

TECHNOLOGY AS A FORM OF EMPOWERMENT: NEW ORLEANS' MISSING RESOURCES

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In today's modern age, technology virtually controls how our nation functions. Our everyday lives are filled with forms of technology that provide comfort, simplification, and ease of communication. Whether it comes in the form of a microwave, a cellular phone, or the World Wide Web, technology is all around us. In some respects, technology makes us feel like we have more control of our lives. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the citizens of New Orleans found themselves in need of a variety of resources, including technology. By making technological resources more readily available, our New Orleans' partners will be better able to regain a sense of control over their lives and their city.

To understand how technology can help with the restoration of New Orleans, one must first grapple with the immediate physical aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the reality of New Orleans today. When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, more was damaged than simply homes and other physical property. Around 350,000 New Orleans residents evacuated during the storm (DeVore, 2007, p. 1), and one year after the tragedy, the population in the city had remained below previous levels by almost 60%, from 454,863 before the storm to 187,525 in the fall of 2006 (Nossiter, 2006, p. 9). Last year in 2007, the population was finally approaching 300,000 in the city once more, still nowhere near the number it once was (Jervis, 2007). The city lost many of its people and with them went many valuable resources.

It is important to note that, even though more than two and half years have passed since Katrina struck, the city is still not back to normal. Rick Jervis (2007) notes that while 80% of the homes in the Lakewood area have been reoccupied or rebuilt as of 2007, other areas of the city have not experienced similar activity. As of December 2007, something as simple as a crooked stop sign in the Lower Ninth Ward had yet to be corrected, and the still-empty lots around it had become overgrown with grass and plants. Persons unfamiliar with celebrity Brad Pitt's Pink City project, which is drawing attention to one of the most devastated areas, might think it a strange sight to see repaired and freshly painted houses on one side of a street and on the other side broken homes devoid of life. However, it seems that many New Orleans' residents have grown used to this scene.

Two issues rise above the others as possible reasons for this mismatched sense of housing support: race and wealth. Individuals with the money to jumpstart repairs on their homes (primarily caucasians) have a kind of leverage over the less financially fortunate residents (primarily African-Americans). The displaced who are struggling to return to their city are also deterred by other problems, including “disputes with insurance companies, inadequate employment opportunities, high housing costs, housing shortages, concerns about flood protection, escalating insurance rates, and reduced city services” (DeVore, 2007, p. 1). Such reasons help to explain why former residents of New Orleans are taking such a long time to return. Those who have returned continue to struggle, often depending upon the care and financial assistance of concerned neighbors (in or out of state) and churches to help restore their lives.

In addition to population, New Orleans also lost resources, among the least visible of which is technological capacity. A look at the churches provides but one example of how technology has been used in New Orleans during and after Katrina. In “Rebuilding Black Churches as Sites of Community Empowerment,” DeVore (2007, p. 3-4) writes about the number of pastors who kept in contact with the members of their congregations during the storm through use of technologies such as e-mail and cell phones. According to DeVore, many people used these forms of communication “to



share Katrina stories of evacuations and personal escape, as well as to get information about friends and family" (2007, p.4). Not only did they end up forming a sort of virtual religious community, but through the aid of technology, they were able to help keep faith and hope in their lives (DeVore, 2007, p. 4). Some congregations, such as that of Rev. Hadley R. Edwards, ended up dispersed across twenty-three different states after the storm, so technology aided many people separated from family, friends, and churches, providing a way to remain close even while being far away.

My project in New Orleans focused on using technology to help tell the story of rebuilding the city. Using my skills with computers and video equipment, I helped Churches Supporting Churches (CSC) digitally-record interviews with pastors. CSC's story will be used to help keep the community development work in New Orleans in the public eye. I was also able to provide technology support to the rest of the New Orleans learning community which, in turn, allowed them to better fulfill their own tasks. Finally, I constructed a website for a church, which can be used to access a greater number of potential volunteers through the Internet. Perhaps the two most important potential outcomes of my project are that through the internet the true story of the rebuilding of New Orleans will be told, and through the use of technology, it is more likely that resources can be directed where they are most needed.

CONCLUSION

Because of the importance of technology in today's world, it is vital that pleas for help coming out of New Orleans be presented in visually-interesting, technologically-savvy ways. After Hurricane Katrina, the majority of New Orleans's population was dispersed around the country, resulting in a shortage of resources for those who remained in the city. Technology helped to tell the world about the disaster in New Orleans, attract resources to help the city, and keep people connected to each other. Through technology the people of New Orleans can continue to tell their stories, which in turn will attract more resources. With more resources available, people will be better able to gain control over their lives. Learning to take advantage of technology can empower those in need and help them to accurately represent themselves in the world.

The work I did for my neighbors in New Orleans was a challenge to my endurance, patience, and technological skills, but not impossible. Our learning community used its resources and abilities to benefit those in need. If our efforts attract more resources, then a ripple effect will be created that empowers people to regain a sense of control over their lives and their community.

REFERENCES

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