

Hello! How are you today? Thanks for joining us for another edition of As It Is on VOA. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. Tighten your seat belts and fly with us to South Africa to hear about the search for truth. If you often find yourself questioning what some politician says, then you'll want to listen to our first report closely.

And then we'll reach into the "in case you missed it" folder, and look back nearly five decades at something that had the entire world looking up in wonder. As It Is, sound coming out of your radio, and on your computer, As It Is ...is headed your way!

You can't always believe what people say, or write in newspapers, or tell you on the radio or television. But you knew that. Wouldn't it be helpful to have someone always on the lookout, searching for the truth? Well, in South Africa there is a "facts watchdog," a website that checks facts. It is called "Africa Checks." It reports on claims made by the country's leaders and the media. The site also investigates common statements that are repeated many times by people without evidence.

People often say, for example, that Johannesburg has the largest forest made by man in the world. That statement is easy to believe. The city's greenery covers many neighborhoods. But the statement is not true! Africa Check found that the largest man-made forest is in China, next to the Gobi Desert.

Africa Check's job is to straighten out wrong claims and political untruths. It also tries to keep stories about famous people truthful, or to provide information so the media will not publish false stories.

Julian Rademeyer is the editor of the site. He says it tries to get people to look with doubt at suspicious claims.

"I think the fundamental element of our work is that we are trying to get people to question what they are told, what they read, what politicians say to them, and to look at the information and to ask 'Where is the evidence?' If someone makes a claim, to ask, 'Where is the evidence to support that claim?' Let's actually interrogate those claims, and not accept things purely for what they are."

Agence France Press Foundation launched the website in June, 2012. Africa Check is the first media outlet in South Africa whose single purpose is to check facts. It follows the example of popular sites in the United States like Politifact and Factcheck.

Mr. Rademeyer and a researcher are the site's two full-time employees. A team of part-time reporters also work on fact checking.

South Africa has a strong history of investigative journalism and photography from the country's apartheid period. That was a time of legally enforced racial separation. But Mr. Rademeyer says reduced budgets and fewer reporters in the country now harm the ability to establish the truth of some claims.

"It allows public figures and it allows politicians to make claims that don't go checked. And I think that's where we play a role. We come in and look at those claims and we have the ability and the time to go through those claims."

Paula Fray is the former editor of the Star Newspaper and a commentator on the media. She says Africa Check may place needed pressures on newsrooms.

"At the moment Africa Check is not known as much as I'm hoping as it is going to be known. I'm hoping that eventually journalists will be writing their stories and thinking, if my news editor doesn't pick up that something hasn't been verified, Africa Check might pick up that it hasn't been verified. So I'm not going to put anything in my stories unless I can prove it."

She hopes Africa Check will create a better culture of responsible journalism. The site also deals with stories that get repeated so often that they go unchecked.

For example, a South African musician with 175,000 Facebook followers claimed that white South Africans are being killed at a frightening rate. When Africa Check looked into that story, it found that most of the musician's claims were untrue or overstated.

But the report also demonstrated one of the problems with South African statistics from the apartheid period. Mr. Rademeyer said crime information from that period in South Africa for white neighborhoods is generally quite correct. But he said crime reporting from homelands and townships during apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s lacked statistics.

Africa Check has also corrected claims including some about statements about traditional healing and the country's rate of people seeking refuge.

Look! Up in the Sky! Isn't that Ed White?

And now, a bit of history. Space history. Nearly 50 years ago this summer, some amazing happened. People around the world listened to their radios and watched their televisions to see and hear reports about a man who was risking his life, in the name of science, thousands of kilometers above us. VOA's Christopher Cruise says he remembers it well.

Forty-eight years ago, astronaut Edward White became the first American to walk in space. White climbed out of his Gemini space vehicle 216 kilometers above the earth. But he remained connected to the two-man spacecraft by a seven-meter-long lifeline that gave him oxygen. It also let him communicate with space flight controllers on the ground.

White was having so much fun that he stayed outside the spacecraft for 20 minutes -- 8 minutes longer than planned. The flight director in Houston had to order him to get back inside.

HOUSTON: "Gemini Four (this is) Houston. Gemini Four (this is) Houston."

GEMINI: "Let's see what the flight director has got to say."

HOUSTON: "The flight director says 'Get back in!'"

GEMINI: "This is Jim. You got any message for us?"

HOUSTON: "Gemini Four! Get back in!"

GEMINI: "OK"

White was not the first human to walk in space. A few months earlier -- on March 18th, 1963, Soviet cosmonaut Alexi Leonov floated in space for ten minutes while connected to his Voskhod II spacecraft.

The two spacewalks showed that human beings could work outside their spacecraft. Less than two years after his historic spacewalk, Edward White died in a fire while training for another space mission. I'm Christopher Cruise.

And I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. We are lighting the birthday candles today for, among other people, William Friedkin, the movie director who won an Oscar for the scariest film ever made ...The Exorcist. If you would like to suggest another, please do so in an email. Mr. Friedkin is 74. Actor Richard Gere turns 64, and ...we also remember ... it is the birthdate of Charlie "Byrd" Parker, who may just have been the greatest jazz saxophone player of all time. He is remembered as one of the fathers of "bop" or "bebop." Charlie was born in 1920, but was only 34 when he died in Rochester, New York, in 1955.

That's all for us today. But more Learning English programs are straight ahead. And there is world news coming your way at the beginning of the hour on VOA.

