

In Memoriam: Dr Brian Semujju

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In August 2025, African journalism and communication scholarship lost one of its most promising voices with the passing of Dr Brian Semujju, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Journalism and Communication at Makerere University. He died on Sunday, August 3, after a year-long battle with liver cancer.

Dr Semujju distinguished himself as a prolific researcher and author whose work traversed multiple domains, including journalism and communication theory, community media, science communication, media law, gender and the media, new media and mobile telephony, environmental communication, climate change, and newsroom cultures. In just over a decade, he produced more than 20 publications in leading journals and edited volumes. His scholarship appeared in *Communication Theory*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *International Communication Gazette*, *Journal of African Media Studies*, *International Journal of Information Communication Technologies and Human Development*, *Journal of Alternative and Community Media*, *Journal of Community, Citizen's and Third Sector Media*, and the *Encyclopedia of Mobile Phone Behaviour*.

At Makerere, colleagues mourned not only a distinguished scholar but also a brother, friend, and mentor. His rapid academic progression reflected his dedication: from Lecturer in 2017, to Senior Lecturer in 2022, with plans to apply for promotion to Associate Professor in November 2025. Professor Goretti Nassanga, his mentor from graduate school and long-time collaborator in teaching, research, and supervision, described him as “a very dynamic scholar, full of energy, outgoing and liked by both staff and students he interacted with.”

Dr Semujju's academic journey began at Uganda Christian University, where he earned a Bachelor of Mass Communication and later served as a lecturer. In 2010, he joined Makerere University for a Master of Arts in Journalism and Communication, graduating in 2012. Reflecting on his graduate years, Professor Nassanga, then Coordinator of the Master's Programme, recalled him as “an exceptional student,” analytical, intellectually curious, and deeply committed to interrogating issues from an African perspective.

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Dr. Semujju leaves behind a body of scholarship that enriches the fields of journalism and communication studies, as well as an enduring legacy of mentorship, intellectual rigor, and passion for African-centered inquiry.

Dr Sam Kazibwe, a broadcaster and lecturer at Uganda Christian University, who was his classmate and friend, told a story of how other students would run to Dr Semujju whenever they needed reading books which, sometimes, could not be found in the university library.

In 2017 Dr Semujju graduated with a PhD in Communication from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in South Africa. Professor Monica Chibita, who served as Dean of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Uganda Christian University when Semujju was a lecturer there, said Dr Semujju was “an unusual student” with a unique sense of humour which many struggled to understand. According to Professor Chibita, Dr Semujju was determined to complete his doctoral studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in just one and a half years, but the university slowed him down. “It was impossible to officially complete the PhD in less than two years,” she said.

A message from his Alma Mater, KwaZulu Natal, signed by Professor Ruth Teer-Tomaselli, praised Dr Semujju as a very good scholar and an able, wry and discerning person with a good sense of humour. Added Professor Teer-Tomaselli: “I hope it brings you comfort to know that his thesis was widely read and cited by other researchers in the area of community media.”

Dr Semujju’s doctoral thesis, which Teer-Tomaselli described as “outstanding”, focused on the use of community audio towers in Uganda as an example of a community radio initiative.

Dr Semujju authored and published many articles from his doctoral thesis, including one in 2020 in which he theorised dependency relations in small media. In it, he questioned what he called “the pervasive western intellectual universalism which disregards Global South imaginations for generalized approaches”. Locating his study in Uganda and building it around Community Audio Towers (CATs), Dr Semujju articulated his case for a deeper scholarly interrogation of “the western-generated community media theory” which, he argued, had failed to account for “the intricate relationship between the individual, society, and small media.” In *Communication Theory* 30 (2020), he proposed a new theory, the Small Media System Dependency Theory, “as a geocultural response to lack of theory from the South.” As he put it, this was his attempt to “southernise” community media theories.

Writing on page 383 of *Communication Theory* 30 (2020), Dr Semujju concluded: “As long as southern intellectuals are still indoctrinated into European epistemic traditions, they are mere foot soldiers, socially commissioned to help the Western episteme to maintain its legacy status.”

Professor James Kiwanuka-Tondo, Dean of Journalism at Uganda Christian University, described him as a brilliant scholar on course to become one of the very best in the field of journalism and communication.

