Black Leaders and Organizations: Ignoring Technology is Choosing to Fail

by Ken Granderson
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0. Introduction

For the past 30 years, I have watched Black organizers wrestle with a pattern of self-sabotage: while fighting for power, justice, and equity, we too often treat the most powerful tool EVER available to us - technology - as if it were a side issue.

We focus on rallies, meetings, and speeches, but fail to put the same energy into the digital tools that shape how power itself is wielded in the modern world.

In the 1990s, this was more understandable. The internet was new, computers were uncommon, and skills were scarce. But in 2025, there is no excuse. To refuse to put technology at the center of our organizing is not just shortsighted - it is a strategic error so grave that it inadvertently dooms our efforts to irrelevance. Technology today is not peripheral. It is the very battlefield upon which power, influence, and survival are decided.

1. Missed Opportunities of the 1990s

In 1996 – TWENTY-NINE YEARS AGO - I tried to convince the National African American Leadership Summit, who stood over the Million Man March local organizing committees, to embrace technology.

I offered to set them up - at zero cost – with email-based forums that would have empowered their regional and national organizers across the country to privately talk and strategize – all day, every day, rather than having to wait for quarterly, in-person face-to-face meetings in different parts of the country.

This is the closing section of my proposal, which you can read in its entirety at
https://kengranderson.com/images/highlights/mmm-tech-proposal-1996.pdf

5. Conclusions

It is difficult to describe the power of this new communications medium until you have experienced it. On a daily basis, I discuss technical issues and problems with Black computer science students across the country via a Black Developer's mailing list that I set up. I do business with a dozen or so other nations on a daily basis via e-mail, fax, and a credit card processing service, without ever leaving my home in Dorchester. I can look up information on just about any subject under the sun in seconds. This new medium has allowed me to do things today that I never dreamed were possible five years ago, and it is available and much more affordable than most people think. Based on my experience and understanding of the directions in which things are moving, I believe that we will do our people a fatal disservice if we do not place computer literacy at the forefront of our agendas.
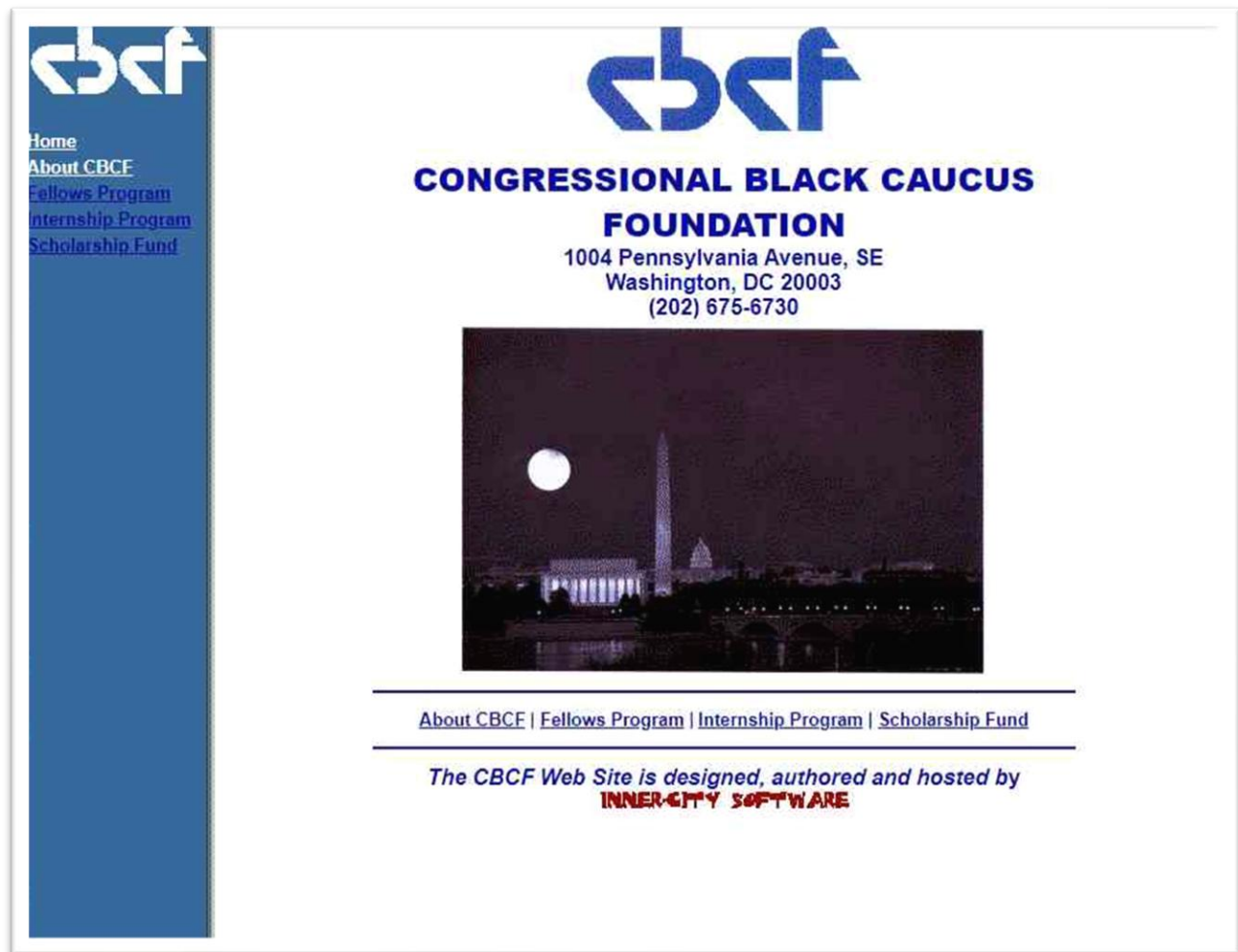
Finally, in case you haven't noticed, no prices are quoted or otherwise mentioned for these services. That's because we are not looking for anything except the opportunity to use what we know towards the empowerment of our people. If, during that journey, we help some people develop skills and we are able to hire them, that will be a double benefit for us and more than adequate compensation for the time that it will take to implement these projects.

Hope to see you online.

This was written **MARCH 23, 1996**.

Unfortunately, they declined.

In 1998, my company Inner-City Software put the **Congressional Black Caucus Foundation** online with a self-manageable website.

Wayback Machine capture of CBCF Home Page:
https://web.archive.org/web/19980208165632/http://www.cbcfnet.org/

But again, leadership didn't understand our grand vision of what technology could mean for Black political power, and after taking the site in-house, within a couple of years, they not only failed to use their site as a connector of mainstream Black political organizing across the nation, but they actually lost their domain name.

These were not isolated incidents. Across the board, Black organizations were hesitant to put their weight behind technology. And while we debated, hesitated, or dismissed it, others - corporations, government agencies, and political machines - seized it, mastered it, and used it to entrench and grow their power.
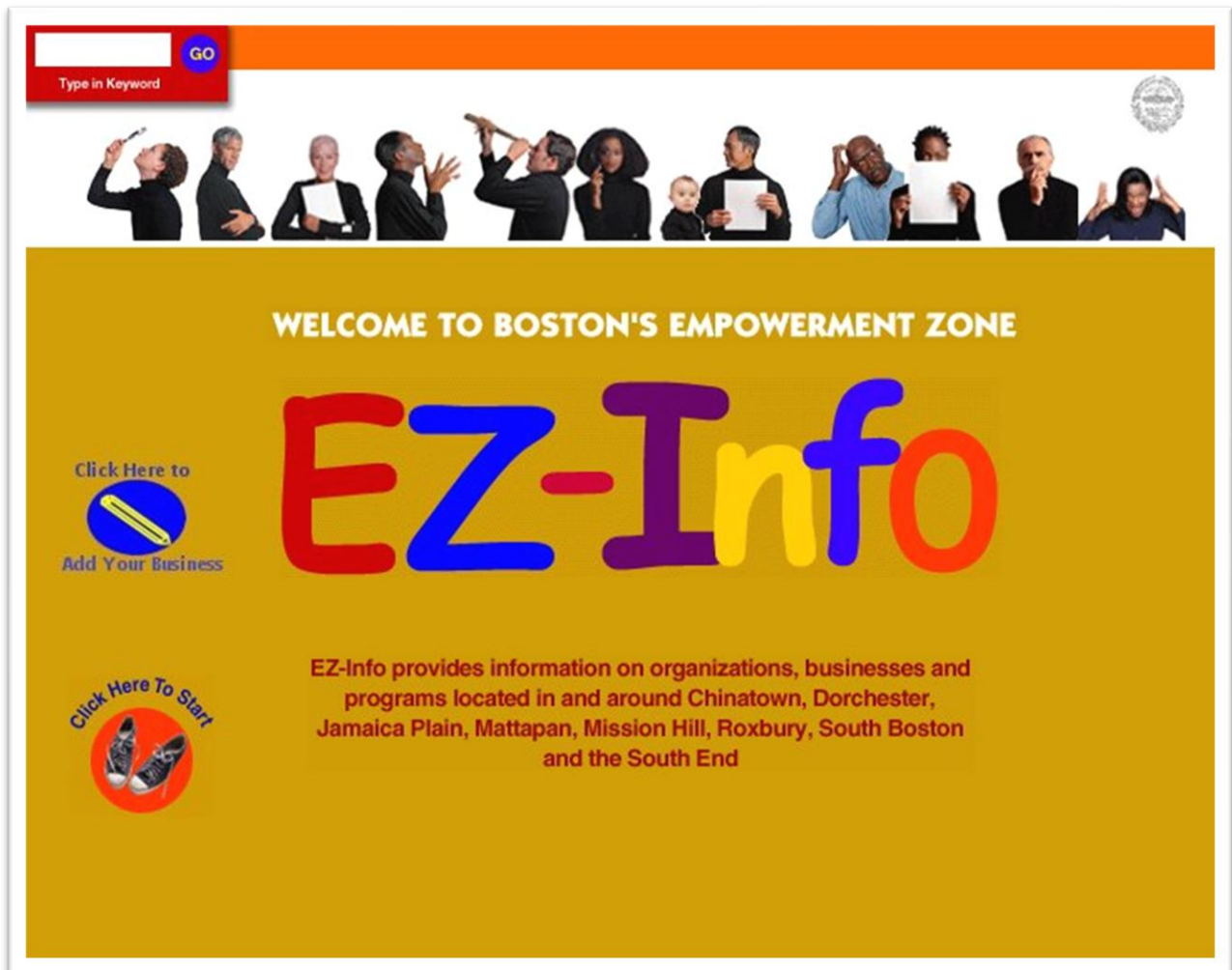
2. Vision + Technology = RESULTS

Yet, even amid that resistance, I pushed forward. In 1996, with no budget and only about a half-dozen committed volunteers, I put my adopted inner-city community online. At a time when very few neighborhoods of ANY demographic had a digital presence, we created one for Black Boston, and helped scores of thousands to experience, for the first time, what it was like to have a smorgasbord of information about YOUR community just a few clicks away.

Inner City Access News Story: https://links.blackfacts.com/inner-city-access-1996

And there were some **forward-thinking** community economic development leaders who understood the importance of using technology to promote businesses in Boston's Empowerment Zone, and in 1999, we put them all just a click away in a 'virtual Yellow Pages' called EZ-Info.

