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The Design of Native American Websites: From Web Rings to Cyber-Locality

Subtheme: Ethnography of Technical Systems

In what ways have Native American cultural identity and values influenced the design of tribal websites? This question is explored in an ethnographic case study of Native American community websites, paying close attention to similarities and differences in website content, structure, scope, and techniques used to reproduce socio-cultural boundaries.

Native American websites emerged in the early nineties with strong ties to offline sociality and culture, signifying key components used to assert cultural identity on the Internet. Web rings represented an early way to connect tribal websites within a cyclical organizational structure. Paula Gunn Allen's (1986) Sacred Hoop focuses on the cross-tribal concepts of the hoop as a metaphor or symbol of individual and community balance. As explored in this study, the structural decision to integrate this circular metaphor aided in establishing commonalities among participants by creating a navigational experience markedly symbolic of American Indian culture.

As technology became more sophisticated, the use of text and images to reproduce local physicality developed across many tribal websites. These websites provided a new context to reaffirm the traditional anthropological notion that physical space plays a meaningful role in identity formation for many cultural groups. The emergence of culture and locality online complicate postmodern cyber theory, which posit a space devoid of physical limitations where social meaning has shifted from the physical to the virtual realm. However, the influence of tribal cultural values on Native American websites suggests a connection between online and offline space, as opposed to a deconstruction of it.