyone in the business will tell you, sending a picture like that out worldwide and getting the wrong woman would very likely mean that she or someone that knows her would recognise her.

⁵⁰ <http://www.nuevodiarioweb.com.ar/nota/locales/562190/confirmado-ni-maestra-capital-ni-santiago-na-video-hot-fue-bajado-portal-pornografico.html>

⁵¹ El Nuevo Diario is a Nicaraguan newspaper, with offices in the capital Managua.

⁵² <http://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanhateshis/the-lucita-sandoval-sex-tape#.fqpBxq9yM>

⁵³ <http://www.nuevodiarioweb.com.ar/nota/locales/562190/confirmado-ni-maestra-capital-ni-santiago-na-video-hot-fue-bajado-portal-pornografico.html>

Yet she has not tried to contact anyone who published the material – a teacher accused of such an act with a reputation to save would sue and demand corrections if the *BuzzFeed* version of the story was correct. So in essence the CEN story was a faithful report of the events that were originally all over Spanish media.

Yes, some of those reports were taken down but again not necessarily because of the fact that they might be fake, as *BuzzFeed* speculates, but because of their pornographic content. Indeed, many others are still online. A complaint from anyone involved in the story was never made to CEN, apart from *BuzzFeed*, and the debate among local media throwing claims at each other amounts to nothing more than speculation with neither side having any hard evidence.

Sex Holidays

The case of the Chinese backpacker looking for boyfriends to fund her trip around the country in exchange for the pleasure of her company and a night of passion was another story that CEN wrote which was targeted by *BuzzFeed*.

Under the headline “*Bed And Bawd*” the story went as follows:

“A 19-year-old girl who is funding an epic trip across China by offering to bed a different man in every city she stops in has created a sensation on the country’s social networking website Weibo.

“The girl - named by some Weibo users as Ju Peng from the eastern city of Shanghai - had posted an online ad looking for ‘temporary boyfriends’ who must be ‘good looking, under 30, taller than 1.75 metres and, of course, rich’.

“Ju says: ‘They will fund my transport to their city and all my expenses while I am there and they need to be generous.’

“She adds: ‘In return, they get a whole night with me, my undivided attention, and a chance to show themselves off in the company of a truly beautiful girl.’

“Ju says she has already travelled all over eastern China this way and wants to see the rest of the country but does not have enough money to fund it herself.

“She said: ‘It is sort of like hitch-hiking. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.’

“But critics say the deal is nothing but prostitution and have called for the ad to be taken down.

“One Weibo user Hsin Tao said: ‘If she was taking cash we’d all know what to call her. This is a disgusting way to carry on.’”

In Alan’s email of allegations he detailed *BuzzFeed*’s objections to the story, saying: “*On 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?

To start off, this story as touched on briefly at the start of this chapter had appeared in pretty much every Chinese newspaper. So again it was not a story that CEN made up.

CEN was apparently one of the first to report the original story in English and made it go viral. Once it was clear that that it was a PR stunt, it would be incorrect to say that CEN did not report the update. In fact when CEN discovered it had been a very well-orchestrated con that had also fooled most mainstream Chinese media, CEN sent out not just one but two updates.

However, this should not be a surprise to *BuzzFeed*, who, having been a CEN customer at the time, were sent the original and later both updates. And as they admitted as well, they had seen that it was published on a web site that CEN manages, the *Austrian Times*.

So where did the story and pictures come from and what checks were carried out?

For the original story, CEN staff looked at many different Chinese media and then went to the Youjia website, which is a clearly professional dating site, with properly checked and genuine dating offers. The picture of the woman as used in Chinese media was there and it was obtained by CEN's Chinese organisation with permission from Youjia. They were happy for the images to be reused and confirmed that the story was true.

Michael Leidig said: "The fact that the firm made it up in order to attract publicity is nothing that CEN as a foreign agency could have known about, especially if local media did not uncover the scam. The managers said it was true, and it was reproduced in good faith as such.

"The next day when the truth was found out, as mentioned above, CEN sent out an update that was also reproduced in our in-house media which revealed it was a PR stunt, and also told its clients as much by sending out an updated story."

Likewise, CEN also informed clients later still, in a second follow up, that the Chinese government had banned the entire company.

That story is reproduced here:

“Chinese leaders have moved to ban a company that tried to promote its app for singles with sex stories that damaged China’s reputation.

“Chinese officials have reportedly been infuriated about some of the stories that have been appearing and organised an investigation to find out the source of the material.

“There were reportedly particularly angry about the viral story widely spread on Chinese social media sites and also reported extensively in Chinese media and international media entitled ‘body for travelling’.

“The media reports said that Ju Peng, described as a 19-year-old woman from the eastern city of Shanghai, was funding an epic trip across China by offering to bed a different man in every city she stops in.

“The girl had allegedly posted an advert on her account on China’s social media site Weibo looking for ‘temporary boyfriends’ who must be ‘good looking, under 30, taller than 1.75 metres and, of course, rich’.

“But the girl’s Weibo profile was actually fake and had been created by app developer Shanghai Zhangyi Network Technology Company to promote their Youjia app about sex and relationships.

“On her account they also posted a message to potential boyfriends: ‘They will fund my transport to their city and all my expenses while I am there and they need to be generous. In return, they get a whole night with me, my undivided attention, and a chance to show themselves off in the company of a truly beautiful girl.’

“The advert and the girl’s profile and pictures generated huge traffic on social media both in China and abroad, with heated arguments about whether what the girl was doing was immoral or not.

“But Chinese officials ordered police to track down the girl and when it became clear that the account was a fake, to find out those behind it.

“They then revealed that it had been created by the Shanghai-based app company to promote its Youjia app, which was already enormously popular with registered users somewhere in the 30 million mark. But the app has now been shut down by the State Internet Information Office who banned its sale nationwide after it was found to be behind the publicity stunt.

“The company was also found to be behind another viral romantic love story, intriguingly titled ‘Sex in an Excavator’ where a 21-year-old man and a 19-year-old woman - who also met through the app - decided to have sex while waiting to be rescued from an earthquake in Shanghai’s Putuo District.

“Both stories spread extensively over the internet and were carried by newspapers across China.

"The information office said in a statement: 'The company crossed the line for promotion. (The stories) contained fake and unethical content,' it added.

"The firm admitted to failings in the management of its marketing and promotion activities, and promised to resolve the matter with the regulators in the hope of being allowed to restart operations.

"The Youjia app has 30 million users, most of them aged 15 to 25-years-old. The app offers tips on sex and relationships, including a guide for men on how to seduce young women 'in three steps'."

The fact that the update was reproduced on CEN's own online media and was republished by clients like the Telegraph shows that CEN passed on an update, and that it was used.

The bottom line is that if CEN thought the story was fake as *BuzzFeed* suggests it would, NEVER have used it as the next question would be "then who is the girl?" And then the next question would be who is going to pay her compensation for the slur to her reputation."

The bottom line is that it was not a story CEN made up, it was a developing story where there was a claim, then the news it was a PR stunt, and then the news those who made the claim had been punished.

Sashimi Tapeworm

On 24 September CEN published a story that quickly went viral entitled: "Sashimi Fan Infected With Parasites."

It started off: *"A Chinese man who went to the doctors complaining of a stomach ache and itchy skin found that his entire body had been infected with tapeworm parasites after eating too much sashimi.*

"According to doctors at the Guangzhou No. 8 People's Hospital in eastern China's Guangdong province, it is likely that some of the uncooked Japanese delicacy of raw meat or fish favoured by the patient had been contaminated with tapeworms' eggs.

"As these x-rays show, tiny but visible parasites had infected most of his upper body, irritating his skin and other organs."

Unlike their earlier complaint, *BuzzFeed* seems to accept that the story is correct, but says that the pictures are fake. But as with the earlier complaints a look at the facts shows this is based on assumptions that have no relationship to any hard facts and certainly no basis in medical knowledge.

Alan White was actually the author of a *BuzzFeed* version of the Sashimi tapeworm story using CEN material that was published on *BuzzFeed* on 25 September, and later updated by him to say it seems it was a fake.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ <http://www.buzzfeed.com/alanwhite/a-man-in-china-apparently-ended-up-riddled-with-tapeworm-par#.sgoqm5Wv7>

CEN found the story on numerous sites in China before writing an English version.^{55 56 57} All these still cite Sashimi as the cause and use the same pictures as CEN. The agency also looked at broadcast media reports that *BuzzFeed* would find difficult to process using Google Translate.

In one report⁵⁸ Doctor Deng Xinghai, a neurosurgeon at the Guangdong 999 Brain Hospital⁵⁹ speaks in mandarin Chinese about the problem (1:30). There is also the patient who speaks from a hospital bed (2:00). He said: "I didn't think there was a problem with eating sashimi, so I ate more and more, and now I regret it because I have this infection." At about the 3:25 mark of the same news report Doctor Deng points out the x-rays on his wall and says that the white spots are parasites.

And finally, if further confirmation was needed that both the pictures and the words were correct, this report⁶⁰ has an explanation from Doctor Huang Huicong of Wenzhou Medical University⁶¹ who says that the x-rays are real, and that the spots are real. The spots he says are cysts that form after the tapeworms die and calcify in the human body. The worms cannot be seen by x-ray when alive because they are of the same density as human flesh.

Doctor Huang also says that it takes about six months for the dead tapeworms to calcify, and that the condition, cysticercosis, comes about after eating not only uncooked meat, but also fish. The condition apparently takes more than 10 years to manifest itself.

CEN staff then spoke to doctors at the Guangzhou No. 8 People's Hospital in eastern China's Guangdong province to confirm that some of the uncooked Japanese delicacy of raw meat or fish favoured by patient Tain Liao had been contaminated with tapeworm eggs.

The CEN story originated from a radiologist's social media post, offering the news and pictures. The images which belonged to the hospital were offered for free as early as September 19, 2014 – from where they were very widely used throughout Chinese media.

⁵⁵ <http://gd.qq.com/a/20140919/009313.htm>

⁵⁶ <http://www.appledaily.com.tw/realtimenews/article/new/20140921/473727/>

⁵⁷ <http://news.life.com.tw/?app=view&no=52053>

⁵⁸ http://hk.on.cc/cn/bkn/cnt/news/20140922/bkncn-20140922035209453-0922_05011_001.html

⁵⁹ <http://www.999brain.com/en/>

⁶⁰ <http://www.bayvoice.net/b5/news/chinasociety/2014/09/21/%E5%90%83%E7%94%9F%E9%B1%BC%E7%89%87%E5%AF%84%E7%94%9F%E8%99%AB%E9%95%BF%E6%BB%A1%E8%BA%AB%EF%BC%9F%E5%9B%BE-254060.html>

⁶¹ <http://en.wzmc.edu.cn/>

In China they still continue to be used, and there is not any doubt in China that the pictures are correct. Backed up by medical confirmation and with permission to use the pictures from medics, CEN ran the story.

So even *BuzzFeed* admits that the story was genuine, Chinese media and doctors still say the pictures are genuine, but without any medical proof to the contrary *BuzzFeed* is content to say that the pictures are fake.

All they were able to offer was a claim that X-ray images used in the CEN report are, as Alan White put it, "*similar to those included in a 2014 case report published by the British Medical Journal (BMJ) 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).*"

The pictures CEN and Chinese media used he therefore admits were not the same pictures as those in the BMJ report showing an infection from pork. And if the previous BMJ article and the current one used different pictures then what exactly is the reason for the questioning? The pictures were clearly recent and of the incident in question and were available from the hospital that had distributed them to the media.

Because the same condition can be caused by either pork or fish, regardless of the source of the contamination, it follows that the condition and the pictures of that condition that they create in the human body is going to be the same.

That means that Alan, who according to the information about him used to be an English teacher and then a TV development producer, looked through the internet and found something in a medical publication that was NOT the same image, but merely a similar image, and showed an infection from pork rather than fish, and on the basis of that and without quoting any doctor or asking any medical professional, felt confident to write that the CEN pictures were fakes.

You Have To Be Kidding

On 17 November CEN sent out a story entitled "*No Kidding - Baby Goat Has Two Heads*". It said:

"Chinese farmer Xu Jinkui, 43, was not kidding when he said his goat had given birth to a kid with two heads.

"Incredulous neighbours who turned up to see the spectacular mutant discovered that the baby goat did indeed have two heads, albeit with just two ears and three eyes, and predicted that the hideous looking creature would not live long.

"Xu said: 'They told me to leave it to die, but I couldn't just do that. I asked the vet and he said it wouldn't live long either, but the mother

didn't reject it and I gave it a bit of extra milk occasionally and instead of dying, it seemed to do pretty well.'

"In fact the kid is now well on the way to becoming a fully grown goat living on the farm in Sanhe village in Changle county in Eastern China's Shandong province.

"He said: 'It is currently 30cm tall and 40cm long and doesn't seem to show anything obvious in terms of behaviour problems as a result of its disability, although anyone that comes here can see straight away that it's a mutant. I have had a lot of visitors, and some pretty big cash offers as people realise it's probably going to live longer, but I'm not interested in selling it. Maybe later, but for now it's fun to have around'."

To the staff at *BuzzFeed*, this image appeared too good to be true, and so they contacted a digital photo manipulation expert. Based on his report they filed a question to CEN saying: *"The goat picture that we investigated appears to be either a digital composite or a series of selective enhancements. What steps did CEN take to verify the provenance of this picture?"*

First of all the story was widely reported on Chinese media^{62 63} and was covered to such an extent that there was little doubt that it was true, and although CEN did not speak to the farmer because he was from a remote location, the agency was lucky enough to see several TV reports with video to confirm that it was obviously correct and offered quotes from him.

The fact that the story is legitimate could have been known even if only based on the fact that the original story was from Xinhua News Agency. This is China's official state press agency – funded by the government and run by the government. To say they faked a story as insignificant as this one according at least to CEN's Chinese staff *"really defies all logic"*. There is no motivation for them to fake it or indeed any need to fake it. All reports confirm the farmer's full name is Xu Jinkui.

To back up the truth of the CEN and the Xinhua story, there is even a video⁶⁴, and the goat in the video is the very same goat as the one in the Xinhua story. And while the faking of pictures might be a possibility, the faking of a video is another story altogether. Not only is it extremely unlikely, in this particular case it would be pointless. Far more likely, as CEN said all along, is that the story is correct.

The analysis of the Chinese media shows that the CEN story, as it appeared on the *Croatia Times*, is not only accurate and in accordance with the original Chinese reports, including the breeder's name,

⁶² news.xinhuanet.com/photo/2014-11/12/c_127203506.htm

⁶³ <http://www.chinanews.com/tp/hd2011/2014/11-14/436696.shtml>

⁶⁴ <http://v.iqilu.com/shpd/shb/2014/1109/4145377.html>

location, and the description of events, but that CEN was also the first to report it in English.

In their allegations, *BuzzFeed* further adds: "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?"

The video above published on 9 November however shows that despite the *BuzzFeed* scepticism, the farmer did talk. In fact this video was just one of the many TV reports where the farmer was interviewed. At 0:22, for example, he points to the goat and says: "Here is one mouth, and here is another."

At 0:33 he talks again, saying: "I didn't buy it [the goat]. I had a female goat (doe) and fed (raised) it for 40 days, then it gave birth [to the goat]. I didn't notice [the heads] during the birth, then I saw two mouths." The news report says: "Mr Xu says he and his family take very special care of the goat. They feed it milk with a bottle. Mr Xu says that even though the goat has one body, it can feed through both mouths." At 1:12 Xu speaks again, saying: "It's drinking through two mouths."

Once again, therefore, it seems there is nothing to suggest that the CEN story is a fake, that the pictures are a fake or that any of the details were made up.

Small Details

The next batch of five stories have been condensed into one with a common thread. It is a thread in which *BuzzFeed* is essentially demanding that CEN and its clients answer questions about obscure details. In every case *BuzzFeed* admits that the stories are correct, but because they cannot find a small detail in earlier reports from the country of origin of the news, they suspect that this information was invented.

As an example in a CEN story about a thief in Paraguay who broke into people's homes by pretending to be a baby, complete with nappy and lollipops, *BuzzFeed* admits the pictures and everything about the story including the man's name, age, geographical location and the circumstances of his arrest were correct. He did wear a nappy. He was photographed in a nappy while being arrested. And he was sucking a lollipop.

Yet Alan White still wanted to know about local woman Lara Orta Ornelas, 59, quoted in the report who said she was surprised the thief had taken so long to catch.

In his email Alan White notes: "A Spanish-language report from four days earlier says that the thief pretended to be mentally ill, but no more. Ms Ornelas' 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?"

In a similar vein, *BuzzFeed* tracked down (presumably from its own inbox) a CEN copy of a story from January, that they also found on the *Austrian Times*, about an underwear thief who "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."

Alan writes conspiratorially: "Conspicuous by its absence from any of the original sources was a quote that appeared in the English press from a 'police spokesman'." Again Alan accepts that all the details of the case are correct, but doesn't believe the police spokesman quote is real because it was not in the Spanish source copy.

In a third story, *BuzzFeed* pleads the case of an aunt who castrated her young nephew when he interrupted her in the bathroom in China. *BuzzFeed* again accepts everything in the story as correct but lays doubt over the reliability of quotes from a police spokesman and a hospital spokesman simply because they could not find them printed anywhere else.

In a fourth story about an Indian man who allegedly had his penis chopped off by a crowd after he was caught trying to rape a girl, there was a quote from a local and police spokesman. Again, the story and its pictures were correct in their entirety, but *Buzzfeed* could not find which local media CEN had 'copied' the quotes from.

And finally in a fifth story *BuzzFeed* highlights the case of a Chinese man who had his penis chopped off twice by his wife where *BuzzFeed* was unable to find a hospital spokesman quoted in any other online report, and therefore suspects that CEN made it up.

The common thread through all of the above as mentioned is the suspicion from the *BuzzFeed* authors which includes the UK investigations unit and the head of their Canada operation that if something written cannot be found on the Internet, then it must have been made up. It strongly implies that the way the *BuzzFeed* newsroom works is to do exactly that, recycle material endlessly from the Internet. However that is not the way journalism works. Articles from reliable online publications can always be a starting point for any report, but for a news agency to be able to have any credibility, it needs to develop those stories.

Especially in the age of Google translate, it is not enough simply to lift and recycle what has already been printed in whatever language. That means in the cases of the above looking at sources that cannot be

found easily with an online search. That means watching television news reports endlessly and using these to enrich content. It means listening to the local radio. It means looking constantly at social media where content is appearing and vanishing at the whim of the account holder, or in the case of some countries at the whim of censors. And it also means sometimes simply picking up the phone. That might mean to make a phone call to police or medics or the fire brigade or government officials or a nearby hotel or pub to where an incident is taking place, or indeed anyone of a number of people that might know something about a story. In the Internet age telephone numbers and emails and social media contacts have never been easier to find. Depending on the country, this direct contact may yield nothing or it may yield something, and if it does then it is clear this will not be in 'local media' where *BuzzFeed* is looking for it.

But that is not all. Also crucial is good ties with local journalists who have access to sources in their area and who are often more than happy to help out and offer a pointer in the right direction. In many cases the advantage of talking to CEN for the local media is that a story they want to cover or even just an angle that is simply not appearing in their own publication can be put under the spotlight elsewhere, and by leaking it to the international media via a trusted partner like CEN, which are not regarded as competition, it gives them an opportunity to do the story citing international media as the source. It is an example of the sort of international cooperation among colleagues that is constantly taking place across borders and where it helps to make sure stories are covered even when publishers on the face of it might be reluctant to be the one to break the story.

In a further CEN story about a wife that discovered her husband had cheated on her with her twin sister, *BuzzFeed* believes that a quote in a story was fake because the witness quoted and identified '*reads like it's being spoken by someone interviewed on a London street*'.

However, it doesn't take into account the fact that all CEN content is originally gathered in a foreign language, because the agency normally doesn't work in English-speaking countries, and this therefore needs to be translated into English. How that information is structured in English depends very much on the person doing the translation, and if they happen to be somebody who writes in a very colloquial way then you will end up with a quote that sounds like it was from someone in a London street. It does not mean the quote is incorrect, it is simply the way that the journalist chose to present what was said.

On this story, *BuzzFeed* also wanted to know where the names and ages came from, and the answer is that it came from our bureau chief in Asia and in the absence of anybody saying they are incorrect, it seems that the CEN bureau chief got it right and they were correctly identified.

Snow From Yesterday

As well as having access to over 8,000 CEN articles *BuzzFeed* has also been looking all over the Internet for articles about CEN content and also looking at the news media sites that are published by the agency, like the *Austrian Times*, which are often referred to in its report.

One of the interests by the *BuzzFeed* team for the *Austrian Times* might be the fact that there were stories published on this web site which would not have been included in the agency's news feed. This is because the *Austrian Times* is a media project in its own right, and while certain stories are of interest to Austrian readers and an international audience, the vast majority are not.

Therefore, many of the stories on the *Austrian Times* were simply written for *Austrian Times* readers, and never published anywhere else. The *Austrian Times* started as a project almost a decade ago as part of an experiment in online publishing. It was an experiment that did not work but the project was kept alive with the occasional stories written by trainees who would spend the day in the office to show off their skills, and at the same time have something published at the end of it. Anybody that proved capable of writing a story during their trial shift had a chance of employment in the main newsroom.

