Telling Us What We Already Know: A Case Study Analysis of Poverty Coverage in Rural Appalachian Community News Outlets

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This dissertation titled

Telling Us What We Already Know: A Case Study Analysis of Poverty Coverage

in Rural Appalachian Community News Outlets

by

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ABSTRACT

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Telling Us What We Already Know: A Case Study Analysis of Poverty Coverage in Rural Appalachian Community News Outlets

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This dissertation examines the roles local news organizations in three rural Appalachian communities play in the facilitation of discussions about local poverty. The study is grounded in Stuart Hall’s theoretical understanding of the encoding and decoding of media messages (1980), which offers insight on the way social practices influence the production and interpretation of news. Through three separate case studies using qualitative research methods (textual analysis and in-depth interviews), the study describes the dominant media frames local journalists used to describe poverty. Interviews with 11 current and former journalists describe the social and professional habits and philosophies that shape their coverage. Interviews with 40 local residents offer insight into how those messages are interpreted.

The study suggests that media coverage in the three communities largely reinforces an understanding of poverty as a byproduct of Appalachian culture, a view that places responsibility on the poor themselves and often dismisses social inequalities that contribute to poverty. Coverage of poverty was largely absent from local news coverage in the three communities studied. When stories about poverty did appear, they often focused not on the poor themselves, but rather on community efforts to assist them. Journalists said coverage of poverty was largely influenced by journalistic norms, business limitations, concerns about exposing the poor to social ridicule, and a desire to
portray their communities in positive lights. This dissertation suggests residents decoded the absence of poverty coverage as evidence that poverty was a normal aspect of life, something they had the power neither to fix nor to discuss. Interview participants experienced similar feelings of powerlessness to counter dominant media images of Appalachia, which, residents said, were largely negative. Such coverage, it is argued, could empower low-income residents and encourage dialog that could contribute to change in local communities.

The study makes several recommendations that could address those feelings of powerlessness, including the incorporation of alternative views and an emphasis on proactive coverage of poverty and need. This research also suggests that local news organizations partner with universities and nonprofit groups in the region to aggregate and publish stories that reflect the diversity of the region.
DEDICATION

For my family, and for small towns.
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I could not have completed this process without the patience, love, and sacrifices of my wife Lisa and my sons Michael and Jace. The three of you continue to be a constant source of strength and inspiration for me, and I feel blessed to have you in my life.

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Finally, I express my sincerest gratitude to the men and women in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek who took the time to participate in this project. The people who appear on these pages, and many more who do not, help me discuss issues that are important not only in Appalachia, but also in communities around the world. They were frank, kind, open, and honest during my time with them, and I feel privileged to have met all of them.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Read through the front page of The Priorsville Record on any given weekday, and you are likely to find announcements of upcoming festivals, local award winners, and, almost without fail, a roster of those booked into the Priorsville Jail that week. A day’s drive away, readers of The Greenburg Star may be reading about methamphetamine busts or new businesses opening downtown. A few hours to the east, the weekly Deer Creek Chronicle might share photos of the U.S. senator’s recent visit to a local college, or a lengthy listing of upcoming family reunions. That down-home news—the fish fries, the middle school graduation photos, the Rotary Club meeting announcements—affirms the links between members of those communities, just as it does in towns and neighborhoods all over the United States. It is, as journalism professor and former newspaper publisher Jock Lauterer wrote, news designed “to persuade people their lives are important” (2006, p. 20).

But what you will not see in those newspapers, most weeks, are stories about the poor: their struggles to find and keep jobs, to get adequate health care, or to manage the stigma of accepting local charity or government welfare. You will not generally hear the voices of those who live on the economic fringe, getting by for now, but one bad day away from financial turmoil. When you do see news about poverty, it probably appears in one of journalism’s more sterilized forms: press releases about unemployment rates burdened by bureaucratic language or small announcements about clothing giveaways tucked away near the back of the newspaper.

That absence of coverage might not be remarkable, were it not for the fact that the Star, the Chronicle, and the Record publish in some of the most economically distressed
counties in the United States.\footnote{In order to protect the anonymity of research participants, the names and geographic locations of communities and newspapers studied in this dissertation have been changed. Every individual who participated in this study was assigned a pseudonym, as were all third parties who were discussed during interviews or featured in news stories described in the dissertation. The extension of anonymity to protect the identities of research participants has a long history in social science research (Guenther, 2009). To maintain that anonymity, researchers in the past have changed the names of individuals, organizations, and, at times, entire towns (for example, see Scott, 2005; Marwell, 2004; Eckstein, 2001; Duncan, 1999). The community selection process used for this dissertation is described in Chapter 4.} They are three of the most disadvantaged communities in Appalachia, an American region that has experienced a long history of economic hardship. For many in the mountain towns of Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek, poverty is a part of daily life. But it is an aspect of life that is, for the most part, absent from the local news outlets that chronicle life in those communities. This research will show that local journalists in those communities recognize the problem of poverty but often struggle with writing about it. The lack of poverty coverage and the formulaic nature of news that is published (and the journalistic routines used by those who produce it) do little to encourage local discussions about the causes and consequences of poverty, or conversations about change in the region. Instead, in the words of a Greenburg middle school teacher, the local newspapers merely “tell us what we already know.”

Through a series of three case studies, this dissertation describes the ways local media (both print newspapers and hyperlocal websites) facilitate discourses on poverty and related social issues in three Appalachian communities that experience high levels of economic distress.\footnote{As measured by the Appalachian Regional Commission, which uses unemployment rates, poverty rates, and per capita income to create a county-level economic index.} Building on past research that examines the ways media influence personal and group identity and literature that explores poverty issues in Appalachia, it analyzes the ways individuals incorporate media messages into their understanding of what it means to be “from” a region. Where a person considers her/himself to “be from” and how that homeplace is perceived are important component in the construction of...
personal identity. Those perceptions are not rooted solely in geography: “Place is history, family, the shape and context of daily life” (Lyon, 2013, p. 189). I qualitatively describe the emphasis each of the six local news organizations operating in these small towns places on poverty and related issues, such as unemployment and government assistance for the poor. Through interviews with newspaper owners, editors, and reporters, I explain the personal decisions and social interactions that shape the way poverty is covered at the local level. Through discussions with 40 residents in the three communities, I attempt to determine how coverage of rural poverty by local and regional media is interpreted, and how those interpretations align with dominant understandings of Appalachian poverty a product of a “culture of poverty.” And through discussions with local philanthropists, social service workers, current and former journalists, and other residents in the communities, I offer suggestions for journalists and residents who want to challenge the dominant views of poverty expressed by local media.

Media have long played a role in the creation and maintenance of a national “Appalachian identity” (Eller, 2008; Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008; Biggers, 2006; Lewis, 1999) and poverty has figured heavily in news coverage of Appalachia. Scholars have commented on the ways Appalachian poverty were represented in popular media such as Harry Caudill’s seminal 1962 work Night Comes to the Cumberlands (Duncan, 1990; Zilack, 2012), Ken Light’s 2006 documentary photography collection Coal Hollow (Scott, 2009), Robert Schenkkan’s play The Kentucky Cycle, which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992 (Billings, Norman, & Ledford, 1999), and reality television programming such as The Real Beverly Hillbillies, pitched but never aired by CBS in 2002 (Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008). Those studies offer thorough analyses of the ways Appalachia and its
Residents are stereotyped as poor, backward, and primitive, but they do little to describe how those messages are created or how they are in turn integrated into regional identity. They also focus on popular media disseminated at the national level, produced by corporations and individuals who are socially and geographically distanced from the rural mountain populations they might other (for an exception to both counts, see Richards-Schuster & O’Doherty, 2012). Little scholarly attention has been paid to the specific ways local media approach poverty in the region. This scholarship addresses that void. Although individual lived experiences of poverty will vary from person to person and community to community, certain common traits, patterns, and ideas emerge. A deeper understanding of those patterns and ideas will benefit those who seek to understand the causes and impacts of poverty in the region more generally, as well as those who are interested in the social aspects of news production and consumption. This study also offers theoretically grounded, practical applications that may help news producers and individual residents challenge existing discourses and the structural beliefs they reinforce.

In the three case studies that make up this dissertation, I use qualitative textual analysis to examine the dominant frames used by community newspapers to describe rural poverty. Through qualitative interviews with reporters, editors, and newspaper owners, I describe the motives, routines, and philosophical positions that contribute to the construction of those local news frames. Through similar interviews with local residents, I explain the ways those local news messages are decoded, and how interpretations of news about local poverty fit into broader understandings of Appalachian identity. I also describe some strategies that journalists and local news consumers might use to change coverage of poverty at the local level.
In Chapter 2, I will lay out the major communication and sociological theories that inform this dissertation. The study’s primary goal is to examine the ways poverty is “encoded” in media and the ways those messages are “decoded” by audiences (Hall, 1980). Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall argued that events (and, I suggest, public issues) must be translated into stories in order to become communicative events that others may consume. That translation of an amorphous event or issue into a news story is influenced by a host of factors: journalistic routines, technical skills and ideologies of individual journalists, approaches to journalism, and assumptions about their audiences, among others (Hall, 1980). Hall also provided a theoretical explanation of the “decoding” of messages, which he described as the translation of media codes “into social practice” (1980, p. 128). He argued that media codes have a dominant meaning that is often, but not always, accepted. In the construction of identity, message recipients have the ability to negotiate the dominant meaning, or to dismiss it altogether. Theoretical understandings of the ways people incorporate media into their understandings of daily life are especially pertinent when one considers history of Appalachia. Media have been important historically in the construction of Appalachia as a land full of outsiders, poor, uneducated, and in need of civilizing.

Chapter 3 explores the evolution of that construction, from the time of the region’s earliest European settlers to the age of social media and reality television, and explores the economic hardships and social challenges residents in the region have faced. Dominant images of Appalachia as a land of social outsiders have endured for generations, and this chapter offers perspectives on the “hillbilly” stereotype commonly applied to the region and other parts of the rural U.S.
In Chapter 4, I describe in detail the case study design used in this dissertation. I conducted case studies in three central and north central Appalachian communities, relying primarily on qualitative research methods (textual analysis and in-depth interviews) to examine the ways four newspapers and two hyperlocal news websites cover poverty in their communities. The histories of those communities, their media markets, and dominant local perspectives on poverty I encountered during my field work are described in detail in Chapter 5.

Chapter 6 offers a summary of the dominant frames used in community newspapers to describe local economic situations. Each community experiences high levels of economic need, but the social consequences of those needs and the efforts to address them are different in each community. The qualitative textual analyses of 161 issues of local newspapers and a secondary analysis of local news websites reflect that diversity. However, some basic themes were common across media in the three communities. The most striking commonality was the lack of coverage of poverty and its consequences. Poor economic conditions were commonly cited as the primary concern in each of the three communities studied, but those conditions received relatively little news coverage in local media. Coverage of poverty that was present largely fell into one of three dominant themes: hard facts, community responses, and resources. Scholarship on media framing suggests that the dominant images of an individual or group play important roles in the public’s believes about those individuals or groups (Lasorsa & Dai, 2007; Gilens, 1999; Gamson, 1989; Gitlin, 1980). Those various images accumulate to create a culture defined by media scholar Robert Entman as “the empirically demonstratable set of common frames exhibited in the discourse and thinking of most
people in a social grouping” (1993, p. 53). The major frames identified in the local newspapers studied here are discussed in detail.

Sociologists have viewed the Appalachian middle class as “‘a cultural bridge’ between the rural community and mass society,” with the ability to influence education, social services, and the local and regional economy (Walls & Billings, 1997, p. 136). Newspaper editors and publishers in most cases likely would fit within what Appalachia scholars David Walls and David Billings call the “mountain middle class,” and thus wield some of that local power. Community media have the power, this dissertation argues, to construct meaning through the use of “social myths, language, and symbols” (Gaventa, 1980, p. 15) which can influence individual understandings of poverty. Chapter 7 describes the thinking that guides some journalists as they construct that meaning. The 11 current and former community journalists interviewed for this study said providing general information to their communities was an important part of their jobs. Most also spoke of themselves as public servants tasked with improving their communities and the lives of their neighbors. Journalists interviewed said news coverage of poverty and need in their communities is an important part of that social mission, but one that required a great deal of care. Journalists described competing motives that influenced the ways they wrote about poverty—they want to provide information that will help their communities, but they were also wary of writing about poverty in ways that embarrassed the poor or painted their communities in a negative light. Often, those concerns lead them to omit personal narratives about poverty from the community.

It has been suggested that individuals’ attitudes toward poverty and specific aspects of poverty are shaped by the discourse on poverty encountered by those
individuals on a daily basis (Gowan, 2011). That is the case for those who do not experience the direct effects of poverty, as well as for those who do. Appalachia scholars Walls and Billings suggested: “being poor involves a social identity which is learned early and enforced by informal relationships in the local community” (1997, p. 136). Interactions that take place in schools, workplaces, and government offices establish and enforce those identities. So too, this dissertation argues, do media interactions at the local and nonlocal level. Chapter 8 explores the ways individuals in the three communities under study experience media coverage about their communities, and how they decode that coverage (particularly at the local level). Forty residents of the three communities under study consistently told me that regional media (metropolitan newspapers and television stations) and occasionally national media painted unflattering, incomplete, and inaccurate pictures of their homes that often hinged on common Appalachian tropes such as poverty, drug abuse, laziness, and ignorance. They expressed a desire to resist those stereotypes and tell a different story about their community. Coverage from local newspapers and online news sources were not uniformly criticized by residents, but most did acknowledge that local economic problems were rarely reported on in any detail. Local newspaper readers decoded the lack of coverage of poverty at the local level as evidence that poorness is, in effect, their lot in life as residents of those places. The social consequences of that very common encoding, as well as other interpretations that subtly reinforce stratification and class division, are discussed.

The public mediation of Appalachian identity—and the incorporation of poverty into that identity—is an ongoing process that involves those with power and those without (Duncan, 2000; Bourdieu et al., 1999). Personal efficacy is an important factor
that helps determine how involved individuals who may find themselves on the social outside will become in advocacy and social change (Bullard, 2000; Bandura, 2001). In his study of quiescence in Appalachia, John Gaventa suggested that, over time, individuals in poverty may be “socialized into compliance” in a way that leads them “to accept the definitions of political reality as offered by dominant groups, classes or government institutions” (1980, p. 18). That socialization may be overcome by “shifts in the power field”\(^3\) that may lead to increased efficacy and community participation (Gaventa, 1980, p. 162), and a change in the ways individuals in poverty conceive of themselves and their situation (Gaventa, 1980, p. 211). This study concludes with a consideration of some ways newspapers might help push for the types of shifts Gaventa described. The recommendations outlined in Chapter 9 are based to a degree on my own observations, but are heavily influenced by my interactions with research participants in each of the three field sites. More inclusive sourcing practices, increased opportunities for reader submissions, and candid discussions between journalists and their communities about goals, values, and perspectives on poverty, growth, and culture all could help local residents reshape public discussions about poverty. The study also suggests that a coalition of local newspapers and hyperlocal news websites could serve as a conduit for residents of the region to counter dominant media images of “backwater Appalachia,” a stereotype that, community members told me, has tangible social consequences.

The study ultimately calls on newspapers to try to encourage what Appalachia historian Ron Eller called a “spirit of collective responsibility” during a 2014 speech on

\(^3\) Such power shifts may or may not directly challenge power holders in a community. Examples might include the mobilization of local community action programs that include elected boards of directors who are not part of the local elite or associated with the local elite (Gaventa, 1980), or programs that allow Appalachian youth to create documentaries that portray local problems through the eyes of young people in the community (Richards-Schuster & O’Doherty, 2012).
poverty in the region. Many of the journalists and publishers interviewed for this study told me they viewed themselves as public servants and described specific efforts to improve economic conditions in their communities. Many local residents, however, told me they believed their communities’ newspapers underachieved in their efforts to create public discussions about poverty. The dissertation suggests newspapers are most effective when they approach their role as a concerned friend of the community—what former newspaper publisher Gil Thelen called a “committed observer,” candid and interdependent with the needs of the individuals in the community it serves (Dean, n.d.).

My goal in this dissertation is to show the different perspectives and understandings held by journalists and their readers, and to suggest strategies that might make the newspapers more reflective of their whole communities and, thus, become more frank and better concerned friends. As Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen (1999) noted, public discussion is vital to the development of public judgment and community values. Historically, social stratification has made such public discussions especially challenging in Appalachian communities (Gaventa, 1980), and increasingly, the bonds that facilitate social dialog are becoming more and more fragile in all communities (Putnam, 2000). I argue that as a concerned friend, local newspapers must provide flexible, open forums for the discussion of problems in a community. They can contribute to a wider awareness of the ways the fates of all members of a community—rich or poor—are linked (Putnam, 2000). In the process, they may help their readers reconceptualize community need in a way that challenges the traditional understandings of poverty that dominate cultural stereotypes of Appalachia. The next chapter explores

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4 Eller’s remarks were taken from the opening address of A Region Reflects: Seeking Truth, Seeking Vision, a conference on Appalachian poverty April 3-4, 2014, at Ohio University.
the ways media aid in the construction and maintenance of community and help people make sense of those types of issues.
CHAPTER 2: MEDIA AND THE CREATION OF COMMUNITY

Before he became a famous sociologist at the University of Chicago, Robert Park worked as a newspaper reporter and editor in Minneapolis, Detroit, Denver, New York, and Chicago. Park Dixon Goist wrote that journalist Park was “fascinated by the social function of news” (1971, p. 49). Park the sociologist argued that in order for democracy to be maintained “the newspaper must continue to tell us about ourselves” (1923, p. 278). Scholars who followed him continued to develop our understanding of the important roles media play in the creation and maintenance of a sense of shared community, and in an individual’s ability to place her/himself in that community. This chapter will consider the ways media generally, and local community newspapers specifically, “tell us about ourselves,” and how those tellings help us place ourselves in broader communities. The creation and interpretation of news products are social processes influenced by producers and consumers of those products. As such, it is reasonable to expect that individuals have some control over those social processes at both the moment of production and the moment of consumption. This chapter considers the amount of agency individuals have, how that agency is (or might be) utilized, how that utilization (or lack thereof) influences the creation and interpretation of media messages, and, finally, how those processes interact with understandings of community.

Defining Community

Perhaps because of the ambiguous nature of the idea of community, many studies of community journalism make little effort to define the term (Lowrey et al., 2008). In 1955, scholar George Hillery Jr. undertook a survey of community definitions in social

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5 Park eventually became “disgruntled with the limited scope of merely presenting the facts, Goist wrote, so he left the newspaper business in 1898 to pursue his academic career. Dixon wrote that Park the academic “still thought of the sociologist as a more scientific reporter” (1971, p. 49).
science literature and found 94 different conceptualizations of the idea, including definitions of community as a place, a process, a group or network of individuals, a common consciousness, a totality of attitudes, and the possession of shared ends, norms, and means. The only area of complete agreement among Hillery’s definitions, scholar Larry Lyon later noted, was “was the rather obvious point that communities are made up of people: (2012, p. 5; see also Chaskin, 1997). Contemporary scholars have seen the definition of “community” grow even more amorphous, leading anthropologist Brett Williams to suggest in 2002 that the term “seems almost hopelessly diluted” (2002, p. 339). In this section, I explain my understanding of “community” for the purpose of this study—an understanding that relies heavily on the social experience associated with community.

The emphasis on social association in the development of communal ties can be traced back to the work of Ferdinand Tonnies’ 1887 work Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft (Community and Society). All human relationships are created through human will, Tonnies wrote. Tonnies described as gemeinschaft, or community, groups that coalesce because of natural will as opposed to a rational will (i.e. the desire to achieve a certain set of ends). Tonnies viewed communities founded on natural will as “living organisms” (2002 [1887], p. 37). In 1936, Park expanded Tonnies’ metaphor of the community as organism, suggesting that communities had a life cycle that included a clear beginning, middle, and end. He wrote:

The essential characteristic of a community, so conceived, are those of: (1) a population, territorially organized, (2) more or less completely rooted in the soil it occupies, (3) its individual units living in a relationship of mutual interdependence that is symbiotic rather than societal, in the sense in which that term applies to human beings. (p. 4)
The balance between the competing interests of those individual units, Park argued, is the basis for the community’s identity. The cultural aspects of social life—political, economic, moral, and custom systems—are what makes human communities distinctive and attractive to members. Studies of community have evolved since Park’s time to understand the distinction between community as a place and community as a social experience (Gusfield, 1975; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The two are not mutually exclusive—individuals who live in close proximity can and often do experience needs fulfillment, social acceptance, and other attributes of experienced community. However, understanding the difference between community as place and community as experience allows for a more nuanced understanding of social alienation (why people in a small geographic area sometimes do not feel like “part of the community”) and mediated community (how individuals who do not live in close proximity come to develop communal ties).

Michel Foucault understood community as a network of relations with a group of goal-oriented individuals rather than a physical thing or a place per se—something to be experienced, rather than a geographic and/or social container (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986). But what social processes result in the experience of community? Community sociologists David McMillan and David Chavis’ often-cited studies on sense of community suggest that we experience community when we belong to a group that fulfills four basic social needs: a feeling of membership that leads to belonging and emotional safety; a belief that we are able to influence others in the community, the

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6 The creation of boundaries, McMillan and Chavis note, is an inherent part of the establishment of membership in a community: “While much sympathetic interest in and research on the deviant have been generated, group members’ legitimate needs for boundaries to protect their intimate social connections have often been overlooked” (1986, p. 9).
fulfillment of some need, such as the reinforcement of social values, and a shared emotional connection based in part on a shared history (1986).

In this study, “community” exists largely around community newspaper readership and the population centers (i.e. towns and villages) in which those newspapers circulate. It is important to emphasize that social relations rather than mere proximity create and delineate those communities. I rely largely on the definition of “community” put forth by sociologist Michael D. Irwin, who argued that community is “a material reflection of society associated with territory” (2007, p. 86). Those territories can be delineated by recognizing the spaces “beyond which regular daily social interaction do not extend” (Irwin, 2007, p. 86). “Regular daily social interaction” may take several forms – media consumption is one of those forms (Anderson, 1983; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Much of the research associated with this study takes place in population centers such as towns and unincorporated townships—these places serve as the hubs for most of the regular daily interaction (mediated and non-mediated) with which this study is concerned.

The Role of Media in Community Formation and Maintenance

Within those community frameworks, media provide what sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) called secondary socialization that dictates role-specific knowledge and helps individuals place themselves. Benedict Anderson (1983) theorized that citizens of a nation establish a collective identity based not on abstract geographic boundaries, but rather on common sets of norms and ideals. Nations must thus “imagine” this sense of belonging and communion because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even
hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). These deep senses of commonality are formed even when inequality exists within the group. Media (in Anderson’s study, books and newspapers specifically) serve to mediate the requisite “national imagination” (p. 30), making it “possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways” (p. 36). Although Anderson’s construct focused on national identity, scholars have applied it to smaller, more homogenous communities such as villages, which are “no less symbolically constructed” (Jenkins, 2004, p. 114). Media play important roles in the maintenance of communal activities, without which societal structure breaks down (Verhelst, 1990). The mediation of kinship may take many forms – novels (Anderson, 1983), newspapers (Carey, 2009; Budarick & King, 2008; Johanningsmeier, 2004), magazines (Webb, 2006; Dollase, 2003), the Internet (Blanchard et al., 2011; Blanchard, 2007), radio, and live musical performances (Roscigno et al., 2002; Rose, 1996) all may foster a sense of unity, identity, and in some cases political efficacy and social action (see Roscigno et al., 2002).

