

John Agada and Malore I. Brown

John Agada and Malore Brown were born in Nigeira and Jamaica respectively. They are both assistant professors at the School of Library and Information Science, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, where they teach and conduct research in the areas of international and multicultural information services. They can be contacted at the School of Library and Information Science, University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee, POB 413, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201, USA (for Mr Agada: fax: +(1-414) 2294848; e-mail: agada@csd.uwm.edu); and for Malore Brown: fax: +(1-414) 2295409; e-mail: maloreb@csd.uwm.edu).



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Towards a Networked Community of Africans in the Diaspora: Problems and Prospects

Introduction

Information is recognized as the most strategic resource in contemporary society.^{1,2} With this recognition has come the quest for universal access to national and global information infrastructures.³ These infrastructures facilitate retrieval of recorded knowledge from databases as well as communication between system users worldwide. The Internet is the symbol of this emergent information environment. Connectivity to and use of the Internet is therefore perceived as a measure of the degree to which individuals or groups exploit the benefits of the new information resource.

The African Diaspora has historically been one of the most isolated regions of the globe. Since the peoples of the Diaspora share a common cultural heritage and socio-economic conditions, access to the Internet would enable them to create culturally relevant networks for sharing experiences and collaborating to solve common problems. Surveys of Internet access, however, suggest that these populations experience low connectivity and use compared to other regions and races.^{4,6} This finding may be attributed to factors ranging from culture, technology, politics, and economics.^{7,8}

This article discusses the unique prospects of Internet access for networking among peoples of the Diaspora and attendant obstacles. Based on the insider-outsider theory of information transfer from the sociology of knowledge⁹ it is assumed that use of the Internet by this group would increase if more information on the net

were contributed by persons from within their subculture. The article therefore suggests avenues for developing indigenous capacities for networking across the region. A sample of Web sites contributed by peoples of African origins is appended.

Rationale for Diaspora-Wide Networks

Conditions of Underdevelopment in the African Diaspora

The African Diaspora consists of all regions inhabited by Africans and their descendants. For purposes of this article, the regions of interest will be limited to Sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and North America. In this article examples will be drawn from Nigeria, Jamaica and inner cities of the USA. Although dispersed geographically, these regions share a heritage of African ancestry. Consequently, there is a cultural continuity throughout the region as manifested in the arts, language, music, beliefs and lifestyles.¹⁰ In the health sciences, for instance, conditions such as sickle cell anemia and hypertension in the West have been traced to genetic roots on the African continent.¹¹

Peoples of the African Diaspora are also characterized by conditions of underdevelopment, poverty and need. African Americans who inhabit one of the foremost industrialized nations are no exception. According to a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report, more than 82% of the countries in the African Diaspora belong among the regions with the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) in the world. The HDI is a measure of life expectancy at birth, income, adult literacy and mean years of schooling.¹² The following table illustrates the disparity between the

Table 1: Human Development Index (1992)*

Nation	Life Expectancy at birth	Adult literacy rate (%)	Mean years of schooling	HDI
High HDI (standard)	74.1	97.3	9.8	0.886
U.S.A.*	75.6	99.0	12.4	0.925
Spain	77.4	98.0	6.9	0.888
Chile	71.9	93.8	7.8	0.848
China	70.5	80.0	5.0	0.644
The Caribbean				
Grenada	70.0	98.0	4.7	0.707
Haiti	56.0	55.0	1.7	0.354
Jamaica	73.3	98.5	5.3	0.743
Africa				
Nigeria	51.9	52.0	1.2	0.348
Uganda	42.6	50.5	1.1	0.272
Zambia	45.5	74.8	2.7	0.352

*African Americans are at least 10 points below the USA figures.