The Empowerment Zone initiative was a pet project of Vice President Al Gore (who didn't create 😊 , but understood the potential of the Internet), so when he visited Boston's Empowerment Zone offices, I demoed the platform to him.

And in another Universe, where just 600 Florida votes went another way, online Empowerment Zones connected millions of businesses across the nation since 2000…

A couple of years later, a **visionary leader** at Fleet Community Bank launched a family computer education program, and we partnered with them to ensure that their graduates had the perfect place to go with their newfound computer skills – the Roxbury.com online community, which featured current neighborhood news pulled from an online platform we built for Boston's Black community newspaper, free member posted business and event listings 2 and 4 years before Yelp and Eventbrite were even founded, and online discussion space on par with Yahoo Groups.

2002 Narrated Site Feature Walkthrough : https://links.blackfacts.com/roxbury

And a dozen years ago, I put the **Government of Saint Lucia** online with a WordPress-lite type custom content management system that has transformed how the Government communicates with their citizens. I single-handedly architected, coded, deployed and still maintain it to the present day.

Official Website of the Government Of Saint Lucia: https://www.govt.lc/

These are not just personal milestones. They are **hard proof** of what technology can do when driven by vision, expertise, and commitment to community. They show that with the right priorities, we can create lasting infrastructure that serves people for decades.