Often, media researchers recognize “community media” as small news outlets (typically newspapers, but also Internet sites, radio, and television programming) designed for people who live in specific geographic areas (Shaker, 2011; Lauterer, 2006) or people who share common values, experiences, interests, or backgrounds (Williamson, 2014; Cover, 2013; Viswanath & Arora, 2000). The most basic definition of community journalism—media produced for a specific subgroup of people who share common traits (including, but not limited to, geography)—may not fully express the complex and at times profound influence media outlets can have on social groups. Writing about the New
York Times specifically, and newspapers in general, Berger and Luckmann suggested that media reinforce a subjective reality and “reaffirms the widest co-ordinates of the individual’s reality,” assuring the consumer that he or she “is, indeed, in the most real world possible” (1966, pp. 149-150). Community journalists take those wide co-ordinates and make them narrow, describing, delineating, and defining individuals’ places among others like them (Terry, 2011).

The social roles of media complicate the simple definition of community journalism as a local news organization for local people. Rather than saying a news outlet is or is not an example of community journalism based on publication frequency or size, it may be more productive to consider community journalism as a collection of practices in which news outlets may choose to engage (Lowrey et al., 2008). Those practices might include making people aware of spaces and resources that community members share (Lowrey et al., 2008), the creation of networks and connections among readers (Reader, 2006), and the reinforcement of small-group values (Janowitz, 1967), in addition to the journalistic role of informing the public. When community journalism is viewed through those lenses, it becomes apparent that some local newspapers practice it more heartily than others.

But does that desire to build community stand at odds with the clichéd journalistic urge to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable?” How can the media promote conflict and debate on one hand and compromise and conciliation on the other? The answers to those apparent contradictions, media scholar James Curran wrote, stems from the important fact that there is no singular “media”: “There should be a division of labor in which different sectors of the media have different roles, practice different forms of
journalism, and make different contributions to the functioning of society” (2005, p. 128; see also Janowitz, 1967). Local newspapers in small towns are sometimes criticized for a lack of tenacity and stereotyped as unsophisticated, ineffective publications reduced to “reporting of social items and local news already known by everyone” (Vidich & Bensman, 1968, p. 84). Such criticism sorely underestimates the power the community press can have to facilitate change in a community (see Hatcher, 2007; Hull, 2006). Just as importantly, it typecasts the newspaper in a way that undermines its position in social life. Newspapers and other media are critical agents in what James W. Carey called the “projection of community ideals” (2009, p. 15). Carey refers here to the information that helps an individual carve out a personal identity and situate her/himself in a broader collective – a nation (as Benedict Anderson understood it), or a local community. Media serve as a vessel for the communicative ritual of sharing ideas and ideals, Carey argued, making possible the “maintenance of society in time” (2009, p. 33).

In her study of media coverage following the 1972 Buffalo Creek disaster, Rita Colistra noted that the regional Charleston Gazette harshly criticized a local newspaper, the Logan Banner, for its support of the coal industry (Colistra, 2010). The Banner was the local newspaper that covered the area where a containment pond that held waste associated with a nearby strip mine ruptured during heavy rains, causing a flood that killed more than 100 people and left thousands homeless (Colistra, 2010; Erikson, 1978). Colistra found that the local Banner contributed 45% of its coverage in the month following the disaster to stories informing the public about relief and recovery efforts; the regional Gazette contributed a smaller percentage of stories to recovery and relief and

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7 It is important to note that Carey did not suggest that this societal maintenance was the sole role of newspapers; he also spoke to their position as providers of information.
focused more stories on attribution of responsibility for the disaster. The *Banner* gave prominent play to stories about responsibility and conflict less often than did the *Gazette*. Colistra concluded that the local *Banner* focused on information that was likely to comfort local residents affected by the disaster (she acknowledged the newspaper’s pro-coal history but did not tie ideological perspectives to news coverage), while the *Gazette* served more of an investigative role. Her findings speak to the notion that local newspapers and metropolitan dailies serve different social roles. Local newspapers serve the important function of cataloging and making visible the daily routine interactions that help us find security in the familiar and navigate difficult moments (Auyero & Swistun, 2009). In the process, they help facilitate the “social opportunities” Amartya Sen found so valuable to freedom from poverty. Sen (1999) suggested it was the role of systems of education, health care, and media to “influence the individual’s substantive freedom to live better” by facilitating participation in economic, political, and social activities and helping individuals connect with one another (1999, pp. 39-40). We know that strong communication networks—be they maintained through interpersonal or mediated communication—link individuals to others in their communities and extend “our knowledge of the community beyond personal observation or experience” (Jeffres, 1987, p. 620). In his study of urban neighborhoods in Chicago, sociologist Morris Janowitz (1967) found that individuals who read community newspapers were more likely to have developed strong ties to the community. However, as media researcher Keith Stamm and colleagues (1997) note, discussion of journalists’ roles in the creation and maintenance of community among users was largely and troublingly absent from 20th century
communication research, perhaps because scholars were unable to agree on the cause-and-effect relationship between community media use and community integration:

It may ... be the case that neglect of the community question handicaps our ability to comprehend mass communication’s role in making community possible. We need a better sense of the community integration process if we are to see more clearly what else mass communication might do on behalf of communities. And if, as many previous studies argue, some kinds and/or degree of community integration are critical to the viability of local media, then logically the problem of community integration should take some precedence (Stamm et al., 1997, p. 98).  

This dissertation is not designed to address the causation question. It does acknowledge the fact that important relationships exist between local media use and senses of belonging and attachment in a community. Because of those relationships, community media become important to the generation of social capital. Social capital is a productive force found “in the relations among persons” that motivate individuals to do things for one another (Coleman, 1998, S100, emphasis added). James Coleman, who introduced the term “social capital,” likens the accumulation of social capital to the collection of social credit slips – debts that can be collected later on, as long as the person who is owed the debt does not lose trust in the debtor. One important facet of social capital, Coleman wrote, “is the potential for information that inheres in social relations” (104). Another is adherence to social norms. Robert Putnam, who popularized the concept in his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, stretched Coleman’s definition of social capital:

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital (p. 19).

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8 Scholarly debate on the integration hypothesis has been robust. See, among others, Hoffman & Eveland, 2010; Stamm et al., 1997; Rothenbuhler et al., 1995; and Stamm & Weis, 1986.
The accumulation of social capital helps individuals become active players in social and political activities (Fleming and Thorson, 2008). Indicators such as social connections, interpersonal trust, and organization membership (Beaudoin, 2009), as well as voting, trust in government, involvement in political activities, and neighborliness (Beaudoin and Thorson, 2004), have been used to measure social capital. The outcomes of increased social capital are often, but not always, positive, Putnam noted:

> It was social capital, for example, that enabled Timothy McVeigh to bomb the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. McVeigh’s network of friends, bound together by a norm of reciprocity, enabled him to do what he could not have done alone. Similarly, urban gangs, NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) movements, and power elites often exploit social capital to achieve ends that are antisocial from a wider perspectives. (2000, p. 21-2).

Those examples, Putnam concluded, are proof of the importance of understanding the different types of social capital and the ways they interact. The two categories of social capital that are most relevant to this study are bonding social capital, which bonds members of a group, and bridging social capital, which creates networks across groups. The two types of social capital are discussed in more detail in Chapter 9.

Researchers have found ties between certain types of media use and the development of social capital, which in turn influences civic involvement. Christopher E. Beaudoin (2009) suggested a strong association between exposure to newspapers and the development of social capital, particularly among white newspaper readers who may have been exposed to fewer negative portrayals than the Latino newspaper readers considered in his study. Kenneth Fleming and Esther Thorson noted that media “influence the quality of public life through selection of media contents and information management strategies; they inform the general public of the importance of different
issues and shape public perceptions and behaviors” (2008, p. 399). Their research reflects a complex relationship between the use of local news media and the Internet and sources of social capital, and that media helped individuals develop social connections that lead to social capital. Research has also suggested that, in some cases, media may contribute to community trust and social networking – measures of social capital – at higher levels in rural areas, compared to urban areas (Beaudoin and Thorson, 2004).

This dissertation explores the ways local media in three Appalachian communities facilitate residents’ abilities to build that social capital, a topic that has been of interest in the region for fifty years. In the 1960s and 1970s, local Appalachian publications such as Mountain Life and Work (published by the activist Council of Southern Mountains) and Hawkeye (published by the Highway 979 Community Action Council) challenged the perceptions of (and control by) outsiders, including the companies that operated local mines (Eller, 2008), and local newspapers such as the weekly Mountain Eagle in Whitesburg, Ky., have actively campaigned against mountaintop removal mining and other exploitative enterprises (Shuford, 2009). However, some contemporary scholars of Appalachia have criticized local media in the region for doing too little to speak up for their readers or to encourage unity and action among community members in the face of challenges that are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. In his study of quiescence in Appalachia, John Gaventa wrote that local newspapers in the region do little “to encourage people to think about the important issues they face, nor about themselves as actors upon them. . . . The power of the media rests just as much in what is unwritten and unsaid as in what is” (1980, p. 218). Rural sociologist Cynthia Duncan likewise takes the local media in Appalachia to task for reinforcing what Gaventa called the “culture of
silence”: “The current paper [in the Appalachian community Duncan visited] is in no danger of violating the norms of silence—it consists mostly of advertisements and coverage of some high school sports events” (Duncan, 1999, p. 34).

Defining Poverty and Identifying Its Causes

Before exploring Appalachian poverty, it is important to understand how poverty is generally defined and explained in the United States. The Appalachian Regional Commission provides what is arguably the most robust statistical picture of poverty in the region, and most of the time, the agency approaches poverty as a matter of access to financial resources. This monetary approach to poverty is the most frequently-used way to view and discuss poverty in the United States (Ruggeri Laderchi et al., 2003).

It is also notable that poverty can be understood and viewed in other ways. For example, Sen argues for a different understanding of poverty, one that concerns the relation between incomes and achievements, between commodities and capabilities, between our economic wealth and our ability to live as we like. While there is a connection between opulence and achievements, the linkage may or may not be very strong and may well be extremely contingent on other circumstances. (1999, p. 13)

Essential to Sen’s capability approach to poverty is an understanding that wealth is a means to comfortable and fulfilling living conditions, not an end in and of itself. Political freedom, civil rights, individual hardships such as age or disability, and concrete opportunities to improve individuals’ capabilities “to lead the kind of lives they value” (Sen, 1999, p. 18) are important factors in understanding poverty and taking steps to eliminate it:

If our attention is shifted from an exclusive concentration on income poverty to the more inclusive idea of capability deprivation, we can better understand the poverty of human lives and freedoms in terms of a different informational base. . . . The role of income and wealth – important as it is along with other influences –
has to be integrated into a broader and fuller picture of success and deprivation. (Sen, 1999, p. 20).

Other scholars (i.e. Barry, 1998; Townsend, 1979) have taken a social exclusionary approach to poverty, which is concerned with groups’ exclusion from participation in society. This multidimensional perspective is more socially defined than the monetary or capability approach, in that it often focuses characteristics of groups (such as age groups or ethnic groups) rather than on the individuals themselves (Ruggeri Laderchi et al., 2003).

The dominance of the monetary approach to poverty in American ideology and discourse has consequences for the conceptualization of poverty causes and the creation of policy to address it—many battles over social and economic policy are in fact battles over which ideational regimes embed their ideas in the social consciousness (Somers & Block, 2005). The traditional monetary approach takes an individualistic view of poverty, suggesting “that poverty should be defined with respect to individual circumstances and behavior, rather than as a social phenomenon” (Ruggeri Laderchi et al., 2003, p. 249). Individual-level explanations of poverty are common in American discourse, public policy and social science, and the notion that poverty can be attributed to “character or human capital deficiencies of individuals in poverty” help advance ideas such as a pervasive “culture of poverty” (Cotter, 2002, p. 536). The cultural perspective on poverty “holds that individuals are trapped in poverty because poor families pass on bad values and norms of behavior that prevent successful participation in mainstream social institutions” (Duncan, 1996, p. 103). As a consequence of the dominant view that individuals are responsible for their own economic lots, policy has historically treated the symptomatic problems associated with poverty (such as low income) without addressing
the broader systemic issues that reproduce – and in fact feed upon – those symptoms (Billings & Blee, 2000; Eller, 2008; Duncan, 1996).

Inherent in the culture of poverty theory is the idea that the poor have different value sets from middle- and upper-class individuals (see Swidler, 1986). The culture of poverty theory has been the dominant explanation for social conditions in Appalachia (Billings & Blee, 2000). At the core of this theory is the suggestion that traditional mountain values and attitudes are “both a cause and consequence of Appalachian poverty”:

According to this approach, as traditional cultural patterns in the region became more and more out of synch [sic] with the dictates of modernity, many people, especially the poor, clung tenaciously to outmoded patterns such as familism and traditionalism. (Billings & Blee, 2000, pp. 318-19).

A number of Appalachia scholars find the culture of poverty argument insufficient to explain Appalachian poverty; while it does recognize the role of community and family in social conditions, they argue, it fails to appreciate the roles external forces have played in the region and ultimately blames the victims for their plight (Billings & Blee, 2000; Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990).

A key facet of many alternatives to the monetary approach is that policy must do more than merely reduce income poverty. They also suggest individuals have a collective responsibility to address poverty and inequality. As Sen notes, “as people who live—in a broad sense – together, we cannot escape the thought that the terrible occurrences that we see around us are quintessentially our problems. They are our [society’s] responsibility—whether or not they are also anyone else’s” (1999, p. 282). Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai argued that poor people tend to be ambivalent to the social norms that Other them, and express that ambivalence as irony, cynicism, or social distance; at the same
time, they experience a “fairly deep moral attachment to norms and beliefs that directly support their own degradation” (2004, p. 65). However, unlike Harry Caudill and others who linked poverty to cultural deficiencies, Appadurai does not place the blame for economic conditions on the poor: “Aspirations are never simply individual (as the language of wants and choices inclines us to think). They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life.” (Appadurai, 2004, p. 67). The ability to aspire, however, is not evenly distributed; the more tools you have in your cultural toolkit, Appadurai argues, the more likely you are to be aware of the articulation of norms and axioms that help people get what they want. So the capacity to aspire is in essence the capacity to navigate the pathways between ends and means. But how are we to equalize the aspirational playing field among poor populations? Appadurai’s recommendations are crafted for planning organizations such as the World Bank, but most of them easily fit into the purview of local news organizations as well. He recommends a close examination of the rituals that produce consensus among the poor, and between poor communities and more powerful groups; educational efforts to help disenfranchised people “navigate the cultural map in which aspirations are located”; and efforts to develop a voice among poor individuals (Appadurai, 2004, p. 83).

The various theoretical approaches to poverty—and the fact that there are so many—illustrate the idea that “poverty” and “being poor” are relatively subjective conditions. The fairly broad definition I assign to those ideas for the purpose of this study reflects that subjectivity. In this dissertation, I suggest (much as Sen did) that poverty

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9 Appadurai is quick to point out that the poor do have the ability to wish, plan, and desire, but “part of poverty is a diminishing of the circumstances in which these practices occur.” Appadurai viewed aspiration as “a dense combination of nodes and pathways”—for the poor, those pathways are more rigid because the poor have fewer opportunities to explore and practice them (2004, p. 69).
should be understood as a deficit that prevents an individual from living a life in line with the basic comforts that individual desires. Often, the obstacle to those basic comforts is purely financial. However, lack of access to capital alone does not necessarily mean one is “poor.” Poverty becomes present when that lack of access to resources results in an inability to access monetary capital and/or convert that monetary capital into social capital. One need look no further than literature on the history of Appalachia to see the structural impediments that limit personal and social growth, such as low-quality schools, limited access to healthcare, and nepotism and cronyism in local labor markets and government workforces.

The social capital needed to help individuals get and stay “out of poverty” should include the ability to live life without being stereotyped as “poor folk.” As the next chapter will show, stereotypes ascribed to poor people generally and the rural poor specifically are detrimental at the individual and social level. They are key components in the development of social class, which enables—and just as if not more often restricts—access to physical resources and social capital. The “manipulations of symbols” that label individuals in a community (Gaventa, 1980, p. 14) as “troublemakers” or “never-dowells” can suffocate individuals’ wills to take part in a discursive process (see also Bachrach & Baratz, 1970) to improve problems in their communities and discourage those who need help from seeking it (Sen, 1999). Their discursive power makes it important to understand the shaping and manipulation of “social myths, language, and symbols” (Gaventa, 1980, p. 15), to recognize the ways those myths and symbols are legitimated and spread, and ultimately to acknowledge the ways in which they contribute to poverty as a social (not merely financial) phenomenon.
Income and Social Class

Individual or family income may be the primary way the U.S. Census Bureau and the Internal Revenue Service classify U.S. residents’ financial class. However, at the local level, we cannot explicitly define *social class* based on access to wealth; cash on hand (or a lack thereof) can be understood as one of several interrelated factors that combine to position one within his or her community’s social hierarchy. Those factors may expressly enable or constrain us in our daily activities (for example, they may restrict our ability to access certain social clubs or events). But just as – and perhaps more importantly, our social positions can (and often do) lead us to *constrain ourselves*. The colloquial admonition against acting “above your raising” is but one way people are conditioned to understand that class is a means of defining what one is and is not meant to do. Even among the “working class,” one’s profession can serve to ostracize, as journalist Barbara Ehrenreich learned when she took a full-time job as a maid in Minnesota during a journalistic project in which she explored the lives of people who work low-wage jobs (Ehrenreich, 2001). In rural communities, having a “good job” can be socially rewarding, even if that “good job” exposes one to physical danger in mines or polluting industries in exchange for low wages and job security that put strains on working families (Yarrow, 1990). Family names in rural communities also help determine social position, as one resident noted:

> A lot of times you can hear somebody’s last name and before you even meet them, you’ve already got the idea that they’re either a good person or they’re sorry as can be. Everybody knows everybody’s family names. If you’re a certain family, then you’re this way. But if you’re from that family, then you’re that way. There are last names that you would just immediately associate with being trouble or lazy—they’re immediately in a class. (Duncan, 2000, p. 9).-
Engagement in focal points of community, such as churches and high school sports, develop social class. The ability to be a high school football or basketball star may open social doors for a young person on the edge of poverty (at least temporarily). However, the odds of developing as a high school sports standout are stacked against poor students. They may not have access to reliable transportation to and from practices. They may not be able to participate at all due to the need to work. Irregular sleep and eating also takes a toll.10

Social class is, at its core, an economic indicator, but it is also a discursive category that contributes to the shaping of cultural processes (Rao & Sanyal, 2010; Harry, 2004). Culture and class are often intertwined; the white trash designation demonstrates that relationship very well. That relationship is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. One may station oneself among “white trash” or “rednecks” for artistic/economic gain, as comedian Jeff Foxworthy and his Blue Collar Comedy comrades and White Trash Cooking author Robley Evans did, with great success (Eastman & Schrock, 2008; Shelby, 1999; Smith, 2004; Mui, 2006). Restaurants and retailers trade on the name of white trash, a trend so popular in 2006 that The Washington Post extolled its promise in an article under the headline “The Selling of ‘Trailer Park Chic.’” After profiling Michelle Lamar, who runs an online store called “White Trash Palace,” the author of the Post article wrote:

Once strictly a pejorative label with racist undertones, the term “white trash” is now being taken up by marketers and retailers. Call it white-trash chic, redneck couture or trailer fabulous – whatever it is, the idea is to make it cool.

10 Participation in athletics is not necessarily a status builder in all communities. The parent of a child in one Appalachian town told rural sociologist Cynthia Duncan that “lower-income families emphasize sports more, like in ghettos. Your higher-income families deemphasize sports, and are interested in more academic, country-club-type things. There’s a divide there” (Duncan, 2000, p. 5).
Lamar calls herself white trash and proud of it. Just read her blog, titled White Trash Mom. Her Christmas lights stayed up months after all the gifts were unwrapped. She has mastered the art of driving while taking on her cellphone and yelling at her kids in the back seat. And sometimes—just sometimes—she buys cookies from the store and crumbles them at the edges so that they look homemade.

Now she has an agent who is shopping a White Trash Mom book. That’s a sign that “white trash” has shed its connotations of rural poverty and poor education to become a symbol of everyman . . . . It now evokes a simpler life and more comforting times – terrorists don’t attack trailer parks. (Mui, 2006).

Social scientists interviewed for “The Selling of ‘Trailer Park Chic’” found the commercialization of white trash culture troubling. Karen Bettez Hanlon, a sociologist at Pennsylvania State University, told The Post that retailers who sell white trash merchandise “are making fun of poverty, making it a recreation . . . but divorced of any kind of social obligation” (Mui, 2006). Middle-classers who represent themselves as “white trash” for commercial purposes still maintain a separation between themselves and real white trash, asserting a position of privilege by keeping the distinction relevant (Smith, 2004). Even those who want to use the label to symbolize hard work and masculinity (Jarosz & Lawson, 2002) or to embrace their roots and rebel against traditional representations “unintentionally reproduce many of the stereotypes of poor whites when selling their white trash identity to consumers” (Eastman & Schrock, 2008, p. 207).

Culture and the Social Processes of Encoding and Decoding Messages

With understandings of the media’s role in community maintenance well in hand, we now turn to the major theoretical impetus of this study: the encoding and decoding of media messages and the roles those processes play in the development of culture. Culture is not a fixed identity—it is rather in a constant state of flux (Rao & Sanyal, 2010). Media and other forms of communication are key to the development of culture (Carey, 2009) in
that they provide a forum for the “reading of prevailing behavior” that often determines how individuals in a community will act (Sen, 1999, p. 277). This research considers culture as a “repertoire of practices, beliefs, and attitudes that individuals call forth at the time of action” (Lamont & Small, 2008). Ann Swindler, one of the approach’s leading advocates, argued that “culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented but by shaping a repertoire or ‘tool kit’ of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct ‘strategies of action’” (1986, p. 273). The “tool kit” approach to culture is one of many ways culture has been understood (for a review of the various ways, see Lamont & Small, 2008), and many of those alternative understandings are relevant to this work on poverty in Appalachia. For example, culture has also been conceptualized as narratives that constitute a “stream of sociocultural knowledge” (Ewick & Silbey, 2003, p. 1328). Narratives are important facets of cultural production, as this study will illustrate; I conceptualize narratives as one of many tools available in one’s cultural toolkit alongside beliefs, values, and social norms.