The origins of these conditions may be traced to the slave trade and consequent colonization of the region by Europe. The economies and peoples of the African Diaspora have remained the most dependent and marginalized within the global system, long after national independence and emancipation from slavery. Today, their populations serve as consumer markets for Western manufactured goods, aid and welfare programmes.¹³ Except for the USA, their national economies are debt-ridden and undergoing structural adjustment programmes under the aegis of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.¹⁴ Despite the infusion of numerous development programmes during the last three decades, the conditions of underdevelopment in the Diaspora have persisted.¹⁵

The modest dividends of aid and welfare programmes in the Diaspora may be traced to the fact that they were often conceived and packaged by "experts" whose world views and value systems are inconsistent with

those of potential implementers and beneficiaries.^{16,17} Agada posits that these programmes are informed by positivist assumptions that knowledge had universal and historical relevance.¹⁸ Consequently, little attempt was made to adapt these programs and their infrastructures to the needs, aspirations and value systems of the consumers. A counter-movement seems to be emerging in current approaches to development.

Grassroots Participation as a Development Strategy

The history of development models since the turn of the century suggests ten-year shifts in strategies.¹⁹ Between 1955 and 1975, development strategies were dominated by the "trickle-down" and "basic needs" perspectives. While the "trickle down" perspective favored central government planning and control of economic growth initiatives, the "basic needs" approach which emerged around 1965 favored

decentralized administration, emphasizing social equity over growth as measured by economic indices only. This people orientation evolved by the late 1970s into the grassroots participation approach. Although the emphasis on social equity was maintained, the role of the people shifted from being passive recipients of development "inputs" to being active designers of development projects.

These perspectives converged with the emergence since the late 1980s of a new development strategy of indigenous capacity building. This approach is defined as "open and pluralist, providing the conditions in which economic and political restructuring can take place in a constructive fashion".²⁰ Small group and individual initiatives are coordinated through intermediaries such as non-governmental and community-based organizations. The quest for social equity within this development strategy assumes a democratic process in society. The wave of democratic reforms across the globe since the last decade is in part a legacy of this development ideology.²¹

The implications of these approaches to development efforts in the African Diaspora are two fold. First, they call for grassroots participation in the design and delivery of development programmes. Secondly, since indigenous experts are few and far between, they draw attention to a need for them to exchange ideas and collaborate on joint projects. Given their shared historical, cultural and socio-economic conditions, they could share experiences of adaptations of "Western" or Eurocentric-oriented programmes to local problems. Such networks are likely to yield higher dividends in resolving problems arising from their common conditions.

Diaspora-wide collaborations would facilitate development of a body of indigenous knowledge and practices relevant to local needs as well as other parts of the developing world. As Esther Hicks, General Secretary of the Advisory Council for Scientific Research in Development Problems in the Netherlands noted, "Research results such as the lessons learned from Senegal and the Gambia about the effectiveness - in the field - of oral and injectable polio vaccines are potentially also relevant in South Asia, for example".²² Such knowledge, however, rarely crosses national borders. The Internet would make such Diaspora-wide communication and grassroots participation in development activities feasible. The prospects of Diaspora-wide networks using the Internet to balance global information flows and enhance communication efficiency and effectiveness are covered below.

Prospects for Diaspora-Wide Networks

Balancing Global Information Flows

Compared to print, information sharing on the Internet is theoretically more democratic, allowing dialogue rather

than one way communication. In the 1970s and 1980s, imbalances in the flows of communication of news and research content had led developing countries in UNESCO forums to advocate a "New World Information Order".²³ Such imbalances are still evident in the control of news by a few multinational entities based in the West. Recently, David Lush of the Media Institute of Southern Africa lamented that "newspapers in Botswana were relying on Reuters for a story on Namibia and if there was no war or famine in Namibia, then no news on Namibia appeared in the papers".²⁴

Similar patterns of coverage are evident in the scholarly literature. Analysis of scientific papers published in 1994 by some 3,300 journals included in the Science Citation Index, a commercial database widely used by researchers indicated these contributions by the following countries:

Table 2: Number of Papers Indexed in *Science Citation Index*, 1994

African Diaspora		Non African Diaspora	
Nigeria	0.073*	U.S.	30.817
Jamaica	0.029	U.K.	7.924
Zimbabwe	0.024	Spain	2.028
Haiti	0.001	China	1.339
Bahamas	0.000	Chile	0.176

* Percentage of total for all nations

This imbalance in contributions from the African Diaspora and the rest of the world prevents researchers in these countries from sharing their discoveries with the industrialized world and with one another. This state of affairs may be attributed to patterns in the creation and dissemination of scientific knowledge in the West. Inclusion in the *Science Citation Index* and a few top databases ensures that an article will be read and cited when scientists search the literature for new discoveries in their field. Western research libraries and database publishers also rely on citation rates to select the journals they include.

