

Untangling the World Wide Web – when errors hit the information superhighway

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'Journalism is a first draft of history' and 'Today's newspaper is tomorrow's cat litter', so they used to say. But the internet has changed all that. The implications of publishing an inaccuracy in one country can have far-reaching consequences, as Sinisa Nadazdin has discovered.

A Bosnian refugee living in Montenegro, Nadazdin was 'born again' as a student joining an Evangelical church in Podgorica and devoting himself to student ministry and peace and reconciliation work in the Balkans. More to the point, in his spare time he helped to provide welfare assistance to impoverished refugees, and was one of the few people willing to work with Roma families. He set up a kindergarten in church premises, and his efforts were rewarded with support from a UK-based Christian charity.

His contacts made him an ideal source for a visiting UK freelance, Dominic Hipkins, keen to expose child-trafficking in the region. But the story that eventually appeared in the *Sunday Mirror* on 25 January 2004 under the headline 'FOR SALE AGE 3' accused 27-year-old Nadazdin of child trafficking. It claimed that he planned to set up a crèche as a 'child supermarket' and above his picture it ran a doctored image of local children with price tags.

MediaWise was contacted by a Danish journalist who believed the story to be untrue, and our investigations helped to clear Nadazdin's name.

In April 2005 the *Sunday Mirror* admitted its error in court and paid Nadazdin £40,000 in damages plus costs under a No Win/No Fee defamation action undertaken by leading UK libel lawyers David Price Solicitors & Advocates.¹

Now let us look at what happened as soon as the original story was published. The online version quickly reached Montenegro and on the Sunday evening Nadazdin was picked up by the police and interrogated. They soon realised there was no truth in the story, and he was released. By now the *Sunday Mirror* story was being reprised in local papers.

Days later Nadazdin was picked up by security police keen to discover who had besmirched the good name of Montenegro by collaborating with a foreign journalist. Along with three other local men who had had dealings with Hipkins, Nadazdin was held in custody and on 4 February they were told they would face charges under Article 82 of the criminal code.

The Montenegrin authorities were still reeling from the international fallout after the Prosecutor's Office in Podgorica halted criminal proceedings in 1993 against the Montenegrin deputy state prosecutor and three others for complicity in 'sex slavery'. The main witness against them was a 28-year-old mother of two from Moldova, who

¹ www.lawyers-media.com

had suffered horrendous sexual abuse for over three years. She alleged that Montenegrin politicians, judges, police and civil servants had tortured and raped her and other East European women. The collapse of the case led Amnesty International to question Montenegro's commitment to fight the commercial sexual exploitation of women and children.²

By 6 February the International Freedom of Expression Exchange was reporting 'Journalist being sought for "harming the image of Montenegro"'. Four others arrested.³

It quoted Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) as condemning the threat of legal action against Dominic Hipkins and the arrest of Sinisa Nadazdin and Jovo Martinovic, both of whom had acted as local fixers for the British journalist, and Dragan Radevic and Nenad Zevenic, all of whom were accused of "harming the image of Montenegro" with a "fabricated report" on child-trafficking.

On 13 February RSF issued its own online bulletin: 'British journalist and four local assistants prosecuted for "harming Montenegro's image"'.⁴

Suddenly a dubious story, which called into question the techniques of investigative reporters operating in countries where their sources are unfamiliar with the ways of western tabloids, had become a *cause célèbre* of press freedom groups. There were perfectly proper calls for repeal of Article 82 of the criminal code, under which those charged face stiff fines and/or up to three years in prison. But the story itself was wrong.

Challenged through the Press Complaints Commission by the charity Smile International, mentioned in the article because it had funded some of Nadazdin's work, the *Sunday Mirror* "stood by its story" but did publish a letter from the charity's director distancing Smile from the alleged scandal.

As we helped Nadazdin painstakingly assemble his case, we discovered that the story had taken on a life of its own way beyond the Balkans on the world wide web. It was appearing as a topic in chat rooms, and was being cited as evidence of UN corruption by outfits like Free Republic 'the premiere online gathering place for independent, grass-roots conservatism on the web'.⁵

On Alex Jones' US website infowars.com⁶ and on global-conspiracies.com⁷ the story had appeared under the misleading headline 'Children Sold Into Slavery by UN Charity'. In fact some of the people mentioned in the story lived in what had once been a UN refugee camp.

The French/Nepalese child rights group Fondation Rajani quoted the story in its 2004 report to Interpol⁸, and it even appeared on the Marijuana and Hemp Network website!⁹

² <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGEUR700172003?open&of=ENG-YUG>

³ www.ifex.org/en/content/view/full/56662

⁴ www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=9186

⁵ www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/914278/posts

⁶ www.infowars.com/print/misc/un_child_slaves.htm

⁷ www.global-conspiracies.com/children_sold_into_slavery_by_un.htm

⁸ <http://interpol-2004.site.voila.fr/page6.html>

⁹ <http://boards.marihemp.com/boards/msg1x57851.shtml>

But perhaps most worrying of all it was being used by white supremacist groups to justify their peculiar world view. 'How Valuable Are White Children To White Nationalists?' asked the Vanguard News Network. Over a copy of the story it declaimed: 'Perhaps we should put our organised, liberating, sacred honour where our mouths are and help these innocent whites who are being tortured and sacrificed before our very eyes.'¹⁰

D. Kearney had a slightly different take in his piece on the story for National Vanguard¹¹ entitled 'Gypsies Selling White Children: Legend of child stealing has a basis in fact'.

'As anyone who has been to Europe recently knows, Gypsies are a serious source of some of the worst crime on the continent... Gypsies have swarmed into what were once placid backwaters and infest all large cities.

'(They) are the non-White descendants of mixed-race Indian "untouchables" and retain their own religion, superstition and even "royal families." Although they have a lower average IQ, Gypsies are like that other nomadic mixed tribe, the Jews, in that they plant colonies in other peoples' countries and live in one way or another off their hosts, while remaining loyal only to their own.

'One of their areas of expertise is in child stealing - a constant in the European folk-memory for hundreds of years. And it not only still goes on, it is getting worse.'

His story reappeared on the website of 'White Pride World Wide'¹², and his theme was taken up in one chat room which blamed Gypsies for abducting Ben Needham, the young British child who went missing in Greece in July 1991. One contributor opined: "I remember hearing the skinheads were being vilified in Europe for going after the Gypsies. What justice is that? The Skins were doing everyone in Europe a service."

Removing the offending story from its online version was a simple enough task for the Mirror group, but Nadazdin and his lawyers are now having to track down all the other online references to serve website controllers with notice that the original story was wrong. It could take a long time and a lot of money to clear the world wide web of the obstacles to Nadazdin's peace of mind. He may have had the satisfaction of winning some recompense for what he described as a "nightmare" year for himself and his family, but the Montenegrin state has yet to withdraw the defamation charges against him and three others - and Hipkins.

Everyone associated with the story in Montenegro has been hurt, and there is even more need for Nadazdin's welfare work. Conditions for the children whose images appeared in the story have deteriorated. They have been moved to worse accommodation, their mother is ill, and they may have to go into care while she receives treatment. Meanwhile Nadazdin has now been engaged to help set up training courses for local journalists.

The whole sorry tale begs many questions about journalism, but it also highlights the new problems we have to contend with when inaccurate stores hit the information superhighway.

¹⁰ www.vnnforum.com/showthread.php?p=22346

¹¹ www.nationalvanguard.org

¹² <http://Stormfront.org/>