Certainly, the development of commonality through patterned interactions and shared social experiences (including experiences mediated by newspapers and other communication outlets) help individuals situate themselves in communities and develop local cultures. Cultural identity, cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall argued, also is formed by focusing on and describing what a group of individuals is not. In the process of that construction, power is wielded through discourse that turns outsiders into “Others” and calls individuals to take certain positions based on cultural understandings (Hall, 1996). Individuals do have the ability to resist that calling, however, because of the power they have to construct self-identity. The shaping of media messages that set out dominant
understandings of what a community is and is not, the subsequent interpretations of those messages, and the way those interpretations are integrated into individual and group identity all are influenced by their own sets of fluid social relations (Hall, 1980). Professional ideologies, tools of production, and journalistic routines are a few of the many social relations that weigh on the journalist as s/he translates some aspect of daily life into a “communicative event” we might recognize as news (Hall, 1980, p. 129). As a news message makes its way through those social relations, Hall argued, they encode upon that message dominant social codes and structures of meaning that lead to understandings we might broadly define as common sense: what is right, what is wrong, and what should be valued.

Encoding and the Outside Pressures on Community Journalists

Dating back to the 1800s, small-town newspaper publishers and editors in new, growing cities had important interests in painting positive pictures of home: the viability of their businesses depended on keeping enough readers and advertisers around. To ensure the stability of towns, editors and publishers depended on optimism and sometimes exaggerated the prospects for success there (Huntzicker, 1998). As noted earlier in this chapter, this image of the local newspaper has led to criticism of the community press as a booster blind to the problems in its community. However, regardless of the size of the community, a reporter’s position within society will shape his or her perspectives on news and rationalizations for decisions (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1980).

Although larger metropolitan dailies may be prone to take on controversy and “stir the pot” more than community newspapers, they still sometimes wrestle with the
prospect of conflict and adversarial writing. It is undeniable, however, that journalists who do their work in small communities face direct influences that their metropolitan counterparts deal with less frequently (Janowitz, 1967; Donohue, Olien, & Tichenor, 1989). In their work on community newspapers, Phillip Tichenor, George Donohue, and Clarice Olien (1980) examined the way power is wielded as communities grow larger and more diverse, suggesting that the social makeup of smaller, less diverse communities amplifies the pressure to avoid conflict and mute controversy in the media. As communities grow larger and more diverse, they reasoned, social power is spread across more groups, public debates over issues become more frequent and more socially acceptable (also see Viswanath & Arora, 2000; Hindman et al., 1999). In smaller, more homogeneous communities where newspapers are viewed as more prominent players in public discourse, journalists may tend to focus more on maintaining consensus, avoiding stories or ideas that could generate conflict. That approach can be the result of economic pressures (editors may be wary of angering large advertisers or casting negative lights in ways that could affect the local economy and, thus, local advertising) or personal relationships (in small communities, media workers may be more likely to have social relationships with sources who have a stake in social harmony) (Donohue, and Olien, and Tichenor, 1989). Small staffs and minimal professional specialization may similarly constrain local newspapers (Donohue, Olien, & Tichenor, 1989).

An awareness of community control and threats to that control is central to Donohue, Olien, and Tichenor’s understanding of structural pluralism. *Internal conflict* between local factions presents a threat to the harmony of a tightknit community, and thus creates a social risk for journalists and newspaper publishers who might air that dirty
laundry. For example, in his study of the construction of community newspaper coverage of the Heart Mountain Internment Camp in Wyoming, where Japanese-Americans were incarcerated during World War II, Ronald Bishop (2009) found that local journalists never quoted sources opposed to the camp or challenged the violation of detainees’ civil liberties. The local newspapers in the area were working to protect their community from a threat, but that threat was the failure of the camp as business enterprise – the newspapers did not want to approach the story in a way that would make them seem unsupportive of a project that was bringing jobs into their community. Theoretically then, conflict in a homogenous community becomes easier to cover when it may be understood as an external conflict in which the unified community is threatened by a foreign force. Members of the local power structure (often including the local newspaper) are more likely to address conflict publicly when it can be understood as originating from external dynamics that threaten the local way of life (Hindman, 1996).

More recent scholarship on structural pluralism lends support for the idea of understanding community media as resting on a continuum, where “organizations could shift from social control to social change” (Nah & Armstrong, 2011, p. 873) depending on a variety of factors, such as diversity (Hindman et al., 1999), dimensions of control within a community (Anderson, 2008), individual stakeholders within a community (Pollock & Yulis, 2004), and at times the issue itself (Nah & Armstrong, 2011; Harry, 2001). Media scholar and former newspaper reporter Joseph C. Harry argued that “the ready distinction between the big-city and small-town social structures does not always obtain when examining news coverage of conflict, given that there may be more than one ‘outsider’ doing rhetorical battle within a small community” (2001, p. 422). His study
focused on *The Evening Review*, a small-town paper that played up the controversy over whether an international company should be permitted to build an incinerator in East Liverpool, Ohio. Unlike the newspapers in Bishop’s study of Heart Mountain, the coverage in *The Evening Review* was slanted in favor of sources who opposed the incinerator. The newspaper did not suppress the conflict, and it bucked the local power structure, which supported the company building the incinerator. There was a rift in the community over the plant, but the business sector was strongly in favor of it.

Interestingly, there were “outsiders” on both sides: The Swiss-owned company that wanted to build the incinerator and the international environmental group Greenpeace, which staged demonstrations against it.

*Structure and Agency in the Decoding of Media Messages*

The process of encoding is clearly vital to understanding how “common sense” is created via the news, but dominant media codes in and of themselves wield no social power. It is only when they are decoded by audiences that they may be “put to a ‘use’” (Hall, 1980, p. 130) in the ongoing maintenance of culture. In his essay on encoding and decoding, Hall describes three different ways such discursive expressions may be decoded (that is, understood by the receiver of the expression): They may be accepted at face value (the *dominant reading*), they may be accepted in part and rejected in part (the *negotiated reading*), or they may be dismissed as inaccurate or incredible (the *oppositional reading*). Negotiated and oppositional readings occur when the recipient of a media message view that message in a different way based on their own social influences (i.e. social position, framework of knowledge, etc.).
If individuals are to cling to all or part of a new understanding of “common
sense,” they must first be presented with a different perspective. Because media are such
powerful purveyors of “taken for granted beliefs,” those outlets (and, by extension, the
individuals who own and operate them) have a great deal of influence over what may be
decoded. Hall critics including media scholar Greg Philo have argued that the
encoding/decoding model does not adequately address that power. His studies of media
coverage of picket lines, taxation, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict suggest limits on
information provided by media are important barriers to oppositional or negotiated

But how much agency do the recipients of media messages actually have to make
sense of media messages in their own way and shape identity? Cultural scholars offer a
range of theoretical approaches to that matter. French theorist Pierre Bourdieu saw the
power to shape social/cultural identity as being diffuse and hidden in the daily, often
taken-for-granted practices of individuals (1993, 1991). The symbolic power wielded
through the use of language such as “hillbilly” or “welfare case,” Bourdieu argued, leads
to the “complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or that
they themselves exercise it” (1991, p. 163; see also Smith, 2004). Bourdieu argued that
cultural transmissions such as media messages largely reinforced the values of dominant
classes: Cultural consumption, he wrote, is “predisposed, consciously and deliberately or
not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences” (1984, p. 6-7; also see
Bourdieu, 1993; Seidman, 2008). Stuart Hall (1996) also recognized the power of
communication to create and reinforce a dominant social order, but he also acknowledged
that individuals who were called to play certain social roles have some say in whether
they accept those calls and play the parts. Dominant cultural notions about the people who rely on welfare from the government, for example, need not define individuals who find themselves in need of that aid. Through the construction of identity, Hall argued, individuals could voice opposition to dominant understandings about what it means to be Othered based on race, class, the location of one’s home, or other factors.

Bourdieu’s British contemporary, sociologist Anthony Giddens, saw more room for individuals to alter the routines that shape our understandings of social life. Giddens’ (1984) understanding of structure and agency suggests that the reproduction of media discourses by individuals (journalists, other online content producers, and those who consume news) allows those narratives to exist as structures. Those structures in turn enable and restrict individual agency, and through agency, the structures may be modified. Giddens argued that all people were capable of understanding the relationship between their actions and the unintended social consequences of those actions (vis a vis the creation of structures that dictate social norms). That ability to understand in turn makes possible significant changes to the social systems we might collectively consider culture; it is then, Giddens argued, the job of the social scientist to help individuals reach that understanding. Giddens understanding of the relationship between structure and agency is of particular importance when one considers the roles journalists and journalistic norms play in the construction of normative ideas of what it means to be poor in a rural community. Journalists and their readers alike possess what sociologist Chris Shilling called “the power to act differently” (1992, p. 75). That power manifests itself specifically in the ability to accept, reject, or alter discursive expressions of what one “is” or “should be.” If we are to believe in the power to act differently, we need not deny the
fact that much of our daily social lives consists of routine, seemingly invisible actions that reinforce social positions (Shilling, 1992). We need only recognize, as Giddens (1984) did, that opportunities to diverge from those routines will present themselves, and that individuals are capable of divergence in those moments. Hall’s decoding construct recognizes that ability to diverge, and in Chapter 9, I will outline some ways in which divergence could lead to more robust public discussions about matters related to poverty in rural Appalachian communities.

Hall’s encoding/decoding model has been criticized both for underestimating the power of the media to shape individual attitudes and beliefs (Philo, 2008; Philo & Berry, 2004) and for downplaying the ability of individuals to engage in oppositional readings (Steiner, 1988). Feminist scholar Lillian S. Robinson suggested that individuals do in fact have the ability to encode messages in a variety of ways:

Certainly, some members of the audience simply assimilate whatever the media expose them to, allowing the images to desensitize them to their own experience. But others transform what they see, making it actually function in their own lives—to provide social alternatives or solve problems in ways that are very different from those suggested by the media “models” themselves. And many people, I am convinced, consciously resist the media, either by withdrawing from their assigned role as audience-consumer or by actively struggling against the ideas and images projected. (Robinson, 1983, p. 322).

Building on Robinson’s work, communications researcher Linda Steiner suggested that social groups have the ability to express concerns in their own language and on their own terms through niche media and thus capitalize on alternative framing opportunities. Steiner studied oppositional decoding in Ms. Magazine’s “No Comment” section, a space where the magazine printed reader-submitted media items that debased women. Steiner argued that the submission of texts to “No Comment”—even without commentary—represented resistance through the expression of oppositional readings. Groups have the
ability, she concluded, to “actively play with the texts of the larger culture, responding to
and reworking both positive and negative images of the group in the dominant media.
The group here deconstructs in order to reconstruct its own story” (Steiner, 1988, p. 1).
As chapters 3 and 10 will note, advocates for Appalachia have tried with limited success
to “play with the texts of the larger culture” as it pertains to mountain representations and
stereotypes.

In this dissertation, I argue that engagement through the expression of
oppositional media readings that challenge dominant narratives offer an opportunity for
individuals to develop their ability to identify codes that suggest what is “normal,” and to
challenge the validity of those codes. Such interactions among individuals—be they
readers of Ms. or members of a rural Appalachian community—have the potential to be
fruitful in that they allow group members to clearly define what they are, as well as (and
just as importantly) what they are not. The resulting counternarratives might not in and of
themselves alter dominant narratives, but they have the potential to help individuals
sustain social identity and challenge dominant narratives more effectively (Steiner, 1988;
Giddens, 1984; Robinson, 1983). Unfortunately, questions of “Who are we?” and “What
matters?” that challenge dominant social understandings are too often discussed in closed
circles of family and friends rather than at the institutional or community level (Wheatley
& Kellner-Rogers, 1998). Literature on international economic and social development
suggests that, when people who are normally on the outside of conversations about
development and community growth are allowed to enter into those discussion in a
meaningful way, they develop efficacy and new attitudes about their relationship to
community powers. Maxine Waller, a resident of Ivanhoe, Virginia, who became
involved in efforts to recruit industry to that town in 1986, recalled her experience this way:

I used to feel so inferior to these people; they had their little suits and they go to the club for lunch, but now I don’t feel inferior to them. I feel superior to them. Theirs is an educated ignorance. They are educated to the point that they are ignorant. I can’t feel equal to them. I can’t be equal to them because I have an open mind. People in Ivanhoe are receptive to new ideas, new thoughts. But these people are not. Is it because they are not cold and hungry? Is it because they have plenty to eat and plenty of money? Is it because we don’t have those things, is that why we are grasping and doing so much and being so receptive to everything and they are not? Because they are comfortable and we are uncomfortable?

They don’t have to listen to us because they are not dependent on us and we are dependent on them—or they thought we were. But somewhere along the line, someday they are going to wake up and they are going to find out that this bunch of people here, this core bunch of people in Ivanhoe, are going to be independent. (Walker et al., 1990, p. 27).

The founders of the Appalachian Media Institute, a program that teaches documentary filmmaking skills to young people in Central Appalachia, use media to help residents learn to level social playing fields, address stereotypes and misunderstandings, and develop strong ties in their communities. Brittany, one young person who took part in AMI, described a social transformation in an interview with program staff:

First of all, I learned that I am a capable person because I created something [a video documentary] and it’s something that I’m proud of and it’s something that other people see. I developed an identity as an Appalachian. Before I knew where I was from, but I didn’t have any feelings of pride. It wasn’t an important part of my identity. It [the video production process] gave me something to identify with and be passionate about. It gave me something to want to fight for and to want to make change for. (Richards-Schuster & O’Doherty, 2012, pp. 86-87).

Brittany’s new Appalachian identity is especially significant given the challenges people in the region face today. Appalachia’s history is one of economic trial, environmental degradation, and social Otherness that has lingered for more than 200 years. From a popular culture perspective, Appalachia is a region that, to paraphrase Walter Lippmann, is understood before it is seen (1922,
pp. 54-55), and that understanding of Appalachia as a place apart has tangible social consequences. Those consequences, and the social, political, and economic histories that created them, are the subject of the next chapter.
CHAPTER 3: POVERTY AND APPALACHIA IN CONTEXT

When he watched CBS’s Tuesday evening lineup in the early 1970s, Appalachian author James Branscome saw image after image openly mocking the culture he loved. On Tuesdays, the network aired its three most popular shows back-to-back: The Beverly Hillbillies, Green Acres, and then Hee-Haw. Branscome called the block of shows the most intensive effort ever exerted by a nation to belittle, demean, and otherwise destroy a minority people within its boundaries” (1971, p. 1). He was so moved by what he saw that he wrote and published a 16-page critique under the title Annihilating the Hillbilly: The Appalachian’s Struggle with America’s Institutions. The first page was largely set aside for Branscome’s sharp criticism of CBS:

Within the three shows on one night, hillbillies are shown being conned into buying the White House, coddling a talking pig, and rising from a cornpatch to crack the sickest jokes to TV—all on the same channel, all only a short while after Eric Sevareid has completed his nightly lecture to the American people on decency, integrity, dignity and the other great American virtues to which he and his network supposedly adhere.

Appalachians were, scholar Branscome argued in 1971, the last social group Americans feel comfortable mocking:

If similar programs even approaching the maliciousness of these were broadcast today on Blacks, Indians or Chicanos, there would be an immediate public outcry from every liberal organization and politician in the country and a scathing editorial in the New York Times about the programs’ “lack of taste.” (1971, p. 1, see also Eastman & Schrock, 2008)

The negative media portrayals of Appalachia were, Branscome argued, just the latest manifestation of America’s ongoing failure to meet the needs of an exploited and underappreciated region. Appalachia holds a rich but complicated position in United States history, existing, as historian Richard Straw observed, “as much in the mind and imagination as on the map” (2006, p. 1). The region’s story is one of conflict between
cultural preservation and change, and between need and exploitation. The region, populated by more than 25 million people in 2010, follows the Appalachian Mountain chain from northern Mississippi to southern New York, spanning 205,000 square miles across 13 states (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.a.). Appalachia is rich in natural resources and cultural history. It has also endured generations of poverty and economic struggle (Eller, 2008; Caudill, 1962). Although the region’s unemployment rate is a mere 0.1 percent higher than the national average, the per capita income in Appalachia was 25 percent lower than the national average in 2009. Traditional industries such as mining, manufacturing, and textiles are declining due to the pressures of a global market, and population outmigration is greater in Appalachia than in any other part of the U.S. (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2011). Economic conditions in the region are not new – in his 1962 “biography” of the region, Harry Caudill observed an “economic depression” that “lies like a gray pall over the whole land” (325). After a number of federal programs, social movements, and more than 50 years of development, Appalachia remains shackled by a legacy of “land abuse, political corruption, economic shortsightedness, and the loss of community and culture” (Eller, 2008, p. 3). In some parts of the region, poverty has many tangible social effects, including low-performing and understaffed schools, a lack of adequate infrastructure, dilapidated housing, and limited access to health care (Lichter & Campbell, 2005). No other part of the country, Eller argues, “has presented a greater challenge to policy makers or a greater test of modern notions of development” (2008, p. 3).

This chapter explores the history of Appalachia, the role news and entertainment media have played in bringing popular understandings of “the poor mountaineer” into
being, and the personal and social consequences of those portrayals. Appalachia’s position in the national discourse was cemented by the work of journalists who traveled to Appalachia to write local color pieces during the decades following the U.S. Civil War, a period when advances in the publishing industry allowed magazines to become America’s first true mass media (Eller, 2008; Straw, 2006; Peterson, 1964). The journalists who came easily found compelling storylines in the hills of West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, Tennessee, and elsewhere:

Those writers who disliked modernity saw in the region a remnant of frontier life, the reflection of a simpler, less complicated time that ought to be preserved and protected. Those who found advancement in the growth of material production, consumption, and technology decried what they considered the isolation and backwardness of the place and sought to uplift the mountain people through education and industrialization. (Eller, 2008, pp. 1-2)

_Munsey’s, Cosmopolitan_, and other magazines popular at the dawn of the 20th century regaled readers with tales of bloody mountain feuds that shattered the peaceful Kentucky forests and rogue whiskey distillers who roamed the hills of north Georgia (Carey, 2013). Americans are as comfortable mocking the Appalachian hillbilly today as they were in 1971, when Branscome wrote in his scathing critique of CBS’s representations of the region that “America is allowed to continue laughing at this minority group because on this, America agrees: hillbilly ain’t beautiful” (p. 1).

As I will note in this chapter, the dominant themes used by the national media to describe this “land apart” changed little in the century that followed. Journalists for national news organizations found it easy to paint broad, unflattering pictures of a region they increasingly had little actual contact with as they absorbed and in turn perpetuated “the stereotypical definition of Appalachia
as ethnically separate and inferior which is rampant in the dominant culture” (Maggard, 1983, p. 78; also see Underhill, 1975; Biggers, 2006; Straw, 2006).

A Land of Outsiders

The land now known as Appalachia was dominated by the Iroquois until around 1300 B.C., when the group divided into the northern Iroquois and the southern Cherokee (Straw, 2006). Europeans started moving into the land in the 1600s in search of space for new settlements and pelts for trading (Drake, 2001). Conflicts between white settlers and Native Americans were common; the British handed the Cherokee their final defeat in 1761, and that victory encouraged more whites to move to the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Great Valley of Virginia, and other parts of the region (Straw, 2006).

Large numbers of English Quakers, Scots-Irish and German immigrants arrived in the region from the Philadelphia area in the early 18th century and settled in central and southeastern Pennsylvania. The early Scots-Irish immigrants found they had little in common with their already-established Quaker and German neighbors, and they tended to live in separate frontier communities (Drake, 2001). Those early Pennsylvania settlers, mostly poor people attracted by generous land offerings and the promise of freedom to practice religion as they saw fit, put down roots in what was considered “by many in Europe at the time as ‘the best poorman’s country in the world’” and established farms (Drake, 2001, p. 35). Its early white residents were a mix of social outsiders whom English society was likely happy to jettison: Scots-Irish settlers recruited to the region for their ability to fight Indians, indentured servants, and criminals who agreed to cross the Atlantic and live lives of servitude rather than go to prison in England (Drake, 2001; Keller, 1991). Other settlers of European descent made their way to the region, often
because of conflicts within established colonies: for example, Daniel Boone’s family came to the region after being expelled from a Quaker meeting for allowing their daughter to wed someone outside the faith (Drake, 2001). The growing numbers of settlers spread along the Shenandoah Valley, then pushed southward to the Carolina Piedmont and on into western Virginia, western North Carolina, and upper East Tennessee (Straw, 2006; Drake, 2001).

In the 1760s and 1770s, famed frontiersmen such as Boone and John Sevier (who later became Tennessee’s first governor) established settlements in the mountains. The region was also settled by Brits arriving from the east coast from Virginia, some of whom owned slaves (Corlew, 2009; Straw, 2006; Billings & Blee, 2000). Mountaineers met the American Revolution with “alienated and somewhat ambivalent feelings” because of a “longstanding hostility to political elites” (Straw, 2006, p. 4). Straw notes that most Appalachian settlers ended up supporting the war, either because of their desire for freedom of religion (in the case of German immigrants) or their distaste for the British crown (among the Scots-Irish). Despite their support of the war, however, many Appalachians opposed the drafting of a new U.S. Constitution, fearing that a powerful federal government would infringe on their personal liberty (Straw, 2006). Residents in the region were unafraid to act on those fears, as they did during the “Whiskey Rebellion” protests in western Pennsylvania in the 1790s, an act of opposition to taxes on alcohol (Barksdale, 2003). Anti-government attitudes in the region would soon be swayed, however, based on two major social events: the forced removal of the Cherokees by President Andrew Jackson and the growing divisions that led to the U.S. Civil War. Compared to the Confederate South, relatively few mountain residents owned slaves, and
many supported the federal government as the War Between the States drew near.\textsuperscript{11} Harry Caudill (1967) suggested that the few slaves that were to be found on the Cumberland Plateau were clear signs of economic divisions in the region. The resentment associated with that division combined with attitudes that favored freedom and independence, Caudill suggested, led many of the region’s poorer residents to abhor the practice of slavery. Other families in the region sided with the Southern states, and splits in communities and among families led to frequent conflicts in the valleys of Appalachia (Caudill, 1967).

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, the residents of Appalachia experienced ebbs and flows of government attention and aid that would in some ways foreshadow political attitudes toward the region a century later. President Abraham Lincoln had promised to help mountain residents who had been loyal to the Union, but he was assassinated before he could follow through on that promise (Straw, 2006). During Reconstruction, Republicans were able to establish social welfare programs and enact other policies, such as free compulsory schooling, improved state tax systems, and basic social welfare programs, designed to improve conditions. However, during the 1870s, Democrats came to power in state governments and underfunded many of those social services designed to help residents who were often seen by Democratic lawmakers as traitors to the Confederate cause. As a result, Straw noted, “Appalachia entered a new era of gross neglect at the state level” (2006, p. 9). State lawmakers may have been losing interest in Appalachia, but many northerners who had been to the mountains during the

\textsuperscript{11} Fewer than one in 10 Appalachian families owned slaves, compared to one in four families in the South as a whole (Straw, 2006). Billings and Blee note that commerce and industry flourished in some parts of Eastern Kentucky in 1806; in many of those communities, slave labor was prevalent (2000).
Civil War were becoming more interested in the region because of the natural resources and simple lifestyles they saw there (Straw, 2006).

