

Can one journalist cover all of Africa?

When one considers that Africa is the world's second largest and second most populous continent, taking up 20% of the earth's land area and accounting for 14% of the world's population, the question of whether it can be covered by one person should be ludicrous. Yet the question is so important to editors that it will be the subject of a panel discussion at the 14th World Editors Forum, to be held in Cape Town next week, 3 – 6 June 2007.



Many international newspapers have only one person covering all the news on the continent.

“Covering an entire continent alone can be equated to counting the number of hairs on your head. You will get confused before you do a square inch,” says Kimani Chege, the editor of the East African monthly magazine *Technews Africa*.

Chege, who is based in Nairobi in Kenya, says a reporter who tries to cover the more than 50 countries will “rush to all the places and achieve (only) insignificant information”.

Unsatisfactory

Most would agree that this is an unsatisfactory way to report on major events. Chege likens a solitary reporter covering such a vast and diverse geographical area to a colonial governor who needs to update his master.

“He seems to know much of what is happening to his region but doesn't have an idea how and why it happened,” Chege, who is also a correspondent for the international science and news website www.SciDev.net, comments.

“With a good budget, we can arm ourselves with the latest tools of the trade, ...[such as] a satellite-enabled laptop, a digital camera and video phone,” Chege adds.

“Without such a budget,” he concludes, “the world still seems too large.”

The Africa editor of the *Mail & Guardian*, Stephanie Wolters, agrees that covering Africa with only one person is extremely difficult.

“Of course it is a far cry from sufficient,” she says, but adds that coverage of the continent can be improved by building up a network of stringers and contributing correspondents from all the main centres.

Shortage of foreign correspondents

Owing to the shortage of foreign correspondents dispatched to Africa, many news organisations have only

one person on the continent and there is very little coverage of breaking news. She says the emphasis is placed on producing in-depth feature pieces.

Walters does not regard Africa as being neglected by the international media, but feels that it was rather a case of too few resources being assigned to the continent. She also does not agree with the argument that the costs of placing more people in Africa are prohibitive. She says the costs of sending one person to different places on the continent are as high as having people based in the relevant areas.

Christina Scott, the editor of the British-based Science and Development Network website, says the question of whether one person can report on Africa is based on the impression that a continent can be covered by “someone in a hotel room”.

“I find the question insulting. Do we ask if it's possible to cover the US from Mexico? Africa spans 53 countries, three time zones, two hemispheres and has five major languages.”

Scott agrees that coverage could be improved by making use of more stringers.

Using only one person to cover the continent could lead to what she calls the “all over Africa” phenomenon whereby reporters make generalised statements about the whole of the continent based on isolated incidents. She says wider coverage will lead to a more balanced impression of events.

For more information on the 14th World Editors Forum, go to www.capetown2007.co.za.