Ever wonder if the Information Superhighway reaches Africa? It does, to an extent—there are now at least 30 African countries with access to the Internet. Regional networks that primarily provide e-mail to African users, such as FidoNet, enable approximately 83 percent of that connectivity. Developing countries are quickly discovering how cost-effective the Internet can be, especially when e-mail is compared to more traditional forms of telecommunication. They are also beginning to discover an important roadside attraction—Penn’s own African Studies WWW (World-Wide Web).

The attractions

The African Studies WWW provides high quality information about Africa that can be used to enhance curriculum development, academic collaboration, and community awareness. Africans and African Studies scholars worldwide can now access the African Studies WWW—an indexed, searchable repository for files on the topics listed below.

- Current events: conferences, newsletters, travel, urgent action items, etc.
- Documents: books, articles, bibliographies, constitutions, speeches, etc.
- Educational resources: audio-visual, K-12, languages and programs, etc.
- Electronic technology: African networking, BBS, e-mail, discussion groups, software, etc.
- Job and grant opportunities: grants, fellowships, etc.
- Multimedia archives: graphics, interactive maps, presentations, etc.

A student interested in South Africa can read Nelson Mandela’s most recent speech online, learn how to send e-mail to Johannesburg, download the latest country map, search the job listings for South Africa, or connect to the Rhodes University library. A graduate student planning to do research in Senegal can identify sources of potential funding, find the current State Department travel advisory, locate other research being done in the region, contact the Senegalese Embassy in Washington, D.C., and even learn how to prepare Senegalese cuisine.

Who’s using what, and how?

Graphics and audio-visual aids (e.g., maps, pictures, artwork) are by far the most popular items on the African Studies WWW. Practical information about Africa (e.g., grants, jobs, travel tips) is also in great demand.

Users are from myriad academic, commercial, and private sector institutions worldwide. The limited access to telecommunications resources by African institutions is clearly reflected in usage statistics. For example, last October, usage broken down by country revealed that only
.3 percent of total global usage was from African institutions. Here are last October’s usage statistics:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Usage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. America</td>
<td>59.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. America</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The African Studies WWW can be accessed from a WWW browser (e.g., Mosaic, Cello, Lynx) or via Telnet. To access it from a Web browser use the URL: http://www.african.upenn.edu/African_Studies/AS.html. Or telnet to www.upenn.edu (enter “pennweb” at the login prompt), select “WWW Servers” from Penn’s home page, and then select “African Studies at Penn.”

**Under construction**

The African Studies WWW promotes interdisciplinary instruction and research in African languages and area studies by undertaking projects that relate information technology with African Studies. Here is a sampling of current and future directions:

**File retrieval via e-mail.** African Studies is currently working with SAS Computing’s Workstation Services and others in international networking to implement a file retrieval tool that will enable e-mail-only users within much of Africa to access online WWW resources and interactive services by request. Without such a tool, African participation in WWW development would be limited to the small percentage of African countries that have full Internet connectivity.

**Hornet.** The African Studies WWW receives a direct file feed from a local FidoNet node in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, called Hornet. The in-country reports and regional information provided by Hornet are invaluable to both the African Diaspora and the academic communities. African Studies hopes to encourage similar information provision from Africans operating local bulletin boards and networks.

**Country-specific archive.** The African Studies WWW is developing a virtual library of country-specific information that can be used by educators and the general public to access up-to-date files on topics such as geography, language, arts, education, economy, culture, politics, geography, demography, literature, literacy, and history. The African Studies Program at Penn envisions a collaborative project among Penn Africanists and other African Studies information networks that will serve as an ever-current, ever-growing, ‘living’ encyclopedia of African Studies information.

**Videoconferencing to remote locations.** Rapidly improving information technology will soon allow the use of videoconferencing software for collaboration with African scholars around the globe in real time. Such distance learning projects would enable universities to offer lectures simultaneously transmitted to multiple classrooms around the world and then discussed by students in live Q&A sessions from their respective schools.

The Internet can potentially bypass many of the regional conditions that have impeded communications in developing countries in the past, such as poor quality phone lines and mail service, as well as social factors like internal strife and lack of basic resources. It provides a cost-effective means of disseminating data on a global scale. As Internet connectivity expands, more and more users in Africa will not only be able to send and receive e-mail through regional networks that link Africa to the rest of the online world; but they will also be able to use interactive services for the price of a local phone call. This will allow users in remote locations to access publications and other data for which they would otherwise pay a premium.

While African networking pioneers are steadily building on-ramps to the Information Superhighway, the African Studies WWW hopes to enhance such endeavors by making quality information about Africa and interactive services available in developing countries. It will be in collaboration with our African counterparts on the Internet that the “African route” on the Superhighway is ultimately paved.

JULIE E. SISSKIND is Outreach Coordinator for the African Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania.