

Crip Indigenous Storytelling across the Digital Divide

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Digital Divides

As the COVID-19 pandemic has run rampant across the world, humanity has become more reliant on virtual access for survival, as well as cultural and community connections and storytelling.¹ Many disabled people in the so-called United States responded to the rise of remote work and distance learning as proof of ableism.² Deaf, disabled, and chronically ill people have been denied remote access needs in the past, effectively shutting us out of employment and education opportunities. Only when the able-bodied had a need for widespread virtual access was it made available.

Yet non-Native members of the disability community have neglected to raise awareness of the ways racism and colonialism intersect with digital access and disability accessibility. Many are still excluded from the new online reality through a lack of telecommunications access. In the United States, 141 million people, nearly 43 percent of the population, lack home internet access at the benchmark broadband speeds set by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) of 25 Mbps down, 3 Mbps up. This digital divide only grows exponentially for Indigenous people.

American Indians and Alaska Natives have the highest rates of disability per capita in the United States. According to the National Congress of American Indians, 24 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives have a disability, compared with the general population at 19 percent.³ Disability rates are greater across all ages. They tend to be higher in older populations, but the rate of disability among Native youths is also the highest of any race, at 5.9 percent of the population.⁴ These rates among Native people are due in large part to the long-standing impacts of colonialism and partially due to a lack of telecommunication access.

Left to Our Own Devices

The colonizer—that is, the US government—loves to pick and choose when our tribes are sovereign nations. When it comes to health care, or ensuring we have culturally appropriate housing, schools, roads, or telecoms infrastructure, we are

“sovereign nations” and left to our own devices. But when pipelines, dams, or other extractive projects are proposed to cross our lands, we’re no longer treated as sovereign nations. We are trapped in the hypocrisy and genocide that colonialism has brought to our doorsteps.

According to the written testimony of Geoffrey Blackwell, chief strategy officer and general counsel for AMERIND Risk Management Corporation, the deployment of fixed terrestrial internet at benchmark speeds deemed the acceptable standard for online streaming measures are significantly lower on tribal lands.⁵ This makes it difficult—if not impossible—to connect to many websites or use phone service. In 2016, only 63.9 percent of total tribal lands had these services, but the numbers vary based on location, with rural areas suffering the worst. Only 36.2 percent of rural Alaskan villages, 43.5 percent of Native Hawaiian homelands, and 31.6 percent of rural tribal areas in the continental United States had telecommunication services at these speeds. Even telephone access is low, at only 68 percent on rural reservations versus 95.5 percent for the United States.⁶

Availability versus adoption of the internet is another common theme among Indigenous communities, as high rates of poverty create barriers to true digital access. In 2016, 26.2 percent of Native people were living in poverty, so even if the internet is available nearby, they often can’t afford it or devices to connect to it.⁷ These numbers vary across tribal nations. However, the Oglala Sioux Tribe on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota has significantly higher poverty rates than the rest of the United States. Ninety-seven percent of Pine Ridge residents live below the US federal poverty line. According to the organization Friends of Pine Ridge Reservation, the median household income on the reservation ranges between \$2,600 and \$3,500 per year, and there is a 90 percent unemployment rate. This poverty has real-life consequences for survival. Based on data before the COVID-19 pandemic, with the exception of Haiti, the Pine Ridge Reservation has the lowest life expectancy in the Western Hemisphere at forty-eight years for men and fifty-two years for women.⁸ According to the Centers for Disease Control, between 2019–2021 the life expectancy for Native people has dropped 6.6 years in the United States.

The expense of up-to-date devices, such as smartphones and computers, to connect to the internet also presents challenges. Brian Howard, a research and policy analyst for the American Indian Policy Institute at Arizona State University, found in the 2019 study *The State of Internet Service on Tribal Lands* that researchers had to include flip phones as an option for phone access, as one elder they spoke with still used this older model of phone.⁹

Even when surrounded by wealth, tribal nations still suffer a digital divide. Vice Chairman Lance Gumbs of the Shinnecock Indian Nation states that 60 percent of his tribal members live in poverty while surrounded by one of the wealthiest areas in the United States: the Hamptons on Long Island, New

York.¹⁰ There's only one internet provider for Shinnecock lands. "The fact that we're being serviced by only one entity—there's a premium that they're able to charge so it's a cost consideration," said Gumbs.