It was a project that attracted no income after it was mothballed in 2012, and it was simply used to showcase the work of staff. The fact that it did not have any income meant that it did not have any budget other than a small amount used to keep it posted on a local server. That includes not having any budget for pictures, and therefore the fact that an Austrian ski resort known as Saalbach-Hinterglemm had covered its hills in snow that had been set aside and stored at the end of last season was possibly illustrated with an old photograph⁶⁵ is not really a surprise. As stated with no budget for pictures and access to archive pictures and free pictures from the Internet including press photographs.

But whatever is used on the *Austrian Times* is absolutely no indication of what was sent to clients. For the record, in this particular case the pictures were press photographs, they did show the area where the snow was being taken from and they did show the snow depot to illustrate where the snow had come from that was being used on the slopes. On this occasion, if the picture was an archive picture, then responsibility would lay with the local tourism board that issued it.

⁶⁵ http://www.austriantimes.at/news/Around_the_World/2014-12-03/52021/Ski_Resort_Opens_With_Snow_Stored_From_Last_Season

At the start of this book we had a situation where *BuzzFeed* was reporting that 11 of the stories they looked at were 'complete fakes', 8 more were 'suspect' because they added extra detail that had not been reported in other online media, and 13 others could not be verified. In fact, the report said, only nine were 'mostly true'.

So far however ALL of the stories that have been analysed have been proven to be true at the time of publishing, and only one was later proven to be a fake which was that of the Chinese hitchhiker.

On the other *BuzzFeed* allegations they have offered nothing concrete to say the points they raised were fake. All that the UK investigation team has been able to offer is speculation, and the recycling of the allegations put forward by others without any proof in even one single case to back them up.

In fact there are only four stories still to be dealt with, three of them in this chapter and the fourth about Justin Bieber and the bear which is dealt with in another chapter.

Of the three stories, one was a story that had already been published elsewhere, that CEN nonetheless purchased in good faith, from a reliable source, although it turned out to be a complete fake. The second had an incorrect photograph but again was a completely true story. And with regards to the third one, the agency has never had a complaint, and the pictures are correct, but *BuzzFeed* disputes the ownership of the pictures, and indeed CEN only has the word of *BuzzFeed* that some of the details are incorrect as the person they say is the real owner and organiser has never been in touch.

The first and only story that *BuzzFeed* cited from 8,000 which they had at their disposal to review was a story about a woman who caused a car crash in Vienna by sunbathing with her bottom out of her window on a sunbed.

It ended up viral because a local newspaper in Austria offered to pay money to reader reporters in exchange for a good picture and a few details as a picture caption. This is cheaper than using real reporters and photographers, but as this example demonstrates comes with its own risks.

In theory, it should have been easy for the newspaper to realise that the powerful images accompanying the story were archive photographs lifted from the Internet. However, this was not done, and the fake story, the only proof of which were the fake pictures, was duly published in the Austrian daily *Heute*.

This was then published both online and in print by *Heute*, where it quickly went viral in the German language media and indeed many other places quoting *Heute*. And that was how it ended up with CEN. The agency buys in very little content from non-media professionals, and typically when sourcing anything from non-mainstream media it was always checked using a professional picture image matching

software like TinEye.⁶⁶ These work by scanning millions or possibly even billions of images available on the Internet and by looking for a match. It is extremely efficient software and in many cases will quickly reveal if a picture is being published for the first time.

However, at this time, CEN did not routinely check images that were obtained when they had already been published in other media where the mistaken assumption was that it would have already been verified. CEN has excellent contacts with journalists in many of the countries where it is based and that is also the case in Austria, where it was possible to obtain the picture unofficially by using a newsroom contact, and to get a full report.

Unfortunately, it later became clear that *Heute* had not done any checking at all, the story was completely made up and the Austrian paper deleted its version and replaced it with an updated version⁶⁷ in which they admitted they had been had been conned. As a result of this slip up, it became standard practice at the agency for all content coming into the system fresh to be checked using image search to make sure it was original.

However, this did not help out in the second story where there also turned out to be a problem with a picture that involved a Macedonian man that chopped off his penis and threw it in the garbage after his girlfriend told him it was 'inadequate'.

Although all images from external media were routinely checked, at this stage CEN was still taking material from its own staff where they had supposedly already checked it and verified it was genuine. As staff members they had the ability to upload images directly into the CEN system, and as a result the picture of the Macedonian man which was published in local television two days before it was sent to CEN also turned out to have been an archive picture which the Macedonian media then claimed was the real image.

This image was obtained by CEN from its correspondent in the region. He believed it to be genuine as it was in local media where he had been assured the picture was a genuine picture,⁶⁸ and on that basis he passed it on. The story itself was 100 percent correct, all the information on all the details were accurate, but the image was in fact one that was recycled from an older image that depicted a different incident involving a Chinese man. Again, as a result of this experience, images are now routinely checked from CEN staff as well to make sure there is no archive footage being included in the output.

⁶⁶ <https://www.tineye.com/>

⁶⁷ <http://www.heute.at/leser/art23650,1030078>

⁶⁸ <http://mkd-news.com/22-god-momche-od-kochani-si-go-presekol-poloviot-organ-zoshto-go-ostavila-devojkata-video/>

Again as with the earlier picture it was not CEN that made the initial mistake, it was other media, and internally it was not spotted because it came from a reliable source.

With regards to the third story, Young women who stripped naked in snow for 'fun' are sacked, the CEN story and pictures were provided by a regular correspondent that covers the Russian market. The story was purchased as a complete report together with pictures.

Basic checks were made mainly looking for extra information and these online checks seemed to confirm that there was nothing wrong with the story we had purchased, and it was filed on that basis. The correspondent says most of the information came from online sources and also from a call that was made to a police source, and from VKontakte, the Russian version of Facebook. *BuzzFeed* might point out that the correspondent is not telling the truth, however, he is somebody that has worked for CEN for five years and there has never been a problem with his stories before.

BuzzFeed claims to have identified somebody else as the owner of the pictures, but if that person has a problem with the copyright or with the facts then all that can be said is they have never contacted CEN or its clients to register that objection.

Neither have either of the young women involved in the story been in touch to register a complaint. In fact, the *BuzzFeed* report and enquiry was the first time it was ever raised as being a problem.

BuzzFeed claims that the real photographer was a person named Gene Oryx, and they revealed that they had spoken to him and he had sent one high res picture as proof that he was the organiser of the event.

However, naked women walking around the town are not going to only be photographed by an official photographer even assuming that *BuzzFeed* is correct and it was part of a proper photo shoot, because we live in an age where everybody has a mobile phone with a decent camera, even in Russia. One picture is not proof that Mr Oryx was the person that took the other pictures. In the absence of anybody contacting CEN other than *BuzzFeed* to say anything to the contrary, there appears to be no reason to doubt that the original accreditation of the pictures was correct.

As to whether the story is true or not, our Russian bureau chief who checks all stories from freelancers including regular contributors has confirmed that all the Russian media agrees that two women did walk around the streets nude. Those same media also confirmed that they were fined for breaking the law and as our original stringer said, they

did lose their jobs⁶⁹. Therefore once again it seems to come down to a question of detail.

So the end of the day with at least four staff and months of work, *BuzzFeed* have managed to prove that two stories were not correct as originally published but were correct at the time of CEN publishing them (the Chinese backpacker and the naked sunbather), and that they had already been published by other media so CEN did not make them up.

And they also found that a third story had an incorrect photo (the Macedonian man). Everything else it alleges is mere hearsay and speculation without a single hard fact to back it up.

Out of 8,000 stories supplied over the course of the year, Internet research, the hiring of experts to analyse CEN photographs and using staff all over the world to look at CEN content, and even recycling alleged debunkings by other media watchers, *BuzzFeed* publishes a story alleging that CEN, a rival in the provision of viral news, is the King of Bullshit News.

Based on this evidence they put together a scenario of how this sad state of events came about. Leidig, they said, *“decided to play the online game, as he saw it. He launched websites such as the Austrian Times and Croatian Times. He cast his net far afield to China, India, and Latin America, scouring for images and posts on social networks that he could weave a story around in order to hit up old clients with a new kind of content. It’s paid off; many major news websites are regular clients. One major British publisher buys multiple CEN stories every day, sometimes more than 100 a month. At £50 per story – which is what BuzzFeed News was charged before it severed its relationship with CEN – that amounts to a sizable income stream.”*

What *BuzzFeed* would have known if they had really interviewed anybody in the British media was that viral content, or is it used to be known quirky news, has been part of the CEN output since it started operating in 1995. One of the agency’s first viral story was about a Romanian man who had stolen the toilet from a train complete with sink and toilet bowl, and then been caught when he rang to complain that it did not work after fitting it into his home. Apparently, he had not realised that running water was a prerequisite.

It means the agency has had 20 years to get it right, and in 20 years there has been not one court case against the agency where it was taken to court over the fact that it produces fake news as *BuzzFeed* alleges.

Charity Work

⁶⁹ <https://versia.ru/devushki-poigravshie-v-centre-xabarovska-v-snezhki-oshtrafovany-i-uvoleny>

When *BuzzFeed* started to look at the work of Central European News on the Internet, they were probably initially only looking at the tabloid news reports, but it must have become quickly apparent that there were many other areas where the agency had become involved in projects to do with journalism.

The reason is that the agency's boss Michael Leidig is vice-chairman of the National Association of press agencies,⁷⁰ with the responsibility for special projects. It means looking at areas where there is a need for a service for journalists, and attempting to fill that need.

Included for example in the ideas he developed was a network of lawyers specialised in media matters prepared to work for freelance journalists and small news agencies at a special discount rate. Another service was an automated copy checker that was designed to help identify usage of a freelancer's material online.

Leidig also set up an online job exchange for freelance journalists and agencies to find work, an online picture and video sharing platform for agencies and freelancers to syndicate content to media clients, and he attempted to create a distribution service to replace email as a way of delivering copy directly to news media clients.

The key point about all of the above is that the services being created were free. They were aimed to help freelancers and news agencies to do the job of concentrating on creating good news and not having to worry about many of the other aspects of working as a journalist without a fixed employer. Writing a story might take a day, selling it can sometimes take a week. Some of the ideas above and others not mentioned like the journalist contacts book worked, others did not for many different reasons which are not part of this narrative.

And *journalismwithoutborders.com* (JWB) was one of those ideas that only partially worked. The basic principle is that with the vast amount of information on the Internet, and the difficulty of finding out what was true, there is a lot of possibility for fraud in fundraising. And because journalists often work on stories where they know whether it is true, there was a possibility of linking the journalist with the charity fundraiser. It meant that the person written about really did stand a chance of getting something positive out of their contact with the media, and although the media working with JWB were paid nothing from the donations, at the very least it meant doing something for those where a reporter may well have had an intense relationship if only for a few days and really did want to help. And if you want to be cynical it always meant there was a good follow up, if nothing else.

The basic principle was that a qualified news professional who had worked on a story that fitted the criteria of JWB would provide a free illustration and a story. This would then be distributed free to the world's

⁷⁰ <http://www.napa.org.uk/>

media, and anybody that wanted to get involved in the story in some way could contact JWB where charity workers would be able to obtain the contact details for those being written about, and arrange for those wanting to help to speak to those in need.

It was obviously a lot more complicated than that, and although money was occasionally what was needed it was not always the case. And on the one hand the project was a success, with the CEN stories which were donated to JWB raising decent amounts of money for the people they were written about. However, this was not always the case, and it seemed to be only the occasional story where there was really interest, even if sometimes the amounts raised were four figure sums.

In theory though, while the idea was good, and in practice it did work, the big problem was that the complete separation of the editorial side that evaluated news and the charity side which dealt with the assistance could not be properly carried out. The project was quite simply taking too much time away from the main agency work.

As an example, CEN offered a story⁷¹ about a young Chinese woman that needed a cancer operation, with pictures that showed the tumour that she suffered from had left her with a similarity to one of the Avatars from the James Cameron film. It is a tabloid story, but it is a tabloid story where a journalist will write it hoping it will make a difference.

None of the CEN clients wanted the story, and the only place it was published was on the JWB website where it then quickly went viral as a free story, attracting millions of readers and a substantial amount of money for the young woman which was then wired to China to pay for one of the three operations she needed. But this story which was offered for free like many others turned out to be a vast amount of administrative work for CEN. As an example, the charity side of the organisation which has an existing track record in fundraising revealed that it was not possible to simply transfer a large sum of money to the girl or her parents. The reason was that having collected it, there was a responsibility to make sure it was spent as promised. That meant the money could only be transferred to the hospital. But the hospital was not allowed to accept money from abroad to pay for an operation. These and other problems eventually meant that JWB was wound down, and then when the charity partner which is an Austrian charity started operating permanently from abroad in southern Sudan, communicating over what was being raised became almost impossible.

Eventually around 12 months ago the project was mothballed, with the page still live, and the bank account was placed into the hands of a media lawyer in Vienna who agreed to work for free to manage any

⁷¹ <http://journalismwithoutborders.com/a-details-running/article/avatar-face-girl-needs-help-for-operation.html>

donations. In that time there has been one story that raised a small three-figure sum, but other than that nothing, and the project is effectively on hold. It needs a webpage that works to deal with a lot of the administration behind the idea, and it needs to be easier for freelancers and agencies to upload copy.

Michael Leidig said: "Of all the related projects that *BuzzFeed* could have chosen that I have done, it was a shame that they chose to target the JWB one as it has now compromised the JWB work. Even though they were offered the chance to come and look at the books to make sure that everything was in order, they did not."

Of course, *BuzzFeed* chose not to reveal that they had been offered this opportunity, which had been made in order to make sure JWB was not smeared in the article that they were planning to run on CEN's tabloid news. The response to this was to black out the part of the letter⁷² from the CEN lawyers where they were offered this opportunity, and to pretend the black had been put in place because it was something that was nothing to do with their report.

In fact that was not true, because JWB was still mentioned in the report and the only reason to cover up this part of the legal letter was because it proved quite clearly that if they wanted to they could have had access to the books, and have then decided for themselves whether anything improper had been carried out.

Instead, they chose simply to mention JWB at the end of their expose, which was of course a report in which they alleged that the vast majority of what CEN produced was untrue and therefore to condemn by association. They wrote: "*Leidig is the owner and co-founder of CEN. He is also runs a charity called Journalists (sic) Without Borders, which claims to provide money to the needy sources featured in CEN's stories. It solicits donations on CEN's site via PayPal that it says it redirects to people featured in the articles who may be in need of medical care or financial support.*"

Leidig said: "It was a cheap shot that really undermined any opportunity to re-launch JWB by saying on the one hand that our stories were fake, but then emphasising that we were soliciting money for those fake stories via PayPal. The reality is that they did not have to rely on what we said, they were offered the chance to look at the books, but they chose not to take up that offer and instead to simply delete the paragraph where the offer was made."

At the point in the story where they explained why part of the letter had been blacked out, *BuzzFeed* said: "This section of the letter relates to questions that did not appear in the final published article."

⁷² See Appendix B for the full transcript.

But clearly it did appear in the final article, and the paragraph that they deleted from the CEN lawyer was effectively the denial of the above allegations. It said: *"As to your questions about Journalism without Borders (JWB), our client has already given you details of those to whom enquiries about its finances can be addressed. Mr Leidig is vice-chair of the National Association of press agencies, with responsibility for special projects, and he is constantly looking for new ideas. Whilst JWB has not, to date, raised significant sums, it is a project which our client still believes and hopes can be reinvigorated, but this requires time and energy from volunteers."*

The request to see the books of course were never made, after all, the offer of opening up the books implies strongly that there is nothing to hide, therefore what would be the point in taking up the offer, far better to just delete the fact that the offer was ever made and ignore it. Indeed, the Viennese lawyer handling the enquiries has confirmed that they were never contacted by *BuzzFeed* with a request to look at the books.

Wikipedia

The final jab at CEN and its owner was an allegation about "Leidig's lengthy and frequently updated Wikipedia page".

It says the page *"describes someone who cares about accountability and the importance of crediting original sources: 'Leidig is also a campaigner for greater support for journalism which he describes as the coalface of democracy. He has campaigned in favour of more responsibility from search engines like Google to give credit to original source material and also for payment for originators of news, arguing that if the journalists all go out of business nobody will provide the content worth having.'* The sole link in the above passage goes to a story on the *Austrian Times* – a website owned by Leidig. Many of the key edits and contributions to Leidig's Wikipedia page are by a user called *Bylinebandit*, who is also a major contributor to the page for the *Austrian Times*."

In the world of online media the importance of Wikipedia cannot be underestimated. If you want to research somebody, or something, Wikipedia is often the first port of call and a more than useful way of deciding where to go from there with an investigation.

In an ideal world journalists and media organisations like CEN would probably be expected to make a donation to the Wikipedia foundation to encourage its work, but in practice with the rates paid for news and the pressure on time it is a luxury to which few are able to commit. In the many projects Leidig looked at, one of those was the possibility of

enriching Wikipedia by offering free content on issues where CEN staff had been involved - had first-hand experience of what was going on and already written material they could share. These were mostly hard news stories that could be added to the community resource, but also some stories where it was noticed items were missing.

Leidig said: "In the course of using Wikipedia for research, it was often possible to notice small mistakes in content and indeed occasionally deliberate attempts at fraud. In order to contribute something to the community and to change this, an account with the name 'BylineBandit' was selected, an expression coined to refer to a news editor from years previous who had been a CEN client and who frequently placed his own name on agency copy, a practice which had become something of a running joke in the office.

"This was not an attempt to benefit in any way. It was simply an experiment to be part of the Wikipedia community and to see what would happen if the idea were to be developed." However, the idea which as far as Leidig can recall started around 2012 and was cancelled the same year died mainly because Wikipedia was often rejecting the edits on the grounds that they were copyrighted.

What this meant was that Wikipedia was finding the place where the CEN reporter published their original story, and then wrongly assumed that the copyright lay with that publication. Instead of simply being able to insert already written text, it meant that it needed to be rewritten, and this proved too much work.

The year 2012 was also the year that Michael Leidig took a sabbatical from the main agency and concentrated entirely on developing the agency's news websites. The aim had been to see whether advertising and sponsorship could be attracted for websites like the *Austrian Times* or the *Croatian Times*. It was supposed to last a year, but by September it was clear that there were no significant sums to be made despite significant traffic that the sites were attracting, and the project was put on hold.

One of the difficulties had been that advertisers have little interest in small websites or tabloid content. Leidig said: "We had some good stories and some good local traffic, but it just wasn't enough. We didn't have a budget for advertising ourselves or anybody working on boosting the page rank in any other way than by simply doing journalism. And local news traffic was okay, but never significant. Boosting readership by using some of CEN's own copies also did little to help, because while viral news brings in readers in vast numbers, it is not the sort of content that advertisers want to be associated with. We would contact people who were interested when they heard our numbers, but not interested when they saw the content and the profiles of the readers. This is clearly a lesson that *BuzzFeed* is also finding out, which is why we are now so desperate to get into quality news."

Somewhere between the start of 2012 and the cancellation of the attempts to sell advertising and get sponsorship for the *Austrian Times* and other media groups, Leidig realised that one of the main problems was that being an agency well-known to media partners was not helping when it came to dealing with advertisers. It was discussed in-house and one of the staff offered to publicise some of the agency's work, which included creating a Wikipedia entry for Michael Leidig.

He said: "This journalist then carried out a short interview and generated a Wikipedia entry which was submitted using the agency Wikipedia password for no reason more sinister than the fact that the reporter did not have her own Wikipedia password to hand.

"It is correct that once it had been uploaded it was briefly looked at and modified on 20 September, and twice in the following week. Apart from one other change almost two years ago, it was never looked at again. It therefore hardly justifies the *BuzzFeed* allegation of 'frequently updated' if it has not been looked at for years."

Or at least it was not changed until now, when somebody has logged in to add that Michael Leidig has been accused of making up news. It now says in the top line: "*In April 2015 he was accused by BuzzFeed of fabricating quotes and details from multiple CEN stories. [1]*"

The [1] then conveniently links to the following useful note [1] "*The King of Bullsh*t News*". *BuzzFeed News*. 24 April 2015. Retrieved 24 April 2015." This was exactly the same day the *BuzzFeed* report was published. It will be interesting to know who was so keen to highlight this fact by updating the Wikipedia page which had apparently seen little change by linking to a story that had only been published at the very end of the 24 April, and therefore could only have been a few hours old.

* * *

Chapter 3

The Microsoft Factor

"They (CEN) tend to depict the inhabitants of those (other) countries as barbaric, sex-crazed, or just plain weird. And often they are inaccurate or downright false."

- BuzzFeed article on CEN.

On Friday, 24th April 2015, the editor of the UK media magazine the *Press Gazette*, Dominic Ponsford, was given a lead on a story that he wanted to get out the same day. He was allowed to see a letter circulating around several Fleet Street offices that gave an insight into a row going on behind the scenes between a traditional UK news agency (CEN) and the online newcomer *BuzzFeed* from the US that had recently opened up an office in Britain.