The contrast is stark: when we ignore technology, we stagnate. When we embrace it, we can build systems that make significant impacts, and may even endure – without large teams or large budgets.

3. And Still, We Keep Missing the Point

In November 2023, an organization had a grant competition to support initiatives that were looking to mobilize more Black men to register to vote.

My entry which I called "Voting While Black," was a Conversational, AI-powered mobile application that would allow grassroots organizations to set up, manage, optimize and broadcast results of 5 different kinds of voter engagement programs, including voter registration drives.

I had members of all five "Divine 9" predominantly Black fraternities (starting with myself, from Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Incorporated, and my business partner Dale, from Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Incorporated) to compete against each other for bragging rights over who could get the most Black men to register to vote, and publish real time results across social media.

But of course, Voting While Black was not selected for funding. And despite saying that they were looking for *"innovative"* solutions, the organizations who received grants of $100K to $250K were **firmly** rooted in 20th century approaches, and often impacting as few as 2500 individuals.

This was in November 2023. Eight months before a series of Zoom meetings for Kamala Harris that had **scores of thousands** in attendance.

And in that 'other' Universe where Voting While Black DID get funded, those scores of thousands would have been able to create VWB accounts during the Zoom, get signed up for registration drives, door-knocking campaigns, fundraisers and 'souls to the polls' events, and would have gotten alerts, notifications, recognition, views, likes, shares and every other motivator straight out of social media and the gaming industry to drive and maintain excitement until a November that might have turned out differently, by using the scalable and personalized communication, engagement and incentive algorithms that influence the behavior of billions today, that ONLY technology can marshal and deliver.

And just last week, I attended an event that featured two authors who have written books around Black historical events. Throughout the entire event, the word "technology" was not mentioned even <u>once</u>, and in the Question and Answer segment, a woman raised a concern about institutional silencing of Black History.

 I spoke after her, and assured her that while she was rightly concerned about what was happening in the **offline** world, that as I have been using technology to put Black History online since 1997 on the public Internet (at https://blackfacts.com), using technology that I control 100%, I was not as concerned, because I CANNOT be silenced, as I AM IN COMPLETE CONTROL.

This is what, even in 2025, so many STILL remain clueless about, in terms of the potentially limitless power of technology.

4. Technology is Different - from EVERY Other Resource

Here are three reasons technology is not just another tool in your toolbox, but a force multiplier unlike **anything** else:

1. **Nearly Infinite ROI Potential** - The same amount of effort invested in technology can deliver exponentially more results than traditional organizing methods. One app, one database, or one platform can accomplish what used to take hundreds of volunteers and many thousands of dollars. Technology works 24x7, doesn't ignore instructions, get tired or moody, play politics or have hidden agendas or ulterior motives. It just does what it is programmed to do.

2. **Level Playing Field in the Palm Of Your Hand** - Unlike 'old boy networks,' financial influence, quid pro quo games or politics, technology works exactly the same way for whoever learns how to work it. A smartphone in the hands of a community activist is as powerful, in raw capability, as one in the hands of a CEO, and neither money, degrees, titles nor connections are required to get millions to hear your words or watch your video.

3. **It Does Darn Near EVERYTHING** - Technology is not one tool, but many at once. A smartphone is a printing press, megaphone, classroom, town hall, archive, and bank in your pocket. No other resource compares.

This is why ignoring technology is not like ignoring a tactic - it is like ignoring the ground you are fighting on.

5. What's Different From 1996

In the 1990s, the hesitation was at least partly understandable. Computers were not commonplace. The internet was fragile. Skills were rare. To embrace technology then took vision, risk, and investment.

But in 2025, the excuses have evaporated:

- **Almost everyone has a mobile device.**

- **Instant speech recognition means you don't even need to know how to type.**

- **Scalable cloud services, social platforms, and AI tools are ubiquitous.**

What was once scarce is now universal. Technology is no longer a barrier - it is the floor upon which the world already stands.

To ignore technology today is not to remain neutral - it is to actively surrender, go home and crawl under a rock. It means letting others define the platforms where our stories are told, the algorithms that shape our visibility, and the data that drives decisions about our lives.

It means that when power is distributed digitally, we have already opted out. And when history is written in databases, apps, and networks, our absence ensures our erasure.

To sideline technology in 2025 is to **choose failure unconsciously**, to consign ourselves to irrelevance – to the dustbin of history.

