Journal of Community Informatics Special Issue: *Charting Sovereignty in the Digital Age: Tribal Leadership, Broadband, and the Rise of Tribal Digital Sovereignty*

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Charting Sovereignty in the Digital Age: Tribal Leadership, Broadband, and the Rise of Tribal Digital Sovereignty

Abstract

This special issue of the Journal of Community Informatics presents a collection of articles exploring the historical trajectory and contemporary convergence of grassroots telecommunications policy advocacy in Indian Country. The articles in the special edition posit that Tribal Digital Sovereignty (TDS) has emerged as a definitive governance framework for Tribal Nations, evolving from decades of work by scholars and practitioners at the intersection of federal Indian law, telecommunications, digital equity, and tribal self-determination. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a pivotal catalyst for this evolution, recasting broadband from a luxury to an essential lifeline and exposing deep-seated disparities in connectivity. This crisis opened an unprecedented opportunity for Tribal Nations to take a seat at the policy table and invest in infrastructure through historic federal investments through the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. These investments have allowed Tribal governments to move beyond bridging the digital divide toward creating community-led solutions shaped by sovereignty and self-determination.

Despite a shifting political and funding landscape, Tribal Nations have successfully transitioned from reactive investments to proactive self-determination in the digital realm. This special issue examines TDS as an umbrella framework encompassing both Network Sovereignty—the authority over physical infrastructure—and Data Sovereignty—the governance of information and its transmission. The articles document how Tribal governments can and are actively institutionalizing long-term strategies, including the development of regulatory codes and protocols to protect governmental and other data. By tracing historical inequities alongside recent advancements, this collection highlights a foundational shift: Tribal Nations are no longer passive beneficiaries of federal policy but are the primary architects of digital futures grounded in their unique cultural, political, and legal foundations.

Keywords: Tribal Digital Sovereignty; Tribal Broadband; Tribal Telecommunications Policy; Digital Equity; Digital Governance

Introduction

If research is ceremony, then data is sacred. Indeed, data is kin.

This special issue of the Journal of Community Informatics is a collection of four related articles that examine the historical trajectory and growing body of policy that underpin Tribal advocacy in the telecommunications space, culminating in an exploration of Tribal Digital Sovereignty as an overarching, definitive concept and digital governance framework.

For decades, Tribal scholars, leaders, and community practitioners have been working at the intersection of digital access, equity, and sovereignty—often in under-resourced environments and outside the mainstream policy conversation spotlight. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, dramatically shifted this dynamic. As broadband became a critical lifeline for healthcare, education, commerce, and civic engagement, the stark disparities in connectivity on Tribal lands became evident.

The idea for this foundational collection emerged post-COVID. The pandemic was a pivotal moment for Tribal Nations, not only in its disruption but in its convergence of Tribal leadership, governance, and telecommunications policy. As Tribal governments responded with resilience, they exercised their sovereignty as co-equal governing entities alongside states and municipalities. More critically, broadband connectivity—once considered a luxury—was recast as essential infrastructure. For Tribal Nations, this revealed long-standing inequities and placed them at the forefront of the digital divide, where the consequences of the lack of connectivity were not just inconvenient but life-threatening. This moment of crisis also opened an unprecedented policy window. For the first time, Tribal voices—long marginalized in technology and infrastructure planning—were amplified in national debates on broadband expansion, infrastructure equity, and digital governance.

While it is an understatement to say that the pandemic changed everything, it is evident that, for Tribal Nations, it was a game-changer on many levels. First and foremost, it altered leadership and governance, as Tribal leaders faced unprecedented challenges and governed alongside other entities, such as states, municipalities, and city governments, as equals. In short, governance has transformed. Second, arguably the most crucial change was the elevation of broadband connectivity to critical infrastructure.

Before 2025, in direct response to the pandemic and through sustained advocacy, Tribal governments stood poised to receive the largest influx of digital infrastructure investment in history. This included $3 billion through the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (TBCP), $2 billion from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and $980 million from the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. These historic investments represented a transformative opportunity not only to bridge the digital divide but also to create new governance structures, digital policies, and community-led solutions shaped by tribal priorities.