The original of that letter had been signed by the lawyer for the British firm and delivered to Alan White, identified in the letter as *BuzzFeed's* breaking news reporter. It had then been shared with CEN's Fleet Street clients, and now as often happens with legal letters, a 'leaked' copy had ended up in the hands of *Press Gazette*.

According to what he later published, the *Press Gazette* editor had asked CEN and *BuzzFeed* for a statement before publishing. CEN's managing editor Michael Leidig replied to his questions, *BuzzFeed* did not.

Instead, *BuzzFeed* later published what turned out to be a 6,958 word piece making various allegations about CEN. Under a sensational headline, they wrote about how a '*small British news agency and its founder fill your Facebook feed with stories that are wonderful, wacky – and often wrong*'.

It explained how CEN would send news items worldwide but mainly to UK media, who then published them and paid a set fee.

Quoting anonymous sources 'too scared' to speak out, they explained how news desk staff on papers that were CEN clients wanted to reject the material because it was, according to the anonymous source, '*utter fucking shit*'. Further anonymous sources would have loved to speak openly to *BuzzFeed*, but could not as their '*bosses would kill them*'.

For added effect *BuzzFeed* used a sub headline branding the whole business an '*open secret*', and drove it home with more anonymous

sources who complained they had '*raised the issue several times*' with their news desk, but that CEN's stories '*bring in clicks, so no one seems to care that much*'.

It seemed an open and shut case, *BuzzFeed* had been threatened with legal action and like a free press everywhere, had decided to defy that to publish the truth as it saw it. And why not?

The use of crude language sprinkled among what purported to be a professional investigation would have helped of course to underline *BuzzFeed*'s youth credentials, it did not really matter to *BuzzFeed* that it was from an anonymous source.

The *Press Gazette* report that was balanced against the *BuzzFeed* allegations might have still been top on the Google search index, but it was already out-of-date as soon as the *BuzzFeed* report ran.

But there was one point about the *Press Gazette* story that was very interesting, and it was to be found in the comments. A user named '*Mark*' decided to post a comment that went as follows: "*Aggressive tactics to sully a rival - poor show. BuzzFeed should be ashamed of itself, as should Heidi (from ST) who took over investigations there in March. There are far more important things for you to look into if you want to be considered a serious investigations unit.*"

The Heidi the user called '*Mark*' was referring to was Heidi Blake. ST is the *Sunday Times*, and since leaving there at the start of the year she has been head of the *BuzzFeed* UK investigations team that organised and carried out the report into CEN.

Heidi Blake is not just any journalist, she is an award-winning journalist, and also a previous customer of CEN both at the *Sunday Times* and later at *BuzzFeed*. It is correct that her name did not appear on the story by her team, but for the user *Mark* who is nothing to do with CEN she was involved. And for *Leidig*, who had worked with her on at least two investigations where CEN was a contributor to the work of the *Sunday Times* Insight Team, it had her trademark entrapment journalism tactics all over it.

He said: "I never met her when we worked together as my office is a 1,000 miles from hers, but I spoke to her on the phone and we exchanged emails. My main Insight contact was a friend I had worked with when we were on a regional daily together in the early 90s, who is just one of the many *Sunday Times* editors we have worked with over the years."

The fact that CEN works with many other departments at the *Sunday Times* can be demonstrated in its invoice records that show that in the last 10 years it has notched up hundreds of published works, although in the 10 years prior to that when budgets were higher - it was much more.

Leidig said: "Of the two Insight team projects I recall working on where she was involved, in the first one we only had a very minor role,

but the second was an idea I had put up about trafficking in children, and had pushed for some time with my Insight contact.

"I walked out a few months before it turned into a disaster and only half the truth ever came out. It was because I didn't approve of the way the story was being tackled that I walked, but she promised me next time we would do it properly.

"That next time was when I offered her a story about corruption at Microsoft. I had asked her if she still wanted ideas for investigations. She said yes, and asked me to send them to her *BuzzFeed* email account which she said was heidi.blake@buzzfeed.com. After that, despite further attempts to reach her, she never contacted me again.

"On Saturday, 24 April, I was woken by a call to say that Heidi and her team, the same team that I had hoped to work with on the Microsoft corruption story, had written an article about corruption not about Microsoft, but instead involving CEN.

"To say I was stunned would be an understatement, anybody who knows the freelance and agency business knows that you don't turn down work without a good reason, but the last time CEN had worked for her we had done just that, and told her we could not go ahead with the child trafficking because what she wanted to do didn't do justice to the story.

"Her team's report on CEN was full of half-truths and innuendo, mixed in with a sprinkle of anonymous sources who were being used to criticise CEN – ironically for using anonymous sources. Of course, CEN's sources often have good reason to be invisible, working and living in parts of the world where being a journalist is dangerous, where neither law nor free speech are much respected. They certainly aren't copying photographs of cute kittens from a cosy office in London."

Leidig added: "I have to say that I don't believe the Microsoft offer was the reason we were turned over by Blake and her crew, but did it play a part? All I can say is possibly. Of course it was only very recently that it emerged *BuzzFeed* had been manipulating its own content to keep advertisers happy, and it was only right at the end of that row that the name Microsoft was exposed as one of the firms that had benefited."

Leidig added that had he known *BuzzFeed* were to be linked with manipulating their feed to appease advertisers he would probably not have offered the story, but that he had focused less on the organisation and more on the person with whom he had an established relationship.

He said: "I thought I had a relationship with her where we could talk openly about investigations and it was clear where the boundaries were, but with the benefit of hindsight I can see I was wrong."

* * *

At this juncture it would be wise to offer a brief item of background on a few scandals involving *BuzzFeed* that are part of the background to the way the *BuzzFeed* CEN story developed.

Quoting from Wikipedia is usually a journalistic no-no, but on this occasion when there is a need to have something impartial and to the point, without any sensationalism, it serves the occasion.

Under the section 'Controversy', the Wikipedia page for *BuzzFeed* states that the publication has been 'accused of plagiarizing original content from competitors throughout both the online and printed media'.

The article continued:

"On June 28, 2012, Gawker's Adrian Chen posted a story titled 'BuzzFeed and the Plagiarism Problem'.

"On March 8, 2013, The Atlantic Wire also published an article concerning BuzzFeed and plagiarism.

"BuzzFeed has been the subject of multiple copyright infringement lawsuits for both using content it had no rights to and encouraging its proliferation without attributing its sources: One for an individual photographer's photograph, and another for nine celebrity photographs from a single photography company.

"In July 2014, BuzzFeed writer Benny Johnson was accused of multiple instances of plagiarism. Two anonymous Twitter users chronicled Johnson attributing work that was not his own. Johnson, according to Wikipedia, had 'directly lift[ed] from other reporters, Wikipedia, and Yahoo! Answers,' all without credit.

"BuzzFeed editor Ben Smith initially defended Johnson, calling him a 'deeply original writer'. Days later, Smith acknowledged that Johnson had plagiarized others' work 40 times, announced that Johnson had been fired, and apologized to BuzzFeed readers. 'Plagiarism, much less copying unchecked facts from Wikipedia or other sources, is an act of disrespect to the reader,' Smith said. 'We are deeply embarrassed and sorry to have misled you'.

"In total, 41 instances of plagiarism were found and corrected.

"In April 2015, BuzzFeed drew scrutiny after Gawker observed the publication had deleted two posts that criticized advertisers. One of the posts criticized Dove soap (manufactured by Unilever), while another criticized Hasbro. Both companies advertise with BuzzFeed. Ben Smith apologized in a memo to staff for his actions. 'I blew it,' Smith wrote. 'Twice in the past couple of months, I've asked editors — over their better judgement and without any respect to our standards or process — to delete recently published posts from the site. Both involved the same thing: my overreaction to questions we've been wrestling with about the place of personal opinion pieces on our site. I reacted impulsively when I saw the posts and I was wrong to do that. We've reinstated both with a brief note.' Days later, one of the authors of the

deleted posts, Arabelle Sicardi, resigned. An internal review by the company found three additional posts deleted for being critical of products or advertisements (by Microsoft, Pepsi, and Unilever)."

The irony, therefore, of the allegations by *BuzzFeed* against a rival might be viewed in a somewhat different light when it was revealed not only was *BuzzFeed* doing exactly what it was accusing CEN of in plagiarising copy without checking, but even more worrying, that CEN was about to expose a major *BuzzFeed* advertiser. It is not possible to prove whether *BuzzFeed* would consider a deal to curry favour and get more advertising by exposing another media group's scoop about them, but it is possible to prove that the email was sent, and that numerous calls were made afterwards directly to Heidi Blake to ask if the story was a runner. She never answered any of those enquiries about the Microsoft story despite asking for the offer to be sent in the first place, and the question is why?

* * *

When news agencies and freelancers pass on a story to media clients, if they are writing about something straightforward like green puppies or pink kittens it is normal to deliver a finished text. They have to trust that the client will pay on publication, usually from a rate card and for a standard fee.

There are always difficult customers like *BuzzFeed* that do not follow the rules by not saying what they used, not paying for what it is obvious they used and did not attribute, and even when a rate is agreed will always come back to negotiate it down to an ever lower level.

Occasionally though it is not possible to just send a story off and work to the rate card, and the Microsoft story was a case in point.

The reason is there will be expenses, and a fee to be negotiated based on how much the media group values the news item. In addition, and more importantly, Microsoft is a powerful firm with top lawyers, and as a freelancer or small agency, work on the final stages of checking is usually done with a big media organisation and their own trusted legal staff.

If a legal case comes, there needs to be a team there to fight it without having to worry about the bill - as long as the groundwork is done properly and it is clear it was an honest attempt to put the spotlight on something.

Even if there is a fine as a result of a court case, it is usual for the publisher to pay it, unless the contributor lied or attempted to do anything other than honest journalism. Then of course it would not only be a financial penalty that was risked, it could also be jail.

So there are a lot of reasons why stories are offered to a commissioning editor like Heidi Blake. Such editors have little time, so the CEN Microsoft story was offered as a few lines only as the first stage of seeing it published. It is normal that a reporter will not pass on everything, in part because commissioning editors do not have time for lengthy pitches. The typical approach is that a freelancer or agency will send an offer with very little detail, just enough to give a flavour of what is available. The practice of sending a condensed outline is also partly due to the fact that at the other end there is no way of knowing who will read the email. Agencies and freelancers do not generally have a problem of sending in offers and then without a commission finding them published under another reporter's by-line, but it remains a possibility and it is always wise to be discreet.

Senior staff running a desk such as the features editor or news editor - or in Heidi Blake's case investigations editor - will typically have somebody check their email when they are not available, and they will flag up anything important. At the time of asking CEN to send her ideas for example, she was also working on a book project.

So it is almost certain that the email sent to Heidi about Microsoft would have been seen by others. It was a standard article offer and it was followed afterwards by several phone calls to try and gauge the interest. And although *BuzzFeed* has a poor reputation for hard news, it was clear they wanted to try and improve that by apparently investing in quality journalism, so it was logical to give it a try. Plus the fact is that CEN had an established relationship with Blake who had said she was in a position to commission work.

The Microsoft story had been pieced together over a few months, meeting contacts in secluded coffee shops in Vienna to follow up leads, and was backed up by leaked documents that showed Microsoft had hired a lobbyist to persuade an Austrian politician to damage the reputation of their rival Google. To do so, the MP was asked to table a parliamentary question that put Google in a negative light.

The story essentially concerns one of Heidi Blake's specialities: lobbyists using their influence to get corrupt politicians to do what they want by paying the money from a wealthy client. Despite the fact however that it was the sort of story she had covered at *Insight*, *BuzzFeed* and Blake appeared not to want to discuss the subject any further.

The story was not only offered to Heidi. After her it was offered to three other publications before it found a home, including a UK magazine, a UK daily quality newspaper and an American anti-corruption news website.

Michael Leidig said: "In the email exchange between Heidi and myself, I told her that the UK paper felt it was too old, and the magazine felt it was not UK-based enough. This is valuable feedback that helps a

freelancer decide whether it's worth offering the story elsewhere, or dropping it and offering something different.

"If it was too US based for UK media, then a US media group like *BuzzFeed* might seem the logical choice, but after Heidi's refusal to offer any feedback, it was offered to the anti-corruption group. Shortly before the article on *BuzzFeed* was published, they confirmed that they were interested in publishing and were discussing it in their editorial meeting. Understandably, after *BuzzFeed* revealed the agency had been accused of faking news, it would be fair to assume that they had changed their minds and this was the reason that it was quietly dropped.

"The reason for the interest in the story by CEN is of course that Microsoft is a major player and a big name and it plays a role in the lives of almost everyone on the planet, I write my stories on a Microsoft computer using a Microsoft word programme, I research them using a Microsoft browser, I discuss the details and do interviews on their Skype service, and on this story I even sent emails to people with Microsoft Hotmail accounts. If I can't trust them then its best to pack up retire."

Researching the relevance of the story and the background, CEN staff found that Microsoft has been fined ⁷³ heavily in Europe in the past and it was now spending a fortune to make sure that similar fines ended up being levied on its rival Google by European legislators.

Microsoft have a lot of money to help the EU put the boot in, spending more on lobbying in the EU than any other European company, and it has founded or funded what has been described as a 'cottage industry of splinter groups'. The most prominent, the Initiative for a Competitive Online Marketplace, or ICOMP, has waged a non-stop public relations campaign promoting grievances against Google. ICOMP hosts online seminars, panel discussions and news conferences. It even conducted a study that suggested changes made by Google to appease regulators were largely window dressing. Microsoft also has links in varying degrees with the three initial complainants that sparked the antitrust investigation into Google.

As Danny Hakim from the *New York Times* wrote: "*The two companies are the Cain and Abel of American technology, locked in the kind of struggle that often takes place when a new giant threatens an*

⁷³ In 2013 Microsoft had a 732 USD fine for the (accidental) removal of the browser ballot screen post Windows 7 SP1 update. Prior to that in March of 2004 Microsoft was ordered to pay 794 USD in a landmark anti-trust case and was ordered to create a version of Windows without Media Player. And in July 2006, Microsoft was fined 448 USD for failing to provide proper documentation on interoperability that was outlined in the March 2004 ruling. In February 2008, Microsoft was fined 1.07 billion dollars which added up to 3.04 in fines to the EU.

older one. Microsoft was frustrated after US regulators at the Federal Trade Commission didn't act on a similar antitrust investigation against Google in 2013, calling it a 'missed opportunity'. It has taken the fight to the state level, along with a number of other opponents of Google."

He added that last month, Microsoft played an important role in a delegation of American companies that met with the US ambassador in Brussels, essentially asking him to let Google fend for itself against European regulators. And the article by Hakim quoted Manfred Weber, chairman of the European People's Party, the centre-right party that is the largest voting bloc in the European Parliament saying: "Policymakers are alarmed that Google's European market share is roughly 90 percent in many countries, even greater than it is in America. Microsoft is doing its best to create problems for Google. It's interesting. Ten years ago Microsoft was a big and strong company,' he added. 'Now they are the underdog'."

The most interesting part of the *New York Times* story though was close to the end where it says: "Groups in Microsoft's employ have spread their wings widely. Burson-Marsteller, a public relations firm, has long worked for Microsoft and ICOMP." It meant that while the UK magazine said the story was too US based, and the UK paper that it was too old, in fact the story linked Burson-Marsteller directly with something which was very current and very European.

Leidig said: "The CEN story we were offering was old in the sense it was from 2007, even if it had only now gone to prosecutors, but according to the *New York Times* 2007 was a pivotal year in starting the current Microsoft anti-Google campaign."

The paper wrote that Alan Watson, a member of Britain's House of Lords who retired from Burson in 2007, had been approached the same year about taking on a new project. "What we want to do is create a type of trade association," Watson said he was told at the time. "Microsoft is going to be one of the main sponsors."

The trade group, ICOMP, would largely take aim at Google, he was told. Watson is now ICOMP's chairman.

Leidig said: "It is the sort of information that helps to let you know the value of what you have in your hand. I was convinced that the story had worth, and was trying to find a place to put it."

"I was aware later that *BuzzFeed* had been accused of deleting negative posts about sponsors under pressure from its own business department, but never really paid it much attention. To be honest I assumed a post meant a comment by a reader, and it only dawned later that 'posts' are what they call their version of news. It means the allegations against them were much more serious than I initially thought."

Only after the offer of the Microsoft story was made was it revealed that *BuzzFeed* had been accused of deleting negative posts about

sponsors under pressure its own business department – and of course that Microsoft was one such sponsor. Posts that were deleted were for example critical of the game Monopoly, whose manufacturer Hasbro is a *BuzzFeed* advertiser, and Dove soap, whose parent company Unilever is also a *BuzzFeed* advertiser. And only after that was it revealed that another of the clients that benefited from this service was Microsoft.

The row was over the fact that a post on *BuzzFeed* 'making fun' of Microsoft's Internet Explorer browser was deleted in 2013 based on a complaint from *BuzzFeed*'s chief revenue officer, according to a memo from *BuzzFeed* editor-in-chief Ben Smith.

Microsoft had been seeking to improve Internet Explorer's reputation as its browser battles against Chrome, Firefox and other rivals. The company is launching a new browser, under the code name 'Project Spartan' for the upcoming Windows 10 release.

CEN as outlined never sent its full Microsoft corruption story to Heidi, but she had enough to know if she wanted to follow it through or not.

The story written here in full had the headline: "*Austrian Politician took money from lobbyist to derail Google's online ad-market expansion probed by prosecutors.*" And the full story was as follows:

"A prominent member of Austria's parliament and the ruling Social Democrats is being investigated over suspicions he was bribed to derail Google Inc.'s acquisition of web advertising company DoubleClick in 2007, leaked documents from the country's anti-corruption task force show.

"Leaked emails link software giant Microsoft Inc., Google's closest competitor for the acquisition and fast-growing online advertising market, directly to the case.

"The papers are from Vienna's Public Prosecutor's office and show that Kurt Gartlehner, the ruling Social Democrats' spokesman for technology, received 3,600 EUR a month, or at least 99.600 EUR in total, from a local public relations firm, whose owner has since been prosecuted on several counts of bribery and corruption. He is also the Austrian representative and partner of UK lobbying agency and PR firm Burson-Marsteller.

"The now 62-year-old Gartlehner has said he provided PR firm Hohegger with advice on wind farm projects in countries such as Romania, Latvia and Hungary.

"In reality, investigators believe, he used his pull as parliament member to secure Hohegger access to key policy makers and to try to sway Austria's stance on Google's DoubleClick acquisition.

"Google landed a deal to buy US-based DoubleClick for 3.1 billion USD in April 2007, much to the chagrin of competitors Microsoft and

Yahoo, who also eyed DoubleClick as a potential fast-track into the fast-growing web advertising market.

"The deal was subject to approval from relevant antitrust regulators, among them EU's antitrust watchdog at the time, Competition Commissioner Neelie Kroes. The question of whether the combined Google and DoubleClick would wield a competition-hampering market dominance, was, however, also eagerly debated in local EU-member state parliaments.

"Austrian anti-corruption squad BAK believes Gartlehner's arrangement with Hohegger prompted a Google-critical parliamentary question on 15 November 2007, posed by Gartlehner to the then Minister of Economy, Martin Bartenstein.

"In the question, Gartlehner stipulated that the acquisition of DoubleClick 'raised the question as to whether there might not be very strong grounds concerned with the freedom of information providing massive arguments against this takeover'.

" 'The potential merger raises obvious concerns about the dominance of Google on the Austrian market, which needs to be considered with regards to whether or not it is in the interests of Austrian consumers that Google will gain access to an enormous amount of commercial information about its users and their consumer habits,' it went on.

"In the question, Gartlehner demanded the minister reveal whether he was aware of the above, and whether he was prepared to take a stand against the merger on EU level.

"Gartlehner also requested to know whether the national competition regulator had or would have been involved, and if proper consideration had been given to the potential negative impact on the Austrian economy.

"Sensitive email correspondence from the investigation now suggests that the parliament question was closely co-ordinated, if not dictated, by Hohegger's firm on behalf of Microsoft.

"The correspondence reveal that Gartlehner was prepped extensively by the PR firm on arguments against green-lighting the merger before asking the question in parliament. And when he finally received a written answer from Minister Bartenstein's office, it was promptly passed on to Hohegger by an employee at Gartlehner's parliament office. From here, the minister's written answer was swiftly shared with one of Hohegger's most prominent international customers, namely Microsoft Inc. The recipient of the information was Thomas Lutz, head of PR and Corporate Affairs at Microsoft Austria.

"Gartlehner last year withdrew his name from the general election ending a 23-year political career, a surprise decision, it has since become clear, that coincided with anti-corruption prosecutors' opening a bribery investigation against Gartlehner. He is formally accused of

falsifying documents that cover up the extent of his relationship with Hochegger.

“Peter Hochegger is not just anybody in the Austrian PR- and lobby landscape. One of Hochegger’s most prominent clients was the Austrian telephone monopoly Telekom Austria, and in September of 2013 the lobbyist was jailed for two years after he was convicted for his part in helping Telekom Austria director’s manipulate the share price, one of several major political scandals he has been involved in.

