

Africa Check

By Julian Rademeyer

Many years ago, as a rather naive young reporter, I worked briefly as a “fixer” for a writer from *The New Yorker* magazine. He was doing a profile piece on Wouter Basson, South Africa’s “Dr Death”, and investigating aspects of Project Coast, the apartheid-era chemical and biological weapons programme.

When he left, he told me to expect a call from one of *The New Yorker’s* fact-checkers. “They go through everything,” he said. “It is a long process. Every note, every line, every name, every date, every quote and every fact.”

I nodded nonchalantly to hide my ignorance. Fact-checkers? I’d vaguely heard the term, but it didn’t mean much to me. Sounded like glorified subeditors, I thought, although a little more intimidating; inquisitorial even.

South African magazines and newspapers have little formal tradition of fact-checking in the US and European sense. It is a task that has largely been left up to reporters, news editors, subeditors and proofreaders.

Some papers, like South Africa’s *Sunday Times*, get reporters to check each other’s copy by comparing dates, names, places, spellings and quotes with original source material and filling out an “accuracy check” form.

I am not aware of any papers or magazines in South Africa that have full-time research and fact-checking departments.

Internationally, *The New Yorker* is one of the best-known examples. It employs more than a dozen fact-checkers who scrutinise everything, from journalism and poetry to fiction and art reviews. Even the cartoons are given a once-over. The German news weekly, *Der Spiegel*, reportedly has the largest fact-checking operation of any magazine in the world with 80 full-time staffers in its “Dokumentation” department.

Today, as the Southern Africa editor of AfricaCheck.org, I am, for want of a better description, a fact-checker.

Africa Check is a non-profit website established by the AFP Foundation, in conjunction with the Wits University Journalism department.

We operate independently on a tiny budget, a skeleton staff, a growing pool of freelance writers and

researchers, and litres of coffee and tea. We strive to be fair and impartial, but we don’t play favourites.

We are entirely dependent on funding and donations and our backers include Google, the Open Society Foundation and the African News Innovation Challenge.

We are not a media watchdog, as some would appear to think. Our aim is to hold public figures and institutions, including media organisations, to account, to encourage good journalism, debate and, above all, accuracy. We want our readers to question and challenge what they see, read and hear on a daily basis. And that includes the reports we produce.

The website is modelled on similar websites that have sprung up in the United States and Europe over the past decade.

There’s politifact.com, which began in the newsroom of what was then the *St Petersburg Times*, and paved the way. There’s factcheck.org, which describes itself as a “nonpartisan, non-profit ‘consumer advocate’” for US voters, and the UK-based Full Fact website which tries to “make it easier to see the facts and context behind the claims made by the key players in British political debate”.

Fact-checking is not an abstract pursuit. It can have real impact. All too often statements by politicians, public figures and journalists make statements that go unchecked.

How true, for instance is the often-repeated claim that more than 90% of South Africans have access to “clean and safe” drinking water? Or the claim, as reported by the *Sowetan*, that 12.7% of schoolgirls in South Africa are HIV positive?

Do the police face R7-billion in civil lawsuits, as claimed by the minister? Or is the real figure closer to R14-billion? Are the impressive conviction rates routinely cited by the Justice Department a useful benchmark of prosecutorial success?

What about promises that 58 dedicated sexual offences courts will be fully operational by September this year, or Jacob Zuma’s promise in his State of the Nation address that 98 new schools would be completed in the Eastern Cape by March this year?

Do 400 000 whites live in squatter camps in South Africa, as claimed by the BBC’s World Affairs editor John Simpson? Does Helen Zille’s claim that nobody in Cape Town has to use a bucket toilet hold true?

These are just some of the claims we have checked in the past two months.

We are still finding our feet, but the response has been encouraging. Our readership has nearly doubled in the past month and continues to grow. The stream of comments, queries and suggestions increases each day.

Next year, South Africa will hold one of the most important elections in the past 20 years. Promises will be made and facts stated. Some will be true, but many will be spurious. And we’ll be there to try and sort fact from fiction.

Visit our website at Africacheck.org or find us on Twitter @AfricaCheck.



Julian Rademeyer is the Southern Africa editor of AfricaCheck.org and the author of *Killing for Profit – Exposing the Illegal Rhino Horn Trade*. julian.rademeyer@gmail.com