

Reading Reflection Access and Affordability

IST- 618

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“As the internet becomes our new town square, a computer in every home, a teacher of all subjects, a connection to all cultures, this will no longer be a dream but a necessity. And over the next decade that must be our goal,” stated former President Bill Clinton in his 1997 State of the Union address (The White House, 1997). His speech highlighted the importance of proper access and affordability of broadband internet services in helping communities, especially impoverished ones, to receive better information to grow educationally and economically. However, over a decade later, the digital divide still just as great, with some demographics, like Native American populations who primarily live in rural areas, feeling the greatest constraints. broadband internet access on reservations and Indian Country could positively affect all areas of Indian life, from future economic developments to healthcare, and especially education. This reflection will review how access and affordability of broadband internet services will affect the unemployment of rural, Native American Indian populations.

5.2 Million people in the United States identified as being full or as combination Native American Indian and Alaska Native (Norris, Vines, & Hoeffel, 2012). 22% of Native Americans reside on tribal lands, like reservations, on and off reservation trust lands, and statistical areas. Most of these areas are remote and rural, while many of these areas do not even have town centers. In addition, Native Americans have the highest levels of poverty and unemployment amongst all ethnic groups in the United States (Krogstad, 2014). This means about 1 in 4, or 25.4% of Native Americans in poverty, compared to 15.5% nationally (Center for American Progress, 2019). Moreover, unemployment on most reservations are over 50%, with the

average per capita income being around \$4,500. The effects of high unemployment are quite dismal. Those that live in continued situations of economic hardship, a result of chronic unemployment, have higher suicide rates, lower graduation rates, poorer health, and poor housing conditions (COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS UNITED STATES SENATE, 2010).

In parallel with this trend, the lowest internet subscription rates were found in areas in or around tribal lands. Only 53% of Native Americans living tribal lands had broadband internet, compared to the 82% for non-Native populations. Also, Native Americans not living on tribal lands had a slightly higher rate of internet subscription, at 67% (2013-2017 American Community Survey Five-year Estimates, 2018). Furthermore, according to a report from the Congressional Research Service, even Native American populations that have active internet subscriptions are more likely to see slower internet speeds. According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Office of Native American Affairs and Policy (ONAP) this digital divide is attributed the rural, often rugged locations of most tribal communities. It would explain largely why providers lack economic incentive to serve those areas. In addition, these communities don't have most forms of basic infrastructure, such as water and sewer systems, and telecommunications. These barriers to development are only hindered by the cost of obtaining rights-of-way to deploy needed infrastructure in tribal lands. These costs include installment, maintenance, and upgrades to existing infrastructure. And while have some Tribal communities have assets held in land trusts, finding credit and financing for communication investment are difficult to obtain (Congressional Research Service (CRS), 2019).

For tribal communities to grow, they need access to reliable broadband internet. Particularly, they need grants and incentivized programs for infrastructure investment. And while federal funds available to However, the underlying problem is much larger. According to a report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO), federal tribes reported that the language and administrative requirements of federal grants are challenging to understand and often more burdensome. In addition, the GAO report determined that the Federal Communication Commission and the Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service maps and reports on the availability of broadband internet services on reservations and tribal lands had overstated availability due to the general definition the FCC uses to define "availability". Currently, the FCC considers internet to be "available" if the communications provider provides, through Form 477, that it is able to provide internet to at the least one location within a community. If this is reported as such, then the FCC considers broadband to be "available" for that area.

Unfortunately, it is this open definition includes areas without that lack the proper infrastructure to connect comes to the communication providers network (Wang, 2018). Changing this definition, of the term "availability" is key in first making sure that tribal communities that need federal funds, receive it. Therefore, before Native Americans can access information and communication technology systems (ICTs) to better their economic situations, they must first have an honest method of attaining the funding needed to build the infrastructure. Even simply building and maintaining ICT's infrastructure will provide some economic relief to communities where service providers train local tribes members through vocational programs. By training local populations in key computer and mechanical skills,

service providers ensure that once the system is built, they will have local maintenance workers ready to provide assistance. In addition, by having internet service, native populations are able to better their economic situations by being able to seek better education, jobs, and participate in the global economy. With internet, local populations can, for example, create online stores or learn how to get a small business lone. However, while these local populations would be able to access the digital economy, they would still lack the needed tools and skillsets to compete and find themselves at a disadvantage. This is why, in addition to internet services, tribal communities need training in digital skills (Donnellan, 2017).

By having new digital access, many current practices on the tribal lands would be disrupted. First, construction and planning would disrupt physical lands and areas. It is important that developers are considerate and aware of local practices before planning infrastructure and development. This is because native populations have unique death and land burial practices. While each tribe varies exactly in their beliefs and rituals, the elements traditional center on seasons and holy land burials (National Parks Service , n.d.). Therefore, prior to building the infrastructure, providers must work with native populations to guarantee holy lands or burial sites are not disturbed. In addition, digital access could disturb locals' populations by increasing migration out of the reservations. For example, by being able to access information about other regions, local jobs, and other opportunities online, local populations may seek to leave tribal lands in order to better their own economic situation (COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS UNITED STATES SENATE, 2010).

Finally, as discussed earlier, while federal grants are provided for infrastructure development, tribal communities are often not able to attain these grants due to inability to meet requirements or due to the confusing nature of the writing of these grants. For tribal communities, resources like training and education on how to use the internet would be very beneficial in helping local populations understand how best to utilize this tool. In addition, resources and education that train local workers in skills that would help maintain and build communications infrastructure would not only create a local career field, it would help service providers address any updates needed to maintain the infrastructure. Regarding policy, ideally, instead of waiting and incentivizing service providers to develop infrastructure for broadband internet in tribal and rural lands, the United States government should treat internet as a utility, just like it did for electricity in the 1930's. In 1936, Congress passed the Rural Electrification Act (REA) as part of the New Deal. This policy let the federal government make low-cost loans to farmers to bring electricity to rural Americans (Rural Electrification Act , 2015). Similar to how President Clinton, in this 1997 State of the Union, expressed the revolutionizing ability of giving internet access to all communities, the REA gave rural Americans a “fair chance” to compete in the expanding economy (The White House, 1997).

Appendix:

Here is a link to Hassan Minaj's Patriot Act episode where he discusses the internet divide. It is a lighter “news-ish” show with great data visualizations and light humor.

<https://youtu.be/xw87-zP2VNA>

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