



EMERGING LEADERS

FOR THE DIGITAL WORLD

EXTRACT

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Tracy Hackshaw from Trinidad and Tobago shares what his mother taught him



More than anything else, who I am today, what I am doing, and any successes I have achieved along the way have been due to my mother – the classic 1960s teenage rebel – and what she taught me from a very early age: work hard, read a lot, ask questions, stay curious ... and never take no for an answer.

It was in 1995 when I was not yet 23, that I fired up Netscape Navigator on an Intel 386 and 14.4 kbps dial-up connection at my desk while doing some research work at the Ansa McAl Psychological Research Centre at the University of the West Indies St Augustine Campus in Trinidad and Tobago. Little did I know the path this relatively minor anti-establishment act would lead me on, but I will come back to this later.

In the Christmas of 1984, my mother, Istra Marion Hackshaw,

took out a major bank loan and purchased my first computer, an Apple IIe – a reward for passing and being accepted to the secondary school of my first choice. In 1984, a computer would have easily cost about three to four months of a typical public servant's salary (my mother was a nurse and a midwife, as well as a single mother). I knew that I was one of the few 11-year-olds in Trinidad and Tobago to have one. The only computers I had heard about then were the BBC Micro and the Commodore 64 – the computer of choice for my more well-off peers who were of the Atari gaming generation.

My mother had always encouraged me to explore new dimensions of whatever I was interested in – no limits were ever placed on me or my imagination. I was a fan of all kinds of video games, technological gadgets, as well as the most modern and accessible technologies of our time – radio, LPs, and cassettes (later CDs). In my desire to explore and discover, I may have – on my own and to my mother's chagrin – invented the term 'mashup' in the 1980s.



So, fastforward a couple of years of Karateka, Prince of Persia, Ms Pacman, and some valiant attempts at BASIC programming, and my computer hobbyist activities were now being taken up a little more formally at school.

The secondary school syllabus for computer studies was pretty intense, at least for the 1980s. My school – St Mary's College – was one of the few in the country to possess a computer lab, and so I began my discovery of the PC. MS-DOS, WordPerfect, and Lotus 1-2-3 were my shiny, new toys. I was an atrocious physics student ... but somehow computer studies seemed to be my cup of tea. It was a pity that St Mary's found a way to

link the two together, so if you wanted to pursue computer studies, you had to study physics as well. I was forced to study mathematics, biology, and chemistry.

To cut a long story short, I found myself at the University of the West Indies several years later, steeped in the social sciences. This was after a sojourn in the electronic media industry (television) when at age 18 I became a foundation technical staff member of Trinidad and Tobago's third (and arguably first, truly independent) television station – a result of government policy facilitating the demonopolisation and opening up of the media industry in the

late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1991, therefore, I took my love of gadgets and technology and 'how things work' to a new, professional level.

How things work

My two year 'sabbatical' from school resulted in a quantum shift away from studying the physical and natural sciences into a new curiosity for how things **REALLY** work. Why do people do the things they do? Where do people, society, politics, mass media, and technology intersect? I hoped that my undergraduate course in sociology and psychology would provide me with the answers. I voraciously devoured everything I could – cultural anthropology,



gender studies, sociologies of education, mass media, poverty, criminology, social psychology, politics and geo-politics, and I even became President of UWIMedia. Mine was an appetite that never seemed to be satisfied until that fateful day in the Psychological Research Centre when I came face-to-face with Netscape.

I had heard about this thing called 'the Internet' from my peers in Computer Sciences and Engineering. They were using it to do all sorts of, perhaps less than politically correct, things – and my quest for knowledge and my hunger for answers drove me to the little Compaq machine in the Research Centre. Only a few of us knew it was able to connect to the Internet, and it was to be used for 'research purposes only' ... once I was in, I was hooked forever.

I pursued the Internet with a passion and drive that surprised even me. With my first 'real' salary, I obtained



an external dial-up modem and got a dial-up connection connecting at speeds of light – 18-21 kbps. I learned HTML. I began building rudimentary websites for my personal use. I convinced my director in my first major postgraduate job at the Department of Women's Affairs (soon to be renamed Gender Affairs) to establish an e-mail address to communicate with our international bilateral

and multilateral counterparts. This ensured that Trinidad and Tobago was kept more up to date globally than most other governments, ministries, and agencies of the day (in 1996) regarding its portfolio relating to women's and gender issues. We utilised this advanced information to consistently mainstream gender issues into government policy, to train staff, and to sensitise friends, family, and peers.



Internet evangelist

This evangelisation of the Internet and the burgeoning World Wide Web continued in my next job as a project and research specialist at the Chamber of Commerce in Trinidad and Tobago. In 1998, I convinced the Chamber's Executive Council to move online, working with a team to conceptualise and create South Trinidad Online, one of the first and most comprehensive business and community web presences in Trinidad and Tobago (<http://web.archive.org/web/19991122170356/http://www.southchamber.com>). I also convinced the Chamber to begin a series of educational and capacity building workshops targeting micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises. One of the major thrusts of the workshops was to expose these enterprises to online business.