“During his questioning, when it became clear he was not going to escape jail, he started revealing details of his other business activities to co-operate with prosecutors. Among the dirty business secrets revealed was the relationship with Gartlehner.

“Leaked protocols show that Hochegger told investigators: ‘I met him in the Viennese restaurant Fabios [a trendy upper class restaurant in the heart of Vienna, known for its VIP clientele] and we agreed to a co-operation that meant between May 2007 and December 2008 I would pay Gartlehner’s Austro-consult via my firm Valora a monthly payment of 3,600 EUR (2,850 GBP) gross plus provisions.’

“Valora, like Hochegger, has been named in several corruption investigations as it was the joint business venture Hochegger had with former Austrian finance minister Karl-Heinz Grassler offering ‘communications consultancy’ to clients.

“Prosecutors have traced paperwork alleging that some of the money paid through the books of Valora stemmed from various projects such as wind farms in countries like Romania, Latvia and Hungary.

“But investigators from the Austrian anti-corruption squad the BAK are convinced the projects served merely as cover for the real ‘product’ purchased by Valora. In reality, Hochegger bought access to Gartlehner’s political connections and use of his weight in parliament as his party’s communications and technology spokesman. A copy of a BAK report from 2012 states that the money was ‘primarily a so-called sweetener for Gartlehner, who was the end beneficiary of the payments’.

“It gave Hochegger, according to the report, ‘access to opinion leaders with relation to telecommunication themes within the SPOe political party’. It added that the regular payments had established a base which Hochegger was able to capitalise on.

“Gartlehner has strongly rejected all allegations and maintains that the payments relate exclusively to advice over wind energy farm projects. ‘I provided a real service. Hochegger’s firm managed to make nearly 3 million GBP turnover because of my wind energy project,’ he said.

“Hochegger, however, has said: ‘If Gartlehner had not been the telecommunications spokesman, he would have been completely uninteresting for me.’

"It would have remained a question of balancing the word of a convicted criminal against that of a respected politician had it not been for the email correspondence obtained by anti-corruption investigators.

"The correspondence covers email contact between Gartlehner and Hochegger between 2007 and 2009.

"The contents confirm the suspicion that Gartlehner used his position both directly and indirectly to develop material provided by Hochegger.

"It shows that in autumn 2007 a person working at Hochegger's PR firm HocheggerCom had given Gartlehner material about the planned fusion of the online marketing company DoubleClick with Google.

"HocheggerCom that was the Austrian representative and partner of UK lobbying agency and PR firm Burson-Marsteller, which in turn had been signed up by Google's rival Microsoft in the USA to instigate a campaign against the merger.

"As a result of HocheggerCom's intervention, Gartlehner raised the matter as a parliamentary question on November 15, 2007.

"Gartlehner has since denied that the question was prompted by his relationship with Hochegger and on behalf of Microsoft Inc., saying: 'The reason for the question was something that was discussed within the SPOe about information technology. This fusion was after all a very controversial topic EU wide.'

"The email traffic between Hochegger and Gartlehner shows a broad spectrum of questionable services including making connections on behalf of Hochegger all the way through to direct political intervention on his behalf. It included sending out press releases which were clearly in the interests of Hochegger clients, or raising matters with key SPOe political figures ranging from the powerful mayor of Vienna Michael Haeupl, through to trade union figures. Paperwork from the Telekom Austria trial reveal an extensive number of meetings between Gartlehner and Hochegger. Gartlehner is formally investigated over suspicions that he falsified evidence in an attempt to cover up the extent and nature of his relationship with Hochegger. However, he is not being investigated over accepting payments on behalf of powerful lobbying interests. Prosecutors have not yet brought formal charges against Kurt Gartlehner. The investigation is still ongoing."

So that was the story, written but until now still not published.

Ironically of course, one of the reasons that such exclusive content is hard to publish is Google, so it is ironic that if this story does now get discussed and published Google, that has done the least to support independent journalism, will be the one to benefit.

CEN has been a high profile critic of the fact that Google does not seem to care about exclusive journalism⁷⁴, and that until recently has shown no interest in investing in the funding of journalism.⁷⁵

If nothing else it should underline that there needs to be among the vast sums being spent on lobbying, PR and marketing also something spent on an independent voice.

* * *

⁷⁴ See Appendix A

⁷⁵ <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/wire/8564>

Chapter 4

An Insight Into CEN

... the evidence assembled by BuzzFeed News suggests that an alarming proportion of CEN's "weird news" stories are based on exaggeration, embellishment, and outright fabrication.'
- BuzzFeed article on CEN.

One of the outcomes of CEN's venture into online publishing and the various other community projects developed to help freelance journalists and agencies is that in doing them, they provided a lot of information about the way the business really works.

Together with the fact that CEN had a business model that worked, it meant there was the potential to combine this existing business with the other community projects⁷⁶ to create a new opportunities, not just for CEN but for other content providers.

This came together as a concept which incorporates more than a dozen individual projects into one, all aimed at easing the way content from media professionals is supplied to media publishers.

The project was put together slowly over 2013 and at the end of the year was taken on board as a potential by an investment bank in Vienna that attempted to attract funding. Although initially there was little interest, eventually the project managed to find sufficient backers and at the end of April 2015 the first payment was due to be made so that the project could launch.

That payment was never made, and since then negotiations have stalled. The suspicion is that the *BuzzFeed* article may have played a role in putting an end to the future of CEN's fledgling project to promote independent journalism.

The *BuzzFeed* report so widely repeated would have been seen by the bankers negotiating the project and the investors, and if so would certainly have made them nervous.

⁷⁶ These are looked at later but include the likes of Journalismwithoutborders.com, NAPApool (A platform for assignments), JPRS – the Journalists and Photographer's Rights Society, Community Contacts Book, YousDesk, Vienna News Centre and others.

BuzzFeed were certainly aware that the investment was about to go ahead, the business plan was sent to many potential partners and it came up in discussions at the start when their reporter Alan White was still pretending he wanted to do a puff piece on the agency's investigations unit.

If anything, instead of respecting that request for a delay in publication in exchange for an exclusive later, the *BuzzFeed* team had rushed even faster to get their report out.

Of course, the damage to the agency's main business had already been done since the questions about alleged fake stories were sent to CEN's main clients. And *BuzzFeed* clearly knew that.

In fact, in any negative reporting on an organisation or individual the main damage usually comes as soon as the call is made by the reporter to check the story, and that call is made before anything is published. In an age where there are so many ways to exchange information, the reporter's question is usually very quickly spread among those most closely connected to the case.

And so it was with the *BuzzFeed* report, when *BuzzFeed* had contacted the agency's main clients. *BuzzFeed's* man in the firing line, Alan White, had put the same allegations he put to CEN to the agency's main customers a week earlier, albeit in the form of questions.

It is a little known quirk of laws on libel (printed falsehoods) and slander (spoken falsehoods) that while a person can be taken to court about almost anything if the other side feels offended and has the money, a press card is an instant get-out-of-jail-free card to say anything to anyone as long as it is phrased as a question.

It does not matter whether that is to ask a person's employer if there is truth to the rumours they are a child molester, tax dodger, having an affair or taking drugs. With a press card, it is possible to put this sort of material to anyone, regardless of the consequences for those under the spotlight.

There is a good reason this is allowed, if a journalist wants to write a story, he has to be able to check it, and that means he needs to be allowed to ask the question that might land anyone else with a libel or a slander writ. But it is a powerful tool in the hands of anyone that wants to abuse it. In Austria, calls to press departments of local firms to ask about a person's Nazi past are usually enough to leave the accused instantly isolated. In the UK in the hyper cautious post Leveson⁷⁷ era that can be turned around from asking the public about Nazis, to asking the press about a reporter making up stories. And it is only because of a relationship going back two decades - and the fact that CEN was able

⁷⁷ The Leveson Inquiry is a judicial public inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the British press following the News International phone hacking scandal, chaired by Lord Justice Leveson.

to offer assurances of the truth of its copy - that meant the business did not dry up in the wake of Alan White's enquiry.

As the Daily Mail put it in their reply to the *BuzzFeed* allegations: "News organisations around the world all work with numerous reputable news agencies to supply stories that can be taken on trust because the agency has researched, sourced and edited the story.

"Our agreement with each of these agencies requires the stories they provide to be accurate.

"If we independently discover this not to be the case we will adjust the story accordingly and advise the agency who is responsible for the story."

The key word of course is 'independently'.

And as the CEN legal letter put it, how can a news organisation that was competing with CEN for viral news claim to be independent in doing a story to expose their rival's alleged wrong-doing?

As the legal letter from the CEN lawyer put it: "CEN is *BuzzFeed's* main competitor for viral news content in the UK market."

On the face of it, of course, there seems little in common between the two. *BuzzFeed*, which was founded in 2006, has 200 million monthly unique visitors, 50 percent of which are 18 to 34-year-olds, and at the end of last year it raised a further 50 million USD from the venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, more than doubling previous rounds of funding. It has about 900 staff and Canada was *BuzzFeed's* seventh international territory with other locations in the United States, Britain, France, Brazil, India, Germany and Mexico.

Balanced against that, Central European News has been in existence for 20 years. It is owned by Michael Leidig, but because it has no advertisers, it is free to do the news it wants without outside influence. The number of editorial staff hovers usually between 10 and 15, and most stories are simply sent to clients that have asked for the daily feed, and who can publish what they want and pay based on usage.

Where they are rivals is over the production of viral news, that is a very visible part of the CEN output, it goes around the world and is repeated multiple times, but it is not the only thing CEN does.

According to Leidig: "For starters, there is also a quality news division that is still very much alive and still working for the likes of the BBC, and has not been closed as has been suggested so the firm can go into wholesale fakery.

"CEN's quality news, like our tabloid feed, is mostly based on good old-fashioned journalism. *BuzzFeed's* investigations editor Heidi Blake knows that because of our previous work together."

One of those stories resulted in the Austrian MEP Ernst Strasser being jailed for bribe-taking. Heidi and Insight secretly filmed him while posing as lobbyists. They showed him being offered a 100,000-euro

(81,000 GBP) annual payment in exchange for influencing EU legislation in the European Parliament.

On this occasion, CEN and its staff were only employed to research Strasser and others targeted by Insight. Strasser was the only one to be jailed. Slovenian MEP Zoran Thaler had resigned, and Romanian MEP Adrian Severin was expelled from the centre-left Socialists and Democrats (S&D) bloc in the parliament but remained an independent MEP.

An investigation like that on the face of it involves little more than simply saying to the person targeted 'do you want a little cash to do something a bit dodgy'. If they agree, it provides a front page that could go round the world.

Of course, in practice it is not so easy, it involves a lot of time and a lot of money simply to get to the point where the question can be posed. That might mean setting up fake webpages, fake identities that will stand up to scrutiny, and most importantly, a lot of time building the connection to slowly gain the trust of the other side.

A case like the Strasser one involving a fake lobbying firm would have been months of work for Insight, tens of thousands of pounds to set up, and a fortune in travel to meet the MPs that did not say yes, and therefore did not end up in the spotlight.

An organisation like the Insight team do not readily give details of what they are doing to outsiders, but as it was a job outside of the UK in Europe CEN was given the call.

CEN had to arrange photographs of their properties and give as much detail about their financial arrangements and property as they could find. And they had to provide illustrations. Everything was carried out discreetly and delivered to deadline.

The article was published, and afterwards CEN carried out follow-up work. An Austrian newspaper that was being sued for example for repeating the *Sunday Times* story needed help in verifying details from London. CEN passed on updates from local media and court press releases to Insight, and followed the court cases that eventually saw Strasser jailed.

But despite its credentials, Central European News' big weakness against an attack like the *BuzzFeed* report is that it does not have media of its own, or at least not one with any significant traffic. It publishes its news via other media, and if they no longer trust what it writes, its business vanishes.

As Michael Leidig said: "*BuzzFeed* clearly have an agenda. With so little being done now in the way of investigative journalism, it is a tragedy that *BuzzFeed* - that agreed to pay CEN 50 USD for a package of words, pictures and video, then asked for a reduction to 35 USD, and then did not pay even that - should use so much manpower and time on an investigation into a rival where they had no leaked documents, no

insider, no official probe or victim. It was a from-scratch look into the way we worked that to my mind could only have been motivated by another agenda.

“Stories are growing up though the pavement like weeds. You just need to reach down and grab them. For journalists to ignore those and to push to create a story when there is none is really a disaster when you think how many other far more worthwhile stories could have been covered than whether a pink kitten was dead, or green puppies had been born.

“*BuzzFeed* need to accept when they read this that they messed up and move on, although the effort they have put into this implies that they won't, and I can guarantee that neither will we, but every day that this goes on is another day where proper journalism is not being done.

“In this whole business so much time and resources are being devoted into ruining the reputations of two news organisations that might have been able to use that time, and money, to make the world a slightly better place. Win or lose this battle, it will not bring any satisfaction to anyone here at CEN.”

Many of the commentators underneath the *BuzzFeed* article pointed out that if, like *BuzzFeed*, you pay so little for news, you only have yourself to blame.

One, Jane Hobson, wrote: “*Pay peanuts, BuzzFeed, get monkeys. £50⁷⁸ a story does not cover the cost of production of either the words or the pictures. What the heck did you think you were getting for that? It's organisations like you that are killing journalism and photojournalism. Quality costs for a reason. And the people who create that quality work are freelance. So you are making professionals redundant, whilst allowing the unprofessional to reign. Shame on you.*”

A powerful argument, although of course CEN maintains that its copy is not rubbish, and there are dozens of systems and checks in place between the story being submitted and finally being sent in the CEN feed, and that includes using journalism in making calls and research to develop its article.

But a look at the CEN books however shows an interesting twist on the comment from Jane. *BuzzFeed* says they can identify a list of 10 stories which they published from Central European News, which they then listed for readers to check.

The reality is that even when *BuzzFeed* told CEN they had used copy, they did not want to pay. And now in their own online article they have

⁷⁸ BuzzFeed pay 50 GBP or 50 USD to CEN depending on whether it was the US or British arms.

handed over the proof as to exactly how they are starving the profession by not paying the money they admit they owe.

In the CEN books *BuzzFeed* have so far paid for only two of those they say they published:

- * *A Dog Gave Birth To Green Puppies In Spain*
- * *German Builders Say This Pavement Swastika Was An "Innocent Mistake"*

The others they admit in their own list that they used from us were never paid:

- * *"Black Death" Plague Surfaces In China And Forces Government To Seal Off A Whole City*
- * *This Is What Happens When You Leave The Hot Tap Running All Winter*
- * *A Russian Guy Says His Justin Bieber Ringtone Saved Him From A Bear Attack*
- * *A Man In China Apparently Ended Up Riddled With Tapeworm Parasites After Eating Too Much Sashimi*
- * *The Unluckiest Man In The World Set His College On Fire With A Fireworks Marriage Proposal*
- * *A University Student Died At A Sperm Bank After Donating For A Fourth Time In 10 Days*
- * *Boy Shocked By Electricity Says He Has Superpowers Like Magneto*
- * *Russian Footballer Hires Muzzled, Tie-Wearing Bear For Son's Birthday Party*

In addition, CEN identified other stories that we also invoiced them for after publication which they never paid either:

- * *Possessed Girl Shown Being Taken To Hospital*
- * *Clumsy Chinese Man Explains How Private Parts Slipped Into Pipe When He Fell*
- * *Shrink Wrap Couples To Preserve The Essence Of Being In Love*
- * *Bust Breasts Need To Be Reduced Says Culture Ministry*
- * *Mutant Rat Chases Swiss Family Out Of Their Kitchen*
- * *River So Polluted It Catches Fire*
- * *Forgotten Chinese City Becomes Diving Paradise*

And in addition to that, there were hundreds of articles that CEN would argue are its copyright, because they were found in obscure local media in a foreign language or from other sources, and CEN worked on them to check them, to find the answers to the questions that an international audience are going to want, and then to pass them on to

clients who published them. In many cases these were then taken by *BuzzFeed* who put nothing back into the communal pot, but had the clicks in return.

In total CEN has enriched the *BuzzFeed* news with hundreds of stories, to date, they have paid for two.

* * *

Chapter 5

An Insight Into BuzzFeed

... the blame for the fact that CEN has been able to circulate such dubious stories does not rest with Michael Leidig alone: He was able to build his business because larger news organisations were so eager to buy what CEN had to sell, knowing that their readers would lap up these lurid tales of faraway people and places.'

- BuzzFeed article on CEN.

When the *BuzzFeed* story broke it certainly seemed to the casual reader to be a damning indictment of the way the agency worked. And while a very small number of people got in touch to say they felt the article was clearly with an agenda, there were many more like Filip Struhárik who clearly felt that it had weight, and who felt that the research and insight offered by the *BuzzFeed* journalists was careful and balanced.

It was billed as a report by *BuzzFeed*'s UK investigations unit, which we already know is headed by Heidi Blake, and three others prepared to step in the firing line to help *BuzzFeed* with its story.

The first of these was Craig Silverman, who according to *BuzzFeed News* is an 'award-winning journalist for his exposes of fake news'. He is also the mastermind of a web site <http://www.emergent.info/> that claims to be a campaigning attempt to expose false stories in the news, and constantly looks to expose the wrong doing of *BuzzFeed* rivals, but not it seems an expose of *BuzzFeed*, which at the time of publishing remains absent from his campaigning site.

According to *BuzzFeed*'s own PR blurb, Silverman became famous on discovering that the now infamous Justin Bieber ringtone story was 'a CEN fake'. In the follow up *BuzzFeed* article that has put Silverman and the others that worked with him on the map, *BuzzFeed* reports that: "Since writing this article, Silverman has been appointed as the founding editor of *BuzzFeed Canada*".

Interestingly, in a different report, an interview with Silverman in the *Globe and Mail* carried out before the *BuzzFeed* report was published, it reveals that Silverman's hiring by *BuzzFeed* 'grew out of reporting he did with the British division of *BuzzFeed* about an Austria-based news agency that has been the source of numerous fake stories'.

His hiring was announced on Friday 24th April, the same day the *BuzzFeed* CEN files were published, but the *Globe and Mail* writes that

their interview was carried out 'this week before *BuzzFeed* announced his hiring on Friday'.

What was meant in that interview, carried out a week earlier, by the expression 'reporting he did'? The only reporting he did about CEN prior to the '*King of Bullsh*t News*' was an article⁷⁹ that was apparently for the Poynter Institute. If that was what he was referring to, then why did he not admit he was also working for *BuzzFeed* at that time?

In his article he wrote the following:

"Bear attack foiled by Justin Bieber's music: A story too good to check"

by Craig Silverman

Published Aug. 8, 2014 2:42 pm.

"In the span of about an hour, it appeared on the websites of The Week, Elite Daily, the Daily Mirror, the New York Post, Mediaite, an ABC affiliate, among others.

"Here's how the New York Post's story began: 'Even bears can't stand Justin Bieber's music. A fisherman in Russia was being attacked by a brown bear and escaped death when his Justin Bieber ringtone went off and sent the beast fleeing into the forest.' Animals? Check. A strange and amazing turn of events? Check. Justin Bieber angle when he's already in the news for a run-in with Orlando Bloom? Check. Too good to check? Check.

"But next thing you know, NPR's 'Morning Edition' covers it, and it ends up in a Seth Meyers monologue:

"Here's the issue: the first story of the bear attack was published in Russian language publication Pravda back on July 31 — and it says nothing about Justin Bieber.

"At some point in making the leap to English, someone added a detail to the story that transformed it into a viral hit. According to Google Translate, the original Russian version said the bear was scared away when Igor Vorozhbityn's phone began speaking out the current time. So, yes, the phone apparently scared off the bear mid-mauling. But no Bieber.

"Did Vorozhbityn change his story in a subsequent interview and realize it was Bieber all along?

"Or did someone insert a seemingly false Justin Bieber angle into the story?

"Point of Bieberfication

⁷⁹ <http://www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/261703/bear-attack-foiled-by-justin-biebers-music-a-story-too-good-to-check/>

"The bear-and-Bieber stories all carried the same pictures of Vorozhbityn. They had the same quotes of him explaining that his granddaughter had put the ringtone on his phone.

"They quote the same 'wildlife expert': 'Sometimes a sharp shock can stop an angry bear in its tracks and that ringtone would be a very unexpected sound for a bear.'"

"Hey, thanks for that too-perfect quote to round out the story, anonymous wildlife expert with no credentials!"

"The symmetry in the stories is because they all used the information contained in a single English language report from a site called the Austrian Times. It's led by a Brit named Michael Leidig, who also owns the Central European News agency. (His name is listed in the domain ownership [sic?] records for the sites, as well as for CEN's affiliate agency, EuroPics.)"

"After the Austrian Times/CEN published the story, it spread to MailOnline.

"Once MailOnline had it, the story was off and running. Bieber and the bear was the real deal, and everyone wanted to plant a flag on it. As of this writing, MailOnline's story has racked up over 13,000 shares.