To most of his students, Dr Semujju was a teacher and mentor who did not entertain mediocrity. Baker Batte, a journalist who is currently doing his PhD at Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR), is one of those who were taught and

supervised by Dr Semujju. To Batte, Dr Semujju was a workaholic who was married to the academia. Eulogising Dr Semujju on August 6, Batte explained how he created time for his students, even outside the normal working hours and out of office. At 5 in the morning, by the roadside, at a restaurant or bar, at his home, Dr Semujju would create the time and meet his students.

Writes Batte in Uganda's Observer newspaper, on August 6, 2025: "Dr Semujju would read our draft theses word per word. There was no way you would smuggle anything in the thesis thinking that he would not see it. When I submitted to him my first draft, he returned it with more red ink than the black in which I had written it."

Dr Semujju demanded the best from his students, often going beyond the substance of their work to such details as punctuation. It was not uncommon to see Dr Semujju dismissing his students with harsh comments because a comma was missing or a semicolon was used instead of a colon. On one occasion, he refused to read a fresh-year undergraduate student's coursework assignment because his name had a "J" missing – Semuju instead of Semujju. He asked the student: "How sure Am I the rest of the work is done well?"

Batte also tested this other side of Dr. Semujju. "One time he returned my draft thesis for simply forgetting to put a full stop on a sentence on the first page," he said.

As a researcher, Dr Semujju worked on many research projects with both local and international researchers. At the time of his death, according to Professor Sauda Namyalo, Dean of the School of Languages, Literature and Communication at Makerere University, he was due to embark on yet another research project with her on science communication.

Public understanding of science was something that Dr Semujju thought about so deeply. He would always question how an ordinary person in a rural setting could benefit from "all the research produced at Makerere University." He sought to break the walls separating the academia and the ordinary person. Under the Makerere University Research and Innovations Fund (RIF), Dr Semujju had teamed up with colleagues in the Department of Journalism and Communication to take science to the people, through another innovative project that sought to communicate research findings through local video content translators commonly known as video jockeys or veejays. The project involved translating complex research into local languages and, well, "veejaying" it to the ordinary person. He was a recipient of many awards and research grants including the 2022-2023 Fulbright African Research Award; the 2020-2022 Carnegie Cooperation of New York's Early Career scholars' Grant; the 2020-2021 Government of Uganda's Research and Innovations Fund; the 2015 Best Student (PhD) Presentation Medal of the World Conference on Media and Mass Communication; the 2017 travel Grant from the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), among others.

For five years, from 2015 to 2020, Dr Semujju was the Editor of the African Journal of Communication, a journal published by the East African Communication Association.

Dr Semujju's hunger for knowledge took him beyond the field of journalism, media and communication. He had a unique fascination about studying the universe, always reading and sharing with colleagues about the planets and the stars. Out of

nowhere, he would send a message about an eclipse, the parade of planets or something else so removed from the usual discussions. Little wonder his daughter is called Venus, a name of one of the planets. Was it a coincidence?

Besides his immensely successful academic journey, Brian was also a musician who composed several songs on such topics as climate change, environment, and disease.

Before his health started to fail him in June 2024, Dr Semujju had enrolled at Makerere University for Master of Science course in Sports Science. Always in search of knowledge. He was writing a book on Communication Theory but from an African perspective, in line with his thinking and need to “southernise” communication research and study. He had also been elected president of the Fulbright Association in Uganda.

Brian was not particularly religious and, whenever he had an opportunity, he questioned some orthodox beliefs about God. But he read widely and informed himself about religion, always discussing it with a sense of humour. In April, as the Catholic Church cardinals gathered in Rome to elect a new pontiff after the death of Pope Francis, Dr Semujju sent me this message: “Good morning, Sir. One of the contenders for the papacy, according to the international papers, is called Robert Sarah. I can’t wait to see the media reporting Pope Sarah.” Robert Sarah is a prelate from Guinea. When I told him that his was a wild card, that another cardinal would be elected Pope, and he will choose a pontifical name, Brian quipped: “If that Pope is Sarah or with another female name, that would make my day.”

Born on October 6, 1980 in Lubanja, Mityana, Uganda, Dr Semujju died just two months shy of his 45th birthday. He is survived by his six-year-old daughter, Venus, partner Peace, mother Milly Nantege, and siblings one of whom, unfortunately, is also battling cancer.

***He will dearly be missed.
May his soul rest in peace.***