

Chris Obore false claim and what it teaches journalists

Imagine you are speaking to a head teacher who says his school has no student called Kaizeyo Uvugeyo. If you believed that Uvugeyo is a student at the head teacher's school, you are going to conclude you were wrong. After all, you heard everything from the horse's own mouth. Why would you have doubts?

The answer is that appearances are deceptive, as examples I have cited here amply illustrate. In fact, these examples are the reasons why — in this day and age when information can look/sound correct but is false — you have to verify, double check and ask the question many rarely ask: How do I know what I know is entirely true?

Last Sunday, I contacted Parliament's Director of Communication and Public Affairs, Mr Chris Obore, to ask a question about the Kalangala District Woman MP, Hellen Nakimuli, who passed away on April 19.

Mr Obore is the spokesperson of Parliament. His office exists to process and disseminate accurate public information about the Legislature. If, for example, he says something about an MP that is not a personal opinion, it should be factual.

But Mr Obore told me Nakimuli lost her seat and that the question I was asking was irrelevant. Some people who care about the truth sometimes pause and say: "Wait, I'm insisting this is correct, but how do I know it is correct?" He sounded so confident and even averred that the public knows the MP was not re-elected.

The problem, he suggested, was me. I was not informed well enough to know which MPs were and were not re-elected.

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Because of the confidence with which he spoke, I started to think that maybe, as spokesperson, he knew something that I did not know.

I went to work. I checked online stories to see if there were any stories about Ms Nakimuli losing her seat. There was none. All stories suggested she had won re-election.

But news outlets can be wrong about just one thing. I had to verify further. The Electoral Commission is sometimes slow to respond, so I reached out to NTV's correspondent Gertrude Mutyaba, who covers Kalangala and had covered Nakimuli extensively. She confirmed the MP was re-elected.

There you have it. Sometimes, individuals and institutions who should know do not. And when journalists rely on them entirely while seeking the truth, they can be misled.

The second example: The website for which I write and serve as an editorial director, OJ-UGANDA, does fact-checks. One of our very first fact-checks was about a claim by the Encyclopedia Britannica that

Rwandan President Paul Kagame studied at Makerere University.

Britannica is a centuries-old institution and is widely trusted. But its claim that Mr Kagame is a graduate of Makerere is completely false. He has never studied at any university, although he has honorary degrees. Amazingly, Britannica still has the false claim on its website.

A third example is from the BBC. In the run-up to the January 15 presidential and parliamentary elections, the BBC published a graphic featuring all Uganda's former presidents from 1962, when the country became independent.

The graphic included Paulo Muwanga. While he served as de facto president, he was never president in the real sense. And that is why his name is not included on the list of former presidents published on the State House website.

For journalists and people working in public information, these examples provide all the evidence we need to know that the truth has to be ruthlessly and scrupulously verified. It is not what our memory says is true that is always true. It is facts.

An up-to-date searchable dataset of all MPs on your smartphone can show you which MP represents which constituency in a matter of seconds. Your memory will struggle. And, crucially, it can get things hopelessly wrong, as the Obore example shows in black and white.

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