*A Land of Opportunity (for Some)*

The treacherous mountain terrain and images of a backward mountain culture that will be discussed in more detail later in this review historically have been seen as barriers to progress in Appalachia (Eller, 2008). However, those arguments obscure other problems in the region’s economic development that contribute to its history and its current state of inequality. Chief among those problems is the exploitation of Appalachia’s rich mineral rights by interests located outside the region (Eller, 2008). The dense forests of the Appalachian Mountains were recognized as a key regional source of timber prior to the Civil War (Caudill, 1967). The U.S. Industrial Revolution represented a shift in local attitudes toward the mountains, which went from being seen as a geographic impediment to movement and settlement to an untapped treasure trove of coal (Black, 2011). Potential riches associated with energy production drew developers to the region as early as 1820, and vast networks of roads, rail lines, and canals were built to draw coal and other resources out of the hills and into manufacturing centers (Black, 2011).

Many scholars have considered environmental exploitation in the region and the impact that exploitation has had on the landscape and on Appalachians themselves. Much of that work has focused on the region’s generations-old tie to extractive industries, most notably coal mining. Mining companies have historically held a great deal of power in the region, and have used that power to keep other industries out of Appalachian communities (Burns, 2007; Caudill, 1962; Eller, 2008). Typically, the owners of those
companies operate outside the communities where the extraction occurs; because they are physically and socially removed from the people who live where coal is extracted, they have little interest in the social worlds that revolve around their operations (England & Brown, 2003). Coal company owners demanded “absolute domination” over the communities in which they operated (Caudill, 1962, p. 113). Through that domination they had the power to deter economic diversification, tying the economies of many towns and communities “to the vagaries of national and, increasingly, international markets” (Eller, 2008, p. 15).

That lack of economic interest in mining, England and Brown (2003) argued, created social fabrics that normalized a lack of local control in extractive communities. As a result, ecosystems are destroyed and communities are rendered uninhabitable because of processes such as mountaintop removal mining, the process by which trees, vegetation, and topsoil are removed from a mountain to allow machinery to drill and blast away rock and earth until coal is exposed, mined, and hauled away (Burns, 2007). The process is lucrative for coal company operators, but “socially, economically, and environmentally devastating” for people who live in areas where it is used (Barry, 2001, p. 121). Mountains are destroyed in the process, and the accumulation of debris alters delicate ecosystems. In her work on MTR, author Shirley Stewart Burns wrote that the physical and social consequences of that destruction, stoked by the United States’ increasing demand for cheap electricity, are borne primarily by low-income individuals in the mountains of Appalachia:

On one hand, MTR mines polluted streams and filled in valleys; some of these valley fills are among the largest man-made earthen structures in the world. On the other hand, while residents found themselves despondent about the consequences of MTR, many felt that they had little or no choice but to accept
things the way they were, in order to preserve coal-mining jobs. In this way, West Virginians felt torn between the desire to preserve the land and the need to earn a living. (Burns, 2007, p. 14)

That struggle between economic interest and environmental well-being is also evident in examinations of other environmental issues, such as siting of hazardous facilities (Scanlan, 2011; Shevory, 2007). It is an important aspect of environmental justice in other parts of the United States as well – the fear of unemployment can be a powerful influence on disadvantaged individuals who find themselves facing the possibility of a potentially dangerous industry that will provide (or that they perceive will provide) jobs (Bullard, 2000). Because companies provide jobs in places where resources may be scarce, they attract loyalty and become core components of local identity despite their destructive potential (Bell & York, 2010; Burns, 2007).

Ken Ward Jr., a reporter and blogger at The Charleston (W.Va.) Gazette, suggested in 2011 that the same social pressures that shape public attitudes toward coal also shape media coverage of the coal industry:

I find, reporting about coal over the years, that when you get a really good story, a story that really explains something that isn’t right, when you listen to the criticism you get, it isn’t that the story’s wrong, it’s that you did the story in the first place. You’re disloyal. And it comes from the coal industry, of course, but from the miners too. I’ve known a lot of coal miners and I have a lot of respect for them. They do ungodly difficult and dangerous work and they deserve every penny they get paid for it. But there’s all this romanticism about coal mining. Ten thousand people died of black lung in the last decade. Is that modern? (Cunningham, 2011, pp. 93-4).\(^\text{12}\)

\(^\text{12}\) Journalists who write about coal face the challenge of dealing with competing discourses, which often are delivered from positions of power. Coal companies and environmental groups opposed to mining use the Internet to deliver information about the industry that, although often inaccurate, is believed by readers (Cunningham, 2011). Powerful politicians are often willing to distance coal companies from major disasters, as West Virginia Governor Earl Ray Tomblin did in January 2014 following a chemical leak at a factory that supplied chemicals used in the processing of coal. The spill left more than 300,000 West Virginians without clean drinking water for several days. Shortly after the accident, Tomblin insisted that the water crisis was not the fault of the coal industry: “‘This was not a coal company, this was a chemical supplier, where the leak occurred,’ [Tomblin] said. ‘As far as I know there was no coal company within miles’” (Ward, 2014). Tomblin’s defense of the industry is reminiscent of remarks made by former West
By the early 1900s, many of the region’s families had traded subsistence agriculture for a life of dependence on wage income from mills, mines, and timber operations, industries where their jobs were vulnerable to market shifts or new technologies (Caudill, 1962; Eller, 2008). When jobs were lost, their dependence “shifted to the state and federal governments as public welfare programs stepped in to prevent starvation and destitution” (Eller, 2008, p. 32). Writing in 1962, Harry Caudill observed that “the simple frontier environment which [mountain residents] loved so well has been shattered by the intrusion of exploitive industry and the infinitely more complex social order existing in the surrounding country” (p. 371), including local corruption that allowed outside interests (primarily coal companies) to wield power. Those who dwelt in Caudill’s Appalachia were depressed in spirit, “listless, hopeless, and without ambition” due to their collective plight (1962, p. 325).  

The 1960s—A Time of Renewed Interest

Initial efforts by outsiders to improve conditions in Appalachia date back to the late 19th century, when the National Education Association created the Committee of Twelve to study education in Appalachia and suggest curricular improvements (Teets, 2006). New Deal-era programs such as the Wagner Act—which led to increased union

Virginia Governor Arch Moore, who in 1972 claimed that national media coverage of the Buffalo Creek floods “was a more severe blow to the state than was the disaster itself” (Colistra, 2010, p. 82). The flood occurred when a massive earthen berm holding back coal ash slurry at a nearby power plant gave way, allowing the toxic waste produced by the plant to spill into the Buffalo Creek valley (Erikson, 1978). While they acknowledge the popularity of Caudill’s work among scholars, rural sociologists Ann Tickamyer and Cynthia Duncan criticize Night Comes to the Cumberlands and similar works as feeding “culture of poverty” stereotypes and “suffering from sentimental hyperbole” and “a deficit of evidence” (1990, p. 72).

In her history of education in Appalachia, Sharon Teets notes that one of the Committee of Twelve’s most significant conclusions was that there was not enough tax revenue to fund all of the schools in the region. As a result, the committee recommended school consolidation, which led to “the beginning of the end of the stereotypical one-room schoolhouse, the community school, and the small high school” as early as 1910 (Teets, 2006, p. 126).
participation at Appalachian coal mines—addressed social conditions in some communities in the region (Straw, 2006). Other efforts such as the Council of the Southern Mountains, founded in 1913 to develop social projects including the Appalachian Volunteers, a reform project that sent college students to repair schools and do other work in the region, also attempted to address local and regional needs (Kiffmeyer, 2008).

In the early 1960s, the publications of Caudill’s *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* and Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* and television programs such as 1964’s “Christmas in Appalachia” brought national attention to poverty in Appalachia (Ziliak, 2012; Kiffmeyer, 2008; Paley Center for Media, n.d.). Politicians were also growing more interested in the region’s conditions. When presidential contender John F. Kennedy made his high-profile visit to the region’s coal fields during the 1960 West Virginia Democratic Primary, more than half of all West Virginians were coping with poverty (Ziliak, 2012). Three years later, then-President Kennedy established the President’s Appalachian Regional Commission to foster economic development in the region (Ziliak, 2012). Federal programs designed to promote change followed, but their influence was limited because they did not address structural inequalities such as local political corruption and policies that benefit outside private interests entrenched in the region (Eller, 2008; Ziliak, 2012).

Perhaps the most drastic efforts to change conditions in Appalachia occurred in the decades following World War II. President Kennedy’s Appalachian Regional Commission, authorized by the Appalachian Regional Development Act of 1965, would become one of only two long-term regional planning efforts in U.S. history (Isserman &
The creation of the commission ushered in the War on Poverty declared by Kennedy’s successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, who helped bring a variety of new programs to the region: the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), Head Start, Job Corps, and Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) (Straw, 2006). The material success of those programs was often limited, but they did help establish a desire to organize for dissent and social and environmental betterment in many Appalachian communities (Fisher et al., 2006; Straw, 2006).

At the same time, parts of the region were influenced by the back-to-the-land movement, a prolific urban-to-rural migration that peaked in the 1960s and 1970s. Some accounts suggest more than one million people relocated to Appalachia during the movement (Turman-Deal, 2010). West Virginia historian Jinny A. Turman-Deal wrote that artists, activists, and others moved to the mountains to escape the city “rat race,” to seek solace in a more pure environment, or to become more self-sufficient, and they saw something of honor in the region’s culture: “Mountaineers were popularly known to be independent, self-reliant, and industrious, qualities that must have been attractive to people who wanted to rely as much as possible on their own efforts for survival” (Turman-Deal, 2010, p. 12).

Statistics compiled by the Appalachian Regional Commission suggest the nature of poverty in the region has evolved over time. In 1965, one in three Appalachian residents lived in poverty, but by 2008 the region’s poverty rate had dropped to 18 percent. The number of economically distressed counties in the region fell from 223 in 1965.

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15 The other was the Tennessee Valley Authority.
16 There are 420 counties in the Appalachian region, according to the Appalachian Regional Commission. The commission creates a rating of overall economic well-being by considering county poverty rates, per
1965 to 98 in 2013 (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.). The numbers could be read to suggest that economic conditions have improved dramatically in the mountains, and in some parts of Appalachia they have. However, as the commission itself notes, the statistics also portray a region with extraordinary economic contrasts. While economic conditions in urban areas and other growth centers have improved, communities in more rural parts of Appalachia—particularly in mining-dependent areas—continue to battle high levels of poverty and joblessness (Eller, 2008; Latimer & Mencken, 2003). The region as a whole still lags behind the rest of the U.S. on several economic indicators, and economist James P. Ziliak noted that parts of Central Appalachia “share lingering characteristics of a poverty trap” (2012, p. 7). Some Appalachian communities have been able to diversify their economies and have thrived. Others continue to deal with extremely limited economic opportunities and high levels of need. The dichotomy, which has long been a part of the fabric of the region (Lewis, 1999), is similar in many ways to the two-class system of haves and have-nots in other rural areas identified by Duncan (1996), and it speaks to one pitfall of viewing poverty exclusively from a monetary perspective, as discussed in Chapter 2.

The Regional “Othering” of Hillbillies and Mountain Folk

For the journalist, the use of phrases as simple and (seemingly) benign as “trailer park” can easily conjure images of the stereotypical residents and all their socially deplorable glory. We know these people by many names: trailer park trash (Harry, 2004) or the more overtly racialized poor white trash (Hartigan, 2005; Wray, 2006), rednecks (Jarosz & Lawson, 2002; Shelby, 1999), hillbillies (Hartigan, 2000; Ballard, 1999;
Branscome, 1971), or crackers (Penley, 1997), to name a few. The monikers are different, but the imagery they create is essentially the same: that of a low-class, unrefined, unintelligent, change-averse, often Southern white caricature who is probably hyper-sexed, quite possibly violent and in all likelihood responsible for his or her own dire economic straits (Jarosz & Lawson, 2002; Harry, 2004; Penley, 1997), a group of people “beyond the reach of modernity’s civilizing influence” (Mason, 2005, p. 39). The joviality with which Americans generally (Wray, 2006) and the press specifically (Harry, 2004) characterize white trash, hillbillies, and rednecks has receded little in the four decades since James Branscome’s scathing critique of CBS’s Tuesday night lineup was published in 1971 (see, for example, Williamson, 2014). Joseph C. Harry suggested that representations of “trailer park trash” might represent “the last gasp of official, class-generated prejudice in America” (2004, p. 227).

National and local media are instrumental in shaping the public’s beliefs (Gilens, 1999), and they clearly play a role in the development and maintenance of the Appalachian narrative. Some researchers have suggested such media frames are necessary both for the production and consumption of news and information. The world simply is too big and complex for individuals to observe themselves; without media frames, journalists and other producers of media content would be unable to process large amounts of information, and readers/viewers would be unable to understand the complicated world in which they live (Lippmann, 1922; Gitlin, 1980; Lasorsa & Dai, 2007). The frames journalists choose to use can influence the ways audiences understand the information that has been presented to them (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Entman, 1993). “Frame” is, perhaps, an easier term to swallow than the more charged term
“stereotype,” but the line between the two seems gray to say the least. In their essay on the hillbilly stereotype, Hansen and Cooke-Jackson suggest that stereotypes are “inevitable” in media (2010, p. 267) and not intrinsically harmful – they cause damage, the authors suggest, when the stereotypes apply narrow traits to broad groups and fail to represent the social realities in which those traits were forged.

Stereotypes are, Walter Lippmann argued, the “fortress of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy (1922, p. 96). Power permeates that statement—the stereotype is a means by which society establishes normalcy and identifies those who dwell outside of it (Seiter, 1986). Richard Dyer argued that cultural representations determine in large part how social groups are treated, “that poverty, harassment, self-hate and discrimination (in housing, jobs, educational opportunity and so on) are shored up and instituted by representation” (1993, p. 1). Stereotypical images, Dyer argued, reinforce images of the natural rightness of certain groups and the “wanting, hence inadequate, inferior, sick or grotesque” images of others (2012, p. 277). Journalists rely on stereotypes as much as anyone, despite being trained to avoid such overgeneralizations. In his study of news habits, sociologist Herbert Gans (1979) suggested that journalists are often unaware that the use of those stereotypes leads to the spread of certain ideologies.

Throughout its history, Appalachia and its people have effectively been “Othered” by the rest of the United States. In his history of the region, Henry Shapiro argued that by the turn of the 20th Century, the nation had come to see “a strange land and peculiar

17 Many scholars have explored the ways media stereotypes reinforce hegemony. See, among others, Carey, 2013; Merskin, 2010; Rendleman, 2010; Reed, 2009; McCloud, 2007; Westerfelhaus & Lacroix, 2006; and Kama, 2002.
people”\textsuperscript{18} (1978, p. x) in the Appalachian hills, an otherness difficult to explain because it was not based on the old standbys of race, ethnicity, or religion. The region has been stereotyped as “a dark zone of chaos and violence in desperate need of ‘civilizing’ influences from the outside” (Blee & Billings, 1999, p. 133) and “another America” that startles the rest of the nation (Mortensen, 1994). Its people have been portrayed as unmotivated and uninterested in working (Precourt, 1983), “insular and passive” (Billings & Blee, 2000, p. 24), and almost entirely detached from the outside world (Giardina, 1999). Those representations, even if unintentional, “seem designed to produce confusion, self-doubt, passivity, frustration, [and] anger” among those being represented (Shelby, 1999, p. 160). At the same time, Scott (1999) argues, they illustrate an Otherness so profound that it cannot be the result of exploitation – “mountain culture,” the stereotypes suggest, is to blame for Appalachia’s problems. Scott noted that “Appalachian difference is naturalized in both popular culture and in academia; hence, the processes of Appalachian marginalization are taken for granted and invisible” (1999, p. 13). A number of scholars have explored the ways the mass media have portrayed Appalachian life. Many of those scholars have expressed concerns over negative representations of Appalachian people, and of the region as a whole. Precourt suggests that “in certain respects, Appalachian poverty images are a phenomenon of the mass media” (1983, p. 103). From documentaries such as CBS’s \textit{Christmas in Appalachia} and 2009’s \textit{The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia} to popular television shows such as \textit{The Beverly Hillbillies} and \textit{The Andy Griffith Show} and, more recently, \textit{Justified} and \textit{Moonshiners}, media on the region are entrenched in the notion of the poor mountaineer.

\textsuperscript{18} The phrase makes reference to “A Strange Land and Peculiar People,” an article written by Will Wallace Harney for \textit{Lippincott’s Magazine} in October 1873 (Lewis, 1999).
In the 20th century, Precourt argued, “the mass media emphasized the very worst economic conditions and, at the same time, it portrayed a picture of the Appalachian as culturally backward, if not actually depraved” (Precourt, 1983, p. 103). The resulting images of the region were “so stereotypically described as ‘hillbilly-land’ that most Americans, including journalists, are hooked on cartoon images portraying debilitating distinctiveness” (Maggard, 1983, p. 72). Biggers identified four frequent, paradoxical frames that dominate much coverage of the region: 1) “pristine Appalachia,” which reflects the natural, unspoiled beauty of the region (while ignoring or downplaying the destructive influences of extraction); 2) “backwater Appalachia,” home to backward people worthy of spectacle (although, as Biggers notes, many influential Americans came from the region); 3) “Saxon Appalachia,” a place dominated by whites (although it has a rich history of indigenous cultures and immigration); and 4) “pitiful Appalachia, the poster region of welfare and privation” (Biggers, 2006, pp. xii-xiii). Inherent in the work of Biggers, David C. Duke, Sally Ward Maggard, and others who examine Appalachian stereotypes (as well as other scholars of cultural hegemony) is the idea that the derelict other desires (or at least should desire) to be like the broader “us.”

“Local-color writing,” the practice of using an area and its people as the subject of a piece of literature or journalism, helped establish many of Biggers’ frames as early as 1869 (Shapiro, 1978). In Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon, author Anthony Harkins traced the use of the word “hillbilly” in print back to a New York Journal article written in 1900 by political correspondent Julian Hawthorne, who made the following observation to his readers: “a Hill-Billie is a free and untrammeled white citizen of Alabama, who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can,
talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy
takes him” (2004, p. 49). After Lyndon Johnson focused the nation’s attention on
Appalachian poverty in 1964, many magazine and newspaper reporters went to the region
in search of images that would reflect the bleakness of the human condition there. They
found what they were looking for, as journalists tend to do (Frank, 2003): “Ignoring the
mountain middle class and the mountain rich, they did indeed find sordidness and
deprivation. Mountain people—all mountain people—were represented as uneducated,
poor, and unable to help themselves” (Bowler, 1985, p. 239, emphasis in original). In her
analysis of national media coverage of Appalachia in the 1970s, Sally Ward Maggard
found that the prevailing stereotypes led to victim blaming and a lack of information
necessary for “a realistic and informed assessment of persistent problems in Appalachia”
(1983, p. 72). Shapiro (1978) suggested the practice of local-color writing went out of
vogue in the early 1900s; I argue that it continues to define Appalachia in the early 21st
Century, although its forms are certainly different than they were a century ago. Biggers’
“backwoods Appalachian” still holds an important position in national discourse on the
region. In January 2014, for example, National Review writer Kevin D. Williamson drew
on as many regional stereotypes as possible in this breathless description of one
Appalachian Kentucky community in an article Headlined “The White Ghetto”:

Thinking about the future here and its bleak prospects is not much fun at all, so
instead of too much black-minded introspection you have the pills and the dope,
the morning beers, the endless scratch-off lotto cards, healing meetings up on the
hill, the federally funded ritual of trading cases of food-stamp Pepsi for packs of
Kentucky’s Best cigarettes and good old hard currency, tall piles of gas-station
nachos, the occasional blast of meth, Narcotics Anonymous meetings, petty
crime, the draw, the recreational making and surgical unmaking of teenaged
mothers, and death: Life expectancies are short—the typical man here dies well
over a decade earlier than does a man in Fairfax County, Va.—and they are
getting shorter, women’s life expectancy having declined by nearly 1.1 percent
from 1987 to 2007. If people here weren’t 98.5 percent white, we’d call it a reservation. (Williamson, 2014).

In most cases, historian Ronald Lewis argued, such negative images of the region have not appeared by chance: “‘Appalachia’ was a willful creation and not merely the product of literary imagination” (1999, p. 22). Katherine Ledford argued that the idea of Appalachians as “adversarial, unnatural, and out of control” became popular at the same time the mountains were commoditized – when “settlers were a potential barrier between the explorers and exploitation of natural resources” (Ledford, 1999, p. 49). As such, the stereotype served to justify the exploitation of the region. Although a great deal of academic work on the coal industry relies on media accounts as a primary source of historical data, few studies have parsed the tone and content of local and regional media messages about the industry itself. Historian David C. Duke’s study of poems and works of fiction traced the image of the coal miner as “Other” back to the late 19th century; since then, he argued, writers and intellectuals have viewed miners as “‘objects waiting to be defined rather than subjects capable of defining themselves” (2002, pp. 3–4) – as a one-dimensional group spoken about rather than to. Miners who were killed in a mine explosion in Sago, W.Va., in 2006 were portrayed as part of an idyllic rural, blue-collar, family-centric community (Kitch, 2007) that received international news attention in large part because of the way the media covered the disaster – several news outlets erroneously reported that the miners had miraculously survived the explosion (McLaughlin, 2007; Langfitt, 2006).

The Appalachian Other, some other scholars have argued, was created for the sake of the rest of America. Eller observed that the “idea of Appalachia as a place in, but not of, America continued because Americans needed to believe in Appalachia’s
existence as part of the ongoing debate over national identity itself” (Eller, 2008, 222).

Scott suggested the popular representations of Appalachians that set them apart from others – including “illness, deformities, old, ragged clothing, dirty faces and hair, bad teeth, and other signs of poverty, as well as images of a downtrodden, oppressed femininity, and prematurely aged women, accompanied by men who seem to embody a deranged and degraded masculinity in their indolent postures and blank stares” (1999, p. 13) – serves to reinforce the normalcy of wealth experienced by the broader American middle class (see also Mortensen, 1994; Eller, 2008). Certainly, the potential for profits also helps drive the use of the hillbilly stereotype (Hansen & Cooke-Jackson, 2010). It should be noted that the hillbilly stereotype and its associated symbols are not exclusively the tool of the outsider; residents of the region sometimes wield them with vigor when they promise to be profitable (Billings, 1999). Evidence of their use abounds along the region’s highways: the commercialization of the bloody Hatfield/McCoy mountain feuds in eastern Kentucky, “Hillbilly Hot Dogs” – a makeshift hot dog stand in Lesage, West Virginia, and the marketing of legally-distilled Ole Smokey Moonshine on interstate billboards in East Tennessee are some of many examples of locals “cashing in” on the stereotype.

