

## Bogus reports prompt questions

May 26, 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

We could say it was just a bunch of phony baloney, and give it a miss. We could also say we've been handed, on a silver platter, an opportunity to ask why truth and honesty are values worth fighting for.

I write of course of the events surrounding manufactured stories about nastiness to Filipinos that appeared on a local Facebook page and in a local newspaper of sorts these recent days (CP 5-23-13 p. 16, TT 5-23-13 p. 1, 3).

A quick recapitulation may be useful.

A woman named Tung reported on her Facebook page last week that she had talked with a Filipino worker who had been refused service at a cafeteria. The worker spoke of an hour-long wait for food, without assistance from anyone. Tung said she immediately bought the worker a meal. She went on to say she used the occasion to scold the restaurant owner for being cruel to an innocent person who has nothing to do with our current diplomatic row with the Philippines after the boat-strafting and killing of Taiwanese fisherman Hung Shih-cheng on May 9, and so on. Tung's words were soon swept up and spread around the world.

And then?

A news reporter named Cheng for the Chinese paper "Lih Pao" writes during the same days that he saw two Filipinos humiliated at a restaurant. The owner of the eatery explained to them that he didn't serve food to "dogs." He threw food on the ground and taunted the workers. If they wanted to eat like dogs, he said, sure, they could do that, go ahead.

And that's not all.

Editor Chang Cheng, in a related publication, "Four Way Voice," then requests that the "Lih Pao" reporter interview the restaurant owner.

Well, Cheng then produces an interview with the miscreant, which, naturally, he swears is as genuine as the satisfied smile on a baby's face. Under pressure from government officials and the public, Cheng later admits both the initial report and the interview were hoaxes. His employer gives him the ax.

Ms. Tung's fate was similar. Pressured by voices that doubted her credibility, she confesses in the end to never having actually witnessed the nasty behavior.

She heard the story, she says. She did not intend to tell a lie, she says. All she hoped to accomplish was to urge justice for Filipinos in Taiwan at a particularly delicate time.

Local media continue to tug at the threads poking from this ball of yarn. I have remarked on only a few of the issues here. Comments from other critics will not die soon.

Is there no difference, for example, between statements on a personal Facebook page and statements in a newspaper that is produced and sold for public consumption?

Also, labor activists wonder if the punishment fits the "crime" for reporter Cheng.

Editors are not the only people who are vulnerable to claims that find their way into public media.

Some time ago, I wrote in this space about several folks reportedly involved in a pact to profit from a young woman's chastity (as if it were a commodity) in an online auction. The "agreement" to sell and buy was consensual, not forced, and the players were adults. I based my words on reports that appeared that week in two large local newspapers.

A reader of The China Post online contacted me from Paris within hours of that column's publication. He excoriated and mocked me. I had been hoaxed, he said. The original report, picked up and disseminated in the international media, was, he said, nothing but a prank.

Why are truth and honesty values worth fighting for?

We in the media know very well that we owe the public the truth. People do not read newspapers because they want to relax with some enjoyable fiction. It is indeed possible for us to get tricked by trusting sources that peddle humor at best, and deceit at worst. Sometimes we've simply got to be more cautious before we believe, and before we print.

A question still nags. From whence comes this need to fabricate in the Facebook story-teller, or in the so called news reporter? What lies behind such dishonesty? Might it be some weird, twisted desire to roll around and wallow in the mud, in the shadows and darkness of life?

Or does it all come down to an elephant-sized need for attention?

Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.