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University of Iowa
International Programs
120 International Center
Iowa City, Iowa 52242

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Amazonian Indians perform for outsiders in a simulated village near São Paulo, Brazil.

Casting a Wider Net

Strengthening Digital Capacity in Nigerian Universities

By Cliff Missen and Michael L. McNulty

USING digital technology and communication tools, The University of Iowa's WiderNet Project continues the university's long tradition of building academic bridges with African universities.

Information and communication have played essential roles in human history. The rise of great civilizations in the Mediterranean basin, and elsewhere in the world, were associated with the building of major libraries and scholarly collections. In Africa, the legendary Library of Alexandria and the libraries at Timbuktu were celebrated as symbols of the refinement and culture of the societies that built and maintained them.

For millennia, the world's scholars have traveled far and wide to gain access to the best libraries and scholarly resources. Like their predecessors, today's scholars seek out the best sources of information and can now employ an increasingly well-integrated network of research libraries and interlibrary loan systems to access information and to communicate with colleagues worldwide. Access to information and ease of communication has accelerated greatly in the past decade. Recent growth in digital information and communication technologies has dramatically altered the way in which scholars and others access, use, and exchange information.

But access and use of these technical innovations are unevenly distributed. While academics in the U.S. and other western nations are quickly adopting media-rich, high-bandwidth communication tools that are revolutionizing the way they teach, conduct research, and interact with colleagues and students, few African scholars have

benefited from these technological advances.

Although a resource gap has long existed between western and African scholars and institutions, in recent years that gap has grown into a stunning chasm. Many of the best trained and experienced scholars of Africa are being drawn away from the continent. African universities are suffering a "brain and information" drain, and a generation of African students are denied the opportunity for high quality education and training. Many African scholars must leave their home institutions if they wish to gain access to the largest library and participate in the largest *collaboratorium* that humans have ever constructed: the World Wide Web.

The University of Iowa's WiderNet Project seeks to combat this trend by strengthening digital communication capacity at African universities and building a digital bridge to facilitate scholarly communication. Working with Nigerian colleagues, the WiderNet Project members work to expand technical capacity and increase access to computers, email, and the Internet for scholars, administrators and technical staff. Increasing access to digital library resources and exchange of scholarly resources are central elements of the WiderNet Project.

On the surface, it seems like a simple technical issue: our African counterparts need Internet connectivity. So a simple technical response might be: let's encourage them to buy computers and an Internet connection and then train them to use them. For many people, the technical issue is resolved, and we can move onto other pressing matters.

But, there is nothing simple about this effort to revolutionize human communication. The impact of digital communication is just beginning to be felt in the Western world. Although some of us might conclude that the recent changes in digital communication are among the most dramatic impacts we have ever experienced, many educators predict we have yet to experience even the tip of the iceberg. New global wireless communication technologies are only now being deployed, and soon we will see streaming video to the hand-held computer and full voice and video communications with devices as small as our current cell phones. All of this at a time when many people in the world, especially in Africa, are yet to experience even the "first wave" of this digital revolution.

These changes are linked with geographic processes (*globalization*) and emerging technologies (*digitalization*) that are having an enormous impact on our lives and professions. *Globalization* as a concept has been variously defined and widely debated. The term often is employed to convey the notion that many aspects of economic, social, and political life are influenced by global processes affecting even the most local and remotest places on earth. Some observers suggest that globalization is rendering "geography" obsolete and predict the "death of geography," by which they mean that the tyranny of distance is being undermined by globalization.

In this view, rapid increases in transportation and communication technologies are reducing the barriers to real and virtual interaction between distant places and globalization is reducing the regional distinctiveness that underlay much geographic research. One of the most frequently mentioned elements of this expanding global

communication network is the rapid emergence and phenomenal expansion of information *digitalization* and the creation of the Internet.

All manner of positive and negative impacts on human life have been attributed to these processes. Some see them as a totalizing influence leading toward an inevitable convergence on certain common modes of economic and cultural production. Some view them as an "Americanization," or at least a "westernization," process involving the expansion of capitalism that undermines local economies and destroys local cultures.

Many local and global groups have emerged to oppose this real or perceived threat of cultural and economic domination and to actively challenge its "hegemonic" designs. Others view the technology as holding great promise of bringing information to the most remote corners of the earth, empowering people who have been information poor, and giving "voice" to millions of people who have been silenced by lack of access to prior communication technologies.

Digitalization and the *Internet* are the terms used to describe the growing web of interconnected computers employing a common communication to link businesses, organizations, and individuals in a global network. In most academic circles, it is practically impossible to get through a day without discussing, interacting with, or hearing about the Internet and its impact on our lives.

Despite its widespread and growing significance, the Internet is a relatively recent phenomenon. A mere decade ago, it would have been rare, indeed, to hear someone talking about something called "the Internet" – and if we did, it was still thought of in terms of science fiction and future possibilities.