The Othering of a region and its people has tangible social consequences: “Regional identities and cultures, such as Southern or Appalachian, often the center of heated academic debate over their meaning and existence . . . are believed to be real and are therefore real in their consequences – consequences that include structures of inequality” (Tickamyer, 2000, p. 810). Stereotyping of the rural poor makes it even more difficult for them to find work in competitive job markets, resulting in increased
competition for limited resources and further social isolation (Duncan, 1996, 1994). Precourt argued the negative effects of the poverty label are not limited to individuals: “When a person becomes identified with the label [poverty] the label becomes a stigma having far-reaching emotional, psychological, and social consequences. When the poverty label is attached indiscriminately to an entire region the influence on inhabitants of the region is similar” (1983, p. 106). Ronald Eller suggested that the prevailing focus on Appalachia as a land of welfare cheats, moonshiners, miners, and other “types” distances society “from the political and economic realities of the region, including our own injustices toward those stereotyped” (1999, p. x). He continues:

In the case of Appalachia, such images allow the rest of America to keep the region at arm’s length, rather than to confront the systemic problems of a dependent economy, environmental decay, and institutional weakness that challenge mountain communities today. (Eller, 1999, p. x).

Academic work on news coverage of poverty as a broader issue has come to similar conclusions, suggesting media have the power to shape public perceptions of welfare policy and poor people, and that the perceptions they create are often negative (Kendall, 2011; Kitch, 2007; Hancock, 2004; Gilens, 1999; Handler & Hansenfeld, 2007). Sociologist Gregory Mantsios (2003) argued that the poor are largely absent from media coverage. When they do appear, media consumers get a variety of contradictory but overwhelmingly negative perspectives of the poor as faceless entities or community eyesores, as people who are “down on their luck” due to unfortunate circumstances or indigents who are to blame for their own condition. Mantsios’ frames were common in Diana Kendall’s analysis of the *New York Times*’ coverage of poverty; some poor

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19 Mantsios offered the following critique of the “down on their luck” frame, which, he argued, is largely applied to the white poor: “These ‘Yule time’ stories are as much about the affluent as they are about the poor: they tell us that the affluent in our society are a kind, understanding, giving people—which we are not.” (2003, p. 102).
people—particularly children, the elderly, and the ill—received sympathetic media treatment, but even then media messages may “cast them in a negative light without necessarily intending to do so and convey the idea that many poor people are responsible for their own condition” (Kendall, 2011, p. 99).

Media practitioners often contribute to the national discourse on poverty without recognizing the stereotypes they disseminate (Manza, 2000; Champagne, 1999). Sociologist Patrick Champagne argued that media often feel they have been useful when they bring issues of poverty and disenfranchisement “into the light,” so to speak, but “such optimism seems at the very least excessive since it does not take into account the symbolic effects which are particularly powerful when exercised over populations that are culturally deprived” (Champagne, 1999, p. 54). Hancock observed that negative imagery of the “welfare queen” was present in media coverage of welfare policy options in 1995 and 1996, and that the trope, “either by intent or neglect, played a role in linking the social construction of the welfare population” (2004, p. 87) that amplified negative attitudes toward poor people generally. Although he questioned whether it was reasonable to expect a “socially accurate” portrayal of individuals in poverty, Gilens concluded that media coverage of poverty concentrated on black urban ghettos, concentrations of poverty “that represent the worst failures of our economic, educational, and social welfare systems” (1999, p. 132). The representations, he argued, distort the nature of American poverty, help advance the stereotype that black men are lazy, and

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20 Analysis by social scientists is vulnerable to the same shortcomings, as is government policy: “A system of support that requires a person to be identified as poor (and is seen as a special benefaction for those who cannot fully fend for themselves) would tend to have some effects on one’s self-respect as well as on respect by others” (Sen, 1999, p. 136).
contribute greatly to negative public attitudes and misconceptions about the poor and about welfare policy (Gilens, 1999; see also Handler & Hansenfeld, 2007).

Perceptions of Poverty and their Impacts on Appalachian Community

History, economics, and inequalities combine to shape the ways residents of Appalachia view poverty, progress, and community. As previously noted, scholars have found that individuals in Appalachia and in other regions with high poverty and little economic diversity become culturally attached to exploitative enterprises such as extractive industries. That attachment results in an economic identity that complicates their understanding of progress. Bell and York’s (2010) study of the coal industry’s efforts to associate coal with the economic identity of West Virginia communities illustrates the problematic nature of that attachment. Through the targeted use of advertising, the research found, “the coal industry becomes synonymous with the coal miner. Thus, the coal industry is presented as a provider – both for West Virginia’s families and for the nation’s energy demands” (Bell & York, 2010, p. 131; also see Cunningham, 2011). Through its pervasive presence in local schools, Bell and York argue, “the coal industry is working to ensure that the future citizenry of southern West Virginia is socialized to believe that coal is indispensable to the life, culture, and economic future of their communities and state” (2010, p. 138). These efforts and their effects certainly are not limited to Appalachia (see, among others, Wilson, 2004; Auyero & Swistun, 2009). Wilson’s 2004 study of two non-Appalachian mining town resulted in comparable findings: in one town she studied, individuals came to view the economic volatility associated with mining as “a way of life” (p. 271). The resulting powerlessness leaves residents dependent on industries that often have not shown themselves to be
particularly dependable, such as extraction companies that exploit workers and high-polluting industries that seek out communities where residents are less likely to resist.

Other research has shown that class relations dictated by inequality in rural environments may stand in the way of broader community efforts to address social issues. Schulman and Anderson’s study of residents in a textile town in Appalachian North Carolina suggested:

all the meso-level structures of community life and the day-to-day interactions in the mill village combined to strengthen networks that integrated mill and community … while simultaneously weakening or destroying contacts and interactions with groups, organizations, or institutions outside the mill community” (1999, p. 360).

The textile mill’s social influence outlived its economic dominance; when it closed, it left its former workers jobless and undereducated, yet still nostalgic for the “good old days” when the mill exerted paternalistic control over their lives. Schulman and Anderson described the mill’s influence as “negative social capital” – ties that restricted diversification and limited opportunities for individual and community development. In her studies of communities in Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta, rural sociologist Cynthia Duncan (2000) observed towns organized into two-class societies, contemporary artifacts of the ways local economies were organized historically. She described a middle class made up of professionals, government workers, and business owners who align themselves with the rich and powerful and who, as a larger group, hold disdain for a lower class seen as lazy, immoral, and dangerous. Those normative understandings and the relationships they influenced were “maintained through memory and tradition, reputation and family history. People know one another’s families across generations, their good deeds and bad, power and vulnerability, successes and failures” (Duncan,
2000, p. 193). The resulting mistrust and marginalization creates an environment where individuals look out for their own interests and do little to build stronger public institutions. It stands in the way of cooperation and participation in the broader social and political systems (Duncan, 2000) and makes it increasingly difficult for activists to marshal support for policies that will improve conditions there, such as limits on mountaintop removal mining (Scott, 2010).

Legacies of poverty, division, rampant negative stereotypes, and a sense of powerlessness in the region have tangible consequences at the individual level: apathy and excessive fatalism (Gaventa, 1980), low levels of self-efficacy regarding education and career aspiration (Ali & Saunders, 2009), experienced discrimination (deMarrais, 1998), and a growing skepticism—particularly among Appalachian youth—of individual ability to engage society in a meaningful way (Hansen & Cooke-Jackson, 2010). Poverty and problems associated with poverty, such as lack of access to resources and public spheres, also help shape the discursive styles of individuals (Rao & Sanyal, 2010), a matter that is of special importance to this study on local media. In their study of democratic deliberation in Indian villages, Rao and Sanyal saw that shaping process unfold as “pleading tones” used by members of the lower caste (2010, p. 160) and allegiance to community harmony.

Geographically, rural India is certainly a world away from rural Appalachia. However, there are similarities between the villagers in Rao and Sanyal’s study and the residents of small, economically depressed communities in the mountains of Appalachia. Both groups find themselves on the economic outside looking in. Both groups find themselves defined by a cultural understanding of what it means to be “poor” that works
to their disadvantage. However, the public forums where Indian villagers from all walks of life can gather to discuss local issues “provide ordinary citizens a place to think about and voice their concerns about broader policy issues and abstract principles that closely touch their lives” (Rao & Sanyal, 2010, p. 163). In those environments, villagers are able to voice their needs and wants by discussing what it means to be poor. The Indian system is far from perfect—power from above stands in the way of the meetings taking truly deliberative forms. However, the forums do serve as an arena where poor individuals “participate and seek dignity” (2010, p. 168). This study will show that, in contemporary Appalachian communities, similar arenas are few and far between.

Research Questions

The discussion of Appalachian history and culture in this chapter and the previous chapter’s consideration of community journalism and the encoding and decoding of media messages bring us to the topic of this dissertation: the ways local media (both print newspapers and hyperlocal news websites) contribute to public understandings of what it means to be poor in the mountains. Employing the theoretical understanding of the encoding and decoding of media messages, the literature on the history of poverty and media representation in Appalachia, and scholarly and professional understandings of local journalists’ roles in their communities, this study examines the dominant frames that exist in community media coverage of rural poverty. It considers how the motives and routines of newsgatherers contribute to the encoding of dominant ideas about poverty into local media messages. It then considers how residents decode those local media messages. Finally, I consider some strategies that might be used to challenge existing structural understandings of poverty and enable alternative understandings.
I employed a qualitative case study approach in three different Appalachian communities to address those issues, considering how journalists come to encode ideas about poverty into local news messages, what dominant themes exist in media coverage, how local residents interpret that coverage, and how that process fits into the larger national narrative that views Appalachia as a land apart. In Chapter 4, I will detail the methodological design employed in the execution of this study.
CHAPTER 4: DESIGN

In their 1977 essay on the sociology of Appalachia, David S. Walls and Dwight B. Billings pointed out that “being poor involves a social identity which is learned early and enforced by informal relationships in the local community” (p. 136). Social interactions that take place in schools, workplaces, and government offices establish and enforce those identities. In this dissertation, I argue that those interactions also take place in and through local media, although little scholarly attention has been paid to the ways those interactions are structured or interpreted by those who take part in them.

The purpose of this study is to examine discourse on poverty as it appears in and is facilitated by local media (both legacy media and new media) in Appalachian communities with high unemployment rates and low per-capita incomes. Specifically, the research will identify social rules that dictate attitudes toward poverty and those who live with it; consider the agentic actions associated with the production and consumption of news that lead to the formation of those structural rules; and suggest new courses of agentic actions that might replace existing structural norms with new norms.

Ultimately, this study helps explain how local media participate in the construction of poverty as a social identity. By examining the methods of reflexive self-examination (Giddens, 1984) in those settings, this study also generates suggestions and strategies for news workers and community members who wish to alter local-level discourses on poverty. Those suggestions, which I lay out in Chapter 9, are valuable in that they help bridge the all-too-common gap between academic research and individual’s actual lived experiences (Wiley, 2004).
Researching discourse on poverty in communities that experience high levels of economic need is no easy task. Rural communities share some common traits, but there are important differences rooted in history, geography, economics, and politics that distinguish them from one another. In this dissertation, I employ a multiple-case study approach in order to consider the similarities from a theoretical perspective while at the same time taking into account the individual circumstances of communities. This dissertation poses four sets of research questions; this chapter describes how each question is addressed:

- Based largely on a close reading of media texts supplemented by qualitative interviews, what common social/structural “rules” governing attitudes toward poverty exist in the communities under study, and how are those rules created and reinforced through local media? How do media suggest individuals “look” at poverty in their communities?

- Based on qualitative interviews with media workers and others in the communities under study, what motives and routines create and maintain those structural rules? What determines how poverty is portrayed in local media, and what are the acknowledged and unacknowledged consequences of those portrayals?

- Based on qualitative interviews with media producers and community members, how are structural understandings of poverty reproduced? How do community media discourses on poverty shape local understanding? How does that understanding in turn shape future media coverage?
Based on interviews and personal observations, what strategies might enable alternative structures? Do study participants feel they are capable of challenging existing structures? How is their confidence (or lack thereof) expressed? How do media contribute to (or detract from) the development of community-level efficacy required to challenge existing structures?

The remainder of this chapter will outline the methodological design of the research project. It will explain the rationale for the use of a multiple case study approach, an overview of the case study design, and a description of the research methods used for data collection and analysis.

Rationale for a Multiple Case Study Design

Yin (1994) described the case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (1994, p. 13). Put more simply, the classic case study research method offers researchers an opportunity to “get as close as possible to the world” of research participants “and to interpret this world and its problems from the inside” (cited in Dyer & Wilkins, 1991, pp. 614-615). Case studies are useful in answering explanatory questions of how and why things happen—particularly when the research involves a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control (Yin, 1994). In those situations, case studies facilitate a “nuanced view of reality, including the view that human behavior cannot be meaningfully understood as simply the rule-governed acts found at the lowest levels of the learning process and in much theory” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 223). An understanding of context is key to the successful execution of a case study. Social life is always
experienced through the filter of time, place, and space, and social science inquiries that seek to explain those experiences must take into account the unique circumstances in which they occur. Case studies provide an efficient means to relay those experiences because they are essentially stories (albeit stories crafted using meticulous social scientific approaches). As will be discussed later in this chapter, case studies have been criticized for emphasizing narrative and practicality over “hard” scientific or theoretical results. However, Flyvbjerg (2006) argued that the development of case studies is vital to the development of social scientific inquiry in large part because of their distinctiveness, which is made possible through vivid narrative: “[A] scientific discipline without a large number of thoroughly executed case studies is a discipline without systematic production of exemplars, and a discipline without exemplars is an ineffective one” (p. 219). The case study research method is ideally suited research that addresses and offers solutions to social issues, for “the case study produces the type of context-dependent knowledge that research on learning shows to be necessary to allow people to develop from rule-based beginners to virtuoso experts” (Flyvbjerg, 2004, p. 221).

Giddens (1984) noted that “[p]ieces of ethnographic research like [. . .] say, the traditional small-scale community research of fieldwork anthropology—are not in themselves generalizing studies. But they can easily become so if carried out in some numbers, so that judgments of their typicality can justifiably be made” (p. 328). While some scholars (i.e. Flyvbjerg, 2006) reject the notion that generalizable conclusions cannot be drawn from single cases, the understanding of social issues clearly is

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21 This understanding is similar to Dolf Zillmann’s exemplification theory of media influence, which suggests that cases carefully chosen can come to exemplify issues, and that such exemplars make it easier for individuals to remember cases and events (Zillmann, 2002; Harris et al., 2007).

22 Flyvbjerg uses the word “rule” here in a general sense; he does not refer specifically to social “rules” as described by Giddens.
strengthened by the execution of multiple case studies that examine the same sets of concepts (Giddens, 1984; Yin, 1994). Cross-case analysis involving multiple cases are useful when researchers want to replicate results, either by producing a similar result or by generating contrasting results that might be predicted based on the contexts of individual cases (Haas, 2004). For example, Bullard (2000) used a cross-case analysis of five primarily African American communities to explain opposition to pollution and outcomes of environmental justice clashes. In what is considered to be a seminal study of environmental racism, Bullard revealed similar sets of environmental and political challenges in different communities, but important differences based on local leadership dynamics and mechanisms for resolution of environmental problems.

Scholars have criticized the case study research method over a perceived lack of rigor, the apparent inability to generalize based on case study results, the time and difficulty associated with conducting and interpreting them, and the production of results that are sometimes seen as practical rather than theoretical (Platt, 1992; Tight, 2010). Yin (1994) and Hoaglin and colleagues (1982) suggest that criticisms involving rigor and denseness of finished case studies are more appropriately aimed at researchers themselves rather than the method: “Most people feel that they can prepare a case study, and nearly all of us believe we can understand one. Since neither view is well founded, the case study receives a good deal of approbation it does not deserve” (Hoaglin et al., 1982, p. 134). In fact, the proximity of case studies to practical life rather than abstract thought can be seen as a strength of the method rather than a weakness:

Concrete experiences can be achieved via continued proximity to the studies reality and via feedback from those under study. Great distance to the object of study and lack of feedback easily lead to a stultified learning process, which in research can lead to ritual academic blind alleys, where the effect and usefulness
of research becomes unclear and untested. As a research method, the case study can be an effective remedy against this tendency. (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 223)

Flyvbjerg also redirects the criticism (suggested by, among others, Anthony Giddens) that individual cases cannot produce generalizable results: “That knowledge cannot be formally generalized does not mean that it cannot enter into the collective process of knowledge accumulation in a given field or society” (p. 227).

While the development of rich, detailed descriptions is a valuable aspect of the case study research method (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Dyer & Wilkins, 1991), a critical risk involved in single case studies or cross-case analyses involves the human impulse to jump to conclusions based on relatively limited, albeit vivid, sets of information (Eisenhardt, 1989). “Thus, the key to good cross-case comparison is counteracting these tendencies by looking at the data in many divergent ways” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 540). To mitigate the risk of premature conclusions, this cross-case analysis employs two methods suggested by Eisenhardt (1989):

- The listing of overt and subtle similarities and differences among cases, which leads to a “more sophisticated understanding” of case study data (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 541), and
- Division of the data by data source. By dividing data according to how it was collected (i.e. textual analysis or interview), researchers are able to identify stronger patterns that lead to more grounded findings (see also Haas, 2004).

Design Overview

Although some basic quantitative data are analyzed for contextual purposes, this dissertation primarily employs qualitative research methods to understand how structural “rules” governing poverty are created and maintained by local media and how those rules
may effectively be challenged in a region that has historically been constructed through mediated communication. The various research approaches have the general aim of exploring the ways individuals make sense of the world in which they live and, more specifically, understanding how media contribute to that sense-making process. Cultural scholar Alan McKee (2003) argued that understanding the ways individuals interpret their lives is important for their own survival—people “must learn to interpret their own experiences and qualities as being valuable and worthwhile in the culture in which they live” (p. 34).

To allow for a robust cross-case analysis and “analytic generalization” that gives case study research more potency (Yin, 1994, p. 31), three separate cases were studied. Each case focuses on a community in a different state within the Central and North-Central Appalachian regions. The communities are similar in that they are all part of Appalachia as it is defined by the federal government\textsuperscript{23}, and each experiences high levels of economic distress as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission\textsuperscript{24}. All three are rural; none of the three is inside a U.S. Census Bureau-defined Metropolitan Statistical Area. However, the communities—and the media used by their members—are far from homogenous, and the local differences are important in that they bear fruit for the cross-case analysis. Efforts were made to analyze communities with somewhat diverse media environments. For example, frequency of local newspaper publication (daily versus weekly), media ownership (local versus corporate), and competition within local media environments.

\textsuperscript{23} As of January 2014, 420 counties were part of the federally-designated Appalachian Region (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.). Congress has the authority to add or remove counties from that list (Auster, 2008).

\textsuperscript{24} The commission creates economic classifications for counties using county averages for three economic indicators: three-year average unemployment rate, per capita market income, and poverty rate. Every county in the nation is ranked based on the creation of the new economic status classification; counties that rank among the worst 10 percent are classified as “distressed” (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.b).
markets (i.e. a single publication, multiple publications, publications and hyperlocal online media, etc.) were taken into consideration when selecting sites. The communities and their newspapers are described in Chapter 5.25

In order to ensure rigor and consistency over the course of the study, I developed a detailed case study protocol prior to data collection (Appendix A). The protocol serves two important purposes: it helps prevent the researcher from veering too far from the main subject while conducting individual case studies, and it maintains consistency in the data collected across the cases studied, which ensures the ensuing cross-case analysis is an apples-to-apples comparison (Yin, 1994).

Methods for Data Collection and Analysis

Each of the three case studies executed in this dissertation involved two primary research methods. The collection of data from multiple sources through different methodological approaches allows for stronger external validity (Yin, 1994). It may also lead to valuable “convergent, inconsistent, and contradictory evidence that must be rendered sensible by the researcher or evaluator” (Mathison, 1988, p. 13). All data from the three communities were hand-coded. This section outlines the primary methodological approaches used:

Qualitative Textual Analysis

The textual analysis employed in this study used cultural context to understand mediated communication, relying heavily on Fairclough’s approach to considering “equivalences and differences” (2003, p. 100-101) that help build identity. McKee (2003) argued that textual analysis serves as an important vehicle to understand individual sense-making processes. Sense-making is important to the maintenance of one’s own sense of

25 To protect the anonymity of study participants, each community has been assigned a pseudonym.
value, and the way we make sense of other people’s lives is an important factor in how we treat them (McKee, 2003). Through the process of textual analysis, researchers are able to “evaluate the many meanings found in texts and [. . .] understand how written, visual and spoken language helps us to create our social realities” (Brennen, 2013, p. 193).

Four months’ worth of daily newspapers and/or six months’ worth of weekly newspapers from each community were analyzed for this study. Online news content was examined on a daily or semi-daily basis and curated for research purposes on a weekly basis. The delayed curation allowed for social media dialogs to develop more fully. Online content was curated through the creation of PDF files. Media content were subjected to three separate readings. The first reading included all editorial and advertising content, regardless of its relevance to the study. During the initial reading, content that pertained to poverty, even tenuously, was identified. That content was subjected to a second reading, in which common themes were identified and frames began to emerge. I used the third and final reading to refine those frames and to consider how they fit within the study’s broader theoretical perspective. Although the textual analysis was qualitative in nature, some frequencies were recorded and reported (for example, the percentage of front-page stories that specifically address poverty). That data, while not the immediate focus of the study, is important in that it speaks to the dominance and/or absence of certain ideas and messages.

In addition, other popular local media content were subjected to a secondary analysis. “Popular” is a subjective idea, particularly as it relates to the huge, ever-evolving world of social media. To select social media accounts and websites for the
secondary analysis in this study, I asked all participants in this study which websites and social media presences they visited for local news and information. If a site or social media account was mentioned by three or more community members, it was subjected to a secondary analysis. That approach yielded two hyperlocal news websites, which were studied alongside local newspapers. I excluded radio and television coverage from the analysis for several reasons. Television coverage of the three communities I studied was largely produced by journalists and producers in the nearest metropolitan area. Only one of the three communities I studied had local cable access, and residents told me local television programming that aired on that channel had no real news value. Commercial radio stations operated in two of the three communities I studied, but the newsgathering capabilities of those stations was extremely limited, and few local residents told me radio was an important part of their local news consumption.

In-depth Interviews

Interviews conducted for this study attempted to adhere to Pierre Bourdieu’s model of the interview as a “spiritual exercise” of “intellectual love” (1999, p. 614). Bourdieu encouraged an open dialog in which interviewees would feel empowered enough to dominate the discussion. The creation of such an environment reduces the objectification of participants in the research project, instead offering them what can be viewed as a therapeutic opportunity to take their private sphere experiences into the public realm. Such an approach requires the interviewer to engage in true conversation with the interviewee and, in the course of that conversation, to give of oneself. Bourdieu likens the interviewer to a midwife who helps the interviewee “deliver up their truth or, rather, to be delivered of it” (1999, p. 621).
Interviews conducted for this study were largely unstructured in nature. I went into each interview with some specific topics in mind (interview guides are included in Appendix B), but conversations between me and the research participants were largely allowed to run their own courses. The unstructured nature of the interviews was intended to maximize the method’s capacity to elicit the “complex voices, emotions and feelings of interviewees, as well as the meanings within the words that are spoken” (Brennen, 2013, p. 28). Interviews ranged in length from 15 minutes to three and a half hours.¹Sixteen of the interviews were conducted via telephone. The rest were done in person. I conducted 17 interviews in each of the three communities. I attempted to interview every media worker who influenced editorial content (reporters and editors), as well as publishers, general managers, and other supervisors who made editorial and advertising decisions. Interviews conducted with media workers focused on their attitudes toward poverty in the communities they cover, the ways they approach poverty and associated issues in news coverage, and the roles they see their media outlets playing in the communities they cover. Participants chose the interview sites; almost all of the journalists interviewed chose to speak at their offices. The study also included interviews with between 13 and 14 people who lived in the communities that are the focus of this study. The sample interviewed consists of local stakeholders with a specific interest in poverty (such as nonprofit managers, pastors, government officials, and social workers), residents recruited through a snowball sampling method (stakeholders were asked to recommend other people who could provide useful viewpoints and information), residents recruited through my personal networks, and other residents I approached during my site visits. I conducted interviews until I reached what Strauss & Corbin called

¹Sixteen of the interviews were conducted via telephone. The rest were done in person.
the point of “theoretical saturation” (1990, p. 65)—that is, the point at which interviews ceased to reveal new information of significance to the study.