Technology can be a force to help topple corrupt governments, amplify marginalized voices, and mobilize millions in ways that street corners alone never could.

Black America - and the broader African Diaspora - cannot afford to pretend that the digital battlefield is optional. We have the tools. We have the skills. What remains in question is our will.

6. It's been THIRTY YEARS: Are We Ready Yet?

Thirty years ago, I tried to sound the alarm. I said that without putting technology at the heart of our organizing, we would miss the boat. Unfortunately, that warning went unheeded.

Today, the situation is clearer than ever. Technology is not a side project - it is the backbone of power. Every institution, every corporation, every movement that wields power in the 21st Century is built on it.

So I pose the question to us, here and now:

Are we ready yet?

Are we finally ready to put technology where it belongs - not at the margins of our movements, but at the center of them?

Are we ready to stop treating it as optional and start treating it as survival?

Are we ready to build the digital infrastructure that will make our communities not just participants in history, but shapers of it?
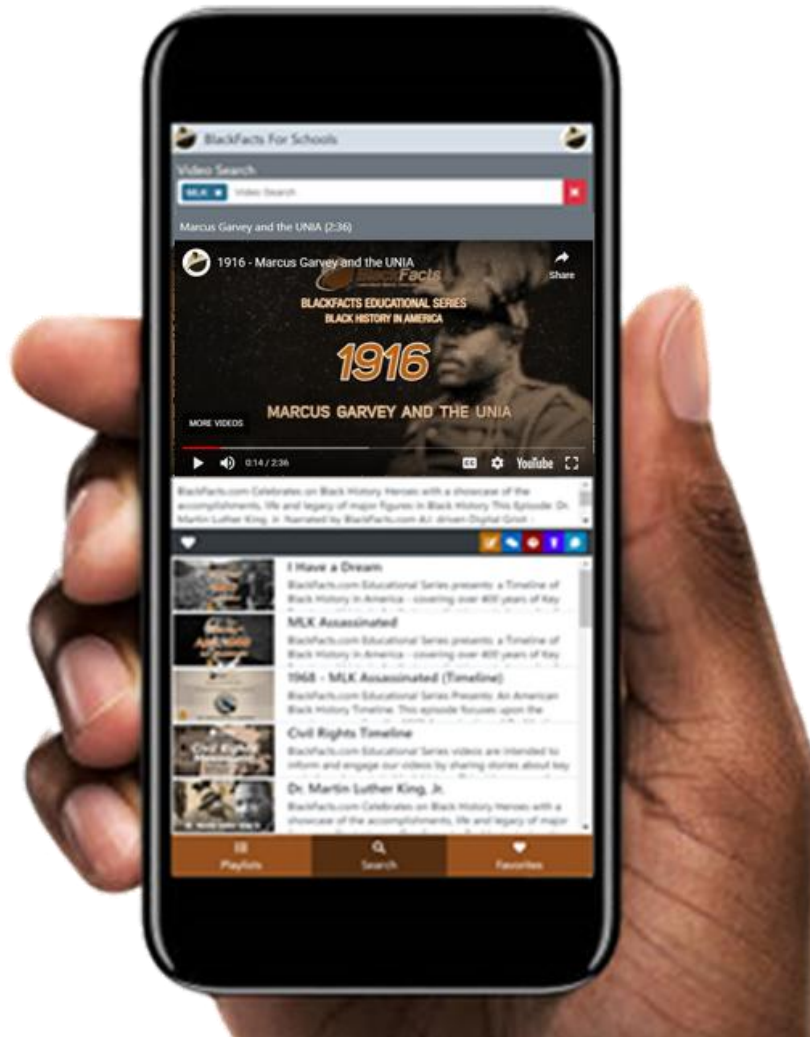
And are we ready to start supporting those who have actual RECEIPTS showing they know how to use Technology to move the needle forward, rather than continually listen to and support those who know 'just enough to be dangerous' (or get good contracts)?

Because if we are not, then we are not going to win.

Despite having, in 2025, the tools that we could use to create equity for ourselves, on our own terms, literally in the palms of our hands.

The choice is ours.

I truly hope that more choose wisely this time.

"Up, you mighty race, accomplish what you will."
Marcus Mosiah Garvey

This document is available online at:
https://documents.blackfacts.com/kengranderson/Ignoring-Technology.pdf