



Indigenous Media Freedom Alliance

Who controls the story?

Tribal data | Independent press | Stronger governance

WHY IT MATTERS

Across the Northern Plains, Native professionals are raising urgent concerns about who controls tribal data, how freely the press can operate and what that means for governance. These insights, drawn from listening sessions hosted by the Indigenous Media Freedom Alliance, reveal how data sovereignty and press freedom are deeply connected to strong, accountable tribal leadership.

WHAT'S AT STAKE: 5 KEY REALITIES

Sovereignty & Ownership

- Tribal control of data is non-negotiable — but many records remain in outside hands.
- Ethical data-sharing policies put control back in tribal hands.
- Debates continue: Is data sovereignty a constitutional right or an operational issue?

Press Freedom & Transparency

- Press access depends on who is in office — few tribes have free press laws.
- Independent Native press improves governance and trust.
- Disinformation era makes a free Native press more critical than ever.

Infrastructure & Capacity

- External vendors quote software tribes cannot afford.
- Fragmented databases slow decisions across departments.
- Research review boards and tribally owned data platforms are emerging fixes.

External Relationships

- Data gatekeeping by state or federal agencies fuels distrust.
- Tribes sometimes never receive their own data back after reporting it.
- Optimism rises when solutions are tribal-led — through local review boards or community-driven data systems.

Cultural Protection

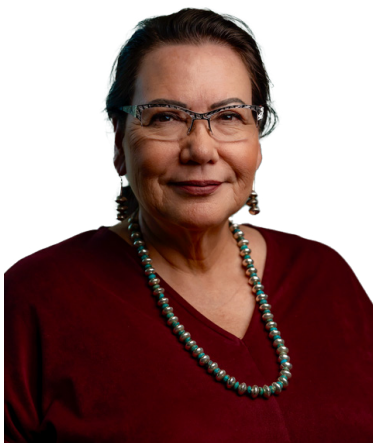
- Language and heritage archives are vulnerable when housed off-reservation.
- Cultural data should be treated with the same care and sovereignty as land or water.
- As more cultural materials take digital form, new sovereignty-based approaches are needed for storage and access.

WARNING SIGNS: LOW TRANSPARENCY & STIFLED PRESS FREEDOM

- Access depends on who is in office — a reporter's credentials may be accepted one year and denied the next when no formal policy exists.
- Government-owned papers self-censor — journalists avoid tough stories to keep their jobs, leaving citizens in the dark.
- Outside agencies hold the data keys — tribes submit information but cannot retrieve it for their own planning.
- Disconnected data systems fuel rumor mills — when they fail to share, misinformation fills the gap.
- Community trust erodes — citizens question decisions when records are closed or slow to surface.

FIVE WAYS A FREE NATIVE PRESS CHAMPIONS GOOD GOVERNANCE

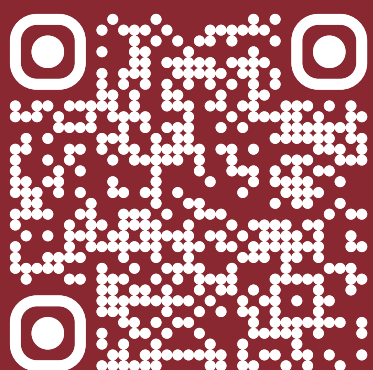
- Sharper decisions — leaders act on verified facts reported publicly, not community whispers.
- Misinformation firewall — an independent outlet corrects rumors before they harden into policy headaches.
- Balanced playing field — clear media-access rules curb political maneuvering and put all tribal leaders on equal footing.
- Citizen confidence — open meetings and responsive records boost trust between government and community.
- Sovereignty affirmed — controlling your own narrative in data and in news shows external entities that governance is Native-led.



A note from Jodi Rave Spotted Bear

Founder and Executive Director,
Indigenous Media Freedom Alliance

“This field guide reflects conversations we’ve had across the Northern Plains — honest, often urgent exchanges about what’s working, what’s missing and where we go from here. We hope it sparks new ideas, deeper commitments and more support for those defending Native press freedom and sovereignty on the ground.”



Want to learn more?

Scan the QR code to explore how IMFA is supporting press freedom and data sovereignty across Indian Country.