The growth of the Internet and the pace of globalization are not occurring everywhere or growing with the same speed from one region to another. Even within countries and within specific locales, access to and control over the Internet is socially and geographically uneven. Of an estimated 201 million Internet users worldwide, over 50 percent are in North America. The adoption of the HTTP, the World Wide Web hypertext transfer protocol, greatly accelerated the growth of the Internet and number of websites. Matrix NetSystems (2002) estimates that there are 172 million sites on the World Wide Web, while Google.com reports indexing over two billion individual Web pages. None-the-less, the vast majority of these were English-language sites concentrated in North America and Western Europe.

And there are vast discrepancies within countries. In many developing countries, access to the Internet is limited to the capital city and only a handful of users. Even in the United States, access varies geographically as well as socially. Press (1999), drawing on U.S. Commerce Department data, notes that "the proportion of Internet users in the United States varies depending upon race, income level, education level, residential classification (urban, rural, central city), and state."

The WiderNet Project is the most recent project in a long history of inter-institutional collaboration and linkages between The University of Iowa and African Universities. These relationships date back to at least 1970 when a



Michael McNulty is co-director of the WiderNet Project and University of Iowa professor of geography. He is a long-time student of Africa. McNulty first visited Ghana in 1965-66 as a graduate student. He later lived and worked in Nigeria (1970-71) and returns regularly to teach and do research with African colleagues. Years ago, Cliff Missen was a student in McNulty's class on "Development Policy and Planning." McNulty recently was a student in Missen's "Internetworks in International Development" class. mcnultym@widernet.org

program of faculty exchanges were established under the auspices of the Rockefeller Foundation's Institutional Development Grants. One of the current authors, Michael McNulty, was the first UI faculty member to participate in this program. McNulty served as visiting lecturer at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria's oldest and largest university, in 1970-71. Other faculty members to participate in the Rockefeller Foundation program include Joel Barkan, political science, and Ed Jennings, former UI economics professor. Both served as visiting faculty members at Dar-es-Salaam University in Tanzania in the early 1970's. Formal exchanges have also developed with the University of Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania), the University of Ougadougou (Burkina Faso), the University of Natal (South Africa), and the University of Ghana. Most recently, UI has been linked to a number of other universities in Nigeria through a partnership with the Nigerian National Universities Commission.

In the past three decades, scores of faculty, staff and students from the University of Iowa and our partner institutions in Africa have benefited from these growing relationships. During this period, the The University of Iowa has hosted more than 30 faculty members from the University of Ibadan alone. UI faculty, students, and staff have participated in numerous research, training, and curriculum development grants linking them with African colleagues. These relationships have resulted in numerous scholarly publications (many jointly authored by UI and African faculty members), course development, opportunities for team-teaching, and expansion of library holdings both at Iowa and in partner institution libraries.

Over the years, we have experienced dramatic changes in the ways in which we communicate and exchange information with our colleagues in Africa. During initial visits to Ghana in 1965-66, and then later in Nigeria, McNulty experienced the difficulty of personal and professional communication which relied on telephone and telegraph technologies that were often unavailable, unreliable, or both. Missen's first visits to West Africa in the 1980's took him to many places in Liberia where contact with the capital city, Monrovia, was impossible, let alone thinking of international communication. Even today, access to communication technologies remains very limited in most of Africa.

Currently in Nigeria only three out of 27 universities have a direct connection to the Internet and none have enough bandwidth to serve their users adequately. In 1999, when Cliff served as a Senior Fulbright Scholar at the University of Jos in central Nigeria, the country's telecommunication monopoly (NITEL) possessed only as much Internet bandwidth as the average American home with a cable modem. The largest university computer network in Nigeria consisted of less than 30 workstations. Those directly connected to the Internet could be counted on one hand.

The full story of that Fulbright year and other aspects of the UI-Nigeria WiderNet Project are available at www.widernet.org.

Cliff's work in Jos resulted in a dramatic increase in the numbers of computers connected to a local area network, and vastly improved the communication links between faculty, students and staff at the University of Iowa and the University of Jos.

We have both maintained a long-standing interest in Africa as have Joel Barkan and other UI faculty that have lived and worked in Africa over the years. Many UI faculty, students and staff have contributed to strengthen relationships with African universities. These linkage projects have created many opportunities for both African and UI students and faculty to participate in scholarly exchanges and study abroad.

