DIGITAL STEWARDSHIP
for RESILIENCE

OPEN TECHNOLOGY INSTITUTE
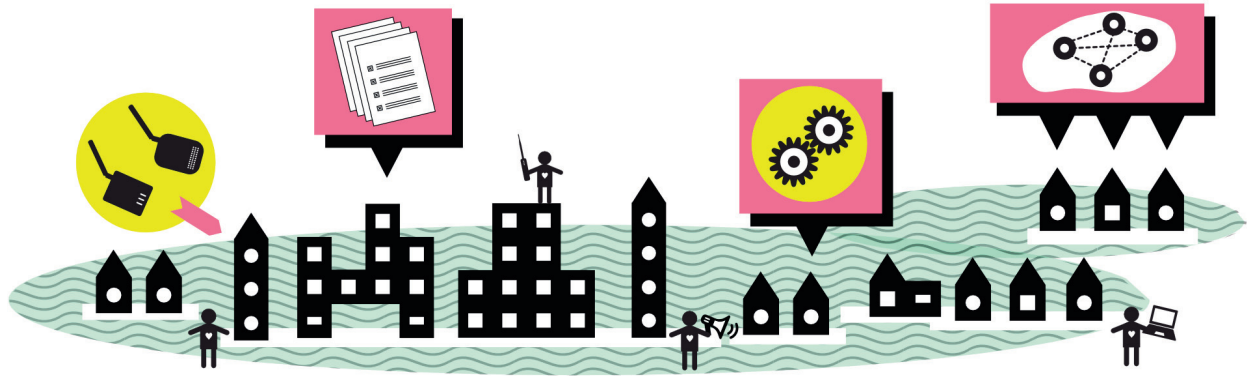

What is Digital Stewardship?

Digital Stewardship is a principled approach to community technology that emphasizes self-governance and sustainability. Digital Stewards grow and maintain the technology their local communities need to foster healthy relationships and increase access to critical information. OTI works with partners to integrate the Digital Stewards approach into existing local projects, missions, and goals.
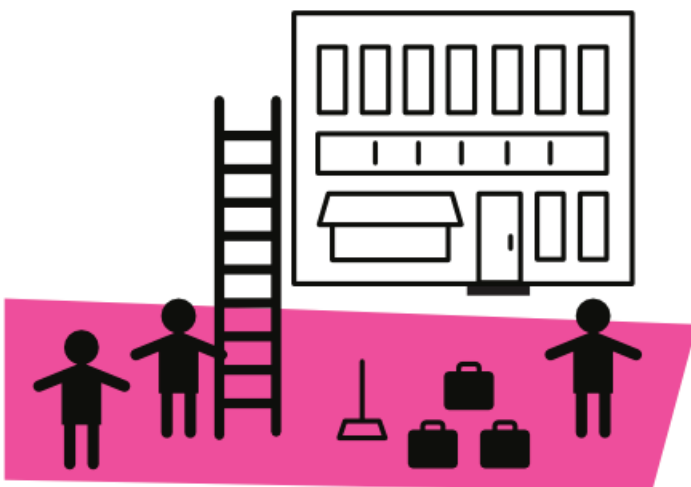
The Open Technology Institute and Detroit-based Allied Media Projects co-developed the Digital Stewards concept through years of community technology collaborations, applying it initially to deployment of mesh wireless networks. Using a Digital Stewards approach, OTI has since helped multiple groups around the world design, build and maintain wireless networks with broad participation from local communities.

Many localities already have people who act as Digital Stewards. They are self-driven tinkerers or makers who are invested in their neighborhoods and enjoy helping people learn technology. Even if they are not skilled with technology, they see its potential and are motivated to help their neighbors figure it out. They are organizers, teachers, artists, technologists, tradespeople, and designers. They may already be working on digital justice issues, or they may simply be open to thinking about how their skills can apply to the digital realm. Most importantly, they are good listeners with strong ties in their communities.
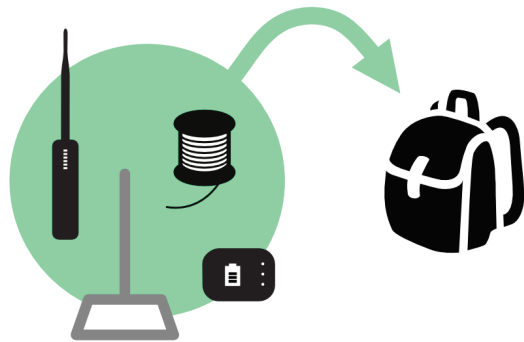

Collaborating for Resilience

Disasters happen to local places. Even when they happen to cities, different neighborhoods have different responses and experiences. Research shows that communities with stronger social ties and relationships fare better. That's why Stewards - local residents with strong relationships - are most qualified to lead the work of building resilient, local digital resources.

The breakdown of large communications systems and power failures can isolate neighborhoods and hamper response efforts. Local Stewards with skills to build, maintain, and troubleshoot communications tools - and relationships with local institutions and leaders - perform an essential role. They support volunteer efforts within their communities, and they can also facilitate relationships between local people and external emergency managers and responders.

A participatory and collaborative approach to building local Stewardship for resilience is crucial: only through collaboration among anchor institutions, small businesses, local organizations, and individuals will digital efforts best serve local places. The result will be that everyone involved will be better prepared for emergencies.

The field of crisis informatics tells us that response systems should be:
- Redundant
- Diverse
- Efficient
- Autonomous
- Strong
- Interdependent
- Adaptable

These are the same qualities OTI helps build in all of the communities where we work with local partners. OTI is deeply invested in collaboratively prototyping innovative, small-scale solutions that can be adapted and used broadly. The key to this process is providing the resources needed to foster a process of learning and innovation that unfolds organically across a network of local leaders and organizers.

In the field of resilience overall, we must develop local capacity and knowledge, and acknowledge and support leadership in local places - right now, before crisis hits. We'll need it during disasters, and even more to rebuild more diverse, efficient, autonomous, strong, interdependent, adaptable, and collaborative communities in the future.

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How can my community build Digital Stewardship?

OTI often receives requests to hold Digital Stewards training programs. We serve as a resource center for local groups implementing community technologies, as well as convening workshops and holding or supporting trainings. We produce, test, and refine the tools of Digital Stewardship: participatory learning tools; research and assessment methods; new, open source technologies; and models for engagement and organizing. OTI developed a collection of learning tools (our Commotion Construction Kit) to help communities build wireless networks.

However, local groups and organizers are the best leaders for their own Digital Stewardship efforts. We recommend that people interested in building Stewardship start by looking around to find:

- Who's already doing related work in the area?
- What goals would local Stewards try to achieve?

Digital Stewards programs can be organized around community networks or other communication technologies, such as public computer centers, SMS or voice-based blogging platforms, disaster preparedness tools, or even policy interventions or basic tech training programs. OTI encourages groups to explore our materials, find people already working in their neighborhoods, and work with local groups with training and organizing expertise to develop and share workshops and trainings.

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