"The images are the first clue as to where the story really came from. MailOnline cited CEN as the copyright holder of the image it used. But the Austrian Times story credits Pravda with the image on its story. A search on the Pravda website turned up the original article with its images and Bieber-less reporting.

"So how did the Austrian Times learn of the Bieber angle that Pravda apparently missed?"

"No answer from Austrian Times/CEN/EuroPics"

"I called the offices of the Austrian Times and first asked to speak with David Rogers, who is the only person listed on the site. (He is both its ombudsman and its primary sales contact.)"

"I spoke with a woman who said Rogers was not in the office. When I asked about the story, she said she would follow up with their office in Russia to get the details and would call me back. I asked if their office there typically rewrites things from wires and local press.

" 'A lot of stories are found on the wire or in local media but also from local interviews on the ground, or we speak to the reporters who wrote them; we speak to police to get things confirmed,' she said.

"I called her again later that day to ask if she had news from the Russian office, and she said they are often hard to get a hold of. She never got back to me.

"I also called and emailed Leidig, owner of both the Austrian Times, CEN and EuroPics. A man who answered the phone at the CEN office said Leidig is on vacation in Romania.

"Leidig, who has lived in Austria for some time, says nothing about himself on the CEN or Times websites, but he has an extensive

Wikipedia page. In the section about CEN, it lists MailOnline as one of its clients, though that and much of the page itself offers no citation for the claim. (In 2013, Leidig self-published a book about Ponzi schemer Bernie Madoff.)

“Along with detailing Leidig’s journalistic achievements, the Wikipedia page includes this passage: ‘Leidig is also a campaigner for greater support for journalism which he describes as the coalface of democracy. He has campaigned in favour of more responsibility from search engines like Google to give credit to original source material and also for payment for originators of news, arguing that if the journalists all go out of business nobody will provide the content worth having’.

“The sole link in that passage goes to... an article on the Austrian Times. Still, one would hope Pravda is therefore earning some revenue from the story and images that CEN and the Austrian Times plucked from its site. (I contacted Pravda to ask about the images and the story, but have not yet heard back.)

“For their part, the Austrian Times, CEN and EuroPics have stopped talking to me. After receiving no information from their Russian bureau, I sent a detailed email Thursday with questions about the Bieber version of the Pravda story and its use — and possible resale — of Pravda images. No has replied or returned my calls.

“Meanwhile, the irresistibly Bieberfied version of the story continues to spread. Entertainment websites and news organizations give it the quick rewrite treatment and link to each other’s versions, completely obscuring the dubious origins of the story.

“Too good to check, and now, I suspect, too entrenched to ever be really corrected.”

On the face of it a good debunking, but like the other *BuzzFeed* criticisms does it really stand up to scrutiny?

One of the obvious criticisms is where the article says the Bieber article publications “quote the same wildlife expert saying: ‘Sometimes a sharp shock can stop an angry bear in its tracks and that ringtone would be a very unexpected sound for a bear’.”

Silverman adds sarcastically in the next line: “Hey, thanks for that too-perfect quote to round out the story, anonymous wildlife expert with no credentials!”

But on the too perfect quotes used by *BuzzFeed* in its own story to back up the claim that all CEN stories are not trustworthy, or rather “utter fucking shit” to quote *BuzzFeed* directly, he has said very little.

In its article about CEN, Silverman and the *BuzzFeed* team wrote: “*BuzzFeed* News spoke to staffers from multiple British news organisations, all of whom expressed scepticism about the agency’s output, although none were willing to be quoted on the record. One person, who works on the picture desk of a major British publisher and

requested anonymity on the grounds that their 'bosses would kill them', described CEN as 'utter fucking shit'.

"The anonymous source goes on: 'I do not trust a single bit of what they send us'."

For *BuzzFeed*, however, making up quotes or rather, as they say, quoting anonymous sources (which according to *BuzzFeed* is the same thing) is par for the course. It is even enshrined in "*The BuzzFeed Editorial Standards And Ethics Guide*".

It says: "*Anonymous quotes: Anonymous quotes are permitted, though writers should always try to get a source on the record before agreeing to let them be anonymous. Staffers should spell out why their source is anonymous and include an explanation line in the story that the reader will understand. When possible, writers should share the source's identity with their editor, unless it's a very extreme case, in which case the editor-in-chief and executive editor for news should be consulted prior to publication. We don't have an arbitrary number of anonymous sources required to verify a story: One well-placed anonymous (sic) source is worth more than four anonymous sources who are all repeating the same rumor.*"

It is worth noting that this guide to ethics and editorial standards is clearly in a dusty part of the *BuzzFeed* website where few of its 900 staff bother to go. Such a glaring error as to say "*One well-placed anonymous source is worth more than four anonymous sources*" is clearly a nonsense that should leap out at any journalist.

But putting that to one side, according to *BuzzFeed's* own guide, it is perfectly OK to have anonymous quotes to help along its stories about CEN or others.

And the anonymous source then added that they have "*raised the issue several times with their news desk, but that CEN's stories 'bring in clicks, so no one seems to care that much'.*"

Despite the use of anonymous sources in his report about anonymous sources, it did not deter the *Globe and Mail* from describing Silverman as a '*leading warrior against fake viral content*'. One would assume that such a warrior would of course bring out the sword of truth to campaign against anonymous quotes, but only it seems when it comes to the quotes of others.

The *Globe and Mail* report on Silverman continued: "*Last summer, BuzzFeed and many others fell for an item published by Central European News about a bear that attacked a Russian man and was scared off by his Justin Bieber ringtone. In a report for the Poynter journalism institute, where he is an adjunct member of the faculty, Silverman, author of *Regret the Error: How Media Mistakes Pollute the Press and Imperil Free Speech*, traced the too-good-to-be-true story to a Russian-language newspaper, which made no mention of Bieber.*"

If he was working with *BuzzFeed* at the time, Silverman's contact with CEN when he did his original expose made no mention of his future employer as the correspondence relating to his 'investigation' illustrates:

From: Craig Silverman [<mailto:silvermancraig@gmail.com>]
Sent: 07 August 2014 17:07
To: CEN Online Desk; photo@cen.at; m.leidig@cen.at; david.rogers@austriantimes.at
Subject: Re: Justin Bieber bear story

Hello all,

I'm following up on this correspondence, and the three conversations I had with people at the Austrian Times/EuroPics/CEN office. As I noted on the phone and in the emails below, I'm trying to determine how this story from Pravda dated July 31 about a bear attack evolved to include a mention of Justin Bieber: <http://www.kp.ru/daily/26263.4/3141355/>

The Bieber reference first appeared in your Austrian Times: http://austriantimes.at/news/Around_the_World/2014-08-05/51543/Justin_Bieber_Helps_Defend_Russian_Fisherman_From_Bear

Your story also includes an image used in the Pravda report, and those images and the details of the story are subsequently credited to CEN on a variety of US and UK news websites.

As noted below, I'd like to have a response from you to these questions:

- How did you gather the bear attack information for your story?
- Can you explain why your account differs from Pravda's regarding the ringtone?
- Did you pay to license the images from Pravda?
- Is MailOnline a CEN client?

I plan to publish my story today by 2:30 pm ET (it's now 11am ET), and would appreciate a response before. I understand Mr. Leidig is away, but as I'm sure you'll appreciate, it's not possible to wait two weeks to publish. I'll also have a comment from Pravda for my story. Thank you.
Best regards,
Craig

He never did get the comment from *Pravda*, or from the Fisherman, or from CEN, but that does not seem to matter in Craig Silverman's world where online research is, it seems, all that is needed to check if a story is correct.

Incredible though it may seem, but there are actually a generation of journalists like Silverman and Alan White that do not realise it can still be true just because you do not find it online.

As Michael Leidig said about the Silverman Bieber article: "As he correctly pointed out I was in Romania, and by the time I had returned he had already published. Yet in the article he wrote, a professional can see that he had never spoken to the Russian man, had never spoken to the journalist who wrote the original Russian story, and had never spoken to the police, rescuers or indeed anyone else involved.

"CEN did speak to the paper to get permission to use the picture, and we did speak to the police.

"With no complaint from anybody other than Silverman who based his investigation purely on a single quote in an online newspaper, we decided to ignore it.

"There were other considerations, one of those being that journalists end up with enemies, and if anyone wants to try and damage what we do here, they need to know who we are and what we are. If they build that on stories like this by Silverman which seemed to me at the time to have nothing to back it up, they are going to weaken their case."

Was the story true? CEN had a Russian freelance correspondent that was employed to find out what the ring tone was and sort out other matters such as getting the illustrations. As far as the agency is concerned the correspondent was a reliable contributor, and if it was wrong, it would have been a first.

Looking at the items written after the row broke out, where the fisherman was again interviewed by Russian media, the likelihood is that the CEN story was wrong. But based on what Silverman did, there was nothing at all that indicated the story was a fake apart from one translation of an article from a Russian paper – and there was no original reporting that brought him any results from the fishermen, the newspaper or from CEN. All refused to talk to him.

Michael Leidig said: "Someone could go to the fisherman now and ask him if it was true, and get an answer. That will prove it one way or another. But it will not change the fact that if Silverman is right, he was simply lucky, as he didn't have a single fact in his article from anyone that counted to prove his case. Right or wrong, stories based on what you find online are a dangerous way to go forward.

“The way the recent *BuzzFeed* article was repeated worldwide is a clear example of why the Internet can be a dangerous place to look for information, as it’s full of a lot of misinformation and anybody using it to prove a point needs to tread carefully.

“We did not challenge the article as it seemed weak and with little substance, and we assumed that if anyone ever tried to use it against us it would be an easy one to take apart. Of course, we did not realise the next time somebody referenced the article it would be Silverman again.”

What else is known about Craig Silverman other than the fact that the story on CEN story made him famous, and it has been great for his reputation? As noted above the story has gone worldwide, winning praise for Silverman for his work debunking CEN. Many admirers like the reporter Filip Struhárik from *BuzzFeed* have been rewarding him with free plugs not just for his fight against fake news but for projects like his books.

In his article Filip urged journalists that want to know how to spot a fake to use one simple step to check up the authenticity of material. The instructions for journalists, he said, may be found in an excellent book – the ‘*Verification Handbook*’, edited by Craig Silverman, which Filip helpfully provided a link for and the note ‘*now available for downloading here*’.

The *Globe and Mail* article in which Silverman gushed about his campaign against viral news went on: “*Part of his focus at BuzzFeed will be helping the site expand its fight against fake news. Last year, Silverman launched Emergent, a project designed to fight the spread of viral news.*” It was a site that debunks stories, again using algorithms, which means a formula to analyse online content, but he admitted this week that he has put it on hold as it apparently does not work. The reason, as any journalist could tell him, is that the only person that can really tell if a journalist is making up a story is another journalist.

In the *BuzzFeed* article published on 24 April he points out: “*A list of those stories we have been unable to verify has been added to Emergent, and we will update them if fresh information comes in.*” What he did not mention at this point was that Silverman is the owner of Emergent, or that it was no longer active, at least in debunking stories. But as a hall of shame devoted to posting stories of *BuzzFeed* rivals and raising questions about their credibility – it was clearly perfect.

True, it was referred to that Silverman is the owner of Emergent in the 7,000 word article above that few people commenting wanted to read, but in the footnote at the bottom that plugged Emergent it made no reference to his vested interest in the site, and nowhere did it mention it was a dead project. It is strange, as usually he likes to plug his pet project. There are many sites where he waxes lyrical about the

technology behind Emergent, and indeed, it seems to be turning over impressive traffic on the back of the *BuzzFeed* link.

Of course, the fact that it does not work is not very often mentioned, at least not by Mr Silverman.

He also does not mention that he has not really uploaded many items, in fact there are only 61 stories on the site, which is only slightly more than the 41 items about CEN that he claims that they looked at.

Of the 61 items, none of those are *BuzzFeed* stories, but there are stories from UK tabloids like *The Sun*, or *MailOnline*.

The *MailOnline* stories include ones like this: "*The woman behind the hugely popular DC Toys Collector (Disney Collector) YouTube channel is a former porn star.*" The viral debunker Emergent has said that the story has so far not been verified, but if you go to the Daily Mail link ⁸⁰ you find an interesting paragraph in the story: "*Attempts by the New York Times and BuzzFeed website to establish their identity failed, though they were able to pinpoint Florida as the location of those behind the channel - which is nothing to do with Disney itself. But Daily Mail.com has been told the identities of the pair by former neighbours and a close friend - and has used publicly available property records.*"

So the Daily Mail had got an exclusive that *BuzzFeed* did not get using real journalism, and as a result someone, it seems Silverman, was tasked with the idea of debunking it. As at the time of writing this, Emergent had failed to do so.

It is also interesting to note that when he did his story on Justin Bieber and the bear, he only asked four questions, and one of those was '*Is MailOnline a CEN client?*' Of all the many media that republished the Bieber story, the *MailOnline* was not the first and not alone, so one wonders why the *MailOnline* seems to be of such interest to Silverman?

The high-tech online tool of warrior Silverman - in one case only - makes a point of highlighting that one of the stories it is working on was picked up and republished by - yes - *MailOnline*. In none of the other 61 items is the re-publisher named. In his story about CEN from 24 April he writes: "*CEN lists MailOnline as one of its clients.*"

His enthusiasm for singling out the *MailOnline* is evident in both of his CEN stories. In the Bieber article he writes '*In the section about CEN, it lists MailOnline as one of its clients,*' and in his *BuzzFeed* CEN expose he mentions the Mail 20 times, with sentences like CEN 'content is often frequently in the Most Read section on the Mail Online'. The Mail even ends up as a sub-headline in the story, and another item on *MailOnline* from CEN had been "shared 40,000 times".

⁸⁰ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2958242/Brazilian-former-porn-star-Diane-DeJesus-mystery-figure-5million-year-YouTube-sensation-DC-Toys-Collector.html>

In his CEN exclusive of 24th of April when he conveniently does not reveal that the site Emergent is actually no longer in use, he also does not mention that he is looking for an investor or a buyer to help in developing the idea.

To find out that bit of information, it was necessary to go to an article on *Poynter.org* where he worked previously and where it states: *"The real-time rumour tracker founded by Poynter adjunct faculty member Craig Silverman has gone dormant since its creator joined BuzzFeed."*

"In an interview with Poynter, Silverman said he ceased updating Emergent after he began his new job as editor of BuzzFeed Canada. The site, which sprung from Silverman's fellowship with the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, has been at a standstill for about two weeks."

It goes on: *"Meanwhile, the future of Emergent remains uncertain."*

And towards the end: *"That doesn't mean the site is completely kaput, however. Silverman is willing to entertain acquisition offers and says the data gathered by Emergent is available at no charge to anyone who wants it (NB: That means 61 stories). He plans to leave the site up for the immediate future before making a final determination of its fate."*

Apparently, he had tried to bring it to *BuzzFeed*, but the viral news outlet decided against it, officially because 'the technology it's built upon doesn't mesh well with that of *BuzzFeed*'s'. Of course, it could also be to do with the fact that as mentioned, if you want to take journalism apart, you need to do journalism.

As an example, still online on Emergent and marked as unverified is a claim that *"IBM will cut more than 110,000 jobs this week"*, the original article was published on 22 Jan, so a week later if there were no job cuts it was false. If there were job cuts, it was true. Three months later however Emergent is still not sure if it's true or false. So much for algorithm journalism.

Silverman gave an interview with a friend of his called Matthew Ingram on the site Gigaom. Unlike Silverman, who failed to declare an interest when plugging Emergent, Ingram correctly admitted at the top of the interview that he and Silverman were friends.

To quote the article, he wrote: *"So how does Emergent work? Silverman and a research assistant comb through social media and news websites using a variety of feeds, alerts and filters, and then enter claims that need debunking into the database and assign what Silverman calls a 'truthness' rating that marks each report as supporting the claim (i.e. stating it to be true), debunking it in some way or simply repeating it. At that point, an algorithm takes over, and watches the URLs of the stories or posts that Silverman and his assistant entered into the database to see whether the content has been changed — that is, updated with a correction or some evidence that suggests it's true or false. If there's enough evidence, the status of the claim is changed, but that decision is always made by a human."*

According to Michael Leidig: "The idea of course is ridiculous regardless of what algorithm he uses. By his own admission in his article about CEN, the Internet is full of nonsense. Anybody who is a news professional knows that you cannot check a story by using Internet research only. Instead, it has to be done by going back to basics and doing the story again with internet research as an aide only. The real work is getting on the telephone, knocking on the door, and looking at original material like court papers, company reports and if possible trusted contacts. Yet his entire career in debunking journalism seems dedicated to simply taking down fellow journalists based on Internet research."

The article then goes on about the fact that fans of his work can continue to follow it over at *BuzzFeed* and says: "One of the things I know for sure is there are a lot of people over at *BuzzFeed* who are checking and verifying things."

Really? It might in that case be worth noting that the story about Bieber that *BuzzFeed* and Silverman were so keen to expose was still on their site, uncorrected, even as they rushed to publish their own report about CEN, and it was only corrected when their eagle eyed readers flagged it up the same day. Under the headline: "*A Russian Guy Says His Justin Bieber Ringtone Saved Him From A Bear Attack*" the site has now added: *CORRECTION*

As *BuzzFeed* News has reported elsewhere, it turns out that the phone wasn't playing a Justin Bieber ringtone. April 24, 2015, at 8:33 p.m.

To quote the great 'warrior' himself at the end of his now famous Poynter article: "*Too good to check, and now, I suspect, too entrenched to ever be really corrected.*"

On Emergent, Silverman's own page, it correctly says that the Bieber story is a hoax, writing: "Reporting by Emergent's editor revealed the hoax. The story of the bear attack was true, but the detail about a Justin Bieber ringtone was fabricated."

So Silverman may claim that there are a lot of people over at *BuzzFeed* who are checking and verifying things, but Emergent, it seems, is not one of their sources.

His pointing out that Emergent was the place where he had put the CEN stories to be checked also raises the question as to why a dead site is being plugged by Silverman, the champion of press standards. Could it be that he wanted to keep it up there for a possible sale? Considering that he is at the same time putting the boot into a *BuzzFeed* rival, it is surely important to be especially cautious and declare everything?

According to *BuzzFeed's* own editorial standards policy, under the section "*Conflict of Interest and Disclosure*" it states: "*If you're asking yourself, 'is this a conflict of interest?' it likely is. Readers are also a*

good barometer for this; take a moment to consider whether the reader would see a conflict of interest. Writers and editors should disclose if they have a financial or personal stake — is the subject a friend or significant other? Have you disclosed this? — in the issue they are covering. Reporters should not have a financial stake in a company in the industry they cover. Check with your editor about whether disclosure is enough, or whether the story should be reassigned.”

This however then raises the additional question that while reporters should not have a financial stake in the industry they are covering, *BuzzFeed* can have a stake in the coverage of rivals in its own business?

So we have Silverman and we have Heidi Blake, lurking in the background behind the whole story and who gets looked at again later in the chapter on the child trafficking investigation.

What about the other two campaigners for better journalistic standards from *BuzzFeed* that we know were involved?

One of them is Alan White, mentioned already for his many emails complaining that he could not find CEN material anywhere else and therefore suggesting it was fake. He is clearly a student of algorithm journalism as advocated by Silverman where you only need to look online to debunk a story. But what else is known about him?

Although not claiming to be an award winning journalist and award winning author like Silverman, he boasts of being a journalist working for *Private Eye* and the *Observer*, *Times*, *The National* and the *TLS*. He has posted 1,400+ stories on *BuzzFeed* at the time of looking at his page.

He began his career as an English teacher and worked as a TV development producer before becoming a journalist, and as well as the impressive line-up of publications already mentioned that he works for, he is the author of two books, *The Shadow State* (to be published in 2015) a study of government outsourcing, and *One Blood* (under the pen name John Heale), a *‘critically-acclaimed investigation of British street gangs’*.

And although he boasts about working for many of the same worthy publications as CEN, on *BuzzFeed’s* own site, looking back over only the last two pages available of his work it is clear his articles include such worthy journalistic ideals as: *‘17 People Who Got Unspeakably Horny Due To Game Of Thrones,’*⁸¹ and of course the classic that will make his Oxford university and City Journalism College professors proud: *‘37 Things That Will Make You Grin Like A Buffoon.’*⁸²

⁸¹ <http://www.buzzfeed.com/alanwhite/milf-of-dragons#.oqLbrVdRQ>

⁸² <http://www.BuzzFeed.com/alanwhite/there-is-no-point-keeping-this-lot-in-my-bookmarks#.kw028OIAQ>

In the two pages, which includes around 40 stories, he does include the occasional decent story, two in fact, although sadly both of which were published by him in a reduced form 24 hours after CEN gave them to the world.

One was a story about a politician standing next to a child with an insulting T-shirt, and the other about a dog that also gave up when its crime gang owners were arrested.

These were the CEN Stories with publishing times and the *BuzzFeed* stories with publishing times:

BuzzFeed posted on April 10, 2015, at 12:26 p.m.

CEN posted on: April 10, 2014, at 10:34 am.

<http://www.BuzzFeed.com/alanwhite/im-with-stupid#.ecMa5gJvo>

BuzzFeed posted on April 7, 2015, at 6:25 p.m.

