Amateur astronomers and their clubs often receive enquiries from friends and the public about astronomical events that have they heard about in a radio interview or read about in a newspaper science column Not only can social media misinform you (sometimes intentionally), but supposedly respected sources such as your national radio station or your city newspaper regularly lead you astray.

A recent comet (C-2023 A3 Tsuchishan) was eagerly awaitied for over a year by amateurs who wondered if they would be able to see it. They know the difficulties that can be expected – light pollution, air pollution, the unpredictability of comets. They know that seeing these celestial objects requires knowing WHERE to look, and HOW to look.

Always looking for newsworthy material, editors instruct their reporters to grab hold of any subject that might attract readership and to sensationalise the news. No point in honestly saying that you probably won't see it in suburban environments without putting in some effort – the reporter would soon be fired. The mix of information ends up including a mix of silly comments, irrelevant facts and entirely impractical instructions on how to see the celestial object.

A so-called expert – a physics professor - was interviewed about the comet. Amongst the science facts he quoted, he confidently advised radio listeners to look in the west from 6 until 8 pm. Had he tried to see it? Was he talking from successful experience? Dusk twilight was still too bright at 6pm. Did he advise that a low horizon was required and that even through binoculars it would not be easy to see?

A newspaper article suggested that readers should not miss their last chance to see the comet – naked-eye note - until it returned in 80,000 years.

Misleading information excites readers and listeners. They become excited about a scientific subject and enthusiastically look forward to taking a look and are disappointed. This not only damages their enthusiasm about the night sky but also makes them feel incompetent or even stupid. These are the last sentiments that science needs. In a written testimony to the US Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation in July 2014, Mariette DiChristina of Scientific American said "Science is the engine of properity".

This warning to regard official sources with a healthy dose of scepticism advises that you rather refer your questions to those who really know what they are doing – because they spend time under the night sky. Contact your local astronomy society who can always be found in a quick google search. Try 'pretoria astronomy'.