

Checking the Africa facts

By [Magnus Taylor](#)

10 Jul 2013

What's the most important question in a journalist's armoury? Answer: is it true?

Peter Cunliffe-Jones, director of the newly launched [Africa Check](#), says that not enough journalists across Africa are asking this question when writing stories put together from often unreliable data. Africa Check - based in South Africa - is trying to promote and teach better journalistic practise across the continent.

Cunliffe-Jones, a long-time journalist with AFP, says that he became increasingly conscious of the problem of "statement journalism" whilst working in Nigeria in the 1990s. This, he says, is the problem of journalists accepting and, consequently, perpetuating statements of 'fact' in their work without every checking that they are actually true.

Over the last decade a fact checking movement has developed in the US and Cunliffe-Jones sees it as a resource particularly vital in African countries. Africa Fact is based in South Africa, and has gained some international press from stories such as its investigation into whether the country's whites were really "being killed like flies" (turns out they're not), but ambitions are continental.

Whilst the aim is partly to produce research into notable stories whose details need a once-over, Africa Check wants to push up journalistic standards more generally in this area. It will also advise journalists on the most useful resources available to help them to properly fact check their stories and eventually develop a kind of 'trip advisor' ranking system for different publicly available data sets.

Reception for Africa Check seems to have been positive, particularly in South Africa where the opposition Democratic Alliance put out a welcoming message (passed by parliament) on its launch.

Cunliffe-Jones says that there's not been any political push-back against Africa Check yet, but one wonders whether things will always be quite so easy as expansion continues into countries without the relatively open and vibrant media environment of its base. As Cunliffe-Jones says, Africa Check must always work hard "to fact check both sides".

Source: [allAfrica](#)