The WiderNet Project is not only the most recent, but perhaps also the most ambitious, in

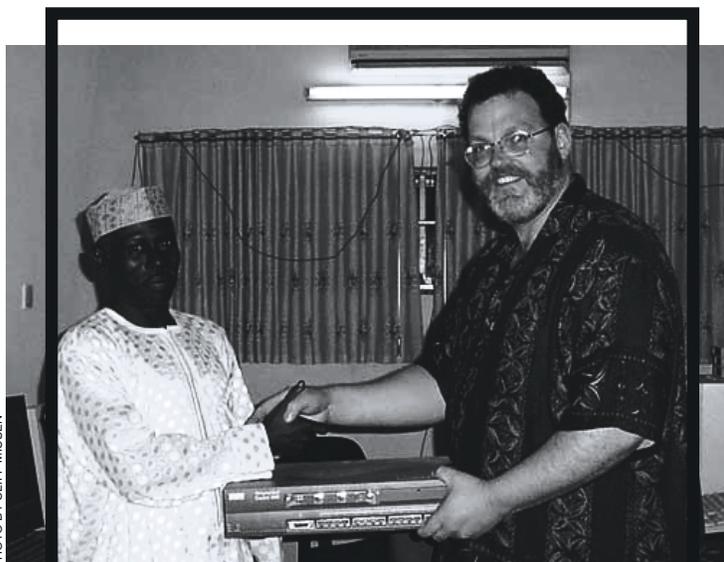


PHOTO BY CLIFF MISSEN

Cliff Missen delivers a donated Cisco switch to one of the UI's partners, Dr. Aminu Ibrahim of the Nigerian National Universities Commission.

Cliff Missen is co-director of the WiderNet Project and has more than 15 years of professional experience in computers, networking, multimedia design, and applications development. At the WiderNet Project, he combines this with his long-term interest in international development. "I want to see the day when African technicians — steeped in the understanding of ICT technology — can bend, twist and share these tools to create appropriate and affordable communications systems for the most rural villages in Africa."
missenc@widernet.org

this long line of institutional partnerships with African universities. With funding from USAID, the U.S. State Department, and the MacArthur Foundation, the WiderNet Project is providing consulting and coaching at eight Nigerian universities. During the last year, more than 100 decision makers and technicians have participated in the WiderNet Project's in-country training programs. Another twenty Nigerian planners and senior technicians will visit the UI this spring to witness first-hand the myriad roles that information technology plays in a modern American academy. We're focusing on getting relevant information into the hands of those decision-makers and administrators who are steering Nigeria's first forays into academic digitization. Then, we're training large cadres of new computer technicians to wire up and maintain the networks. While building digital capacity through expanding computer networks and training technical staff, we are also encouraging the development of scholarly projects aimed at strengthening research and teaching at the University of Iowa as well as participating Nigerian institutions. The immediate objective is to enhance the human capacity to harness these communication technologies.

The project has garnered generous support from numerous quarters: LearnKey, Inc. has provided computer-based training modules for technicians; Microsoft and RedHat have donated their respective network server software packages; and 3Com Corporation has provided networking equipment. And most important, hundreds of authors and Web publishers have given the WiderNet Project permission to distribute their books, articles, and Web sites via CD-ROMs to partner universities. The WiderNet Project just delivered a digital library of over 350,000 items to four Nigerian universities. Without spending a penny on Internet connectivity, members of these Nigerian universities now have access to first rate materials, including portions of UI Health Care's award winning Virtual Hospital Web site.

An entirely unexpected, but very welcome, outgrowth of the project is a successful effort to collect used computer and networking equipment for partner universities. The WiderNet Project has collected more than 300 Pentium-class computers, plus a wealth of accessories, software, books, and printers. We've received several large donations from organizations including the Cedar Rapids-based Physicians Clinics of Iowa and the Stanley Foundation of Muscatine, Iowa. But, over half of the equipment collected so far has come from individuals around the Iowa City-Coralville area.

None of this might have been possible, however, without the tremendous efforts of the student assistants in the WiderNet Project and the dozens of volunteers working at the International Center through International Programs to collect and prepare the equipment for ocean shipment. The cost of transportation is paid by the recipient universities in Nigeria. It's a win-win situation for everyone. The computers stay out of a landfill, the donors are pleased about helping to bridge this digital divide, and our Nigerian partners get good low-cost computers with many years of life left in them.

Those wishing to donate computers or network equipment can find out how by browsing to <http://www.widernet.org/donations>)

With a population of 125 million and abundant natural resources, including large oil reserves, Nigeria is perceived to be West Africa's keystone economy. If Nigeria succeeds, many other countries in the region will benefit. The lessons we are learning in Nigeria will inform the progress of other African universities. Plans are currently underway to involve faculty and staff from other African universities in future WiderNet Project workshops in Nigeria.

The WiderNet Project could be termed "bridge building." Today we are pounding the pilings, laying the steel, and pouring the concrete. The noise and hubbub and disturbances of today are like building a bridge that, one day in the future, will be traversed by millions without a concern about the labors that went into its construction. We will be able to use the bridge to deliver courses, conduct mutually beneficial research, collaborate with our African colleagues, and provide our students with unmediated interactions with their peers from other cultures. These types of linkages provide us the opportunity to continue as a visible forerunner in this field - opening doors to manifold research and collaboration opportunities as well as bringing dozens of prominent Nigerian academics to the University of Iowa.