

Casting a Net

Web Site That Unites Blacks Is Big Ambition Of Henry Louis Gates

But Hurdles for Africana.com Are Big, Too, Including Rivals, Size of Audience

Lining Up the Columnists

By DANIEL GOLDEN

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Henry Louis "Skip" Gates Jr. has never been accused of selling himself short. And, most of the time, he has fulfilled his lofty ambitions.

He rose from a West Virginia working-class family to graduate *summa cum laude* from Yale and become the first African-American to earn a doctorate in English from Cambridge University. After taking over as chairman in 1991, he transformed Harvard's struggling Department of Afro-American Studies into a mecca for the foremost black thinkers. He carried out civil-rights pioneer W.E.B. DuBois's long-deferred dream of creating a black encyclopedia, and did it both in CD-ROM and book forms.

Now the 49-year-old academic aims to realize an even grander vision, which he describes as unifying blacks worldwide through the Internet in the way the Catholic Church defined European culture in the Middle Ages. His pulpit is a year-old Web site, Africana.com, that he founded to help market his CD-ROM encyclopedia.

Drawing on his star power and unsurpassed Rolodex, Prof. Gates has recruited a lineup of black luminaries as columnists, including his mentor, Nobel Prize-winning Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, feminist critic Bell Hooks, Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson and Harvard law professor Charles Ogletree. Prof. Gates and his partners in the for-profit venture have hired a public-relations firm and are expanding the site's staff to 50. To pay for it, they hope to raise \$15 million this year from investors.

Prof. Gates, who writes in longhand on a legal pad and rarely went online before the site's launch, is undeterred by his paucity of Internet experience. "We're very, very ambitious for Africana.com," he says. "We want it to be *the* black educational portal in the world. As long as we stick to our focus, which is education in the broadest sense possible, I don't think anybody can compete with us."



Henry Louis Gates Jr.