The non-media participants in this study were diverse in terms of biographies and lifestyles. Some were lifelong residents of their communities, and others were newcomers or, in a few cases, people trying to leave for personal or economic reasons. Some held jobs many of their neighbors might covet: factory managers, bank executives, and teaching positions at local schools; others worked for low wages or did not work at all. Some held positions in local government (one was his town’s mayor); others said they viewed themselves as social outcasts. Interviews conducted with community members focused on the representations of poverty they experience through local media, their experiences with local media, and the roles they believe local media play with regard to creating community dialog about social issues. Anonymity was extended to all interviewees (journalists and community members) to encourage honesty and candor, and research participants were assignment pseudonyms. Audio recordings were made of most of the one-on-one interviews and those recordings were coded for common themes.

To execute the cross-case analysis, I employed the specialized explanation-building approach to pattern matching, an inductive approach in which case study

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27 Five participants asked that our conversations not be recorded.
28 The dissertation protocol I created at the beginning of the research process also included plans to conduct focus groups in each of the three communities under study. Unlike interviews with individuals in a one-on-one setting, focus groups including six to eight people are able to “exploit the ‘group effect,’” taking advantage of “the fact that, in both ordinary conversations and guided discussions, people draw upon a shared fund of experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 183). I abandoned plans to integrate focus group findings into this study after unsuccessful attempts to conduct them in two of the three communities I studied. In each case, only two individuals attended focus group sessions, despite recruitment efforts that included personal contact with potential participants, newspaper announcements, and widespread word-of-mouth outreach through informants in the community. Those who attended were interviewed and are included in the study, but I considered them interview participants rather than focus group participants. It is possible that the difficulty I encountered in recruiting focus group participants is reflective of the challenges associated with trying to build interest in broader community dialogues about social issues.
narratives lead to explanations that “have reflected some theoretically significant propositions” (Yin, 1994, pp. 110-11). As was the case with Bullard’s (2000) study of environmental injustice, the purpose of this study is not to “assign blame” for socioeconomic conditions in any particular community, and the cross-case analysis should not be understood as an attempt to provide “if/then” typologies. Rather, the aim is to provide insights into the ways local media in three different communities facilitate dialog on social issues, or the barriers that keep community media from engaging in such a dialog. The individual case studies and cross-case pattern matching build toward the broader explanation-building strategy that addresses similarities and differences among cases and engages various rival explanations for those similarities and differences in an effort to “obtain an in-depth understanding of a complex phenomenon, both in and of itself and in relation to its broader context” (Haas, 2004, p. 72).

My Position within this Work

Social scientists (particularly those who do qualitative research) since the 1970s have wrestled with the spoken or tacit understanding that a researcher’s personal experience might shape his or her scholarly work. Understanding and acknowledging the fact that personal identity and professional pursuits in academia are inextricably intertwined attacks head-on the “positivist fiction of an objective observer” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 285). Social science, like social life, is inherently messy. The selection of research topics, research methods, research questions, and publication venues all involve subjective choices based on the goals of the researcher, which are inseparable from her or his individual identity. One may choose to dodge these matters or refuse to acknowledge them. Or, one may contemplate the matters in a public fashion that allows
the research audience (and in fact the researcher her/himself) to incorporate biography into the interpretation of study findings. I find the latter approach to be more productive, particularly given the understanding that social scientists produce social understandings as much as they reflect them in their findings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).^{29}

I grew up in a rural community and have spent most of my life living in areas that one might colloquially refer to as “out in the country.” Most of that time was spent in the U.S. South, where I grew up and lived as an adult around people who were, for the most part, like me: lower-middle to middle class working folks, farmers, small business owners, and rural-to-urban commuters, many of whom had never lived anywhere else in their lives. Being “from the country” was (and, in many ways, still is) a deceptively complicated idea. We were different because of where we were in relationship to the city, a difference that is easy to qualify and understand. But we were also different because of what we did. This difference and how it is defined and reproduced—what Stuart Hall called the “production of self” (1996, p. 13)—were more difficult to unpack. Sociologist Erving Goffman made this astute note about the politics of identity:

> [A]ll of us, sociology sometimes claims, speak from the point of view of a group. The special situation of the stigmatized is that society tells him he is a member of the wider group, which means he is a normal human being, but that he is also “different” in some degree, and that it would be foolish to deny this difference. This differentness itself of course derives from society, for ordinarily before a difference can matter much it must be conceptualized collectively by the society as a whole. . . . The stigmatized individual thus finds himself in an arena of detailed argument and discussion concerning what he ought to think of himself, that is, his ego identity. To his other troubles he must add that of being simultaneously pushed in several directions by professionals who tell him what he should do and feel about what he is and isn’t, and all this purportedly in his own interest. (Goffman, 1963, p. 123-4)

^{29} The same certainly could be said about journalists, as much of the scholarly and trade discourse about journalistic objectivity in the early 21st Century suggests.
For me, the exploration of the research questions outlined in this study is also a personal process of exploring the ways I have been pushed to understand my own regional identity, and the ways I as a professional journalist who often wrote about rural people and issues pushed others to understand theirs. As a local newspaper reporter and editor during the first half of my career, I usually tended to write and report from the community journalist’s perspective described in Chapter 2. As a metropolitan newspaper reporter during the second half of my career, I was more often an outsider looking in, although my outsider status was lessened when I would report on the communities I had previously covered as a community journalist. In both cases, I made decisions about how to portray people that had tangible social consequences—I will never forget the woman who called me outraged about the fact that I had referenced the thickness of her glasses in a story as a coy way of emphasizing her age. I sometimes wonder about the people who did not call because they did not believe reaching out to me would make a difference. I frequently reflected on my time in the newspaper industry during my five months in the field collecting data for this dissertation; some of those reflections appear as footnotes in this study.

The people and places discussed in this study are familiar to me biographically in some ways. I went into this study with a few personal contacts in two of the three communities, and all three are full of people to whom I feel I relate to a degree. However, as similar as I may perceive myself to be to the individuals interviewed in this study, I remain an outsider to their communities. I am a social scientist asking questions of people in a region that has a long history of scholarly interest (one might colloquially say Appalachia has been “studied to death,” although the quantity of literature on the region
seems to have ebbed somewhat since the 1990s). I am a man with the financial means to leave a full-time job to pursue graduate education, talking to people about poverty in one of the poorest regions in the United States. The end result of my questions is a written portrayal of the ways their lives, problems, and opportunities are portrayed by other writers, and the ways they understand those portrayals. In the process, I run the risk of subjecting the participants in this study to what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called the "symbolic violence" associated with field work:

It is the investigator who starts the game and sets up its rules, and is usually the one who, unilaterally and without any preliminary negotiations, assigns the interview its objectives and uses. (These, on occasion, may be poorly specified—at least for the respondent.) This asymmetry is reinforced by a social symmetry every time the investigator occupies a higher place in the social hierarchy of different types of capital, cultural capital in particular. (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 609).

Symbolic violence exercised by the researcher objectifies the research participant for the sake of the research project. It also creates an environment, Bourdieu (1999) argued, in which participants recognize the social chasm between themselves and the researcher and, because of the understood difference, may be inclined to "play along" with the research process—that is, to become the subjects the researcher wants them to be rather than the individuals they understand themselves to be.30

To address those issues, I return to Bourdieu’s 1999 analysis of social suffering, in which he advised researchers to make the participants’ problems their own problems. As Bourdieu noted, every act of social science involves at least a small degree of

30 The process of objectification of interview subjects is not the exclusive terrain of the social scientist; journalists may be guilty as well. Patrick Champagne made the following observation about residents of the Vaulx-en-Velin suburbs in Paris, who were regular subjects of news stories about violent outbreaks in the early 1990s: “These districts are presented as insalubrious and sinister, their residents as delinquents. . . . This journalistic vision of the suburbs is strongly rejected by a small section of the population of these districts, generally the most politicized or the most militant, and arouses their indignation. . . . Still, most of the inhabitants, notably because they are culturally deprived, take to heart the vision of themselves produced by these interested and somewhat voyeuristic spectators that journalists necessarily are (’it’s a ghetto here,’ ‘we don’t count for anything,’ etc.)” (1999, p. 55).
intrusion. The key to reducing the symbolic violence associated with that intrusion is to recognize the distance between researcher and research participant and to mitigate it as much as possible by making the participant’s problems your own through active listening and concerted efforts to put yourself in the place of the interviewee: “social proximity and familiarity provide two of the conditions of ‘nonviolent’ communication” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 610).

Such understanding does not begin and end with the interview process. It must be actively exercised throughout the entire research process, especially during the writing of results and conclusions, moments when the author may through the choice of words and images “place [the research subject] in the dock or, worse, in the stocks” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 625). Throughout this research project—from conception to data collection to the penning of findings, impressions, and conclusions—I have worked to expel any notion that this dissertation is a detached, clinical case study. I rather choose to view it as a collaborative effort involving myself and the 51 women and men who chose to help me complete it. Those men and women, and the communities they call home, are introduced in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5: LOCAL STORIES

During my visits to Deer Creek, local residents would sometimes ask me if I had seen what most referred to as “the mansion.” I would pass by several nice two-story brick homes as I drove into town from the east, but local residents assured me that those homes paled in comparison to the mansion. So one day, I drove west in search of it. Just a few miles past the major oil company headquarters, I found the mansion: a massive complex anchored by a stately home past a wrought-iron fence and a well-manicured lawn. The mansion belonged to the local oil company owner who many residents called “the Local Millionaire”—his name was painted in large black letters on one of several white barns on the property. From the highway, I could see his fenced tennis court, his pond (with a fountain in the middle), and, beyond the pond, what appeared to be a bronze statue. The mansion symbolized the Local Millionaire’s success and, to some residents, the distance between those in Deer Creek who have money and those who do not.

The mansion was unlike any other home I saw in Deer Creek, or for that matter, Priorsville or Greenburg. It symbolized the power and influence that the oil and gas industry currently have in Deer Creek. Older residents in Priorsville and Greenburg could recall the time when coal held such power in their communities, but those days have long since passed. Today, the discount megaretailer Walmart is one of Priorsville’s major economic drivers, although some residents hope ecotourism might be the town’s future. In Greenburg, despite an effort to revive the downtown business district, most people still said they need to leave town to make a decent wage or purchase items that go beyond what you can pick up at the grocery store.
As I noted in the previous chapter, the three communities under study in this dissertation share some common traits. But they are different in important ways. In this chapter I describe those differences. The histories of the communities, analysis of their media markets, and descriptions of local attitudes toward poverty are important if one is to better understand the role local media play in discussions on poverty there. In order to maintain the anonymity of research participants, the names of communities, newspapers, websites, and media companies discussed in this study have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Case 1: Greenburg

It is likely that the area now known as Greenburg was sparsely populated by early Indians—there is little evidence of widespread Native American settlement, aside from burial mounds likely built by the Hopewell or Adena cultures. While few Native Americans lived in the area, a number of tribes used it for hunting grounds before the Iroquois Confederacy drove them out in the 1650s, claiming the land for themselves. The first lasting European settlement was established in the late 1770s on land inhabited by the Delaware Indians. The Delawares took issue with the fact that white settlers were squatting on their land and took their concerns to the Continental Congress, which in 1779 ordered that the settlers leave the land and not be allowed to return. However the federal government found it impossible to enforce the decree given the demands of the Revolutionary War, and the Delaware—who were allied with the U.S. government—did not move to evict the white settlers, so they stayed put. In the 1780s a territorial

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31 Much of the historical descriptions and data compiled for this chapter came from locally published books and historical documents available at public libraries and historical societies in the three communities under study. When necessary, I have withheld formal citations of those sources in order to protect the identities of study participants.
government was established, and the promise of cheap land brought many new settlers to the region. Greenburg’s proximity to natural resources and river transportation made it an ideal place to settle, and by the 1870s it was an established industrial town.

Agriculture had historically been an important economic force in the developing towns in Green County. On their farms, residents raised cows, sheep, and chickens, and they grew corn, potatoes, sorghum, and other crops. Early settlers were sustenance farmers, but as state taxes made farm production more expensive, they began growing more than they needed and shipped the surplus for sale in New Orleans or St. Louis. However, the extraction of coal and salt quickly came to dominate the local economy and fuel Greenburg’s growth. The first coal mine in the region opened in 1805. Thirty years later, the city was home to some of the largest mines in its state.\(^{32}\) Coal production in the community peaked between 1860 and 1880, although production remained strong through World War I.

The end of World War I marked the beginning of a major economic contraction in Greenburg. In 1925, the Pittsburg Coal Company and other coal operators pooled millions of dollars to break the United Mine Workers of America in the region. Greenburg’s mines were their first targets. One local account, published by the Green County Historical Society, noted:

They broke the union alright, but at a frightful loss of property and lives. There were five big coal tipples burned, besides other acts of sabotage. There was fighting between pickets and non-union miners and two men were shot and killed before it ended.

Mining continued to be an important economic force into the 1960s, when two large mines were established in Green County. Large numbers of people were expected to

\(^{32}\) Many of those mines were owned by a single coal company based in Boston, Mass.
move to Greenburg to work in those mines, but employment numbers failed to reach anticipated marks, and many of those who did work in the mines were locals, not new residents. Greenburg’s population declined sharply in the years following World War II. Coal mines in the area were hotbeds of labor strife and conflict, and new salt deposits discovered in other areas drained off that business. A busy railroad line had brought jobs and money to the city, but local train service was discontinued in the early 1950s, leading to a large loss of jobs and a 50% drop in population.

In 2012, the estimated population of Green County was roughly 23,000; about 2,000 of them live in Greenburg. They county is overwhelmingly white (more than 97%, which is well above the state average), according to U.S. Census Bureau statistics. Eighty-three percent of county residents were high school graduates in 2012 (below the state average), and roughly 11.4% had at least a bachelor’s degree (less than half the state average). The poverty rate reported in 2012 was 21.6%, nearly 50% higher than the state average, and more than 40% of the families with children under the age of 5 lived below the federal poverty line. Median home values and per capita income were also significantly lower than the state average. The fields of education, health care, and social assistance accounted for 27% of the jobs in Green County in 2012, with retail, construction, and manufacturing also producing significant portions of the county’s jobs. Mining jobs were rare in 2012—agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining work made up less than 3% of the county’s jobs. There is still coal in the area’s mines, some local residents told me, and a few suggested that they believe mining might make a comeback in the area one day.
The main road through Greenburg, Oak Avenue, is a two-lane street bordered on one side by a river and on the other by storefronts that house bars and restaurants, shops, banks, a Laundromat, churches, gas stations, and a small park. Some storefronts sit vacant. Others have been converted into apartments. The short stretch of shops and offices represents almost all of Greenburg’s commerce—locals who want to shop at big-box retailers drive to one of the bigger towns nearby. Community leaders have emphasized efforts to keep Oak Avenue’s businesses afloat in recent years, work that has been covered prominently in the local newspaper. An ongoing downtown revitalization effort has resulted in pots of pink and purple petunias hanging from lampposts along Oak Avenue, new landscaping in public spaces, and tourism promotion efforts by the local chamber of commerce (which partners with the local newspaper to produce visitor’s guides and other promotional materials). The efforts speak to the fact that local leaders see tourism as an important part of Greenburg’s economic future.

Almost all of the 17 Greenburg residents interviewed for this study said the community’s economy was in bad shape. “We’re a poor county. There’s not a lot of places to work,” said Linda, a Greenburg native in her mid-30s who does clerical work three days a week at a small museum dedicated to Green County history. Several longtime residents described a sense of entitlement among young people that did not exist a generation ago. Mary, a social service manager who oversees a food distribution program in the community, said that older members of the baby boomer generation in the community have a sense that nothing is free. Some younger people, on the other hand, have “a huge sense of entitlement,” which manifests itself as an expectation that they will be taken care of. “When you grow up in an area like this, you deal with a lot of apathy,”
she said. “It is hard to reeducate people” to get them to want to work. Other local residents pointed out that there were few jobs in Priorsville, and little to help young people and low-wage earners adjust to compete in a global economy. Theresa, who operates a local news website, pointed out that the local school system does little to “prepare our kids for the culture shock of leaving the area” and, as a result, many who do leave for better jobs or education end up coming back. Low wage earners such as Mary, who works in the cafeteria at the local senior citizens’ center, and Brandy, a single mother on welfare who, when we spoke, had just accepted a job at a fast food restaurant, told me that higher-paying jobs are hard to come by, in part because people who have those jobs tend to hold on to them. Both women have family obligations that have kept them from pursuing work in other communities. “Pretty much all we need is jobs. That’s all anybody needs, is a job,” said Jenn, a single mother of two in her late teens who was unemployed and drawing welfare benefits when I interviewed her. Clint, a middle school teacher in his late 40s and lifelong Greenburg resident, made a similar point:

There are stores, but there’s no real business. So there is no real chance that anybody’s going to go out and make a lot of money. There’s just not. Until somebody comes in and thinks of an industry that they can put in this area, uh, even my children talk about it all the time. As we’re driving through town they’ll see an empty lot and they’ll say, “Boy, it’d be nice if there was something there.” People around here get excited if they put in a Taco Bell. That just gives a few people a few minimum wage jobs. That’s not industry and it’s not helping our economic status at all. We’re not ever sending a product out into the rest of the world.

Those lacks of opportunity, coupled with stigma, make it difficult in some cases to motivate people to believe they can succeed. Floyd, a local nonprofit manager in his late 50s, said the community makes too many assumptions about its poorest residents: “We’re so judgmental. We judge people first and condemn ‘em, when they may be the nicest
people.” That persistent judgment, he said, makes it hard for young people to find the fortitude to pull themselves out of bad situations. “They’ve been told all their lives that you’re welfare trash, or trailer trash, or whatever you want to call it. So there’s no self-worth.”

Some people—mostly local journalists and business people—did point out some reason for optimism about the local economy. In the last two decades, Greenburg has established several festivals focusing on local history and cooking competitions, among other things that draw in tourists from the region, and the community has also embarked on the beautification effort to make the downtown business area more attractive to potential businesses and customers.33 Although coal mining has not been an important part of the local economy for two decades, some residents I interviewed suggested that fossil fuel extraction or power plants would be good for the future of Greenburg. Theresa said a coal-fired power plant that was proposed for the area in the 2000’s but never built “would have transformed everything” in a positive way. Hydraulic fracturing, a relatively new and controversial way of removing natural gas from the ground, has not been widespread in Green County, but Theresa said she believed local residents would support it if natural gas deposits were found in the area: “You say jobs, and people say OK.”

Local legends in Greenburg are rife with tales of unsavory characters and outlaw activities that continue to this day. Historical accounts make note of a network of criminals who were known for counterfeiting and systematic robbery in the mid-1800s. In a memoir penned in the early 21st century, a writer who once lived in Green County described his farm there as being surrounded by neighbors involved in cock fighting.

33 Newspaper workers and community leaders I interviewed were supportive of the beautification effort. However, as Chapter 8 will show, the program—and news coverage of it—are viewed very differently by some of the community’s less wealthy residents.
heavy drinking, and the production, sale, and use of marijuana. The outlaw reputation—particularly as it pertains to drug use—remains relevant today and was mentioned by several participants interviewed for this study as a byproduct of the area’s poverty.

Kathy, a retired secretary, told me many young people who are motivated end up leaving the area. “What does stay, and what comes in, they drift toward the drug culture,” Kathy said.

Despite the economic hardships and other social problems they experienced there, most of the Greenburg residents I spoke with said they had no interest in moving elsewhere. Many pointed out that they liked the close ties that they had developed with others in the community and the willingness of others to help those in need. Others told me that family ties in the area were important and that leaving Greenburg would represent a sacrifice of those ties that they were not willing to make. Those expressions of security available in a tight-knit social setting were common among people of all incomes, and they were mentioned by residents in Priorsville and Deer Creek as well.

*The Greenburg Star* and *GreenburgToday.com*

Greenburg is served by one local print newspaper, the *Greenburg Star*. The *Star* publishes five days a week, with a circulation of roughly 3,500. It is owned by Henderson News Co., a large media chain with several other newspaper holdings in the region. Henderson owns a larger newspaper near Greenburg; a managing editor at that newspaper has editorial oversight over both newspapers. The *Star* has a small editorial staff consisting of an editor/general manager, a news reporter and a sports writer who also writes for the other Henderson newspaper. When my fieldwork began, the Henderson editor who oversaw the *Star* and other newspapers in the region was Nancy, a Green
County native in her late 30s who sometimes pitched in to write stories for the *Star.* She told me that she liked her job because “I really enjoyed being able to speak on behalf of a community that largely doesn’t have a voice, I guess.” As a teenager, she said she wanted to leave Greenburg. Like many youth, she said, she saw few career opportunities. But she did not want to live in a large city, so she attended a small regional college and earned a bachelor’s degree in communication, and when a local newspaper job became available, she took it. “There’s a lot of need here. There’s no shortage of things to write about. There’s no shortage of issues that need addressed in this region. I liked being one of the ones that didn’t run away from that and that stayed put to try to address some of those issues,” Nancy said. She frequently referred to the service element of journalism during our two-hour conversation. When I asked her why journalistic service was important to her, she replied:

I think some of that just goes back to just the kind of person you were born to be. I think that some people just automatically from a young age lean to being more empathetic about other people’s problems and try to be more considerate of other people, and then there are other people who don’t [pause], that’s not what’s in their head. Maybe they feel that the people they’re most responsible to might be their immediate family, and they feel like successfully doing that means bringing home a great big paycheck, which pushes them out of the region, possibly. I guess I never looked at it quite like that. In my mind, I’ve never really been hung up on material things. So I think that I am more interested in being able to look at myself in the mirror, and being able to sleep at night. And I feel a certain sense of pride in serving the area that I grew up in, and not only that but the area that my parents grew up in.