However, in 2025, the political and funding landscape shifted as federal attention turned elsewhere, and large-scale financing changed dramatically under a new presidential administration and its new priorities. Despite this changing context, the momentum of years of work by Tribal Nations led Tribes to move toward self-determination in the digital realm. Across Indian Country, Tribal governments are actively asserting their digital sovereignty by developing infrastructure, creating governance codes, asserting control over data and networks, and institutionalizing long-term strategies for digital equity, cultural protection, and technological resilience.

Tribal Digital Sovereignty

What is Tribal Digital Sovereignty? Where did this term come from? Why is it of paramount importance to communities? Tribal Digital Sovereignty is a governance term that encompasses both tribal network sovereignty and tribal data sovereignty. It refers to both the information and the physical means by which that information is transferred, governed by a community's policies and codes that control data, infrastructure, and networks. Digital sovereignty is the governance and regulatory oversight of a Tribal Nation's digital realm. Tribal nations exercising their inherent sovereignty over their digital world is arguably the next phase of tribal self-determination.

Because of the tribal trust relationship and federal status as political entities in the U.S., tribal governments can and are establishing digital sovereignty policies for the data they generate and manage, as well as for external data collected by outside parties and government entities. A comprehensive digital governance plan may cover oversight and regulation of: infrastructure; planning and maintenance; implementation of digital equity; economic sovereignty through digital governance; educational and research activities in the digital space; data use, transmission, and storage; and capacity building to support infrastructure and equity. It might also include developing Tribal codes related to digital sovereignty within their nations. Potential activities could involve establishing a regulatory body, creating governance codes for regulatory structures, managing data usage, data transmission, cloud storage, creating sovereign clouds, education, research, cultural data, enterprise data governance, existing gaming regulations, cybersecurity, AI policies by Tribal agencies, and policies for telecommunications infrastructure and technology use by government entities. Exercising sovereignty in the digital realm is not a new concept; it mirrors efforts to exercise sovereignty in sectors such as education, health, and natural resources.

Conclusion:

The pandemic catalyzed a long-overdue transformation: connectivity is now a lifeline, and digital governance a core pillar of Tribal sovereignty. No longer passive recipients of federal or state action, Tribal Nations are designing digital futures based on their unique cultural, political, and legal foundations. This special issue of the Journal of Community Informatics documents the history of tribal policy work in telecommunications, including evolving definitions, policies, and practices that shape Tribal Digital Sovereignty. It also highlights the urgent need for comprehensive planning in infrastructure, digital equity, cultural protection, and data governance. These articles trace the historical inequities, recent advancements, and the foundational shift from crisis response to a sovereign digital future. Further, this special issue aims to document the historical trajectory, uplift current models, and contribute scholarly and practical solutions to a growing field of inquiry and governance.

A Note on Terms

Throughout the articles in this special edition, four terms and their usage should be discussed: Tribal Nation, Indigenous, Tribal Sovereignty, and the Trust Relationship.

Tribal Nation/Tribal Nations is used purposefully as a descriptor for a sovereign political entity, not as an ethnic or social group. There are 575 federally recognized Tribal Nations in the U.S.

The term Indigenous is used in some instances to refer to the global inclusivity of a community or to international movements of culturally related peoples.

Tribal sovereignty refers to the inherent legal authority that Tribal governments exercise over their nations. This authority does not come from the U.S. government. Tribal sovereignty is a tool of self-determination.

The Trust Relationship is an obligation that the U.S. government has to Tribal Nations via treaty rights. Further, the Trust Relationship refers to the legally enforceable fiduciary obligation of the United States to protect Tribal treaty rights, lands, and assets. This term is vital when discussing federal funding, such as the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (TBCP). It frames federal investment as a debt owed or an obligation fulfilled, rather than charity. Finally, using this term positions this work within the framework of Federal Indian Law. It holds the state accountable for the digital divide as a failure of its trust responsibility.

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