CEN posted on: 6-Apr-2015, at 11:40am.

<http://www.BuzzFeed.com/alanwhite/tha-dogfather#.vyEaPKpmo>

Could it be he has an axe to grind about the fact that his stories had gone viral 24+ hours earlier via CEN? If the snapshot of his work is anything to go by then it is possible. *BuzzFeed* may be a big noise in America, but in the UK it is having to play second fiddle to the content CEN was generating, at least if Alan's efforts are anything to go by.

CEN staff did not find one story in the two pages of his feed that the agency had deemed worth doing - but they found two CEN stories that he had lifted from somewhere else, and of course not paid for.

Alan White was the front man for the *BuzzFeed* report, Craig Silverman only revealed his role at the date of publication, and Heidi Blake not at all. But as the online commentator Mark pointed out earlier on *Press Gazette*, her absence only made her all the more conspicuous.

Whatever you may say about Heidi Blake she is a good reporter, and she would have seen the warning signs all over the *BuzzFeed* hatchet job a mile away. Craig Silverman may claim to be an expert in viral debunkings, but it seems the lure of the glory of breaking this big story was simply too much for the 'great warrior against viral news'.

But looking at Alan it is clear that he was perfectly chosen as the man to step in the firing line, as if what he has written is anything to go by, he has little understanding of the way the business works.

Being a teacher and a TV development producer before moving into journalism may have left him off to a slow start but it is also interesting that he mentions he studied at Oxford.

A recent article by a British sub-editor, a person who checks stories, proved fascinating reading for many in the UK media and in particular one part comes to mind.

In the article Margaret Ashworth, now aged 65, whose career started on the *Luton Evening Post* before subbing on the UK nationals is talking about new arrivals to journalism: *"She described the trainees as 'charming young people, with excellent degrees mainly from Oxbridge', but added that they are 'very raw and to my mind suffer from an odd lack of curiosity'.*

"'For example, if I had a story about a 'veteran' driver, shall we say, I would want to know his exact age,' Ashworth said. 'Or if it said that someone had three children and named only two, I would find out about the third.'

"This sort of question does not seem to trouble the youngsters. There was a conversation a while ago between an old-timer and a trainee who had not heard of Rudolph Valentino. 'Before my time, I'm afraid,' said the trainee breezily. 'Hitler was before mine but I've still heard of him,' was the reply. The trainee in question is now chief sub on a quality national.

"This lack of curiosity, coupled with the absence of guidance or training from the middle bench has resulted in a catastrophic drop in standards."

Oxbridge of course is Oxford and Cambridge, and Oxford was where Alan White who also seems to suffer from an odd lack of curiosity was also from. If he was more curious he might have wondered why there was not any mention of CEN's investigative work in his final report or indeed any mention of the positive work of CEN that he would have found in *Press Gazette*? Why did he think his award loving investigations boss did not put her name on the article as well? Does he really believe that it's OK to move from writing about orgasms watching *'Game of Thrones'* or grinning like a buffoon to a hatchet job on a rival without anyone noticing?

And finally, we come down to the third man, Tom Philips, who claims to have bravely made a stance against tabloid fakery now he is working for *BuzzFeed*. We could find very little about him of any significance apart from the fact that he has taken the occasional snipe at tabloid rivals in his writing. But what more do you need to say, he is somebody who was happy to work for an employer and 10 years later when he finds himself working for a rival suddenly finds the courage to reveal the shocking details of the rival's business.

He was quoted liberally in the article revealing details of his time working at a London daily when he had to deal with CEN copy. According to the *BuzzFeed* report he had apparently stopped the usage of CEN copy on journalistic grounds. The *BuzzFeed* News report says: *"Tom Phillips was a news editor at Metro in the UK in the mid-to late 2000s, he regularly used CEN stories, before stopping when he eventually became suspicious of their too-good-to-be-true nature."*

According to CEN's records there was never any stoppage or even a slow-down in the usage of CEN content. There was never any complaint about the standards, and if it was such a big issue, why did he not contact the *Media Guardian*, or *Private Eye*, or the *Press Gazette*? They are always happy for tips about media fraudsters. Why did it only become an issue on which he wanted to make a stand when he was taken on at *BuzzFeed* that clearly had an agenda in taking down a rival agency?

* * *

The story as mentioned did not include the by-line of Heidi Blake, although *BuzzFeed* itself says the story about CEN, Michael Leidig and his employees was a project involving Silverman and the 'UK investigative news team'. The UK investigations team is a team of four headed by Blake.

As Michael Leidig said: "The first thing I asked myself is: 'why was her name not on the story?' Despite the fact that it was clearly a long project in which it was inconceivable that she was not involved as department head, and she had the legal letter sent to her prior to publication, she was not bylined? Why? In fact, she was not publicly involved at any stage despite the fact it is inconceivable that she was not aware of it. Of course, to make the call to check details as she could have done would have confirmed her involvement in the *BuzzFeed* report, and for whatever reason that seems to have been something she wanted to avoid.

"Instead, she ignored my calls and emails and the legal letter and sent the author of stories like '*17 People Who Got Unspeakably Horny Due To Game Of Thrones*' to try and worm his way in here. It was an attempt at ambush journalism that has to go down as one of the saddest in the history of undercover work. I thought he had fallen off his seat when he asked for a date to do a puff piece on our 'great' agency and our award winning investigations, and we told him to get lost.

"Did she worry about speaking to me and send the inept Alan White because she knew the first thing I would say on tape and on camera is 'can we go ahead with the Microsoft story?' She knows as well as I do that a freelance or agency can't usually offer a story twice, in case you end up with two ordering it at the same time. I would have asked for an answer.

"Or did she suspect me of leaking the details of the child trafficking story that went so badly wrong? I have no idea where it broke first, but I am sure if that is the case that they may not say where it came from, but will confirm it was not from me or CEN."

Leidig believes that the probe into the agency's work actually started before Blake joined *BuzzFeed*, a suspicion backed up by Silverman's

many interviews in his campaign against fakes, but the question remains as to what happened to the offer of the Microsoft corruption story, who saw that email, and why was she so keen to not be associated with the report even though she must have been intimately involved?

Heidi Blake likes the limelight, not exactly something that fits in well with being an undercover reporter and possible one of the reasons she left the *Sunday Times*. She won three prizes at the British Journalism Awards.

She specialises in entrapment journalism, but it's not the only thing she does. Her recent investigation into the FIFA Files where the Insight team of Blake and Jonathan Calvert obtained hundreds of millions of secret documents was a classic example of good old-fashioned journalism that justified an award.

But the projects that made her famous were her entrapment probes. There are cameras to record the interview in which the unwitting suspect boasts of their connections and abilities, and recordings of telephone conversations to prove the point. Based on what we know she likes awards, and a name, so why would she have stepped aside and let her underlings share the glory?

In their own press release announcing her appointment *BuzzFeed* said: "*BuzzFeed News announced today that it has hired Heidi Blake, who has won multiple journalism awards and is currently an assistant editor at The Sunday Times, to build and lead an investigative team in the UK.*"

It went on: "*In London, Blake will initially lead a team of three reporters on ground-breaking untold stories that combine the best of traditional reporting with the tools and philosophy of the social web.*"

"*Blake will also work closely with Luke Lewis, Editor-in-Chief of BuzzFeed UK and the growing London office.*"

And it continued with a quote from Blake: "*I couldn't be more excited to be joining BuzzFeed News to lead a brand new investigations team in London after three wonderful years at The Sunday Times. It's a chance to combine the fearless and forensic reporting that makes Fleet Street great with the vibrancy and technological brilliance that marks BuzzFeed out as a defining news organisation of the 21st Century. BuzzFeed News has assembled a world-class investigations team in the US whose outstanding reporting is already blazing a new trail for journalism in the digital age. The London-based team will join them in rooting out corruption, holding power to account and breaking seismic stories for a ballooning global audience. It's a watershed moment for investigative journalism in Britain and I'm thrilled to be part of it.*"

That as we now know started with the investigation into CEN.

As Michael Leidig says: "I read that interview and thought it would mean a chance to do something new, I didn't realise of course that this would mean trying to take down CEN.

"As far as I am concerned we may be the first victim of their investigations unit, but will we be the last? By subscribing to our feed and then a year later using that material against us, wherever they claim they got it, it should raise serious questions about anyone that supplies *BuzzFeed* with news. Who will be the next agency or freelancer that they target? And what will be the reason then? They can argue they did not take note of the Microsoft memo, that nobody saw it or that it was not even delivered, but they cannot deny 8,000+ CEN stories sent to their news queue that then became the subject of that same *BuzzFeed* investigation.

To suggest they struggled to find CEN copy is simply not true. In journalism, the end is often seen to justify the means, and deceit and subterfuge may arguably be acceptable when it comes to criminal enterprises. But with so little at the end of such a long investigation did the *BuzzFeed* CEN report really justify the deceit?

"And if everyone gets wiped out where will news come from? *BuzzFeed*? Is that the future? Will there simply be *BuzzFeed* style news organisation feeding on themselves in an ever smaller circle generating mindless click bait with sensational headlines and little or no content?

* * *

Chapter 6

And Finally

'In recent years, CEN has become one of the Western media's primary sources of tantalising and attention-grabbing stories. They're often bizarre, salacious, gruesome, or ideally all three ...'
- **BuzzFeed article on CEN.**

BuzzFeed started taking CEN news items after they requested them in 2013. Despite their later denial of being a customer, in that time, upwards of 8,000 emails with CEN material complete with confidential notes on sources to editors, video links and pictures have been supplied for the *BuzzFeed* news queue and therefore were available for the Heidi Blake-led UK investigative team to read. This includes warnings on possible areas of weakness, the veracity of sources, and other confidential notes.

As a customer, they also had the right to ask about any story, and they did with phone calls and emails. This gave them further valuable insight into the way CEN operates.

As Michael Leidig sums it up: "Over the course of a year we can prove with email traffic that numerous *BuzzFeed* staff received all of our new items. Those would have been available to anyone in their news team that accessed their system."

BuzzFeed would probably have had little detail about CEN prior to 2013. With no visible independent online presence, it works B2B, supplying news and information to professional media outlets.

And although *BuzzFeed* deny it, CEN and *BuzzFeed* in what they produce are very clearly rivals. They look for the same news content, as demonstrated by Alan White's recycling of CEN news 24 hours later. The only way the two differ is in the way of publishing. And as a result there was on the face of it no reason for CEN to say no when *BuzzFeed* contacted them and asked for content, there would have been no reason to suspect that it was for any reason other than to republish.

As Leidig adds: "Our business is not selling adverts to Microsoft, or doing high profile PR campaigns disguised as news, it is purely about providing content to our clients. It is enormously liberating as a journalist to do whatever you think is interesting. Only one part of our business is spotting viral news before it goes viral, and selling it to news

organisations who then publish it first. We also do award-winning investigative journalism, and we do campaigning journalism, and we fight for the rights of freelancers and other small agencies, attempt to build projects helping freelancers to connect and to get published.

“And most of all, even though people that only heard of us through *BuzzFeed* may be surprised, we believe in the profession.”

Most people will know big news wire agencies like Reuters or Associated Press, but few - and that includes an American news organisation like *BuzzFeed* - would be aware that there is also a flourishing market for small press agencies like CEN across the UK.

They grew out of the Fleet Street tradition to have stringers - correspondents - in every major town in the United Kingdom and in most major world capitals where there were not staff correspondents already in place. Agencies or freelancers like these became the backbone of the British newspaper industry. They dug, they found the nuggets, and polished them and sold them on for shining display in newspapers and magazines. When staffing roles were cut back ever more as the financial pressures grew on newspapers, the importance of agencies like CEN grew. Initially each agency was unique by its geographical location, but later some of them started to specialise. An agency located near one of the big UK football clubs might have started focusing purely on sport, whereas another agency in the home of the Royals in Windsor might have begun concentrating on the Royal family. Some of those agencies like South West expanded to become organisations in the UK with editorial teams to rival the national newspapers they were supplying, while others like Barcroft or South West or Splash have expanded beyond the borders of the UK to become truly international news organisations.

Leidig said: “CEN has always been a small player for many reasons with what some might say is a 20 year unhealthy obsession with quirky news, but 18 months ago this section of our business started to expand rapidly. There is enormous interest in quirky news if you have correspondents around the world capable of delivering quality content. Having been in operation since 1995, we have an established relationship with many UK newspapers.

“Our agency has always produced viral news, which was then known in the print business as quirky news, and in broadcast journalism as the ‘And Finally’ news, designed to leave the viewer or listener with a smile. It is one of the reasons that we have built a global network of correspondents in a business that invests all of the profits back into journalism.

“On the viral news that we generate, the product now is not much different to what it was 20-years-ago to the reader. In fact, the only difference is that we now cover the entire world, whereas before we really concentrated on central and eastern Europe.

“But the way that news is gathered has changed so much that it’s no longer recognisable. It was a business model that worked in 1995 because in this pre-internet age many newspapers were continuing with the process of pulling out foreign correspondents in the same way as they cut back on district reporters in the UK. That was leaving them with little or no coverage from countries for stories that were not picked up by *Reuters* or *Associated Press*.

“With staff on the ground in countries in central and Eastern Europe, we could fill that gap, especially for the quality. Indeed at that time, it was only really the quality papers like the *Times* and the *Telegraph*, or broadcasters like the *BBC*, that had a real appetite and a budget for foreign news.

“Ironically the quirky (viral) news for which we have now come under fire, although it has always been present in what we do, was far from being a big part of our business for most of the time. It is certainly not something that was tacked on because we could no longer sell quality news.

“For sure the biggest income especially in the early days came from working for the *Guardian*, *Sunday Telegraph* and *Sunday Times* - which was later expanded to providing content to the *Times* and *Telegraph*. *The Observer* was also later a client.

“In the news business in which we operate we supply clients that have a clearly defined market, but the type of journalism we do is across a spectrum that is as broad as our client base. It might be an in-depth look at a business for a specialist trade magazine or a human interest feature for a woman’s magazine, it could be an undercover investigation for the *Sunday Times* insight team or research for a TV documentary. And it could equally be hunting down Nazi war criminals for the *Sun*.”

Organisations attempting to run so called ‘quality’ and ‘tabloid’ journalism in the same stable quickly came under fire. The public perception might be that the *Times* publishes only law reports and *The Sun* only topless models, when the truth is that a balance of light and heavy stories can be found in all broadsheet and tabloid newspapers.

Andrew Phelps from the Nieman Journalism Lab once pointed out that one of the most popular online sites, *Gawker*, seemed to contain two opposite types of content ranging from Chinese goats on the one hand, and real journalism on the other.

He noted: “Half of the people think *Gawker* is diluting its high-quality material with Chinese goats; the other half think *Gawker* should stick to Chinese goats and stop trying to do real journalism.”

But the reality is that an ability to write across a broad spectrum can only benefit a writer. To criticise a tabloid journalist, you need to be able to do tabloid journalism as well, because only then can you really

understand the demands, the problems, and how to produce a report that meets the standard.

Tabloid media has suffered hugely in recent years with phone hacking and sensationalist regurgitation of celebrity PR, but the reality of tabloid journalism is that it should also be about taking on the biggest bully in the playground, about chasing the story regardless of whether it is politically correct – and in many cases in starting the ball rolling on a subject that might otherwise never have been noticed.

Tabloid media also deals with serious issues of course, but attempts to put them in a form where people are going to bother to read them, the rights of women, children or animals, for example. These issues are dealt with every day by CEN and unlike many news media are tackled in both a tabloid and a quality news feed.

When it comes to tackling any issue, tabloid writers are the SWAT team that kick the doors down and go in with all guns blazing, and quality writers are the forensic team that move in afterwards to make sure they really nail the bad guys.

Leidig said: “When the aim of any report is the need to inform, educate and entertain, I would argue that to write for *The Sun* you need to be able to entertain, but to write for the *Financial Times* or the *Times* you learn about informing and educating. But understanding of the entire spectrum actually helps to do all three. Many broadsheet journalists would benefit from being able to tell their lengthy and sometimes dull stories in the form used by the tabloids, and likewise tabloid writers would benefit sometimes from using facts that are often far more sensational than the tabloid buzz words they are encased in.

“As for CEN, variety has always been a strength. But as with *Gawker*, now our Chinese goats are being used to destroy the rest of what we do instead of to strengthen it.”

Unlike the public, the media professionals CEN works with such as the desk editors judge it on what it delivers, and there is a maxim in the business that you are only as good as your last story. Get it wrong and you will not be asked again.

CEN does not only deliver copy that can be cut and pasted to the page, the newspapers and magazines of the world also contact CEN when they do not have somebody in the right place at the right time, and they want CEN to provide freelance cover. That might be a football match, a visiting celebrity, a request at the local version of Companies House or something more complicated like unravelling a family tree.

It has the advantage that CEN staff never really know who they are going to be working for, or what they are going to be doing from one day to the next. And it has the advantage of creating a journalist really capable of producing content that matches the BBC definition of what journalism is all about - to inform, to educate and to entertain. So with few people outside the media business aware of what CEN does, and

new clients being added all the time, especially as contacts moved from one paper to the other, it was not a surprise when in December 2013 *BuzzFeed* became a client and realised perhaps for the first time the extent and breadth of what CEN was delivering.

The person who contacted the agency was Matthew Tucker, who had worked with Central European News at AOL and in the three years had been, according to his email, a fan of its content. As he wrote to the CEN picture desk at the time: "A quick note to let you know that I'm moving on from the Picture Desk at UK/AOL UK. It has been a pleasure working with you over the last three years!"

He asked to continue receiving the CEN news when he was at *BuzzFeed*, but after buying a few items, by April 15th they were haggling about the price. The orders dried up, but as it was not cancelled the feed continued.

The *BuzzFeed* claim therefore that they only managed to find 41 stories to investigate is entirely disingenuous, and the wording is just one of many examples of the way *BuzzFeed* news attempts to manipulate the facts. They wrote: "*Because BuzzFeed is no longer one of CEN's clients, it has sometimes proved impossible for us to verify absolutely that a particular story has been circulated by CEN, as opposed to just the pictures on which its credit sits...*"

As mentioned, emails in the CEN database prove this claim to be untrue. They show that CEN were sending every story written complete with video and pictures as requested to the addresses requested by Matthew between December 2013 and the end of 2014, and that it continued after that to some isolated addresses like richard.james@BuzzFeed.com, when he asked to be taken off the feed:

From: Richard James [<mailto:richard.james@BuzzFeed.com>]
Sent: 12 February 2015 12:17
To: online@cenagency.com; kathryn.quinn@cen.at
Subject: Please remove me from your mailing list
Hi there,
Please can you remove me from your mailing list.
Thank you,
Richard James | UK News Editor | @richjamesuk
BuzzFeed: The Social News and Entertainment Company
19-21 Hatton Garden, London, EC1N 8BA

And the agency's former friend and previous regular customer Mathew Blake was also still getting the feed. He sent a note on 2

February 2015 enquiring if CEN could confirm ownership of a set of pictures. With hindsight, maybe the enquiry was not so innocent.

So *BuzzFeed* tells the world they are not a customer, but neglects to mention that after telling CEN in 2013 they wanted to be a customer, they had for a year received every single story the agency generated.

BuzzFeed tells the world they found it hard to track down which stories were from CEN: *“BuzzFeed News – contrary to the claim made in the legal letter – is no longer one of CEN’s clients, it has sometimes proved impossible for us to verify absolutely that a particular story has been circulated by CEN, as opposed to just the pictures on which its credit sits, although we believe that selling both picture and story together is the firm’s invariable practice. Instead, we have relied on similarities between the copy on the company’s sites and other published versions of the story, or on the fact that competing news organisations have produced near-identical stories, featuring matching quotes and details, accompanied by pictures credited to CEN.”*

So *BuzzFeed* claimed they were not a customer – glossing over the fact that they still had all the stories as if they were a customer. They still continued to publish the stories they were sent as if they were a customer as well. And they still asked questions as if they were a customer. In fact, the only difference between *BuzzFeed* and CEN’s other customers was that they no longer paid for what they used, and instead said they were sourced from a CEN client that had paid for them.

BuzzFeed may feel accepting a product, using it and then not paying for it by saying they took it from someone else does not make them a customer. But there are few others that would agree.

In addition, the fact that those stories were sent to *BuzzFeed* makes the sentence above about how hard it was to track CEN copy and pictures seem rather flawed. They wrote: *“We believe that selling both picture and story together is the firm’s invariable practice”*. In reality, they knew it was the firm’s invariable practice because they had the stories in their system, pictures, video and text all packaged together into one. It was complete with confidential editor notes and attached pictures and videos.

It is also unclear why it then *“proved impossible for us to verify absolutely that a particular story has been circulated by CEN”*?

* * *

One of the reason the *BuzzFeed* report was so damning is that it implied such a high percentage of the CEN material was fake or embellished. But how many of the CEN stories are suspect in say the 8,000 news and picture items that *BuzzFeed* were sent? Clearly it

would be too much to check every one from scratch, but there are formulas that can be used to make a decent estimate.

