Lessons From Wakanda: Embrace Technology To Protect Your Culture

One of the key factors underpinning the success of the fictional African nation of Wakanda featured in Marvel Comics 'Black Panther' is that they were able to protect themselves against all invaders and avoid colonization through their development and use of technologies that were superior to that of all attackers.

In the real world, the knowledge, history and peoples of the African continent have repeatedly suffered the ravages of human destruction, slavery and colonialization, leading to today's global African diaspora made up of descendants of once-mighty nations whose history has been largely erased from the knowledgebase of humanity.

Unfortunately, there is no way to go back in time and prevent the loss of more than the highlights of cultures, empires and leaders such as Gao, Garamantes, Mansa Musa, Takrur, Kanem, Askia, Wagadu, Shaka, Songhay and Zafun.

However, thanks to today's technology that is available (in the industrialized world) to most people, regardless of one's station in life, we have the opportunity, never before available to any but the ruling and / or scholarly classes, to document and preserve our own stories, and forever banish the generally accurate statement 'history is written by the victors' itself to the dustbin of history as an idea whose time has passed.

In 1995, I first envisioned using computer technology as a disruptive opportunity for people of African descent to sidestep decades of redlining, old-boy networks and other systemic barriers to social and economic equity, and with the permission of the Boston Public Library, digitized their 1992 book 'African-Americans in Boston: More Than 350 Years' as an interactive software product on CD-ROM that I intended to distribute for free to any Boston Public School capable of using the technology (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7yQ-CBORKo).

The BHAG (Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal) of the '350 Years' project was to create an opportunity for children (and their adults at home) from communities of African descent to see that this new-fangled computer stuff was not just, like so many other things that they might get to experience at home, 'something for white people,' but that not only were they able to use computers and software too, but they were actually represented in it, and wait – it gets better – that black people made this for them!

While I was later to discover that internal political concerns about the demographics of which schools were able to use it or not (take a guess) prevented the project from ever getting into the schools, this project became a precursor to my 1997 Black History Month Technology Project, BlackFacts.com.

Conceived as a project to teach myself how to do online database programming (it's not like there were many contract opportunities for that at the time), and fueled by a public domain of 'Today in Black History' factoids, Black Facts launched in February 1997 as (AFAIK) the world's first searchable database of Black History facts, and without question, the only one that has operated consistently for the past 21 years (https://web.archive.org/web/19970413144554/http://www.blackfacts.com).

In addition to the searchable database, Black Facts also had an email listserv of the hundreds of Internet users who signed up as 'Black Facts Research Associates' the 'Black Facts Historians' (mostly teachers) who approved submissions, and a daily automated mailing list called the 'Black Fact Of The Day^{SM}' that grew to over 30,000 subscribers by 2001.

As Black Facts was originally launched as a programming exercise and public service, it never had a business model, but was lovingly supported by the staff of my company Inner-City Software which I ran from 1992 until 2004, when the rise of free software and the 50% discount offshore programming industry made it untenable to pay $65K salaries for the staff who worked out of the top two floors of my home and office located right in the center of 'the hood' in Boston.

So for over a decade, BlackFacts ran on automatic, without listservs, Research Associates or Historians.

In the summer of 2017, deciding that I needed to figure out if I would ever do anything again with BlackFacts, in order to force myself to do some feasibility research on its viability as a business venture, I enrolled in a business pre-startup course, and one weekend when I could not attend class because I needed to be out of town, I asked my longtime friend and frequent collaborator (https://youtu.be/vnHePmZbYLM?t=34s) Dale Dowdie to attend the class in my place.

While Dale had also previously viewed BlackFacts as a public service / informational project, after just one class, he saw the potential to re-launch BlackFacts as a business venture that would ultimately be self-sustaining and could also become a platform to launch other culturally-focused technology ideas that we had been discussing for years, and he committed to take on the business development, marketing and operations responsibilities that would be required to complement my efforts in architecting, coding, deploying and maintaining the technology.

The BlackFacts (http://blackfacts.com) of today features a modern look and natural language processing technologies to link the content, which is a combination of the existing content and content aggregated from the public Internet. The BlackFacts of next month will re-introduce the ability to submit content via our new crowdsourced content tools and content moderation system. And the BlackFacts of future months will provide turnkey custom web sites to organizations and individuals who want to capture, categorize and disseminate their achievements by and for people of African descent – from anywhere and to anyone with access to the public Internet.

But what, you may ask, does any of this have to do with Wakanda and superior technology?

While Wakanda may be fictional, BlackFacts.com represents a completely real opportunity to achieve a new BHAG – to apply our knowledge and mastery of computer technology to build a searchable online system that captures the global history and knowledge of people of African descent, and ultimately makes that information available to users via computers and other web-enabled devices, machine-searchable via APIs and sharing data with external systems like Wikipedia. Because it is available not only to scholars and publishers, but to anyone with Internet access, BlackFacts has the potential to collect, save and protect knowledge of the achievements of those who would otherwise become unsung heroes and sheroes of the past, present and future, and for the first time in history, provide the children of the African diaspora with the ability to tell our own stories, in our own words, for all perpetuity.

From scans of documents of antiquity such as the Timbuktu manuscripts to footage of future events like the opening of the Obama Presidential Center, if it is online (or someone types or scans it and submits it to us), BlackFacts will become the only source that will be able to connect the events and achievements of the African diaspora across the ages and fields of endeavor, and deliver this knowledge to present and future generations so that never again will the history of black people be lost to the sands of time.

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TEACH BLACK HISTORY.

BE BLACK HISTORY.

SUPPORT BLACKFACTS.COM.

2019 Update: The President of Ghana understands the history-changing power of technology. In his closing comments at this event announcing 2019 as the 'Year of Return' for children of the African Diaspora (watch here), he says:

Never again will we allow a handful of people with superior technology to walk into Africa, seize our people, and sell them into slavery.
-- Akufo-Addo, President of Ghana