For the most part, two people produce the newspaper’s editorial content: Sandra, the editor and general manager, and Susan, a reporter. Sandra, who grew up in a neighboring town and is in her early 80s, first started working at the *Star* as society editor shortly after fieldwork began, Nancy left her job as managing editor at Henderson News for a job in public relations at a nearby university. Henderson News assigned a newspaper editor from another part of the country to replace her. The new managing editor did not respond to my requests for interviews.
in the late 1960s. Back then, she said, Greenburg was “a Saturday night town” with a bustling downtown full of shops and taverns. Today, she said, Greenburg is “certainly not what I’d call ‘thriving,’” although she believes local efforts to attract more businesses, most notably the local business association’s downtown revitalization effort, are moving the economy in the right direction. “We’re never going to be what we were 30 years ago, but I think we are showing some improvement,” she said. Sandra sees herself as a part of that momentum. She told me on several occasions that, as the town’s newspaper editor, it is her job to advocate for business growth. When we spoke for the first time, Sandra was finishing the Green County Visitor’s Guide, a magazine the newspaper produces every year in partnership with the local chamber of commerce. Henderson Media profits financially from the Visitor’s Guide, which is supported by advertisements. Susan also told me she gets a great deal of personal satisfaction from her role in putting the guide together, and that she spent a great deal of her personal time working to make it as clean and lively as possible.

Sandra writes mostly about local schools and social organizations, and Susan covers government meetings and crime-related stories and handles all the newspaper’s social media. Stories and photos are shipped off to a design center in another state every night, where Henderson News employees lay out the newspaper. Sandra told me she dislikes this arrangement because it results in uncreative page designs. Susan, the Star’s reporter, is a recent college graduate in her late 20s who grew up in Green County and got her first job as a sportswriter at a nearby Henderson News newspaper. Susan, a single mother, said she enjoys working at the newspaper, but finds it difficult to raise her young child on the salary she receives there (Nancy told me young reporters like Susan
generally start at $9 an hour). She told me she hopes to parlay her position at the *Star* into a better job, perhaps as a reporter at a larger newspaper or, more likely, as a manager at one of Henderson News’ other area publications. “I think this [position] is a stepping stone for a lot of people,” Susan told me, although she is conflicted about the possibility of leaving her hometown, even if it means higher pay.\(^{35}\)

Theresa, the Green County native mentioned above, launched an online competitor, GreenburgToday.com, after losing her reporting job at a nearby newspaper during a round of layoffs in the early 2010’s. Theresa writes local news stories for the site, and it also publishes large amounts of submitted material, such as news releases and obituaries. Theresa, a college graduate in her late 30s, said she launched GreenburgToday in part because of what she saw as negative and inaccurate reporting on Greenburg that appeared in regional news media. “I wanted, when people Google Greenburg, I wanted them to see something positive come up,” Theresa said. She also said she believes the local newspaper has done too little to address corruption in local government. She criticized the *Star* for being too close to local officials, but said she believes the presence of a competing news source has forced the *Star* to publish more complete accounts of government activities. Nine of the 13 non-journalists I interviewed in Greenburg said they read GreenburgToday with some regularity, although most said they saw little significant difference between its coverage of local issues and the *Star’s*.

Case 2: Priorsville

Priorsville sits at the top of the Cumberland Plateau, about 1,400 feet above sea level. Its remote location and the fact that there are no river lanes in and out of the area meant that early settlements around Priorsville grew much more slowly than other

\(^{35}\) The effects of Susan’s economic position on her work as a reporter are discussed in Chapter 7.
communities in the region. Like Greenburg, Priorsville was largely a “no man’s land” for Native Americans and early white settlers. No tribes laid permanent claim to the land, although the Cherokees, Shawnees Chickasaws, and Choctaws used it as a hunting ground. The first white settlers—mostly Scots-Irish—laid down roots in what is now Priorsville in the early 1800s.

Early settlers in Priorsville found life challenging. Mountain trails made accessing the land difficult, and the soil was hard to farm. Land speculators in other sometimes coupled with local residents to fleece newcomers with fraudulent property titles, promising them fertile river bottom lands that were, in reality, often rocky ledges. Still, the region’s first residents managed to make lives for themselves as subsistence farmers, and they raised large families—it was not uncommon for couples to have 10 or 15 children.

Timber was the dominant force behind Priorsville’s economy in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Hardwood flooring companies and mills set up shop to process the poplar, maple, chestnut, and oak trees that were so abundant on local hillsides. Much of the county’s virgin timber was gone by the 1950s, but logging continues to be a source of income in the area. Commercial coal mining took hold in Prior County in the early 1880s after railroads were built in the region, allowing coal to be shipped out. A Cincinnati businessman opened the first mines in the community and recruited people from Wales and England (and later black Americans) to work in them. Miners’ wages, as meager as they were, still were valuable to local residents who had lived largely off of the farm products they could produce on their land. By the late 1800s, the biggest mine in the area was producing 350 tons of coal a day. During that period, Prior County developed a
reputation for drunkenness and debauchery. Liquor flowed freely from local saloons, and local lore suggests that, at one point, it was rumored that a killing happened in Prior County every day.

Like many other communities on the Cumberland Plateau, Priorsville residents supported the Union during the U.S. Civil War. There was little support for slavery there, in large part because so few white residents could afford them—one local historical account suggests that only five families in the county owned slaves at the start of the Civil War. Large numbers of African Americans came to work in the community’s coal mines in the late 1800s—blacks made up half the workforce at the community’s largest mine. People of different races lived separate but largely conflict-free lives until the high-profile murder of a popular local shopkeeper in the first decade of the 20th Century. The clerk, who was white, was killed by a black man, and the crime brought to a boil racial tensions that local historians suggest had been simmering for some time. After the murder, Priorsville’s white residents put their black neighbors on notice—leave now or face the threat of violence. Signs were posted at the county line warning blacks to stay away. By 1910, the community’s black population had fallen from more than 300 to just 16, according to U.S. Census records. The signs are distant history, but the county is still overwhelmingly white (98.3%, well above the state average, according to the U.S. Census Bureau).

By the mid-1950s, Priorsville’s economy was booming. A short-line railroad terminated there, allowing locals to export lumber, coal, and livestock. Several factories were producing doors, flooring, and other wood products, four automobile dealerships were in business, and one newspaper account from the era noted that there was over $6
million in construction going on around town. That growth slowed significantly in the 1990s and early 2000s. Aside from the two-room local library, a large church, and a few other government offices, Priorsville’s old downtown district, which built up around the railroad terminal, is largely vacant. Many of the town’s businesses have migrated to the highway that runs into town from the north, joining Walmart and several fast food restaurants. Priorsville seemed more economically vibrant than Greenburg and Deer Creek, but much of the town’s commerce takes place at discount retailers like Walmart and fast food restaurants, which typically create low-wage jobs. During one informal conversation, two local women told me they were surprised that Priorsville could support so many restaurants, given the fact that so many people who lived there could not afford to eat out. Following the closure of a large manufacturing plant that made flooring in 2010, unemployment in Prior County rose as high as 23%. The county has held its state’s highest unemployment rate fairly consistently since then; in 2012, the county’s 16% unemployment rate was the highest in its state. The fields of education, health care, and social assistance accounted for 28% of the jobs in Prior County in 2012, with manufacturing accounting for another 19%.

The estimated population in Prior County in 2013 was about 22,000. About 4,000 of the county’s residents lived in Priorsville, the largest incorporated town in the county. Seventy-five percent of the county’s residents were high school graduates in 2012 (below the state average), and roughly 11% had a college degree (less than half the state average). The poverty rate reported in 2012 was 25.8%, eight percentage points higher than the state average, and a third of the families with children under the age of 5 lived below the federal poverty line. The remote community is surrounded by forests and
recreation areas. The state government bought thousands of acres of forest land in the 1980s and 1990s, and many study participants pointed to parks and natural resources as the primary amenity that set Prior County apart from its neighbors. At the time of this study, local officials were discussing growth in the eco-tourism industry in Prior County as a means to create new jobs. Almost all of the 17 people interviewed for this dissertation were familiar with those discussions, and most were generally supportive of eco-tourism development, although some doubted its ability to substantially improve economic conditions in the community.

Local residents told me that unemployment was Priorsville’s most pressing economic/social problem. The cause of the county’s high unemployment rate, however, is a source of at times contentious debate in the community. Two building material factories that served as the community’s largest employers closed in the early 2000’s. A few years later, another large building material plant laid off more than 250 workers, and local residents told me that the town’s workforce never recovered. Several people noted that local jobs are hard to find, and it takes more than an hour and a half to commute to the nearest major city. Ed, the Priorsville Record’s owner and publisher, suggested that local leaders do little to bring in new businesses because they are resistant to change: “They don’t want to mess Mayberry up,” said Ed, who is in his late 40s. Nick, the editor of the other local newspaper, the Priorsville Post-Examiner, said a lack of jobs is the primary problem, but “the other side of it is an unwillingness to work.”

Some local residents blame that unwillingness to work on government aid programs that they see as too generous. Bill, the publisher and owner of the Priorsville Post-Examiner, told me he believed the expansion of welfare benefits was “a detriment”
to the needy, because it only encouraged them not to work. Scott, a local resident in his late 60s who owns a company that provides in-home healthcare in Prior County, expressed a concern that “our government don’t seem to realize that work ought to be worth more than not working.” Scott’s company employs about 150 people, most of whom make minimum wage or slightly more. “I just pay what I can. I don’t put my company in jeopardy by guaranteeing something I don’t know if I’m going to be able to meet,” he said. At the time of our interview, he said he has 15 open positions he cannot fill. Others said more jobs would help matters significantly. “Jobs do away with a lot of poverty,” said Micah, a former coal company executive in his early 60s who opened a textile plant in Priorsville after the local mines closed. While some people are not motivated to seek unemployment benefits (“There are always people who want to be on the wagon—some people push and some people want to ride,” Micah told me), he believes many Priorsville residents would return to the workforce if there were more opportunities.

The Priorsville Record and the Priorsville Post-Examiner

Priorsville’s first newspaper was founded in 1887 and published just a few issues before closing. It was replaced by a Republican newspaper that published until 1915. When that paper closed, a local businessman established the Priorsville Record, which is still in publication today. Ownership of the weekly newspaper has been consistent over the last 50 years. The Record’s current owner, Ed, bought the newspaper from his stepmother, who had owned it for more than 40 years, when she decided to retire in 2011. Ed, who grew up in Priorsville and is in his mid-40s, is not a journalist by trade—he has worked several jobs, including stints as a policeman, a truck driver, a welder, and a
barber. For two years before he bought the newspaper, Ed worked in circulation at the
*Record*, delivering newspapers. I interviewed Ed in the spring of 2014 at his barber shop
in Priorsville; he worked at the newspaper on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays, and
cuts men’s hair on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. Ed told me that people associate
him with the barber shop rather than the newspaper. He makes editorial decisions and
sells ads, but never writes stories for the *Record*. He emphasized to me several times that
he does not consider himself a journalist, and that he never planned to own a newspaper
before buying the *Record*. When I asked him why he bought the newspaper from his
stepmother, he hesitated for a moment. “It was there,” he replied. “I was getting a good
deal on it.” The *Record* is edited by Jim, a retired government employee in his early 60s
who works at the newspaper three days a week. Jim has lived all over the U.S. He
moved to Priorsville in the mid-2000s to be close to his wife’s family. Priorsville has “got
its plusses and minuses,” Jim said. He told me he was not sure he would recommend
people move there, in large part because of the economy and the number of people who
are “on the draw.” He got the editor’s job at the *Record* through a temp agency, and Ed
convinced him to stay on. Both Ed and Jim told me they believe the fact that Jim is not
from Priorsville helps him be a good local journalist because he can see local issues from
a fresh perspective.

Priorsville has a second weekly newspaper, the *Priorsville Post-Examiner* (known
locally as the *PPE*). Four local men founded the *PPE* in the mid-1970s, when
Priorsville’s economy was still growing. Bill, one of the four founders, was the
newspaper’s editor and publisher for nearly 30 years. Bill, a soft-spoken Vietnam War
veteran whose family moved to Priorsville when he was 4, works out of the morgue in

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36 Most of the *Record*’s five employees, including Jim and Ed, work part-time.
the back of the PPE’s office, where he can smoke Marlboro Reds and pull historical articles for quick reference. He and his fellow investors founded the newspaper at the same time the government was establishing a large recreational area just outside Priorsville. “I thought we were going to bloom. And we did, we had some good years. But we had a lot of bad years,” he told me. During our first meeting, he told me stories about selling Grit magazine to make money as a 9-year-old, about covering cockfights (“that sold a lot of papers”), about the time he was physically attacked (by one of the subjects of the cockfighting story), and about taking on crooked cops.

Nick, a Priorsville native in his mid-30s who had covered sports for the newspaper, was hired to be the PPE’s editor in the mid-2000s. Bill, who is in his mid-60s, told me he was “burning out” because of the workload and needed someone younger to take over editorial duties. He still acts as the newspaper’s publisher and occasionally writes articles and commentary. Nick told me he originally went to college with plans to be a teacher, but decided to pursue journalism because he liked to write: “I decided I would rather do something else—teaching wasn’t for me. I always liked to cover sports, so it seemed natural. That is what spurred my interest—covering sports.” As editor, he still covers sports, and writes most of the newspaper’s news copy as well. Nick is also actively involved with the Priorsville Chamber of Commerce, serving on its 30-member board of directors. Nick and Sharon, the chamber’s director, both said that Nick’s ability to “get the word out” about chamber efforts through the PPE was one of the main strengths he brought to the organization. Nick told me he had no trouble separating his duties as the newspaper editor from his chamber of commerce responsibilities, and that he saw his chamber involvement as a natural extension of his role as a community
His involvement with the chamber of commerce will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

The *PPE’s* weekly circulation was about 5,000 in the spring of 2014. Most of the 13 residents who told me they read a local newspaper mentioned the *PPE*, and many said they consider it a superior product to the *Record*. Many local residents who told me they like the *PPE* attribute its success to Nick, who they see as a force for positive change. “Nick’s really digging into the roots” of local issues, said Sharon, the director of the Priorsville Chamber of Commerce. Nick was born in Priorsville and graduated from the local high school, and he told me he enjoys working in his hometown and the outdoor opportunities he can enjoy there. However, Bill told me he worries about whether he’ll be able to keep his young editor around—he knows Nick has turned down job offers from other, larger newspapers recently.

When Priorsville resident Micah fought in the Vietnam War in the early 1970s, he had the *Priorsville Record* mailed to him. He shared this recollection:

> *The Priorsville Record*, rolled up, is the size of your pinky finger. The guys that I was in the service with was getting the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Herald*, from all over. They’d get daily papers that, rolled up, were two inches in diameter. And I’m getting the *Priorsville Record* once a week, and there come this little bitty paper rolled up—this is the truth, this is funny. The *Priorsville Record* would have all local stuff: so-and-so visited so-and-so, somebody killed a rattlesnake or a deer, this happened. And those guys would line up to get the *Priorsville Record*, and they would read every word [laughs]. It was their entertainment for the week.

When I asked him why he thought they liked it, he replied:

> Because it was so down-homesy. It was personal: It was about this family and that family. It was stuff that the [metropolitan] newspapers did not, could not cover. The big papers didn’t care who killed that rattlesnake, or who got their first deer, or whatever.
Micah still subscribes to a local newspaper, but today he takes the competing *Priorsville Post-Examiner*. Like many residents, Micah told me he finds the *PPE* more interesting than the *Record*. The owners of both newspapers have for years questioned how long the small town’s advertising and subscriber bases would be able to support two local newspapers. Bill and Ed both told me that there have been discussions in the past about merging the two papers, but those never materialized into an actual business plan. Both newspaper publishers told me their publications are losing subscribers as older readers die and younger people do not pick up the newspaper. To try to attract a younger audience, the *PPE* publishes an e-edition that allows paid subscribers to view its content online. The *Record* also launched a paid e-edition in 2013, but owner and publisher Ed told me that it was scrapped after a few months because of a lack of subscribers. Ed values the business because of its place in the community’s history, but told me that he finds it increasingly difficult to sell enough ads to make the *Record* profitable. Most of the roughly 4,900 newspapers sold weekly are sold at racks. The newspaper’s paid circulation had fallen to 600 in spring of 2014, and some weeks the cost of mailing out the newspaper consumed profits. “I’d hate to give it up, just for the heritage side of it,” he told me.

**Case 3: Deer Creek**

Deer Creek is the smallest and most remote of the three communities studied in this dissertation. Compared to Priorsville and Greenburg, there is little locally-produced history of the community, which sits in a wide spot in the valley carved out by the waterway that gives the town its name. The creek was once a transportation lifeline for

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37 The *Record* launched its first news website in June 2014. Its first attempt at an e-edition was delivered by email.
the community, but years of erosion runoff, illegal dumping, and falling trees have made it unnavigable for boats larger than canoes. The first white settlers established themselves in what is now Deer Creek in the first decade of the 1800s. They came slowly—Deer County did not have enough people to organize until the mid-1800s. Agriculture was an important part of the community’s early economy. Tobacco was grown, harvested, and packed into barrels known as “hogs heads” and floated down Deer Creek for larger waterways and eventual shipment to Europe. Potatoes, oats, hay, sheep, and cattle were also important agricultural products. Farms still dot the landscape around Deer Creek, although the sheep, cattle, and tobacco that were once so important to local markets are becoming less common. Timber was (and still is) an important industry, although the rich virgin stands of white oak, yellow poplar, and black walnut, the most valuable trees in the area, were largely gone by the late 1940s.

Since the 1870s, however, oil and natural gas have driven the local economy in Deer Creek. The first oil in the county was drilled in 1875, and after that, small wells were scattered all around the county. Systematic drilling began in 1900, and there was an oil boom in 1917. In 1920, one local historical account reported, a Deer Creek man told of a well that produced 17 million cubic feet of oil (about $1,000 worth) a day. “Dozens of communities in particular and the entire county in general was changed forever by the population increases and greater prosperity brought by the discovery of oil,” that historian wrote. Many Deer Creek residents told me that jobs with local oil and gas companies were seen as the best jobs in the community. The availability of those jobs waxes and wanes based on the price of oil and gas, local residents told me. When prices are up, oil companies are busy and jobs are available. When prices are down, companies
idle their drilling crews. When people discussed the economic elite with me, they were almost always referring to the men who own those companies. A few local operators have achieved millionaire status. Their names are on local bridges, athletic facilities, and academic buildings at the local college, and they often came up in my conversations with residents.

There are about 8,700 residents in Deer County, with 1,500 of them living in the town of Deer Creek. The community is more racially diverse than the other communities included in this study (84% of the residents of Deer County are white). Despite the presence of a small local college, the number of residents in Deer Creek with a college degree is below the state average. The community’s 27% poverty rate from 2008 to 2012 was the second highest in its state. Deer County’s per capita income in 2012, about $16,000, was well below the state average. However, the 7.4% unemployment rate in Deer Creek is below the state, regional, and national average. Some local residents said the college acts as a stabilizing force for the local economy. The college is Deer County’s second largest employer. The largest is a medium-security prison built a few miles outside town in the early 2000s. The prison was billed as the community’s employment savior. Many local residents told me that it actually produced relatively few jobs for people in Deer Creek, and that most of its employees live elsewhere and commute to the prison. A few residents suggested that unemployment is low because locals who are unemployed drop out of the workforce once their unemployment benefits ran out, living off of Social Security or disability payments. About 59% of Deer County residents over the age of 16 were not part of the workforce in 2012, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.
Deer Creek’s old downtown district is built up around a single stoplight near the creek. The downtown area is home to three restaurants, a bank, a hotel, two churches, and a few other storefronts that house real estate agents, insurance companies, a small grocery, a florist, and other businesses. Another small commercial district, which includes a chain auto parts shop and a fast food restaurant, is about a mile down the highway. Local residents told me there is a lot of business turnover in Deer Creek, in large part because there is little support for local entrepreneurs. There is no local chamber of commerce, and most people travel an hour or more to larger towns to get anything more than the basic necessities.

Although the poverty rate in Deer Creek is higher than in either Greenburg or Priorsville, residents in Deer Creek discussed it with less uniform concern than those I interviewed in other towns. Juanita, a librarian in her early 60s, told me the economy in Deer Creek was “not real good, but it’s not as bad as people think it is.” Those who work in oil and gas, at the university, or with the local prison make decent wages, she said. Those who do not work in those fields make far less, but are able to get by because the cost of living in Deer Creek is low. Rick, a retiree in his mid-70s, said the economy “is pretty good in some respects”—tax appraisals are up, for example. “I think looking around, we have pretty good roads, things have been improved over the years,” he told me. Quinn, a secretary in her early 40s who once worked as a reporter at the Deer Creek Chronicle, told me:

I’m told all the time that we’re poverty-stricken, but I’ve always been able to find a job and keep my family supported. I think there’s work out there, you know, if people want to look for it. It is slow, there’s not good jobs to be had, really. A lot of people are on welfare, food stamps, but you know, that’s all over the country. You know, it’s not growing. It’s shrinking, the population is shrinking, people are
taking their families and moving when they grow up, and they’re not moving to this area. It’s stagnant, at best.

Quinn’s ambivalence about the local economy is reflective of the attitudes of many of the men and women interviewed for this study: She saw and understood the difficulties others faced to make a living wage, but at the same time suggested that there were jobs to be had. Other residents were more concerned about the state of Deer Creek’s economy. “I think all of us are struggling, more so than we would like to admit,” said Stacy, a single mother in her mid-30s who worked as a clerk at a struggling retail shop in Deer Creek. Four of the 14 non-journalists I interviewed specifically mentioned the challenges in finding affordable housing, and nonprofit directors I interviewed said homelessness was an issue locally.

*The Deer Creek Chronicle and the Deer Creek Advocate*

The *Deer Creek Chronicle*, Deer Creek’s local newspaper, has been in circulation since the first decade of the 1900s. Gregory bought the newspaper about 20 years ago. He was introduced to journalism at a young age—his father worked in the editorial department of a metropolitan newspaper in the Southeast for nearly 50 years—but newspapers are his second career. He has a Ph.D. in history from a large state university in the Southeast and has training as a museum curator and historic preservationist. As a museum director in the early 1970s, he found himself doing a great deal of writing in a public relations capacity, so he decided to get into journalism in the mid-1970s, taking a job as the publisher of a small local newspaper. “I essentially learned to be a publisher and editor on the job,” and through training he received through his state press association, Gregory told me. He said his advanced schooling has helped him as a journalist—he is able to integrate economics, political science, and history into his
reporting, leading to a style of writing he described as “kind of academic.” He worked at several newspapers in Appalachia and the Midwest (he told me with some degree of pride that he’d been fired from two different publisher’s jobs for refusing to bend to the demands of corporate owners) before buying the Deer Creek newspaper to be closer to his children, who live nearby. Gregory often wrote about his private life in the Deer Creek Chronicle in personal columns that sometimes filled half of a page. In the six months’ worth of newspapers I reviewed for this project, he discussed among other things, his allergies, his travels, and the person chosen to be the president of his state’s flagship university (which is in another part of the state). In one issue, he published a photo of himself at the state capital, standing beside a state politician who was considering a campaign for the U.S. Senate. In another, he published an entire page of photos from a vacation he took with his two adult sons.

