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Truth Conquers

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In the town where I grew up, the local newspaper, *The Sligo Champion*, had above its banner the immortal motto 'Truth Conquers'.

Now excuse my cynicism but any medium of communication, be it regional or international, claiming to espouse *'the truth'* always makes me grin. While the idea of a newspaper actually calling itself *The Truth* (La Razón) is - shall we say - more than a little dubious.

Open up and compare any national dailies or tune into one or more of the various *telediarios* on offer and you'll quickly see that the 'spin doctors' are always hard at work, shifting perspectives and putting a suitable slant on each story that best serves their interests and those of their sponsors.

It's not only the traditional media that exerts this influence on the unsuspecting public. The speed with which the internet can disseminate information now means that, in the words of Winston Churchill, "*a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on*".

One example of this occurred last week when a friend of mine sent me the above image with a text explaining that the photo had been taken just before the March demonstrations by monks and other ethnic Tibetans in Lhasa, marking the 49th anniversary of a failed uprising against Chinese rule in Tibet. The image shows Chinese troops in Lhasa being issued with Buddhist monks' robes and

the text points out that this was in order for them to be able to blend in easily and hijack the demonstrations.

In the email message, Buddhist monks were quoted to have said that many of them were locked up before the protests and therefore hadn't been able to take part, leaving the soldiers, dressed as monks, to mix freely with the protesters. Subsequently, the protests turned to riots and nearly 100 people died in the ensuing clashes with security forces.

The photo had been taken 'secretly' by a British news agency and smuggled out of China and the message finished up with a request to pass it on to as many people as possible.

Having previously been saddened by reported deaths and casualties and further angered by the cynical depths to which the Chinese authorities would stoop, I immediately forwarded the message and the photo to a number of colleagues.

Within twenty-four hours of sending out the message I received a reply from a Buddhist in the US via a friend. She pointed out that, this picture had been doing the rounds for some time. She had seen it several times and assured me that it had been taken two or three years ago and that the soldiers in the photo were actually preparing to be extras in a film. This had nothing to do with the March 2008 violence, which, by most accounts was perpetrated by young laypersons, not monks or indeed anyone dressed as monks.

Well, didn't I feel a bit sheepish? I suppose I should have known better! So it would appear that not only the written and spoken word can mislead, but what we see with our own eyes can also deceive us if our perspective is shifted. So, who or what can one trust? I think I've learned a lesson.

The good thing about the internet, I suppose, is the fact that the truth as well as the lies can get around and that this time at least, the truth managed to get its own pants on and get itself out there too. And so, to paraphrase the words of *The Sligo Champion*, the truth finally conquered, or did it? What exactly is the truth?

I suppose it is only fitting that we finish this week's letter with a quote from Buddha:

"Believe nothing, no matter where you read it, or who said it, no matter if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and your own common sense."