As any scientist will tell you, in order to answer a question like how many of the 8,000 stories that were sent to *BuzzFeed* are correct, you only need to take a sample of say 41 and carefully check that number – exactly as *BuzzFeed* did. If you find one is fake then the chances are that the percentage is repeated across the entire selection. So one fake story in 41 (2.4%) from a random selection of 8,000 will mean 195 fake stories in 8,000. But in *BuzzFeed*'s random selection, there was not 1 but 11 that were 'complete fakes', 8 more were 'suspect' because they added extra detail which had not been reported in other online media, and 13 others could not be verified. Only nine were 'mostly true'. And that means none at all that were completely true.

So 11 stories out of 41 is 26.82% which would mean 2,145 stories were complete fakes, if the percentage was applied to the whole 8,000. How believable is it really that 2,145 stories were fake? Can it be true that an agency generating that volume of untrue news would not have been caught out earlier? These stories were published and republished all over the world, translated and retranslated hundreds and sometimes thousands of times.

Of course the formula does not work if one does not take a random selection, and instead select only the stories where internet research by others has already identified a potential problem.

CEN for its part was unaware of the *BuzzFeed* probe as it continued to deliver its material to the online site, and at the start of April 2015 the agency received a call that many politicians and business leaders have received before them offering something tempting.

In a summarised form it boiled down to: "Hello Mr Leidig, Alan White, I am from *BuzzFeed* News, I have to say you have a great agency and congratulations on all the work you're doing. I think it's fantastic the way that you manage to fund serious investigative journalism from a tabloid news feed, love to fly over to Vienna to meet you to do a focus on your agency."

The answer was a clear no, but the request was repeated in an email sent as follows:

From: Alan White [mailto:alan.white@BuzzFeed.com]
Sent: Donnerstag, 02. April 2015 10:02
To: editor@cen.at
Subject: Follow up interview

Dear Michael,

Thanks so much for your time yesterday – I really enjoyed chatting to you and would be really pleased to continue our conversation.

The idea behind our piece is to explore the challenges of reporting in the digital age in depth, and how the appetite for quick-fire viral news can end up starving serious journalism of oxygen. I'm particularly interested in the way you manage that mix, because our chat made it clear to me that you're trying to do important, challenging investigative journalism while at the same time producing a very high volume of lighter viral or tabloid stories. I'm hugely interested in how that balance works, and I'd love to talk to you about it some more.

I was especially struck by your mention of your lengthy investigation into child trafficking and your failure so far to secure funding for it, and also the mention you made of women's rights in Turkey and child abuse in China - these are exactly the things that the current online ecosystem seems to make it harder and less rewarding to do. CEN seems to be a really interesting example of taking quirky stories from across the world and turning them around quickly for a Western audience, and then using the proceeds (as you say) to fund more substantial investigations."

He then mentions that obviously there are pitfalls in fast turnaround news stories which occasionally do not work, and repeated his offer to fly to Vienna despite the fact that the one of the last jobs CEN did with *BuzzFeed* they had wanted to pay 35 USD instead of 50 USD for a story.

The call requesting an interview was taken by Michael Leidig, who said: "It never figured in my imagination that Heidi Blake was using the same tactics you would expect for a child molester or a Mafioso or a corrupt politician to try and gain insight into what we do.

"What did occur to me was that the person writing the email didn't have any understanding of the basics of journalism. He asked for the interview, and the instant reply was no. Because *BuzzFeed* had asked to become a customer and was being sent all of our news for months, I made a few extra off the record comments and I found these quoted back at me in his email.

"Off-the-record is in practice the point in an interview between a journalist and the possible subject of a story where they get to say something without worrying that it will be quoted back at them. In practice that often means something along the lines of 'I have no comment to make, but off the record, I will sue you if you write anything bad about me'.

"However it can work well with established contacts, so when you go to a connection who knows you and trusts you, you can say: 'Off the record, what's going on here?' It allows a contact to give a reporter an idea if they are on the right track or will need to go in a different direction, without the risk of being quoted.

“So when I told Alan White I was talking off the record, I did not expect to be quoted back in an email asking to expand on those comments.

“Throughout the time when *BuzzFeed* were fencing over the interview request, I don't know why they did not simply call up straight away with the allegations instead of treating us like their other entrapment victims.”

Leidig had further calls from Alan White attempting to resurrect the Vienna interview, before finally revealing his cards in a 4,000 word email on 16 April. He said: “It was clear that CEN had been the subject of an in depth investigation into every aspect of our work, and they were now at the last stage in giving us a chance to reply.

Selected extracts include: *“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 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.

“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.”

It then lists the items that were later published in the *BuzzFeed* article and concludes: *“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.”*

Michael Leidig said: “There is not really any reply that you can make to an email like that. To my mind it was written by an organisation that had an agenda, and that was to attack what we do. If you answer them and point out their examples are flawed, they will only find out more. In addition, to explain where and how we managed to get the stories that were constantly beating *BuzzFeed* would be to reveal the secrets of how we worked to a competitor, and that was not anything we could do. Legally though we had to reply, otherwise it would have meant they could write what they want and we could not easily complain afterwards.

“I could not have claimed I did not see the email, it was sent to the firm's UK address, had been emailed to staff, and then sent to our clients as well.

"One of my former colleagues now living in France even got a call with the same attempt at subterfuge. She cut him off when she realised the way the questioning was going, and then called me to ask if I was aware that *BuzzFeed News* were making various allegations about CEN. I asked her to send me an immediate memo while it was fresh in her mind detailing everything and was shocked by the contents.

This is the memo:

April 17, 2015

At 9.49 am CET on April 17, 2015 I received a call on my mobile phone from the number +39 075 572 0741. The phone also displayed the word 'Perugia' under the number.

A man introduced himself to me (I didn't catch his name and didn't note it down). He said he was from BuzzFeed which he asked if I had heard of. It rings a vague bell so I said yes, thinking it might be a client I had dealt with in the past.

He said he was doing a report about stories that go viral on social media and that in his research he had come across my name as being one of the founders of CEN. I corrected him saying I had not been a founder but I had worked there right at the beginning.

He said he realised that at that time (he gave me the year 1995) social media didn't really exist but it was around the birth of the Internet and he was interested in how we worked.

In no particular order, details I remember giving him about CEN: that it was founded by Mike Leidig and Tom Hagler, that there were very few of us at the beginning with me working full time while Mike and Tom continued part time with Blue Danube Radio, that we also had a translator (I didn't mention Lizzie by name), that we basically scoured Austrian news for items which might be of interest abroad (the only example I gave him was the Austrian law on men doing housework), that we had little competition back then because only Reuters had an office in Vienna and one of their three members of staff was permanently at the IAEA.

I believe I said we had some stringers in other central/east European countries.

His line of questioning then shifted to the veracity of CEN reports now. I immediately said I was only prepared to talk to him about what I saw when I was there and was not in a position to comment about anything since I left.

He persisted, saying they had looked into a number of stories and found them to not stand up or that perhaps the picture was real but the story connected with it wasn't. I repeated my refusal to comment on anything since I had been there.

He also said CEN was producing stories out of India and China that seemed completely untrue. I repeated my no comment line again. He

asked me whether, based on my experience of working with Mike Leidig, I thought him capable of making up stories.

I told him that I did not like the direction his questions were taking, that Mike Leidig was a personal friend of mine and I did not want to answer any more of his questions.

At some point in the conversation (towards the end) he asked how long I had been with CEN and when I told him eight months he seemed a little disappointed it hadn't been longer.

This is my best recollection of the conversation which took place roughly five hours ago."

It showed that *BuzzFeed* were using more entrapment journalism. Michael leidig added: "I know I am repeating myself but it seems supremely ironic that the last time we (Heidi and CEN) worked together, I pulled out of the project because I didn't approve of her trying to entrap impoverished gypsy families by offering them cash to sell their babies. I offered child trafficking to Heidi and the *Sunday Times* Insight team, it was my idea, and I have been left scratching my head as to why somebody that had worked with me on at least two investigations, and could potentially have worked with me on any of the stories above, for some reason had opted to work on a story about my agency.

"In a world of journalism increasingly starved of resources *BuzzFeed* could, I believe, have spent its time better in championing those who stick up for the craft and its agents. They could have lauded our efforts reporting on child slavery, trafficking, refugees, crime. They could have joined in with their own efforts. But the reality it is an organization which feeds from their opponents, and they simply do not want to pay.

"Over the last few months we have done many serious investigations, from items like how Iran was hoping to set up trade deals in advance of having the trade embargo lifted, arms smuggling or the funding of Isis terrorists through to a UN probe into the difficulties of a family with a disabled child.

"None of the above stories can be done in under a month, and often they don't even get published. But we still do them and send them out and occasionally we find one of our contacts is interested.

"The fact that we do many stories that sometimes never get published shows news is at the heart of what we do, and it is not really wasted. The media landscape we used to have is changed forever, and something new is going to emerge, and if our agency is at the centre of that in doing something, we're going to be in the right place to catch the wave. That is why we invest a lot of money on quality in-depth investigations.

"By far the biggest investigation we have ever done has been the trafficking of children that Heidi and Insight so spectacularly messed up. It involves extremely dangerous gangs gathering children from

impoverished Eastern European, mostly Roma, families and using them in the West for begging, prostitution, stealing and even in one documented court case, organ harvesting.

"It arose out of a related investigation with a former *Sunday Telegraph* Foreign Editor who had wanted some suggestions for great front-page stories to be really eye-catching for a relaunch of the paper planned for 2006.

"At this stage I'm sure Heidi will be impressed by the fact that every email that comes and goes from this company is saved, and also many of the telephone conversations are recorded. Purely for training purposes of course, and nothing to do with the fact that every time somebody calls leaving threats about the latest story we are working on, the inevitable question from our client newspaper is 'did you get it on tape?'"

Of course CEN don't save all telephone conversations, although they do keep all emails. What decides the fate of a recording depends on whether it has any relevance to something CEN might be writing about, and fortunately the human trafficking story it was actually a two-part piece. One of the parts was the eventual story in which CEN wanted to publish about the situation with regards to trafficking in children. That was one Heidi knows all about.

But the second part was for the trade press, and was an investigation into the difficulties of doing in-depth investigations independently in terms of getting a commission or getting sponsorship. It meant that Leidig kept not only details of the fact that he had offered the story to a huge swathe of media clients, 15 in total, but also detailed notes on the conversations and emails lasting over a month with sponsorship organisations like the The Pascal Decroos Fund for Investigative Journalism. And included in the emails and conversations with 15 CEN clients it includes the *Sunday Times* Insight team – and Heidi Blake. CEN offered the child trafficking to them as a follow up to the agency's Paul Foot award winning investigation for the *Sunday Telegraph* on trafficking in women.

Insight was chosen as a possible place for the child trafficking story as it always needs new ideas, because as well as publishing a vast number of exclusives, it also has many other ideas going on at any one time some of which never end up being published for many reasons.

The idea was pitched and then resent several times with updates. The following is just one of the emails that form part of that correspondence, and an important thing to bear in mind is that a spec⁸³ offer is not the final story, it is simply an outline of what a freelance or agency believes the eventual story will be and an idea of what is being investigated. This

⁸³ In item sent usually only as a brief outline on spec, which means speculative in the hope the newsdesk will want to commission the item.

email was addressed not to Heidi but to a colleague on Insight and it said:

"Was good to talk to you earlier – and as promised here is the outline of the special investigation I would like to do about the baby harvesters of Eastern Europe. One report about the black market of trafficking with children in Romania alone included some 30,000 children and sums worth a billion euro.

"Basically there are a great many children born in Romania that fall under the radar of official statistics. Mostly they are born to gypsy communities where great store is set on a woman's fertility and they are encouraged to have as many children as possible from as early an age as possible. 12-year-old mothers are not even uncommon - marriages made sometimes before children are even born. Romanian officials treat the gypsy community as an underclass and rarely bother to apply the same laws that they do to the rest of the country – often children particularly in remote areas are not even registered – they officially don't exist - sometimes even being born to mothers who officially don't exist. The director of Bucharest based Caritas Hospital, Dr Bogdan Jansen, admits he has been forced to make sure staff lock up the 18 persona non grata babies he has in his maternity ward to stop them falling prey to the child traders. He said: 'They are a big problem. Technically they should not be in hospital as they are not ill, but they cannot be evicted as there is nowhere for them to go. They have no birth certificate and no identity number, and no family to care if they were to vanish. We are hard pressed to fund caring for them and certainly can't afford a security guard as well, so locking the doors of the maternity ward is the only safe option.' He said he had also asked security staff to demand ID papers from all people leaving with a baby, saying the extra checks were vital because he could not rule out that his own staff might be looking to cash in on the trade by allowing unwanted babies to be removed.

"These children are worth a lot of money as various gypsy leaders discovered after the borders opened – they are first used for begging then when they are older the boys are forced into stealing or are disabled so they can carry on begging and the girls are forced into prostitution or begging – still later they become gang leaders and members of the criminal network themselves. When the borders were opened these children were defenceless – there were a great many numbers of cases of children being stolen or kidnapped either from hospitals or from poor parents – single mothers for example who gave birth and had the children taken away immediately. There was a ready market among people in Israel and Italy notably whether mother would say that the man adopting was the father easing the paperwork through. But more recently there has been a wholesale harvesting of

these children - and the number one destination now is the United Kingdom. The UK officials were just not geared up to understanding the nature of the problem and as a result it is a paradise for the child smugglers. Children seized by police are simply handed over to social services who hand them over to a group of homes always fighting amongst each other and not coordinated who then hand them back two or three days later to which ever faked relative turns up to stake a claim to the child – they are not even sent back to Romania. Even if they were it wouldn't do any good – Romania only ever paid lipservice to helping these children by setting up 80 specialist treatment centres, but as soon as they had EU membership they closed these down. That means that in the unlikely event of any child ever actually being sent back to Romania – they are handed straight out of the parents with no checks and a few days later are back on the streets in London. Romania did ban international adoptions but it simply drove the whole business underground and meant it is even more lucrative as there is now no official channel or way for couples that would like for example to adopt to get these children. There is also a strong suspicion that with only Romanians allowed to adopt, that the children are also being passed onto unsuitable parents. Obviously, this is also going on in Bulgaria but I have less strong connections there although I do have one case of two girls being shipped to the UK that had simply been bought off the streets where they officially do not exist and were easy targets for child traders. Romania's adoption boss Theodora Bertzi, admitted: "I have heard that babies are fetching as much as 10,000 euros." She said children abandoned in maternity or paediatric wards were the most sought after because they come with a blank slate 'no questions asked'.

"I am prepared to invest a lot of my time and the time of my staff in this project - but we are looking at a time line where we probably wouldn't see the report before at the very earliest two weeks and probably a month – there are numerous leads to follow up although I have a lot of material already. I will keep costs down to a minimum but even if I don't charge you for the journalistic work I would still need around about 2,000 GBP to cover travel and other expenses including hospitality for the various contacts I need to pull out of the bag. The story is already there – the question is how much detail of the sort you will want including personal tales of people who were fed into the network that I can get in the time allowed."

It is important to say that a lot of the above is based on interviews with contacts, not just carried out by Leidig but by other staff in the CEN organisation. Some of it might later turn out to be incorrect, but if the basic story pans out then the person that makes the spec pitch does not have any problem getting paid.

Leidig said: "Of course a timeline of between two weeks and a month was a ridiculously small amount of time and there was little possibility that the deadline could have been met if it had not been for the fact that a lot of the work had been done, two years of work in fact. However, generally deadlines on timeless stories like this can be extended and once they had agreed that they wanted to cover it an extension would have been possible. In addition, we had already contacted a number of freelancers who were ready and willing to work on the story and confident that they could deliver the goods.

"The fee of 2,000 GBP was also a joke, but still a lot for an investigations budget to match. The plan here had been for us to subsidise the story, but we wanted to make sure the Insight team were really committed. And that meant getting them to put money they could ill afford to waste on the table."

CEN managed to get the *Sunday Times* to agree to commission further research on a smaller budget, pending a full commission, and at that point started dealing with Heidi directly.

Leidig said: "I worked with her for some time on the project and arranged for my correspondents around the world in relevant countries to send a detailed feed explaining exactly how the network worked. One attended for example a trafficking congress in Romania to get contacts, we approached a Romanian investigative unit to make contact about a co-operation, and I met a contact from the social services that tackles the issue in Vienna to get an update.

"My understanding was that once they had all the reports from the team, they needed to get the budget rubber-stamped. In the post Leveson era, as the Insight team told me, you need to do almost all the work on standing up a story in the first place before you can do it for real.

"The management were not prepared to simply say yes without knowing what they might get in advance, and that involved our pre-investigation to test the water. Reports were commissioned from our staff in Italy, Romania, Slovakia and Bulgaria outlining what angles might be taken and what the realistic chances were of success. The decision at the end, however, was that it was too expensive."

Leidig added: "I was extremely disappointed when we were told no. I heard it first from another Insight editor, but that was then followed up with a call from Heidi to apologise. She told me they had decided to do it the simple way, which was using entrapment journalism. I told her that as a journalist for hire we usually accept most assignments from news

clients, but I told her that I had done the same thing she was planning years earlier,⁸⁴ and discovered it was just not appropriate.

“Offering impoverished families in Romania or Bulgaria cash to sell a child had been already done dozens of times before – including by me – and it does not make any difference to anything.

“The sad fact is that child trafficking is very real, and nobody is doing anything about, or cares about it, or indeed anything except in the occasional sensational case like the blonde Greek baby.

“There was no way I was going to throw away a story that was crying out for a professional job and replace it with a cheap piece of entrapment journalism. I told her that I would be charging nothing for my work for Insight as they had rejected my idea and I was keeping it to sell elsewhere, but that she would have to pay the CEN correspondents that worked on the story for her⁸⁵.

“I also kept the emails confirming my decision to walk and why. It was never the intention to use them to embarrass those who decided against using the story for whatever reason, and had been to allow a discussion in general terms of the pitfalls of attempting to do investigative journalism in the modern world as an independent.”

After CEN cancelled the project, Heidi Blake had called to commiserate and Leidig said: “I had been surprised and pleased when Heidi called. I had already told Insight I was walking, the call was out-of-the-blue in which she told me she understood my decision not to work with them, she respected it, but she couldn’t be responsible for the fact that the management did not want to spend the money. She said that she would keep my number and details to hand. She said she was looking forward to working with me on a different project.

“So when I heard that she was at *BuzzFeed* and controlling the budget, and had been so friendly, encouraging and genuine it seemed logical that she would want to get in touch with me about the baby trafficking story.

“Mistakenly, I believed my warning to her over the child trafficking story that had proved absolutely correct after it resulted in a high-profile disaster might have given me some credibility with her for doing it properly the next time.”

To quote the Media Guardian section of the British broadsheet newspaper for the details:

⁸⁴ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/romania/1448140/I-know-one-with-blonde-hair-green-eyes-very-beautiful-you-will-love-her.-The-price-70.html>

⁸⁵ When a newspaper commissions a story they agree to pay, and in turn the freelance hands over the intellectual rights to the story. To accept a payment from the Insight team would have meant it was not possible to offer it elsewhere and therefore it was stressed that no charge would be made.

"This is one of those crazy things that can happen to undercover journalists engaging in a spot of subterfuge.

"Two Sunday Times investigative reporters, Jonathan Calvert and Heidi Blake, set out to discover whether it was possible to purchase a Bulgarian baby.

"What was supposed to be a straightforward purchase case ended up as a case of the biter bit. Bulgarian TV station, Nova, and its reporter, sensing a sting operation going down, turned the tables on the duo in some style. The result is a hilarious six-minute video, still viewable on the Guardian⁸⁶ - in which reporter Veronika Dimitrova plays them along while they are covertly filming her.

"We are very amused by this - it hasn't ever happened to us before!" said Blake, trying to pass off the train wreck of their probe as something of a light-hearted joke.

"We have found lots of women in Bulgaria offered to sell their babies or act as surrogates for cash. How about you? We are also looking at Romania, Georgia and Ukraine and other countries," says Blake at one point in the video.

"It led to renewed, so far unsubstantiated, reports that Insight is to face the chop. But it still rumbles on."

CEN was told about how the investigation had derailed by its Bulgarian freelance contact some time before it appeared in the *Guardian* and Leidig rang his Insight contact to discuss it.

He said: "As soon as he heard my voice he said: 'Leidig, how did you find out?'

"What those who followed the story in the *Media Guardian* and others didn't realise of course was that I had warned Insight not to do it, or that I refused to get involved because it was a bad idea. And what they also didn't realise was that my Bulgarian correspondent that had told me about the story had also offered it elsewhere when I had told him I was not prepared to include it in our feed.

"That other person was Mazher Mahmood, the 'Fake Sheikh' of *News of the World* fame, and he had been spying on the two groups of reporters hoping for an exclusive. He told me had seen the advert by Heidi and Jonathan, and told Mazher that there was a British family trying to buy a baby.

"So you had the bizarre situation where Heidi and Jonathan were inside being interviewed by Bulgarian journalists selling a baby to each other, and outside you had a photographer and journalist working with Mazher Mahood trying to photograph them.

