The 60th World Association of Newspapers Congress and the 14th World Editors’ Forum came to Africa for the very first time. The steep conference fee was going to exclude many senior journalists until the SA National Editors’ Forum and The African Editors’ Forum stepped in and negotiated a rate for their members and the educators more suitable for southern pockets. The African Editors’ Forum chair Mathatha Tsedu and secretary general Elizabeth Barratt then did some very hard work organising sponsorship and travel so that a significant 202 African editors could make it to Cape Town. The South African delegation was by far the largest contingent (375 out of 1 600 people from 109 countries) with editors and educators joining media managers and owners. Most of the sessions at both sections of the overall event (WAN and WEF) were geared towards educating and conscientising editors and owners about the threats and values of digital and mobile technologies and about how to run multi-platform newsrooms. There was also a great deal of pumping-up talk about the growth, value and future of newspapers. Africa did get a slight look in at the round table session dedicated to the issue of press freedom and a focused session on reporting Africa on the

Information in se

What dominates the treatment of African subjects by the Western media and the international news services? War, endemic disease, poverty and misery, corruption and political conflict. It is as if there is a standardised format for the information coming out of this continent.

Ignacio Ramonet, director of Monde Diplomatique, commented: “…information was a rare good – thus expensive. Today, it is superabundant, and tends to be free. At the same time, it is regarded more and more as goods, so that its value does not depend any more on the criteria which traditionally gave it value – the truth and the lie – but the number of people likely to be interested by it. Information thus is primarily subjected to the laws of supply and demand.”

Information is thus, actually a product. And like any goods, it is in search of a market that enables it to find purchasers. Where is this profitable market? Not in Africa where there is an insufficient number of consumers of information ready to pay the price. In the West? Certainly. When journalism is not creative any more but becomes a simple provision of services which breaks the impartial duty of information, one will search in vain for professional rigour without any chance of finding its traces.

But is that a reason for Africa to remain an object rather than a subject of western journalists’ coverage? Often to counteract this Africans call for “African reporting”.

One should not speak about reporting which is typically African, European, American or Asian. As a profession which requires internationally-recognised universal standards, the manner of practising journalism should not vary according to continent and country, at least in form. It is as ridiculous to speak about African, American or Arab literature; one should indeed speak only about “literature” or
Editors’ Forum
arch of a market

by Cherif Moumina Sy

However, a report cannot be dissociated from its author; it is indeed about a point of view. No matter how objective or impartial it aims to be, it conveys (even unconsciously) the cultural, social, economic and political background of the journalist, all the experiential landscape which marked out the life of the journalist.

It is this socio-cultural background which determines the appreciation that journalists have made of events of which they are the direct witness or simply the relay, placed in a privileged position between a source and a receiving public. This is why a report on a given event will not be the same when treated by journalists coming from different countries and especially from different cultures.

The relations between Africa and the rest of the world show that, in spite of the fantastic progress made on the continent since the ’60s, the way westerners, in particular, see Africa remains characterised by economic misery and cultural backwardness.

How to improve the coverage of Africa? Africa must become an information provider for itself and the rest of the world. It is necessary to support the growth of African journalism made by African journalists on subjects of which they have a better reading culturally and socially. What is needed? To do an audit of news agencies on the continent and to set up credible agencies to cover Africa for Africans and the rest of the world, and to reinforce the media’s institutional capacities and their human resources. If Africa does not want to remain an outfall of information, it is necessary that it obtains a necessary to support the growth of African journalism made by African journalists on subjects of which they have a better reading culturally and socially. What is needed? To do an audit of news agencies on the continent and to set up credible agencies to cover Africa for Africans and the rest of the world, and to reinforce the media’s institutional capacities and their human resources. If Africa does not want to remain an outfall of information, it is necessary that it obtains a powerful means of communicating to an international audience. The Arab world has given us just such an example with the TV channel Al Jazeera.

Improving reporting

“The unfair coverage debate has a long history,” said Azubuike Ishiwere, executive director of Punch in Nigeria. And this debate often focuses on how the West sees Africa as “death, disease, destruction and despair”.

But in the spirit of the focused session on Africa which the chair Mathatha Tsedu steered away from bewailing the situation and towards solutions, Ishiwere then made the following points about how to improve the reporting:

1. Journalists covering Africa need to be familiar with its histories, cultures and peoples.
2. They need to understand context.
3. They should realise that their journalism must give voice to the weak, the vulnerable and minorities.
4. They should be aware the African landscape is changing rapidly (citing the Chinese investment into the continent of $40-billion).

“Journalists need: specialisation, numeracy, fluency in other languages, extensive contacts and sources and analytical ability,” he concluded.

Good governance

According to the Economic Commission for Africa good governance survey of 2005 of 28 African countries, while corruption, the bane of good economic management, continues to be found:

- respect for human rights on the rise (with some glaring exceptions);
- adherence to constitutions is getting stronger,
- legislatures and judiciaries are asserting their independence,
- the legitimacy and credibility of the electoral process have increased,
- voter turnouts are on the increase,
- the political space is more inclusive, and
- economic management is getting better.

“Journalists need: specialisation, numeracy, fluency in other languages, extensive contacts and sources and analytical ability,” he concluded.

A 50 Years of Journalism: African Media since Ghana’s Independence by Elizabeth Barratt and Guy Berger, promotes independent African journalism and takes stock of the situation on the continent, five decades after the first colony became free. The book is no dry overview. While it does an audit of the regions of the continent lumping geography and language, it also contains some of the liveliest stories about the “characters, cases and causes”, displaying the unique and clever ways journalists have made stories, issues and their outlets an indispensable part of African life and history.

The African Forum for Media Development is a “well co-ordinated media assistance programme,” according to Jeanette Minnie, a media consultant and activist, “and a network of African freedom of expression organisations.” One of the tactics now being worked on by those searching for the best way to secure the freedom of African media is to make viable and sustainable the many media businesses and ISPs on the continent and to spawn new businesses, because a proliferation of functional businesses is very difficult to control and shut down for repressive regimes. “A great plurality is required,” says Minnie, and “tremendous capacity building.” And to this end energy is being put into training in “the art” of how to run sustainable media and into sourcing venture capital which Minnie calls “a whole new entrepreneurial approach”. This is being done through Samdef, a small development bank for media, which is to both “inspire and fund” media development.