

## NATIVE AMERICANS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Despite decades of federal policies designed to fulfill the promise of bringing universal access to telephone and television service to all Americans, Native Americans are still invisible in the media, and the telephone penetration rates in their communities are among the worst in the country. These were the topics under discussion at a conference convened by the National Indian Telecommunications Institute (NITI). The event, "Digital Council Fires", was held in Albuquerque, New Mexico in mid-May, and brought together Native American communities from across the country to discuss problems and share solutions regarding communications services.

Karen Buller (Comanche), Executive Director of NITI, opened the conference by noting that while National Telecommunications Information Administration statistics show Native American telephone penetration rates at around 80 percent, anecdotal evidence suggests that penetration rates are actually much lower, as few as 40 percent in some communities. A variety of speakers directly attacked the "myth" that Native Americans do not want telephones. One of the reasons the penetration rate is so low, they explained, is the comparatively high cost Native Americans pay for equal access to services. Fees to run and connect telephone lines to rural communities or tribal lands have been as high as \$10,000, and broadband data transmission charges can cost as much as \$3,200 per month. Furthermore, the lack of access to Telecom service results not only from the expense, but also from poor connections and lines that routinely fall during severe weather and high winds.

While some speakers focused on Native Americans' lost economic opportunities, others talked about the human costs resulting from this disparity. Jean Whitehorse (Navajo), told the tragic story of a child who died because an emergency call could not get through. Participants also discussed Internet service, technology in educational institutions, and the use of media technology to preserve Indian culture. Conroy Chino (Acoma Pueblo), one of a handful of Native American reporters, talked about the lack of television news coverage of important issues on and off the reservation. He also decried the negative images of Native Americans that persist on broadcast television. Mark Lloyd, Executive Director of the Civil Rights Forum on Communications Policy, reminded participants that broadcasters have a responsibility to serve all the viewers in their communities. He also urged participants to join People for Better TV; a coalition of organizations formed to advocate for the interests of the public as the nation makes the transition to digital TV. Finally, Lloyd called on the FCC to take steps to make certain that digital broadcasters will be held accountable to the needs of Native Americans.

Despite the obstacles to universal service facing Native Americans, Marcia Warren (Santa Clara Pueblo), co-author of the new Benton Foundation publication, "Native Networking: Telecommunications and Information Technology in Indian Country," reported on the many efforts underway to resolve these challenges. The introduction to "Native Networking" notes that "more native organizations and businesses are focusing on telecommunications and technology, broadening the options for tribes and acquiring skills needed to develop their infrastructures. Likewise, federal agencies are utilizing both their technology funds and Indian Affairs offices to extend more opportunities to Native American communities." "Tribes are entering a new era-an exciting time of emphasizing their identity and potential," the report's authors say. "A network of people and expertise is beginning to form, but like all new

social structures it will take more time and effort to fully mature."

For more information about NITI, call 505.986.3972, or check them out on the web at <http://numa.niti.org/>. "Native Networking" can be found on the Benton Foundation website at [www.benton.org/library](http://www.benton.org/library). People for Better TV can be reached at 1-888-37-4PBTv, or on the web at [www.bettertv.org](http://www.bettertv.org).