For journals from the less developed world, this is a vicious circle. According to Benitez-Bribiesca, editor of a Mexican medical journal, "We don't get many citations, because the journal is not well known because it is not in the international indexes". This closed system of review and citation has also been blamed on subtle prejudices as evident in the remark by Jerome Kassirer, Editor-in-Chief of the *New England Journal of Medicine*: "Very poor countries have much more to worry about than doing high quality research...There is no science there".²⁵

Such sentiments make the Internet appropriate for researchers, professionals and lay persons in the African Diaspora to share their work, experiences and findings, rather than pander to the research agenda of their colleagues in the West. In 1995, Benitez had observed that although researchers in Mexico have discovered new strains of drug-resistant cholera, "international journals refuse our papers because they don't consider cholera a hot topic. But what if these strains spread across the border to Texas or California? They will think it important then. Meanwhile, the previous knowledge about the disease will have been lost."²⁶ Researchers in the Diaspora who rely on Western scientific literature therefore learn of problems or discoveries of local relevance only when such problems have reached epidemic proportions with global implications as in the case of the outbreak of Ebola in Central Africa.

The Internet is said to be a symbol of the information era, as the book was for the industrial era. As a "system of systems",²⁷ it comprises multiple public and private telecommunications networks with the capacity for transmitting voice, data, text and visual information. Besides its use as an information source, the Internet is also a communication tool. The latter use may be in the forms of electronic mail, bulletin board, electronic journal and computer conferencing. However, the development of its services and content already reflects the biases of the print era. As Michael Marriott and his colleagues observed:

Blacks can feel like interlopers when they venture into computer stores, crammed with software that seldom reflects black images or African American tastes and habits. While popular CD-ROM discs are transforming computer screens into art museums of European and Euro-American art, few discs feature African or Latin American and African American art. The solution may be in browning of cyberspace. That means more content and services that appeal to non-whites.²⁸

Enhancing Communication Efficiency and Effectiveness

Internet and electronic networking facilities provide savings in time and cost, compared to telephone and mail services. These savings may be in forms of:

- increased efficiency through elimination of unreturned telephone calls and memos. Participants in an exchange do not have to be present simultaneously for messages to be received.
- costs are reduced due to lower phone and mail rates and reduction in paper work.
- increased effectiveness by offering additional communication options, adapting to user convenience and providing archives of user transactions.

Use of the Internet for dialogue between individuals and groups in the African Diaspora would ameliorate its

image as a "white thing".²⁹ Africans in the Diaspora suspect the validity and relevance of knowledge originating from outside their lived experiences, trusting personal more than impersonal sources.^{30,31} Like print, most contributors of information on the Internet are not black and come from outside the Diaspora.^{32,33} However, the prospects for reducing ethnocentric bias in communication are higher for the Internet than print.

In 1996, Nicholas Negroponte³⁴ advanced three reasons why the Internet can be made free of ethnocentric bias:

- *Low entry cost.* One could publish on the Internet in any language with less than USD 2,000 in capital equipment and USD 10 per month in recurrent costs.
- *Customized access.* Information can be delivered to a sparsely populated universe around the globe, without regard to geographic density and mass audience criteria. Thus, five Yoruba-speaking physicians, who may have different lingua franca, can consult with each other and their clients on the effect of drugs, food and life style on conditions of sickle cell anemia.
- *Selectivity.* You "pull" information from the Internet, rather than have it "pushed" at you. Consequently, the reader has control of choice in what to view. Its potentials for multimedia and language translation (with multilingual browser) enhances its relevance and use by non-literates and non-English speaking populations who constitute a majority in the Diaspora.