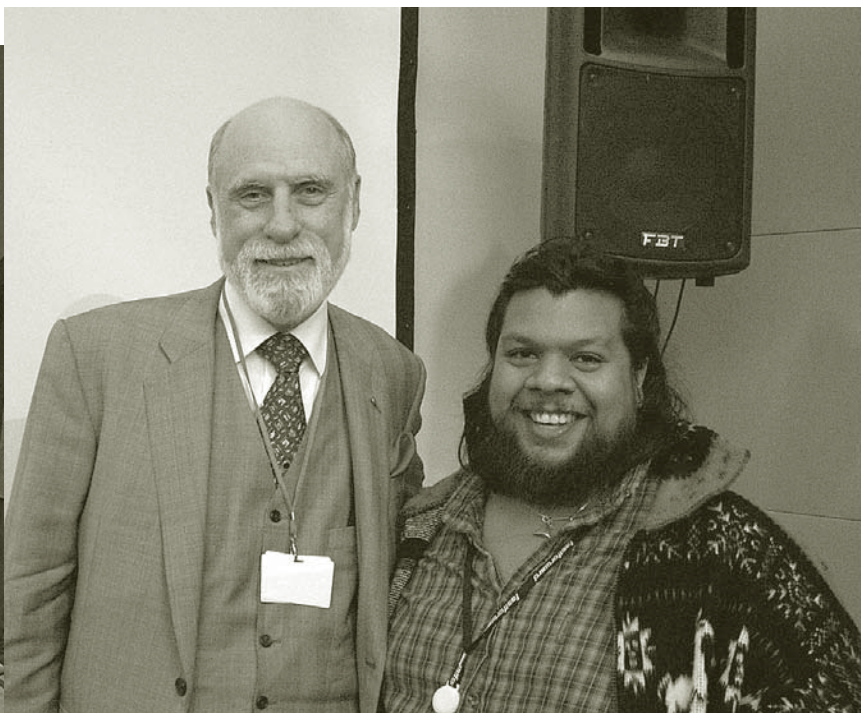
These were exciting and revolutionary times – the dot com bubble was growing bigger and bigger, and in 1999,

the government of Trinidad and Tobago took notice. The Chamber nominated me to represent its interests at the ground-breaking National e-Commerce Policy Committee, and I was honoured, privileged, and humbled to contribute to one of the world's first National e-Commerce Policy documents (you can find it online at <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/caricad/unpan008535.pdf>). Several of the recommendations contained therein have since been implemented and have created significant change to the national Internet and information and communication technologies (ICT) landscape in Trinidad and Tobago.

Making a difference

Having now moved formally into the private sector, my mother's sole piece of job advice kept repeating itself in my head like the chorus of an 1980s power ballad – 'Whatever you do in life, wherever you are, always

seek to make a difference.' Moving on from the Chamber, I accepted an offer from the ICT group with one of the Caribbean region's largest conglomerates to initiate their thrust into the Internet space. We worked with some of the largest technology companies in the world at that time – Oracle, Microsoft, and Vignette, among others – to slowly but surely move several of the region's largest private sector organisations and government agencies onto the Internet and to take advantage of Internet-based technologies. The exposure and learning gained from this assignment was life-changing in more ways than one. During this period, I undertook postgraduate studies in International Management at the University of London, and, practicing what I preached, chose to embark upon these studies through 'flexible learning', a mixed mode of distance learning, online education, and face-to-face interaction. Life began moving at Internet speed. The lines



between work, family, and life began blurring, moving rapidly and rollercoasting through highs, lows, achievements, challenges, disappointments, marriage, fatherhood, birth, death, loss, despair, loneliness, happiness, all the while searching for the path that would lead me to bring into effect what my mother had taught me ... 'make a difference, make a difference'.

Today, I have shifted again. I am now working for the government of Trinidad and Tobago (and have been since 2004), designing, architecting, and implementing transformational solutions – largely based on Internet technologies – that are intended to change the way the government does business, improve the level of quality of and satisfaction with governmental service delivery, and, most of all, reorient the government's interaction with its citizens, netizens, and all of its stakeholders. The latter is being done by placing the focus on their NEEDS as opposed to what the government WANTS to deliver to them. I have also embarked upon another life-changing journey with DiploFoundation, participating in the Internet Governance Capacity Building Programme (IGCBP), first as a learner, and now in several other meaningful capacities. I successfully received various fellowships (ICANN) and ambassadorships (Internet Society – ISOC) to attend Public Meetings of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), as well as various

Internet Governance Forums between 2009 and 2011. At these meetings we are trying to raise the voices of the developing world, especially those of small island developing states (SIDS), and call attention to our different needs.

Finding my niche

I particularly feel that it has all led to this: I have now found my niche. I have come literally full circle, first as a naïve, nascent, and humble Internet user, observing in amazement and wonder the development of the Internet. Now I am equally humbled to have found myself in a position to utilise the Internet and all of its potential and underlying capacity to be the catalyst for development

and transformation in my country, in my region, and in SIDS.

As I write this, I finally feel, I finally hope that I am using the opportunities that I have been provided to truly make a difference, to fully act upon the trust that has been placed in me and to truly actualise what my mother taught me.

Dedicated to the memory and life of Istra Marion Hackshaw, RN, LM. 18 May 1946–24 March 2010.

Rest in Peace, Mom. I love you. I miss you. Your pain is gone now.

Tracy Hackshaw works for the government of Trinidad and Tobago. ■



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