

Encyclopedia, Web site trace history of blacks

By Verena Dobnik
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Some news from the virtual grapevine: The work that black slaves did in America would be worth more than \$1 trillion in today's money.

That's just one fact flying through cyberspace on a new Web site — Africana.com — which aims to be a live forum linking blacks worldwide.

"The grapevine is of huge importance to the black community, since historically we were excluded from the mainstream media," says Henry Louis Gates Jr., the site's co-founder and head of Harvard University's African-American studies department.

"A Web site with black content is the new place to 'hang out,'" he says. "It's a talking drum for the 21st century."

Africana.com is an educational portal that offers a black perspective on everything from the daily news, history and the arts to practical advice.

Visitors to the site can share views, and differences, in online discussions, sign up for free e-mail or buy books and music. And they can listen to 80 radio stations in places from Benin in Africa, and Guadeloupe in the Caribbean, to the United States.

"We don't advocate anything, we don't tell you how to be black," says Gates. "We want to help raise a healthy black community, by addressing concerns about health, wealth, love."

The site was launched to accompany a new 2,095-page book called "Africana" — billed as the most complete record of Africa and the black diaspora in one volume. A parallel CD is called Encarta Africana.

The book realizes the dream of civil



Associated Press

Chairman of the Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard University, Prof. Henry Louis Gates Jr., left, stands with fellow members of the Africana.com Web site editorial board, including Prof. K. Anthony Appiah and Dr. Harry M. Lasker III, on the steps of Widener Library on the Harvard campus Jan. 31 in Cambridge, Mass.

rights pioneer W.E.B. DuBois. By the time he died in Ghana in 1963, he had sketched the beginnings of the encyclopedia.

Then Gates came along, equipped with a brainy Rolodex, the Internet and millions of dollars in capital.

He is a practical dreamer: The company that runs the Web site is for-profit. Its president, Darrol Roberts, is a marketing expert who once worked for Reebok. With Gates' help, he hopes to raise \$15 million this year from investors and keep the site advertising-free.

Gates' chief business partners are a fellow Harvard professor, Ghanaian-born philosopher Kwami Anthony

Appiah, and Harry Lasker III, a designer of educational media who helped create "Sesame Street." Music mogul Quincy Jones chipped in money, too. (By the way, the encyclopedia reveals, his middle name is Delight.)

The need for a special "black" Web site points to a new racial problem linked to the Internet — failure of blacks to match whites in digital literacy.

Among America's 35 million blacks, far fewer households use the Internet than the general population, according to Commerce Department figures. And the 700 million blacks in Africa have even less access.

Africana.com

According to the Web site, Africana.com offers history, news, a newsletter and e-mail as well as many links to other sites.

You can find it at:
<http://www.africana.com>

With Africana.com, "we want the black content to inspire people to log on and learn," says Roberts. "We want to be a digital bridge."

Africana.com is in the process of hiring 50 people to staff offices in Cambridge, Mass. Their goal reaches beyond the Internet — to try to close the gap between plugged-in blacks and those with meager resources.

With that aim, the site offers free lesson plans for teachers based on entries from the encyclopedia.

Thousands of encyclopedias and CD-ROMS have been donated to schools across the United States through individual and corporate grants. And a copy of the printed encyclopedia will be donated to every library in Africa.

Africana also will tap traditional black markets by setting up sites in churches and mosques.

"Black people meet more in churches than anyplace else, as a group," says Gates.

With his presence on television and the media, Gates' star power has drawn a lineup of expert commentators like Nobel Prize-winning Nigerian novelist Wole Soyinka and Benjamin Carson, a Johns Hopkins Hospital neurosurgeon and innovator in separating Siamese twins.

But Gates, a 49-year-old academic who grew up in a West Virginia working-class family, also has drawn

the disdain of some of the black intelligentsia — as an elitist whose Harvard department once was dubbed the "Cotton Club on the Charles" by the Rev. Eugene Rivers, a Boston-based activist.

Rivers has now signed up as a commentator on the Web site. And a Boston court is sentencing troubled youth to attend a pilot Africana program in Rivers' church.

Co-edited by Appiah and Gates, the entries are signed by 220 contributors, and balance is sought on controversial topics. For instance, the Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan is called an African-American religious leader who advocates black self-sufficiency but has been criticized for "anti-Semitic statements."

"It's very important to us that the heart of this is telling the truth, and it's not just cheerleading," says Appiah. "The truth includes the 10 million AIDS orphans in Africa — and Farrakhan."