To be competitive in the global economy, for instance, "national markets" in the African Diaspora need to be unified into regional systems. Online access to electronic markets and investment flows would enable formation of alliances and the development of niches for Diaspora products and services in the global marketplace. Without such collaboration, competitive production of raw materials and services could create conditions of oversupply and price dampening in the global economy. The fall in cocoa prices between 1986 and 1989 by almost 48%, for example, is attributed to boosts in cocoa exports by the contiguous West African nations of Ghana, Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire.³⁵ Although these countries are members of the West African Economic Commission (ECOWAS), there had been little information sharing and coordination of their market environments and strategies.³⁶

However, the Internet has been largely perceived as a unidirectional information source. The interactive communication facilities of the Internet has not been well publicized. Given the popularity of added values to telephone services, such as cellular, three-way lines, call waiting options among the African American population in the USA, it is speculated that the prospects of the Internet in the Diaspora lie in its use as a communications tool. Several obstacles however, need to be overcome before such prospects are realized.

Obstacles to Internet Access and Use

Obstacles to Internet access and use may be traced to historical and contemporary trends in the region. These trends are due to political, technological, economic, and socio-cultural factors.

Political Factors

Although the peoples of the African Diaspora share a history and culture, the colonial experience left on them imprints of diverse political, economic and ideological systems. Thus, in each country, a system of European world views, values and language was superimposed on indigenous ethnic cultures and languages. In West Africa, for instance, the Yoruba ethnic group like many others, was divided into French and English colonies. The assimilationist policies of the French and American governments ensured that educated citizens of French colonies and African Americans respectively, were even more differentiated from their counterparts in other parts of the Diaspora. These differences are further exacerbated by the absence of a harmonized information infrastructure for Diaspora-wide networking.

Although new patterns of influence replaced the colonial balkanization of the Diaspora, Internet service providers still operate on national, rather than regional basis. Since no country (except Brazil) or group of Africans produce their own communications technology, the trend to deregulate the industry promises to place the provision of Internet services throughout the Diaspora in the hands of multinational corporations. Consequently the same multinational entity could theoretically serve African populations in the USA, Jamaica and Nigeria. Although such monopoly has not materialized, the prospect raises problems of the sovereignty of those nations as well as the security, privacy and control of the intellectual products of their citizens. It also discourages development of indigenous telecommunications industries.

Technological Factors: Structural

The infrastructures for information services installed in the African Diaspora were inherited from the erstwhile colonies of Europe. The Caribbean and African nations, unlike the USA, could not afford to replace these systems upon gaining independence. Most often, the quality and stability of electrical power in these countries was therefore marginal and their communication facilities, particularly the switching devices, were unsuitable for transmission of digital data. Moreover, the region is home to a vast variety of national information infrastructures, many of which have incompatible telecommunications and electricity standards.

International contact within the Diaspora is therefore difficult. For example, telephone contact between Lagos

in English-speaking Nigeria and Lome in French-speaking Benin Republic, which are less than 100 miles apart, has to be routed through London and Paris, because of their colonial links.³⁷ Such bottlenecks have persisted in the coupling of national infrastructures. For example, links between the 100% digital network of Botswana and the extensive, digital, fiber optic and ISDN capacities of South Africa can only be coupled with analog circuits at 9.6 Kbps,³⁸ which is barely enough for individual user, let alone an entire nation's international traffic onto the global information infrastructure. Such problems leave satellite and off-continent connections as viable options for intra-Diaspora communication.

This option is, however, unpopular in countries where the communications industry has not been fully deregulated. In Nigeria, for instance, the government has clamped down on satellite phone companies which circumvent the services of the state-run Nigerian Telecommunications (NITEL).³⁹ In Jamaica too, all the private service providers are tied to the government mandated telephone monopoly.⁴⁰

In Africa, although up to 40 countries have electronic connectivity, only Egypt, Zambia, South Africa, Ghana, Algeria and Mozambique have direct Internet access. Others access the Internet via nodes in the host countries of donor agencies. In Southern Africa, there are no less than 45 service providers.⁴¹ International donors and non-governmental agencies are largely responsible for such access at little or no fees. There is, however, little coordination between them. As a result, incompatible systems which cannot "speak" directly to each other have been installed within one country. In Nigeria, for instance, e-mails between Lagos and Ilorin, cities which are about 100 miles apart, have to be routed through the nodes of their respective sponsors: the UNESCO Regional Informatics Network in Africa in Italy and McMaster University, Ontario, Canada.⁴² Similarly, e-mail messages between Kingston and Mandeville, both in Jamaica are routed through the Network Access Point in Virginia, USA.⁴³ Such routing not only makes use of the Internet slow and expensive, but is reminiscent of the colonial telephone services.