⁸⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2014/apr/17/sundaytimes-bulgaria>

Leidig said: "I spoke only a month ago to a *Sunday Times* contact who knows her, and I mentioned in passing that she seemed to have been rather quiet since joining *BuzzFeed* News. That silence in refusing to take my calls or answer my emails is now no longer such a surprise.

"I don't think that Heidi was employed to take down CEN, as she was open and friendly enough when I wrote to congratulate her on her job, and reminded her that we could still resurrect my child trafficking piece if needed.

"On 14 January I wrote to her on LinkedIn as I was not sure whether she was still at the *Sunday Times* and accessing her Insight team email. My message said: 'Happy New Year and all that, and congratulations on the appointment. Read it in *Press Gazette*. Child Trafficking is still out there if you are interested, also I have a new investigations team with a former *Dow Jones / Wall Street Journal* reporter.' The same day at 19.00 she replied:

'Hi Mike!

Great to hear from you. I'd love to chat to you about your investigations. Jonathan and I are up against a fiendish deadline on our book about Fifa just now, but could we touch base in February? I haven't moved yet but am accessing BuzzFeed email — heidi.blake@BuzzFeed.com

Speak soon!

Heidi.'

Leidig added: "And that's why on the same day, again on 14th of January at 7 PM, I added the update on Strasser that I had sent to Insight in a reply to her, and started the discussion on whether she wanted my Microsoft story.

"In the news business you don't give all the details, I learned that lesson when I once sent a story to a foreign desk of an unnamed newspaper that I discovered routinely harvested any stories from the foreign desk and syndicated them. I had sent the story as an outline, and was stunned when it ended up being published in an Irish newspaper word for word.

"So my conversation with Heidi did, out of necessity, not have too much detail. I started out pointing out that we were already a *BuzzFeed* contributor in an email that went as follows:

"Yes, we already do a lot of work for BuzzFeed but not anything you'd be interested in, it's the tabloid stories that provide the funding for everything else we do.

"Mind you I reckon I'm happier with that than taking money for PR or marketing firms to include stuff in our news feed."

I told her that we had often been approached to do PR work but did not name any of those who had contacted us, and then continued:

"What I want to do is deliver finished investigations that we do here simply because we are interested in them, like the child trafficking, and to have a network of editors like you trying to place the items where they will probably find the most interest. Money is not the main priority, happy also to work for free if the story is the right one, at the end of the day it all helps to build up a reputation for what we are doing."

Perhaps it might have been a good idea to stop at that stage, and wait-and-see interest, but I believed that Heidi Blake was somebody I could trust, if my Insight contacts trusted her than I did as well, and so I offered her the story that we had unpublished in our catalogue which I thought would be most interesting. I wrote:

"I'm happy to talk in February, although I do have a story on corruption involving Microsoft and the former PR agency that used to employ the British justice minister Grayling which is written and ready to go – are you interested in looking at it? I have all the leaked documents necessary to keep the lawyers happy.

"I had been planning to do it for my friend at Private Eye exclusively but he decided the Grayling angle was too weak. He is quite correct of course, the only connection really is that it's the place he used to work and I don't think he had anything to do with the Microsoft deal which I found out about.

"Anyway, also happy to leave it until February where I'm sure we will have some other ideas and good luck with the book project, sounds very exciting. I can't say that my books have ever been very well read, but I've always enjoyed doing them and I consoled myself with it's not getting there, but it's how you get there that counts.

"Pass my regards onto (name deleted), and I will leave you with my Strasser story sent earlier this week to the UK media."

Was she the only one looking at my message or were others accessing her email? Was *BuzzFeed* aware of the email sent to Heidi from seeing my email to her *BuzzFeed* address? Did she ask if there was any interest in my idea to her boss or anyone else at *BuzzFeed*? Is that the reason she never contacted me again? Is that the point at which *BuzzFeed* started looking at CEN in earnest?

Until an insider comes forward it will never be known: But what is a fact is that I sent her a story about corruption at Microsoft, she broke off all contact, and the next thing I knew her team had turned us over with a 7,000 word mostly inaccurate analysis of our content.

Leidig said: "When I heard that she was editor of *BuzzFeed* news investigations, and given her earlier assurances, it seemed logical to contact her to offer her the Microsoft investigation from our agency. This year we have looked at dozens of cases of corruption and abuse

from our small team that is dotted across the globe. It does not matter if it is arms smuggling, sanctions busting or corrupt politicians - we do a broad spectrum of news that is offered in strict confidence to our clients.

"What future is there for the business though if media uses the trust that exists with other media to do 'campaigning journalism', as Heidi calls her *BuzzFeed* reporting, to wipe out a rival?"

"Heidi never replied, the line went dead, and although I called several times afterwards inquiring about whether she was interested in taking items from us like the Microsoft story, she never replied. Was she annoyed I had reminded her of the child trafficking, which although a disaster was a story I had warned them about? Could it possibly be that she was unhappy about the fact that I had slighted her by refusing to work with her in trying to trick penniless gypsies into selling their children with an offer of an unbelievable amount of money?"

"I had wanted to approach child trafficking professionally with a team across Europe. She had tackled it another way, and suffered humiliation as a result. It is not believable that she knew nothing of the investigation that was then done into CEN by her team. The only good reason for not taking calls was to keep herself and her name away from what was going on.

"In trying to find out about *BuzzFeed* I read material about its founder Jonah Peretti including an interview with writer Felix Salmon that listed ways in which way in which he differs from most other moguls. It said 'If you succeed in building something similarly successful as a result, he will be cheering you all the way'. That has not been our experience.

"*BuzzFeed* and Heidi were well aware of the attempts to fight for causes we believe in. They also read the *Press Gazette*, yet all their quotes from the many articles available were all selectively chosen to cast us in the worst light. They make plenty of mention of their own position, but although their initial email approach showed they knew about our other work, and they wanted to underline it, in the end there was no mention of our investigations which were being sold to others, or published on CEN's own online media or in books.

"Silverman makes a sneering comment in his first CEN article about my 'self-published' book on Bernie Madoff, as if self-publishing a book is for losers. The reality is that no publisher wanted to publish a book that takes on one of the most powerful financial institutions in Europe. The book generated almost a dozen news articles in Austria's largest newspaper. I should ask him how many journalists he knows that are prepared to take on a Blue Chip firm with top lawyers without a media backer? Silverman could also have asked the Madoff Trustee off the record for a view on the book if he wanted to sneer at it.

"At lunch with the head of the US investigation into the Madoff case he told me: 'Your book came at us like a bolt out of the blue, there was so much in it, so many answers to questions that we had not managed

to find out about. And the really interesting thing was the way different bits interested different people, everyone was reading it, and everyone was trying to talk about a different part'.

"I recall a statistic from 2011 around when I was considering adding PR to what we did where it was claimed that the industry in the UK had a 7.5bn GBP turnover and employed 61,600 people all generating content. To write a one-page press release I could earn 800 GBP. Then to send a news item on to a newspaper using the dedicated CEN line⁸⁷ on behalf of a paying customer could bring upwards of 1,000 GBP.

"Providing a pic or video can triple that, and then there is the consultation fees and everything else rolled in. Against that media clients like *BuzzFeed* offer 50 GBP or 50 USD depending on whether it is the US or UK desk."

Looking ahead to the future, will anyone want to offer *BuzzFeed* news afraid that they might be next? And if the payment issues CEN has are repeated elsewhere in the industry, then why would anybody want to offer them content?

Leidig said: "Quite apart from all the many issues already raised here the all abiding one seems to be the question that nobody has answered about who is going to be providing the original content if you only have the likes of *BuzzFeed*, which is simply taking news from everybody else. Somebody has to be creating it.

"Even the PR industry must realise that there needs to be genuine news happening if there is not to be a complete breakdown in trust from the public in what they are being given to read.

"It is perfectly clear why *BuzzFeed* are now so keen to get into quality journalism and are spending a fortune on hiring people with the good name to provide that content. We tried the same business model of tabloid only content five years ago, and realised then that it didn't work.

"In 2012 CEN invested heavily in building up traffic on its own online sites by boosting readership using the tabloid news about green puppies and pink kittens. We ended up with an Alexa ranking without any manipulation that was under 100,000, making us a player in online

⁸⁷ In the pre-email days agencies and freelancers could dictate copy to newspapers using copy takers who were simply typists on the end of the telephone, and later a precursor to emails was created that allowed the electronic sending of news known as the mailbox system. The main one was Telecom Gold (sometimes also known as BT Gold) that was an early commercial electronic mail service launched by British Telecom in 1982. Even when email arrived many papers continued using dedicated lines because unlike email newspapers could control who had access to the mailbox and therefore avoid spam or PR and marketing material ending up in the news queue. As an accredited supplier CEN's news items will turn up in the news list along with staff news and mainstream news wires like *Associated Press* and *Reuters*.

news, but then we found that the bottom line is advertisers don't want to advertise on tabloid news sites.

"The reason is that they don't want to be associated with the inevitable scandals that the tabloid news sites cause, and they don't like it when they or somebody they are linked with become an inevitable target of the same organisation.

"*BuzzFeed* may well have already worked this out as they are suddenly desperate to try and change their business model, but the fact remains that they have a reputation for clickbait,⁸⁸ and while they are still enjoying the honeymoon period, the ads are coming in, but at some stage advertisers are going to realise they are better placed putting their money elsewhere. As this story about our agency shows, having lots of money and bringing in big names is not enough to do good journalism. The fact is that you need roots going back years with contacts and an understanding of the business that for example Fleet Street does have, but *BuzzFeed* does not. Otherwise, you would not claim an algorithm and rehashing the work of others sprinkled with a few anonymous quotes was enough to destroy a business with 20 years of experience in news production.

"Maybe they might go back and do it properly next time, but does anyone really care? If you dig hard enough you can always find something that proves what you want, and likewise if you want to go the other way and prove CEN is a campaigning and free thinking fighter for justice and independent journalism, there is more than enough material there to do that too.

"The fact is though that whatever the future holds, *BuzzFeed* clearly had an agenda and gave it their best shot, and what they produced was, to quote *BuzzFeed* again, 'utter ****'."

What they do in the future will never take away from that, or from the question marks that now exist over the company over why it is so keen to suddenly do serious news, and the questions that now exist over its fledgling investigations unit and those named here in this story. But the most important thing is that for every mistake a news organisation makes, something needs to be learned, and something needs to be changed to make sure it does not happen again.

⁸⁸ Clickbait is a term describing web content that is aimed at generating online advertising revenue, especially at the expense of quality or accuracy, relying on sensationalist headlines to attract click-throughs and to encourage forwarding of the material over online social networks. Clickbait headlines typically aim to exploit the 'curiosity gap', providing just enough information to make the reader curious, but not enough to satisfy their curiosity without clicking through to the linked content.

And that needs to be done with the honest desire simply to report the story with the intention to inform, to educate and to entertain, and nothing else.

* * *

Appendix A.

For this interested in more detail on the row between CEN and Google On 23 January 2012, Michael Leidig sent the following email to the *Press Gazette* as well as a redacted version that were published on their pages on 24 January. The note was an attempt to underline the way Google was undermining independent news content creators.

Why Google Doesn't Understand News

By Michael Leidig.

Anybody who wants to find a news article on the web has the opportunity to go to Google News to find it.

In order to be listed in the Google news directory you need to be a registered new source, which means you need to be employing professional writers and generating a certain amount of original copy on a regular basis.⁸⁹

Google has thousands of registered news sources and its powerful search engines are constantly crawling the sites looking for news.

It's big business. There is no doubt that for an online news source a Google listing on the news page means a lot of traffic. Traffic means clicks and exposure and that means money. But exactly how Google chooses which items to list is a closely guarded secret. It uses what is an extremely complicated algorithm, an equation that decides automatically what news to list based supposedly on who broke the news first, how popular the site is in terms of traffic and links and probably a whole host of other figures that I'm not qualified to talk about.

And even if I was, it would be irrelevant because the way the algorithm works is, as already said, a closely guarded secret.

What I can tell you is that it doesn't work. At least not under the terms that anyone who is a professional in the news business would understand. And nobody at Google seems prepared to comment on why.

In 1993 CEN was founded and every day generates news reports that are distributed worldwide.

To put that into perspective, on a typical day we usually have about 50 written news items, not to mention video and pictures. As with other

⁸⁹ <http://support.google.com/news/publisher/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=40787>

news agencies this material is available to the newsdesks on papers all over the world who decide whether to publish it - and pay for the right to do so. But our material is also published in-house online over a network of eight online newspapers, and has been for five years. And that is why we know that Google news doesn't work - at least according to the journalistic standards that any newspaper editor would apply. Every day even before the advent of the Internet a newsdesk whether it was a local paper or international publication would receive a massive amount of potential stories from everything from newswires to PR agencies.

In order to be noticed, as any freelancer or agency knows, you need to file before anybody else – you also need to be correct and get the facts right - and it needs to be well written. In short - you need to do a better job than any of your rivals. If you could fulfil all three criteria then you would be home and dry. Anything sent would sail into the news agenda and you would be paid. That does not happen with Google news. If we look at the Austrian Times news site for example, which our agency publishes, over November when we started researching this, we did not find a single Austrian Times story on Google news. Many of the stories were published on the Austrian Times first, and were all exclusive stories written by professional reporters who are on the ground. Many were published elsewhere later, but all were published on the Austrian Times first.

When Google were asked about the matter they handed over a name, and this is the letter that was passed on to the person who they suggested it would be able to help in answering queries. That person was Manuela Kager, Designated Press Spokesperson for Google Austria.

Not all of the questions are relevant to this story as they centred on our online news projects like the Austrian Times. But question 3 was to ask what value Google gives in its algorithm to individuals who are the first to publish material?

And at question 5 I asked whether Google was considering any incentives for officially registered and accredited news suppliers to encourage them to contribute to the global Internet community?

I added: "It seems to me that Google news at least gives little or no incentive to anybody with an original story to publish."

At this point Manuela Kager made it clear that she was not an expert, and was simply providing a bridge between us as a reporting team with a set of questions and the relevant person within the Google organisation. The number of people authorised to answer the questions was limited, she said, and the questions were passed constantly up the scale which was the reason for the delay. By the time of publishing this however now two months later there had still been no reply.

That was the story then, and three years later Google now suddenly sees a need to invest in the media. It has not helped to grow by paying

millions to the usual suspects with names that will provide good PR and that will help show it does care about news.

The international head of news partnerships at Google, Madhav Chinnappa, told *Press Gazette* that the new scheme was of course unrelated to the competition inquiry the company is facing in Europe.

He said: "It goes way back before that. It follows on from discussions we have been having since the end of last year with a group of publishers who we see as our critical friends. This didn't happen in a week, this has been going on for some time. It's really about our place in the news ecosystem. We've always felt we were a positive part of that ecosystem and we want to make sure that continues."

Google said in a further statement: "The goal is to help support a sustainable news ecosystem and promote innovation in digital journalism through ongoing collaboration and dialogue between the tech and news sectors. The Digital News Initiative (DNI) will seek to extend its work to other European publishers and anyone involved in Europe's digital news industry will be able to take part in any or all of its elements."

Google president of strategic relationships in Europe Carlo D'Asaro Biondo said in a statement: "Through the Digital News Initiative, Google will work hand in hand with news publishers and journalism organisations to help develop more sustainable models for news. This is just the beginning, and we invite others to join us."

A short while before I wrote the Google article I ended up by chance sitting at a Xmas lunch with the head of Google Austria, and had an hour to outline to him why the company was not doing enough to invest in proper journalism. I then turned up at a press conference outlining a new news related gimmick to ask the same questions, I was offered the chance to have a high level phone call with an expert at Google in London.

Either he barely spoke English or it was a bad line, but he clearly had no idea what I was talking about, and if anything was an indication of how seriously they took the issue. Until the start of last month it seemed as though CEN had the chance to do something that might be a step in the right direction with its NewsTeam Project, but in the wake of the *BuzzFeed* article that now seems unlikely to go ahead.

* * *

Appendix B.

This is the full text of the legal letter sent to *BuzzFeed*.

Dear Sir

We are instructed on behalf of our clients Central European News [CEN] and Michael Leidig in connection with your recent communications with him and, in particular, in relation to your emails of 15 and 20 April 2015. We note that you asked for a reply originally by Tuesday, 21 April. Given the scope of your questions, this was an unreasonable deadline and our clients have not had time properly to investigate the matters you have raised, some of which relate to stories that were published over a year ago. Mr Leidig did not see your email of 15 April at the time it was received, as it went into his spam folder. We understand that you have also sent enquiries to the Mirror Group, and have given them a deadline of 5 pm today. Our client told you today that we would write to you, and we trust you will properly take account of our clients' response, notwithstanding the fact they did not meet your original arbitrary deadline.

You state in your correspondence that *BuzzFeed* News is preparing to publish "an article which proposes to report that [CEN] is responsible for the circulation of a string of stories that have subsequently been proven false either in part or in their entirety". In your questions, you assert that our clients are to be suspected of "fabricating" quotes. These allegations are highly defamatory of our clients and if published are likely to cause serious reputational harm, in particular in the eyes of their customers. As you know, unlike *BuzzFeed*, our client does not publish news itself, rather it sells material to customers, including the mainstream media organisations in the UK. As you also well know, two of our client's customers are Mirror Group Newspapers and Associated Newspapers, to whom you have already made these allegations, ostensibly in the guise of an enquiry about stories published by them which originate from CEN.

CEN is *BuzzFeed's* main competitor for viral news content in the UK market. Our client is not therefore prepared to engage with *BuzzFeed* about the detail of any of your questions as to do so would involve giving information about its sources and practices to a competitor. As we explain below, it seems that the true purpose of your investigation is to fish for information from our clients, and the proposed publication of the allegations is calculated to damage CEN's business.

Our client denies absolutely that it makes up false stories or fabricates quotes. It relies on trusted contributors to source content. None of the

stories upon which you rely in your questions provide evidence, or, as you put it, "proof" to support such claims. Our clients are not aware of any complaint having been made either by the subjects of the articles or by its customers about any of the stories to which you refer. In relation to your statement that you find it "incredible" that CEN gets quotes from sources that no-one else does, the fact that you have been unable to find quotes online does not provide any basis for any suspicion that our client fabricates quotes. The allegations upon which you base your questions appear to a large extent to be based not on proper investigation but on information you have apparently found on other investigative sites (for example Snopes).

You state that you intend to report "on this pattern as a matter of legitimate public interest and concern". However, there is no evidence of a "pattern" of behaviour of fabricating stories. We understand that, since January 2014, *BuzzFeed* has been a subscriber to CEN's newsfeed. In that time, it has therefore received newsfeed for over 8,000 stories and, of those, you have identified 17 items about which you have raised questions. On any analysis, the fact that a tiny minority of stories might raise questions, is not indicative of what you have described as "a pattern". For the avoidance of doubt, our client does not accept the claims you make about these stories to be accurate, but, as *BuzzFeed* will itself be well aware, on occasion, mistakes are made or information that is received in good faith proves later to be unreliable, in which case our clients will promptly correct their story.

You said at the end of your email of 15 April that you are "interested in writing a new ... and balanced piece about the pressures of running an online news organisation in the viral internet age". We do not accept that the story that you indicate you plan to write is a matter of public interest, nor can you reasonably believe that publishing the article is in the public interest. There is of course no public interest in a false story and if the true purpose of your article was to write about "the pressure of running an online news organisation in the viral internet age", then your own organisation, *BuzzFeed*, is surely the place to start. Your proposed article, however, is in fact about a rival organisation and, as we say above, the purpose of the article therefore appears to be to attack or undermine your biggest competitor in the UK market, possibly, our clients suspect, to detract from negative publicity that *BuzzFeed* has itself been receiving, relating to charges of plagiarism, copyright infringement and, more recently, in April 2015 the suggestion that it deleted articles that criticised its advertisers.

You were entirely disingenuous in your early efforts to engage our client in your investigation, stating, falsely, that you wanted to write an article about the great way the agency was expanding and "to explore the challenges of reporting in the digital age in depth". It is now obvious from the nature of your questions, that this was not the true purpose of

your enquiries. Even though in your email of 15 April you refer to our client's "laudable investigative journalism", and, at the beginning professed to be interested in how our client balances challenging investigative journalism whilst at the same time producing a high volume of lighter viral or tabloid stories, this, if mentioned in your proposed article, would not detract from the damage that would be caused were you to allege that our client made up stories or fabricated quotes.

As to your questions about Journalism with Borders [JWB], our client has already given you details of those to whom enquiries about its finances can be addressed. Mr Leidig is Vice-Chair of the National Association of Press Agencies, with responsibility for special projects, and he is constantly looking for new ideas. Whilst JWB has not, to date, raised significant sums, it is a project in which our client still believes and hopes can be re-invigorated, but this requires time and energy from volunteers.

Our client's Wikipedia page is entirely uncontroversial and has nothing at all to do with your story.

In light of what we have said, it will be clear that our clients will take very seriously the publication of any false allegations about them, and all their legal rights are reserved.

Yours faithfully

Carter-Ruck

cc: Luke Lewis & Heidi Blake

heidi.blake@buzzfeed.com

luke.lewis@buzzfeed.com

* * *