Dwayne Barnes PIT-KN: Elevating the Stories and Knowledge from Underrepresented Lived Experiences

PIT In Practice Profiles

Member/Grantee

University of Michigan

Author

Dwayne Barnes Jr., M.P.A., founder of Social Technology Ventures
THE CATALYST

The elevation of the technology economy through social media and apps of the 2010s and the proliferation of technology in the form of artificial intelligence, augmented reality, virtual reality, and the internet of things during the early 2020s. During that same time, the amount of venture capital raised by startups, initial public offerings of tech companies, company profits, and salaries of tech-based professionals skyrocketed.

Some people were intuitive enough to learn computer science, coding, and programming, and they benefited economically. But most people became tech adapters. Many missed the opportunity to take advantage of the technological and economic boom. However, they were always on the cutting edge of technology from a consumption to a popularity standpoint. I am one of those people. I used technology and benefited from its convenience, but I never really created it.

PIVOTING TO PIT

The Vision

I launched Social Technology Ventures, a think tank that examines the intersectionality of technology, education, entrepreneurship, employment, politics, and culture through the lens of technology. It aims to raise awareness and create solutions to address opportunities that can leverage technology to benefit urban communities.
I saw the daunting statistics identifying disparities in access for people of color in technology fields: access to the internet, access to quality STEM education, access to careers, access to entrepreneurship. However, I also saw the potential of technology creation to provide financial opportunities through entrepreneurship, lucrative careers, and education. I didn't know it then, but I was studying and practicing in the field of public interest technology.

The Work Continues

I can envision how Paul Revere felt when trying to awaken the troops to an impending battle or how W.E.B. Du Bois felt when defining the “Talented Tenth” ideology. In the case of Revere, I can relate to alerting people today to their impending battle for economic and technological freedom. I can relate to Du Bois because I am having an inter- and intracultural conversation about the souls of Black folk and our relationship with technology.
In having more conversations about the creation, consumption, and impact of technology in urban communities, I aim to magnify the creative and economic opportunity that technology creation affords its practitioners through entrepreneurship. And along the way, I aim to empower my community and other stakeholders to take bold action and create an avenue that begins to solve this problem.

Allies in Action

Through my affiliation with the University of Michigan PIT Knowledge Network, I found a theoretical and practical home in the emerging field of public interest technology. I was in my own lane, and I learned to appreciate the utility in that space. Until I understood PIT as a
discipline, I felt alone and out of place in the spaces I navigated. I was not techie enough for the tech crowd nor academic enough for the research crowd.

Through the Knowledge Network I was able to connect with other entrepreneurs, learn more about their ventures, and share lived experiences. In addition, I was able to understand the academic/research side of PIT through interactions with the professors and students I worked with. That emboldened me to continue my journey.

WHAT I LEARNED
Early in my career, I worked at a think tank so I had an idea of how they operated and were financed. However, building a think tank has been more challenging than I imagined. In my haste to innovate, I failed to recognize the utility that the traditional organizational structures afford the founder. This kind of venture builds momentum through monetary support of funders, issue expertise from allies, governance from board members, and lived experience from volunteers. They all help the founder set their course for success.

The startup phase of any enterprise is a challenge in and of itself. I was forced to be the issue expert, the marketing person, the intern, and the chief executive officer. Playing all those roles, I learned that the cliche of being a jack of all trades (and master of none) was quite fitting. To that end, my journey has been riddled with fits and starts from an entrepreneurial and a research perspective.

Read More Stories

PUBLIC INTEREST TECHNOLOGY
Knowledge Network