

NATIVE VISIBILITY PROJECT

Insights for Amplifying Native Voices

TV Indians (2017) by Cara Romero



What is the issue?

Arts and culture are central driving features of Native communities. Yet, much of this work is systematically under-recognized as well as under-funded. The term “Native invisibility” refers to how Native peoples, cultures, and issues are routinely excluded from or misrepresented by stereotypes in mainstream media, education, politics, and public discourse. Invisibility and widespread misconception undermines public perception, resource allocation, and Native peoples’ ability to advocate for their communities.

What is the research context?

IllumiNative, an organization with the mission of building power for Native peoples, undertook a range of campaigns and projects between 2018 and 2025 to amplify contemporary Native voices and stories, and to advance justice, equity, and self-determination. The Native Visibility and Power-Building Project (NVP) covered here expands upon previous findings of the 2018 Reclaiming Native Truth Project in order to identify where, over five years later, Native peoples gained visibility, where invisibility remains, and how to inform narrative and cultural organizing strategies. IllumiNative sunset as an organization in December 2025. As an evolution of its seven

Research Approach

IllumiNative conducted five research studies, each in collaboration with a different research partner, exploring the dominant narratives, perceptions, and influences that shape public opinion of Native peoples. The research studies included public opinion focus groups; a nationally representative survey; social media analysis; interviews with law clerks, judges, and legal experts; and confidential political interviews at the federal level.

years of work, IllumiNative launched Indigenous House, a lifestyle brand and media platform powered by Indigenous culture and community.

What are the research findings?

Across the research studies, NVP found that Native invisibility persists. The national public opinion firm Lake Research Partners found in its focus groups that

Research brief based on The Native Visibility + Power-Building (NVP) Project: Insights and Action guide by IllumiNative.

while the majority of participants find Native invisibility unacceptable and believe that teaching future generations accurately about Native peoples is essential, they hold widespread misconceptions, stereotypes, and misinformation. Participants also said they believed that education and social media can provide major avenues for correcting and reshaping non-Natives' perceptions of Native peoples.

The online survey by Nielsen Emerging Media Research, echoed these findings, reporting that almost half of survey participants were unable to name a single famous or noteworthy Native person and that the most persistent perceptions about Native people included poverty and alcoholism. The majority of participants also felt it was important to feature more stories about Native Americans in the media and showed interest in viewing more content with Native characters.

The social media analysis by Unfiltered Media, which examined over 1,700 posts on X and Reddit, found that a small group of Native influencers, representing less than 1 percent of content creators, was responsible for nearly a quarter of all engagement in Native-focused conversations. They found that Native voices are carving out unique online spaces to address topics like land sovereignty, systemic discrimination, and cultural preservation, while rejecting binary partisan labels, reinforcing that Native peoples are not a monolith. The analysis reported that influencers are more effective at shaping

the national conversation when they approach social media as an organizing strategy for advocacy instead of simply a means to publish messaging.

Holly Cook Macarro of The Angle and Mary Kathryn Nagle of Nagle Law partnered with NVP to undertake political (Cook Macarro) and judicial (Nagle) research and found that media portrayals and stereotypes of Native Americans impact judicial outcomes. Participants also held many misconceptions that stem from ignorance on issues ranging from Tribal court operations to Congressional updates to statutes. Indian gaming, which is critical to Tribal sovereignty, is also viewed with prejudice by legal institutions, which in turn influences individuals' perceptions of tangential issues, like the impacts of federal employment law on Tribal lands.

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Implications for Stakeholders

The NVP study makes the case that narrative change is urgently needed to shift non-Native understandings of Native peoples and strengthen tribal sovereignty. A key lever for narrative change includes Native-driven cultural content and media, strategic storytelling, and authentic representation. Funders can seek out and support Native authors, filmmakers, artists, and influencers and can use their own platforms to center Native voices in conversations about policy, media, representation, and justice.

Funders and allies can take steps to educate themselves, as well as advocate for better representation of Native peoples and Tribal sovereignty in a range of educational spaces including media, public school curricula, and in higher education.

The study this brief is based on was funded by The Wallace Foundation as part of its Advancing Well-Being in the Arts initiative. The initiative seeks to support and document the essential role that arts organizations rooted in communities of color play in the U.S. arts ecosystem. The original research and findings summarized in this brief are those of the researcher and do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.