The digital divide doesn't end on our reservations for the Native community. Seventy-one percent of American Indian and Alaska Native people live in urban and suburban areas. According to Matthew Rantanen, director of technology for the Southern California Tribal Chairmen's Association, there are no reliable numbers for broadband access for urban Natives, and much of the data on access in general for the United States are self-reported by the telecommunication companies themselves.¹¹ The high rates of poverty for urban Native communities mean many have to use free resources at libraries and community centers—which were closed or had reduced hours during COVID-19—or access the internet at a friend or family member's home.

Native American Lifelines, a small organization in Baltimore and Boston, provides community resources and limited health care to urban Natives. During the COVID-19 shutdowns, Lifelines had to set up a telehealth room at their Baltimore location so that clients would have access to phones and internet for telehealth appointments.¹² While the shutdowns are currently over, Lifelines has decided to keep the telehealth room, as there's a clear need for it going forward.

As a partial solution to the digital divide, the FCC offered its first-ever free spectrum licenses to tribal nations on February 3, 2020. According to Rantanen, the process was mired in bureaucracy and it was incredibly difficult, if not impossible, for some nations to apply.¹³ Given how COVID-19 spread like wildfire throughout Indian Country, leaving many ill or dead, tribes had their hands full, and the spectrum licenses may not have been a top priority. As a result, the FCC granted a thirty-day extension, beyond the original six-month application schedule, to September 2, 2020, for tribal nations to apply. Despite urgency expressed from legislators, tribal nations, and Native organizations that the priority window be extended again due to pandemic disruptions, the FCC closed the window to apply.¹⁴ Under the Biden administration, new applications have been accepted.¹⁵ As of September 21, 2021, the FCC reported 270 licenses were granted to tribes, with an additional 20 applications accepted.¹⁶

Storytelling across the Digital Divide

Beyond telehealth access, the COVID-19 shutdowns across the country and tribal lands left many with a strong need to connect to community and culture. Andrea Delgado-Olson (Ione Band of Miwok Indians), founder and chair of Native American Women in Computing and the program manager for Systems and GHC Communities at AnitaB.org, has a goal to "connect tradition with technology." According to Delgado-Olson, the internet is allowing Native people to practice traditions like talking circles.¹⁷ Delgado-Olson was "longing

for connection” when she created an online talking circle for Native women. It brought the women together to discuss their feelings and community issues. It became so popular that Delgado-Olson said participants were meeting four times a week, sometimes up to two hours. However, many in her tribal nation lack high-speed, reliable broadband and the devices to connect to the talking circle.

The Ione Band of Miwok Indians, located in Northern California, is small, with only 750 people. Delgado-Olson said that before the pandemic, students would search for places with the internet and do their homework in parking lots. With social distancing measures, though, this stopped. Not too far from the Miwok, “smartbuses” were providing the Sacramento area with internet by serving as Wi-Fi hotspots, yet these temporary solutions to internet access are often denied to tribes.¹⁸ Diana Cournoyer, executive director of the National Indian Education Association, stated in a briefing led by the National Congress of American Indians that 37 percent of the students at the Bureau of Indian Education schools are without internet, making online distance learning impossible and “the school year a wash.”¹⁹ “Without internet access, it doesn’t matter how hard they [students] work,” she said.

With Native ingenuity, there are other ways to bridge this divide and tell our crip, Indigenous stories. On July 20, 2021, I, Tony Enos, and Marcy Angeles released an original song (“Others Like Me”), music video, and panel on the arts and access for disabled and ill Indigenous people. These works were made available for free download or view on Tony’s website and on YouTube. Hard-copy CDs were also made available for free for Native-led organizations and tribes to distribute to their communities. This work joins the ranks of a growing crip Indigenous movement.