Technological Factors: Social

Internet hardware and software are mostly developed and produced outside of the Diaspora. To attain optimal benefits, Internet use ought to be integrated, not only into the technical but also the cultural, and socio-economic environment of the Diaspora. Access to and effective use of the Internet require literate and technically skilled populations. The lack of indigenous skilled systems designers, programmers and analysts would limit the degree to which services could be customized to local needs and communication patterns. Currently however, unemployment is relatively high throughout the African Diaspora and their labor force is poorly trained. Moreover, there are indications that

illiteracy and the school dropout rates are on the increase among these populations.⁴⁴

Use of the Internet suggests an increase in the level and education of the work force. Moreover, there is evidence that children who have computers in the home are more likely to be computer-literate.⁴⁵ Given the socio-economic conditions in the Diaspora, ownership of computers is largely restricted to the upper middle class. A 1994 study for the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, for instance, found that black households had the lowest rate of ownership of computers and modems among the racial groups in the USA.⁴⁶ In Africa and the Caribbean, the cost of a PC could be equivalent to several years' of a middle class income, thanks to IMF mandated currency devaluation. Consequently, most network participants depend on institutional, mostly government computers and subsidized billing payments. In addition, e-mail correspondence yielded several responses in which individuals from several Caribbean countries (Jamaica, Trinidad and the Bahamas) stated that they did have Internet access, but only through their place of employment or attendance at a university. Most respondents stated that they did not own a personal computer and the few that did own a computer stated the computers were not Internet-capable.⁴⁷

Although the grassroots vision of the Internet is yet to be realized in the more affluent West, the prospects for such a vision are more dismal in African Diaspora. It is unlikely, for instance, that multinationals would champion the diverse needs of the specialized submarkets and niches of these populations. Such needs, which include the development of multilingual browsers for indigenous language translations and the integration of voice and image capabilities in electronic networks, may be unattractive to profit-seeking multinationals. There is an historical precedent in the publishing of indigenous language literature in Africa during the last three decades. Such specialized markets were shunned by profit-oriented publishers. Sponsorship of services to specialized groups like non-literate and indigenous-speaking populations may therefore be left to the government and donor community.⁴⁸

Socio-Economic Factors

Capital resources in Africa and the Caribbean are scarce and many of the nations are debt ridden and currently undergoing economic structural adjustment. Investment in importation and maintenance of computers without direct and visible impact on the economy may therefore be hard to justify. Moreover, it may be argued that traditional communication modes are cheaper and more convenient (not requiring specialized training) than the investment in computer networks. Computers may also be perceived as replacing workers when used for clerical and labor intensive tasks.

A reoccurring issue in the development of networks in the Diaspora relates to project sustainability. According

to Lisse, "too many projects in developing countries have faltered after the outside funding ran out."⁴⁹ Issues in the sustainability of network projects range from funding to technical support, service value, and user ownership of projects. With dwindling aid budgets and the constraints on expenditures placed on welfare and social service programmes, it is unlikely that many network projects will survive without fees. Economics of scale therefore serves as a powerful incentive for expanding network communities.

According to the Nairobi-based Environment Liaison Centre International (ELCI), a self-sustaining community using Fidonet software would require a base of 50 users paying USD 10 per month and 50 cents per message. While such rates may be considered "cheap" in Western terms, in Africa where countries such as Ghana suffered a currency devaluation of up to 97%, without a commensurate growth in real income, they are exorbitant.⁵⁰

Cost may not be the only deterrent to Internet use. Other reasons may arise from the lack of a technological culture. A study of use of a Milwaukee-based "grassroots" electronic network, however, indicated that provision of these services alone does not guarantee use. Although the five-year old service charged an annual subscription fee of USD 25 (which could be waived based on need), none of the study sample of gatekeepers in Milwaukee's African American inner city neighborhood had ever used the network.⁵¹

Conclusion

Recommendations

Many of the obstacles identified above fall in the realm of international economic and political relations; and therefore beyond the direct responsibilities of information professionals. However, the need to update existing infrastructures and train skilled manpower has long been recognized.⁵² Given the multiple initiatives by national governments, multinational enterprises and non-governmental organizations, it is reasonable to expect that the structural problems of technology access may be resolved in a couple of years.