The song and music video were a gift to our communities, so we wanted to ensure that our work was accessible across disabilities, geographic locations, and the digital divide. Taking this a step further in my own work, I am now researching and creating opportunities to offer hard-copy newsletters, zines, books, art, and more to our relatives who are denied internet access.

While the internet may be relatively new to humanity, storytelling is a traditional Indigenous value and one that must be continued across the generations. This includes our crip stories. Only through the fight for our full rights and tribal sovereignty will the digital divide no longer affect our ability to share our lived experiences.

NOTES

- 1 This piece contains segments of the following: Disability Futures Festival, “A More Inclusive Community: The Power and Presence of Indigenous Disabled Stories” panel. Ford Foundation July 20, 2021. “Pandemic and Digital Divide Threaten Accurate Census Count of Native Populations” *Truthout*. “Historic Injustice Against Native People Put Them at Greater Risk of COVID-19.” *Truthout*.

- 2 *So-called United States* is used here to denote that this land pre-dates the United States and is Indigenous land. What is known as North America is known as Turtle Island for many Indigenous people.
- 3 *Disabilities*. NCAI.org (n.d.). Retrieved April 25, 2022, from <https://www.ncai.org/policy-issues/education-health-human-services/disabilities>.
- 4 Bureau, U. S. C. (2021, October 8). *Childhood Disability in the United States: 2019*. Census.gov. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2021/acs/acsbr-006.html>.
- 5 Blackwell, Geoffrey C. "Oversight Hearing on GAO Reports Relating to Broadband Internet Availability on Tribal Lands," October 3, 2018, <https://www.indian.senate.gov/>.
- 6 Donnellan, Emily S. "No Connection: The Issue of Internet on the Reservation." *American Indian Law Journal* 5, no. 2 (July 1, 2017): 362.
- 7 "2016 ACS Shows Stubbornly High Native American Poverty and Different Degrees of Economic Well-Being for Asian Ethnic Groups." Working Economics Blog. Economic Policy Institute, September 15, 2017.
- 8 American Indian Life. Running Strong for American Indian Youth. Accessed April 7, 2020. <https://indianyouth.org/american-indian-life/>.
- 9 Deerinwater, Jen R. Interview with Brian Howard. Personal, December 4, 2019.
- 10 Deerinwater, Jen R. Interview with Lance Gumbs. Personal, May 6, 2020.
- 11 Deerinwater, Jen R. Interview with Matthew Rantenen. Personal, March 26, 2020.
- 12 Deerinwater, Jen R. Interview with Kerry Hawk Lessard. Personal, September 8, 2021.
- 13 Deerinwater, Jen R. Interview with Matthew Rantenen. Personal, March 26, 2020.
- 14 "FCC Closes Tribal Spectrum Priority Window Despite Objections." Native Business, September 4, 2020. <https://www.nativebusinessmag.com>.
- 15 "Wireless Telecommunications Bureau Announces Additional Rural Tribal Priority Window License Applications Accepted for Filing." Allnet, September 22, 2021. <https://www.allnetinsights.com/blogs>.
- 16 "Wireless Telecommunications Bureau Encourages 2.5 GHz Rural Tribal Priority Window Applicants to Resolve Mutual Exclusivity," September 22, 2021. Federal Communications Commission. <https://docs.fcc.gov>.
- 17 Deerinwater, Jen R. Interview with Andrea Delgado-Olson. Personal, May 19, 2020.
- 18 The WiFi Bus Pilot Comes to an End. Sacramento Regional Transit Authority, July 1, 2020. <https://www.sacrt.com>.
- 19 "Indian Country Addresses COVID-19," March 20, 2020. National Congress of American Indians. <https://www.ncai.org/>.

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- Deerinwater, Jen. 2020b. "Pandemic and Digital Divide Threaten Accurate Census Count of Native Populations." *Truthout*, June 5, 2020. <https://truthout.org/articles/pandemic-and-digital-divide-threaten-accurate-census-count-of-native-populations/>.
- Ford Foundation. 2021. "A More Inclusive Community: The Power and Presence of Indigenous Disabled Stories." Panel at the Disability Futures Virtual Festival, July 20, 2021.