The economic and social obstacles may be ameliorated in part by integrating the Internet into the information environment of Africans in the Diaspora. To ensure sustained use, the Internet must be identified with the popular cultural communication modes among Africans in the Diaspora. In particular, it ought to provide access to such knowledge systems that define reality for the majority of the populations. Such undertaking would involve those schooled in indigenous knowledge systems in information exchange on the Internet. Indigenous knowledge ultimately needs to be

documented, organized, up-loaded (in diverse formats and languages) and made accessible at any location. The following recommendations were made specifically for the Black Caucus of the American Library Association and its sister organizations in Africa and the Caribbean:

1. Create a consortium of library associations in the Diaspora to serve as an advocacy group to monitor Internet access and use among Diaspora populations as well as a forum for training and sharing expertise, resources and experiences.
2. Seek grants to support projects for linking libraries that do not have access to the Internet and training of staff and clients.
3. Organize workshops (free of charge or subsidized) for training on computer and Internet use for clients, and encourage them to input data to the Internet, rather than use it solely for information retrieval.
4. Establish a listserv devoted to discussions relevant to common interests and problems of professionals and lay persons alike throughout the Diaspora.
5. Create home pages on the World Wide Web linked to information on the Internet dealing with issues of interest to Diaspora listservs and discussion groups.
6. Establish electronic mail services between clients throughout the Diaspora.

Summary

Peoples of the African Diaspora are historically the most isolated populations of the world. Given their shared history, culture, and socio-economic conditions, they could benefit from sharing ideas, experiences and collaborating to resolve common problems. The Internet and electronic networking technologies offer timely ways to interact with information resources and individuals worldwide. Current development and democratic forces all over the world favor the use of the Internet for mass information sharing between professionals, scholars and lay persons alike in the Diaspora. Obstacles for mass access to and use of Internet and networking technologies have origins in the historical and contemporary developments in the political, socio-economic, and technology transfer issues of the Diaspora.

This poses an enormous challenge to librarians, archivists, and documentalists, among others. While librarians and information professionals cannot directly impact all these factors, it is recommended that if we create Diaspora-wide professional linkages, offer forums for clients across the Diaspora to network, and encourage mass training and education on the values and use of the Internet, such programmes would go a long way in inculcating a culture of Internet use and ownership of its content in the Diaspora.

Appendix

Web Site Contributed by Peoples of the Diaspora

- American Visions: <http://www.americanvisions.com>
A magazine of Afro-American culture, art, history, music, cuisine, heritage; an online service and web hosting service.
- Go-Jamaica: <http://www.jamaica-gleaner.com>
Provides up-to-date information by the national newspaper (The Gleaner). Includes current news, tourism information and information on commerce and industry.
- Spectralinks: <http://maelstrom.stjohns.edu/archives/spectralinks.html>
Internet guide to African Americans.
- USAfrica Online: <http://www.usafricaonline.com>
A medium to bring Africans and African Americans to the same issues and interests of community service and strategic business networking.
- WorldWide Black Online: <http://www.wwbol.com>
A forum to develop and publish information for people of African descent on the Internet.
- Blackworld: <http://www.Blackworld.com>
"Your Friendly Internet Directory" includes "webvertisers" classified listings of businesses in Jamaica, Nigeria, Toronto, London, Capetown, Los Angeles and San Francisco.
- NetNoir: <http://www.netnoir.com>
Interactive online community for Blacks. Includes cultural information, news, entertainment, business and politics and shopping.

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- ⁴⁷ Internet research. E-mail communication between Karin, Network Systems Administrator/Webmaster, Jamaica Promotions Corporation and Malore Brown, 10 September 1996. Terrance, Trinidad, 11 September 1997; Robert, Kingston, Jamaica, 11 September 1997; Eric, Nassau, Bahamas, 8 September 1997.
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- ⁴⁹ Lisse, E. "Electronic Networking in Southern Africa: The Namibian Experience". *FID News Bulletin* 45(7/8):253(1995).
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