Gregory is in his early 70s and suffers from a recent back injury, but he still does a great deal of the front page reporting, writes a weekly column, edits submitted copy, and designs pages. In the absence of a local chamber of commerce, he also organizes a monthly meeting for local businesspeople, which he uses to promote advertisers. The Chronicle’s weekly circulation is about 3,500. Gregory said advertising revenue has suffered in recent years, but he noted that the Chronicle still ended last year with a profit in excess of $70,000. Gregory told me he occasionally thinks about retiring, but has no immediate plans to do so. Gregory’s son Eric works with him as general manager of the newspaper, handling managerial duties, keeping computers operating properly, and occasionally writing stories. “I hesitate sometimes to call myself a journalist because journalism implies that I’ve got the funny hat on with the little press sticker and I go
around and I do stories all the time. Which I don’t really,” said Eric. In his mid-40s, Eric, who has spent much of his adult life working at various newspapers, rarely conversed with me without cracking a joke or two. Gregory suggested Eric might take over the newspaper when that time comes, but Eric was noncommittal about his interest when I asked him. “The newspaper business is just something I’ve always done, and it’s something I’m doing automatically now. It’s not really a challenge,” Eric told me. His passion is helping people with their computers—he left an IT job in another state about two years ago to help his father at the newspaper following Gregory’s back injury.

High-speed internet is available in Deer Creek, but is hard to come by in much of the rest of the county. Local residents told me that several websites covering Deer Creek news have come and gone in recent years. Most people in the community said they take what they read on those sites with a grain of salt—many of them are run by people with political agendas, and some publish claims that seem outlandish (shortly before my field work began, one site published a topless photo of a woman it claimed was the daughter of a prominent local family). One site, the Deer Creek Advocate, seemed to provide a more even-keeled analysis of local events, and several residents said they read it to find out what was going on around town. Lance, a computer company executive who founded the site, chose not to participate in this study.

Gregory told me that the newspaper is well-liked in the community. However, residents I interviewed were not shy about expressing their dislike for the Chronicle and its owner. Crystal, a local resident in her early 60s who wrote a column for the newspaper under its previous ownership, called Gregory “incompetent.” “I’ve written up stories and handed them in. He will change names and things, just because he’s the editor.”
result was inaccuracy. “He’s always so apologetic, so surprised,” she says somewhat sarcastically. But still, the problems happen. Crystal said she believes the newspaper presents too much positive news and kowtows to its advertisers. “There’s not any real reporting going on. It’s really just a journal for out-of-town people,” she said, referring to the large numbers of photos from school events published in the newspaper weekly. She does not believe Gregory really cares about the newspaper: “It’s just a business. It’s about his ego and his legacy for his children. It’s not about helping the community.”

Rebecca, the manager at a local social service agency, shared similar opinions about the *Chronicle*. She said Gregory once interviewed her for a story, taking notes on the back of a business card.38 “The article turned out horrible,” riddled with inaccuracies, she said. She’s also had problems with mistakes in advertisements and, as a result, she has become reluctant to submit stories or ads to the newspaper. “It could be such a good newspaper, and years ago it was,” Rebecca said. The previous editor had reporters who covered local stories. Now, “it’s almost like they’re trying to fit everybody’s kids in it to get news.” She continued:

It [the newspaper] is only about a few businesses, a few people and their families. It doesn’t benefit the community as a whole. I would subscribe again if there was something to see, not just them [the newspaper] trying to build up the higher-ups, the people who have millions of dollars. I don’t have millions of dollars—what I do, they may not notice. They need to actually get the news, not cater to certain employers or the college. Make it a people’s newspaper.

As Rebecca, Crystal, and others who will be introduced later in this dissertation illustrate, there are sometimes disconnects between the view journalists have of their work and the view their readers take. One of the main goals of this dissertation is to

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38 I had an opportunity to witness firsthand Gregory’s ability to turn everyday objects into news collection tools. I accompanied him to a local business mixer not long after we met. He took several photographs at the event with plans to publish them in the next week’s paper. On that night, he took notes on the back of a bank deposit slip.
examine those disconnects—to show how journalists view their work on poverty, to explain what influences that work, and to show how their readers interpret the final product. Before discussing the social inputs that influence coverage (the *encoding* of media messages) and the way stories are interpreted by readers (the *decoding* process), it is important to show exactly *what kind* of poverty coverage the news organizations under study are providing. The next chapter will use qualitative and quantitative content analyses to describe how much coverage of poverty local news consumers in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek receive, and exactly what that coverage looks like.
CHAPTER 6: DOMINANT FRAMES IN LOCAL POVERTY COVERAGE

In spring of 2014, *Priorsville Post-Examiner* editor Nick visited a small nonprofit thrift store on the edge of Priorsville to interview Sally, the nonprofit’s founder. Sally, a lively grandmother in her mid-50s, moved to Appalachia from a large Midwestern city in the late 1980s with her husband, who had family ties there. After commuting to and from large city an hour and a half away for about 10 years, her religious faith moved her to quit her job in the late 1990s to try to help those in need in Priorsville. For several years, she ran a local women’s shelter, where she helped women escape abusive relationships and try to overcome addiction. Then, in the early 2000’s, Sally’s son, who was in his early 20s, was killed in a car crash in rural Prior County, devastating Sally and her family. At his funeral, people gave her money rather than flowers. Sally, overcome with grief, had no idea what to do with it until, a year later, she decided to open the thrift shop and use it as a way to raise money to help people who need a few dollars to make their rent, buy groceries or keep their electricity on that month.

Nick’s article, which appeared on the *PPE*’s Business Spotlight page, shared Sally’s story with her community. She described the grief and uncertainty she experienced following her son’s death. Not one to hold in her opinions, Sally also spoke in strong terms in the article about living conditions for Priorsville’s poorest residents, using words like “oppression” to describe the lives of those in need. In one quote from the article, Sally told Nick, “We have a community with a lot of issues right now. . . . There is lots of unemployment, there are a lot of families that can’t seem to make ends meet. [The nonprofit thrift shop] is a Band-Aid.”
But Sally’s profile was not a story of a woman to be pitied, or about a withering community unable to help itself. It was, rather, a caring call for compassion, positive in a way that was unexpected, at least to Sally. A few weeks after the article’s publication, she told me she had been “shocked” by the positive way she spoke of Priorsville when Nick interviewed her, despite the suffering she’s seen some of its residents endure. “I love this community, and I love these people with my whole heart,” she told me. “And they are worth fighting for. It’s who we are.”

When the PPE article about her came out, “I was a superstar for about a week,” Sally laughingly told me over the telephone. “People came up to me in Walmart and hugged me. There was a lot of good reaction.” She shared one particularly memorable exchange:

I was at a gas station, and there’s this gentlemen there who’s taken care of me for the last couple of years when I go in to get my gas. So he walks out, and we do what we always do, and he says, “You know, I saw your picture in the paper, and I read the article,” and I say, “You did? Thank you.” And he says, “You never know what people have gone through in their life.” He didn’t know, he had no idea, you know, about me losing a child, why [the nonprofit] was there. He said, “I liked you before. I like you better now.”

Since her story was published, Sally told me, donations have increased. “I think people, they read it and they heard my heart,” she said. “They didn’t know, you know. I assumed people knew.”

The story of Sally’s life and passion for the less fortunate in Priorsville, and how the broader community came to know of them, offers a small demonstration of the power local media can have to shape views among their readers. There are people in communities all over the world fighting to change minds and challenge status quos. But often, people like Sally who are outspoken and at times critical of community institutions
in place to address social issues locally have a difficult time making their voices heard. In Sally’s case, appearing in the newspaper elevated the credibility of someone who, because she moved in from somewhere else and is not afraid to challenge those who think Priorsville does not need to change, was viewed as an outsider. But who gets the opportunity to talk to newspaper audiences about matters such as poverty, and how are those stories framed? This chapter is primarily concerned with those questions. As noted in Chapter 2, readers and viewers of media products use the frames journalists provide to make sense of new information (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Entman, 1993). I conducted qualitative and quantitative analyses of the primary local news sources in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek to identify those frames. As noted in Chapter 4, I analyzed content published over a six month period in the three weekly newspapers, and over a four month period in the one daily newspaper, the Greenburg Star, reviewing the publications for news and information relating to local poverty and need. I recorded basic quantitative data about stories that appeared on the front pages of the newspapers for a quantitative analysis, coding for story placement, story topic, the inclusion of photos, whether the story made mention of poverty, and what sources were quoted in the story.

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39 The Greenburg Star sample included the 85 newspapers published between November 1, 2013, and February 28, 2014. The Priorsville Post-Examiner sample included the 26 newspapers published between October 3, 2013, and March 27, 2014. The Priorsville Record sample covered the same dates but included only 25 newspapers, because the Record does not publish a newspaper during the week of Christmas. The Deer Creek Chronicle sample covered the 25 issues published between November 7, 2013, and April 24, 2014. Two hyperlocal news websites, GreenburgToday.com and the Deer Creek Advocate, were subjected to a secondary analysis. The GreenburgToday.com sample included 197 stories published between November 2013 and the end of February 2014. The bulk of posts published on the Deer Creek Advocate and the slow load time of the site made calendar-based sampling impractical. Instead, I used keywords to create a purposive sample that is described in more detail later in this chapter.

40 The author coded stories for the quantitative content analysis. To test the reliability of the coding instrument, a second person coded the front pages of 15 issues (90 stories) randomly chosen from the sample. Reliability estimates using Scott’s pi were .75 for both story classification and references to poverty, which are high enough to draw tentative conclusions (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998, p. 131).
The analyses of newspaper content in this chapter show that news about poverty and issues that residents directly tied to poverty, such as unemployment and homelessness, was largely absent from the columns of local newspapers, the pages of local news websites, and their social media feeds. Quantitative analyses of samples of the four newspapers published in the fall and winter of 2013 and the spring of 2014 showed that the percentage of front-page stories that addressed poverty or economic need in the community ranged from 10% in the Prior County Record to 4.4% the Deer Creek Chronicle.

Before discussing what was not written, however, this chapter will examine what was written in the four newspapers. In the sections that follow, I will describe local poverty coverage in each of the three communities under study, gleaned from qualitative and quantitative analysis of newspaper content. I will also discuss a secondary analysis of two popular local news websites in Greenburg and Deer Creek, which were cited by residents as important alternatives to local newspapers. I return to the three dominant frames at the conclusion of the chapter, where I will illustrate the ways that the dominant local news frames relate to (and, in most cases, reinforce) established understandings of poverty in Appalachia. When news about poverty was present, it took the form of one of three dominant frames:

- **Hard facts**, usually in the form of statistics about economic issues in the community and often presented in the newspapers with little or no context. These stories were almost always based on the release of statistics (in most cases, unemployment rates) from a state government. The newspapers did not include many stories utilizing the hard facts frame, but those stories that did
appear tended to be featured prominently. The fact that hard fact stories tended to make it to the front page (four front-page stories in the Record featured the hard-facts frame, and the Star and the PPE each published three front-page stories using the frame), coupled with the seriousness of unemployment and poverty in the three communities under study, make the hard facts frame important, despite its relative infrequency.

- **Community responses** to poverty that show readers what others in the community are doing to help their less fortunate neighbors. To borrow a phrase from newspaper lingo, this frame often appeared as “grip-and-grin” coverage: a photo of one person or group handing over a check or donated goods to the representative of a nonprofit organization over a smile and a handshake. Community response stories sometimes appeared as nothing more than a small photo and caption of a one-time gift buried deep in the newspaper. At other times, they took the form of bylined news stories about local church efforts or charities. There is a congratulatory tone to many community response stories. They show that individuals in the community care about those who are less fortunate and are able to mobilize resources to help them. Often, community response news is less about those who use services and more about those who provide them.

- **Resources** for those who need help with emergency housing, food, clothing, and other matters. In some newspapers, recurring news briefs about permanent resources for the needy were published in almost every issue. In other cases, news about community resources came more sporadically, as deadlines for aid
applications approached. Unlike stories about hard facts or community responses, information about resources for the needy rarely took the form of a fully reported news story. More often, it appeared as a paragraph or two tucked away inside the newspaper.

As the data in this chapter show, the local newspapers in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek—three of the most economically distressed communities in the United States—provide little information about those in their communities who are struggling. Why aren’t their stories “newsworthy?” It was not because the people are not newsworthy or important: my sample of 804 front-page stories in four newspapers included stories about many “regular people” who made it into the newspaper for acts as simple as walking a dog through town (this man was profiled on the front page of the Deer Creek Chronicle after the editor met him and struck up a conversation) or feeding bread crumbs to the ducks at a local pond when the weather turns cold (in another short profile on the front page of the Greenburg Star). It was not because advertisers did not want to see those stories: local businesspeople who advertise in each of the three communities told me they wished their newspapers would cover poverty more aggressively (as will be detailed in Chapter 8). The reason the stories of few low-income people are told is, I will argue in the next chapter, more innocent but nonetheless problematic.

Greenburg: “We’re Moving Forward”

During the study period, the Greenburg Star’s front pages were most often dominated by stories about government acts or local crimes. Those story types accounted for 21% and 16% of the front-page news items in the Star between November 2013 and
February 2014. Sandra, the Star’s editor, told me the remote pagination center that designs the newspaper uses a formulaic approach and, as a result, front pages often tend to look alike. Most front pages I reviewed for this study included a lead story running all the way across the top of the page. That lead story was almost always about crime, local government, or local politics.

I conducted a content analysis to get information on poverty coverage that appeared on the front pages of the 85 issues of the Star published between November 1, 2013, and February 28, 2014. Of the 406 stories that appeared on the front page over those four months, 37 (9%) referenced poverty in some way. Twenty-three of those news items (which included photos as well as stories) were about philanthropic efforts in the community or events honoring volunteers that fall neatly into the community response frame. The sample included three front-page stories about unemployment that were consistent with the hard facts frame (no other front page stories used statistics about poverty or unemployment). Seven of the stories referenced resources to locals in need (in line with the responses frame). An examination of sourcing revealed that nonprofit agency directors or spokespeople were quoted in 17 of those stories, government officials were quoted in three stories, and a local resident (a business owner who organized a food drive) was quoted in one. Seventeen of the stories that referenced poverty, including the three unemployment stories, did so without attributing comments to a source.

41 The remaining four stories were about other local issues and referenced local poverty only in passing. For example, a January 2014 story about a city council meeting noted the council’s interest in applying for a grant for local revitalization. The grant, the story noted “is targeted to distressed communities where residents fall into the low to moderate income bracket.” The reference to the grant was the story’s only mention of Greenburg’s economic condition, but since it was mentioned, it was coded as a reference to poverty.
Twenty-four of the 37 news items that referenced poverty included a photo. Some of those were “stand-alone” photos—pictures published with a caption, but not accompanied by a story. As was the case with story sources, nonprofit organizers and spokespeople were featured heavily in those photos. Only two of the 24 photos appeared to picture individuals who were receiving services. One of those photos was a wide-angle shot of people at a food bank in which few faces are clearly visible. The other was a photo of police officers shopping with children at a “Shop with a Cop” event. In that photo, which showed readers how the local police force accompanied young children to a local retailer and bought them Christmas toys using money donated by others in the community, the faces of service recipients are clearly visible. Their names are not included in the photo caption—they are identified only as people who benefited from the program.

The “Shop with a Cop” story, versions of which also appeared newspapers in Priorsville and Deer Creek at about the same time, is an example of a story that reflects the community response frame. The frame highlights the work individuals in Greenburg are doing to address the needs in their community. Of the three frames described in this study, the community response frame was the most common, especially around the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. In a front-page story published under the headline “Signup time for Christmas toys and food boxes,” Sandra wrote:

GREENBURG – For many years the [local faith-based nonprofit organization] has given out special holiday food boxes to disadvantaged Green County families. In addition, the [organization] has provided toys to assure that no child wakes up on Christmas morning to find there are no gifts under the tree.

Churches, community organizations and many individuals have contributed generously to both the food and the gifts for children programs over the years. However, as jobs have disappeared and money has become tight for many families, the contributions have decreased just as the need increased.
Recognizing the plight of many community residents, the [local social club] which earlier carried out a program of providing gifts for children, joined the [organization] in its toys for kids of parents who qualified to participate in other programs offered at the [organization].

Although the headline suggests that the main thrust of the story will be about signing up for the services, only the last three paragraphs speak to what individuals need to do to benefit from the services. The rest of the story is about the volunteers who organize the efforts, as are the two photos published alongside it (one of members of the faith-based organization, the other of members of the social club). The story does little to encourage people to relate to those who are in need or foster discussion about ways to change their situations. Rather, it focuses attention on other individuals who are providing the gifts—an admirable act, but one that does little to encourage the community to reconsider its attitudes toward the poor.

While community responses to poverty are sometimes reported under bylines on the front page, much of the coverage attributed to that frame appear in the forms of stand-alone photos of groups donating food, clothing, or a check to a local charity, or as announcements about opportunities to engage in such a donation. Churches, civic groups, and nonprofits often submitted news items such as this one, which ran on an inside page in November:

[Local community organization] will hold their fall food drive on [date] at the Dollar General Parking lot in [community] from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. We will be collecting canned food, non-perishable [sic] food items, paper product, personal hygiene products, and monetary donations. All items collected will be donated to [local nonprofit] and will be distributed at Christmas time. For information, contact [organizer name and telephone number].

Although it was by no means common, the Greenburg Star utilized the community resource frame far more often than the other newspapers considered in this
study. Those resources took many forms: advertisements for housing vouchers for low-income residents (better known as Section 8 housing), notes about one-time free clothing giveaways, and brief informative pieces about standing opportunities to get assistance.

The following announcement often appeared at the end of a church calendar published in the *Star*:

The [local faith-based nonprofit organization] hosts a variety of events and service projects available throughout the week at [community center]. Some of those are as follows,

- Meals at [community center] – 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m., Tuesday and Thursday.
- [Organization] shop [a thrift store] – 9 a.m.-3 p.m., Monday-Friday and 9 a.m.-1 p.m., Saturday.
- Comfort Club – 9 a.m.-noon, Wednesday.
- Food Pantry – 9-11 a.m., Tuesday-Friday.
- Celebrate Recovery – 7-9 p.m., Monday.
- Shape-up – 9-11 a.m. and 5-7 p.m., Tuesday and Thursday.
- Zumba – 6:30 p.m., Tuesday.

The above announcement provides dates and times of events at this nonprofit, one of the larger charitable organizations in Greenburg and the recipient of quite a bit of coverage in the *Star* (often in the form of a photo of an organization volunteer accepting a check). However, resource information oriented more toward people who need help is fairly uncommon.\(^42\) The man who runs the faith-based nonprofit in the announcement above told me that the coverage the *Star* does provide, while appreciated, often does little to offer real help to its readers or community activists who want to address poverty.\(^43\)

The voices of those who struggle with financial uncertainty were so rare across the four newspapers studied for this dissertation that I did not assign them a frame. However, they are present in some ways in the *Star*, albeit in ways that do little to tie the issue of poverty directly to Greenburg. The *Star* occasionally publishes a column by a

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\(^{42}\) The infrequency of the resource frame was even more pronounced in the other three newspapers studied.

\(^{43}\) The nonprofit manager’s views are discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.
woman in another part of the state who writes about parenting children with special needs. In one column, that writer spoke to the experiences of those who live with need:

But the true pain felt by the special needs community during these festive months is financial. Often on fixed incomes or one-income households due to needing one parent constantly available for care, medical appointments and therapy, the added expenses of the colder months when the heat is usually turned on, additional groceries for the holiday dinner, buying unnecessary presents for too many people based on society’s expectations, and all the while truly needing to purchase warm winter clothing/boots/hats in this year’s sizes for their loved one. Or a new therapy item. Or to fill a small corner with sensory items recommended by the therapist.

I know that feeling. Our family applied for food bank help a week or so ago only to find it closed for the next two weeks. In addition, many families like ours have difficulty receiving help from food banks due to dietary restrictions which are wide-spread in our demographic. I don’t qualify for medical or dental help since my divorce isn’t final. My children have been making due [sic] in summer clothes far too long, and the looks on their faces when they put it on and intentionally don’t complain lances my heart in horrible pain. We’ve stretched groceries farther than I ever thought they could be. None of us ever want to see beans and rice again, a wish I’m quite sure won’t come true. I’d give anything to have the funds to get the iTouch devices and behavioral apps that the therapist recommended as they make real progress when they have help dealing with not only the autism and bipolarism but especially ADD/ADHD. Instead, I will pray I can get her new socks, underwear, gloves, and a hat for this winter already forecast to be harsh and snowy. My budget for groceries, medical copays and medication next week is so small that I cried when I saw it in print.

In this piece, the writer offers her readers a glimpse into what it’s like to live with need and uncertainty—a story with which many individuals in Priorsville can relate. Although it published very few locally produced editorial and columns, the Star often published nationally syndicated opinion columns about matters ranging from national politics to which electronic tablet would make the perfect Christmas present this year (even if it is a gift that would be too expensive for many local residents). Several of those columns published in late 2013 and early 2014 expressed support for efforts to increase the minimum wage. The Star also published eight different syndicated editorial cartoons that addressed social inequality, often from a political perspective and usually about the
minimum wage. While that syndicated editorial content was present, it did not have a local angle and did not seem to resonate with local readers in Greenburg. Most Greenburg residents I interviewed for this study told me the Star rarely writes about poverty; none of those I interviewed mentioned the syndicated content that appeared on the editorial page of their local newspaper.

Under her Star byline, editor Sandra often was quick to point out the economic positives in its community. The first two paragraphs of a front-page November story she wrote provided a typical example:

GREENBURG—“Lots of customers, busier than usual,” was the general consensus of merchants in downtown Greenburg about the traditional holiday open house held Monday night as a kickoff to the Christmas shopping season.

Shelves in the downtown stores were filled with holiday decorations and gift items for holiday giving and customers were in the mood to begin their shopping.

In another article the same month (and using the same lead construct), Sandra again expressed optimism about the community, and particularly its efforts to put a good face forward, as she wrote about a local marketing effort:

GREENBURG—“We’re moving forward.”

That was the response from two business people when asked last week about the [community marketing] project being carried out in collaboration with the [large state university in the region].

Coverage of Greenburg’s downtown business scene often reflected a community where there was money to be spent. The images of a thriving downtown Greenburg were particularly off-putting to some individuals who had less cash for Christmas goods. Their interpretation of stories like the one above is included in Chapter 8.

At GreenburgToday.com, the community’s new hyperlocal news site, editor and founder Theresa told me I could expect to see a news product that was markedly different
from the *Star*. While she prides herself on her willingness to cover political arguments and challenges to local government that do not make it into the *Star*, Theresa said her primary motivation for founding the site was to provide positive news about Greenburg.

During the time period I analyzed (November 1, 2013-February 28, 2014), Theresa typically posted four to six new posts every weekday. Some were reported stories that carried her byline. Most were news releases or short announcements. She published many press releases from state government offices, a small regional university not far from Greenburg, and corporations with a regional interest (including a healthcare chain that owns several hospitals in the area). Many of those news releases had no clear local news angle, although most had regional or state relevance. Bylined pieces were most often stories about drug busts (most often involving methamphetamines) or coverage of city council meetings in Greenburg. She also published large numbers of obituaries (with each obit warranting its own separate post) and announcements about upcoming events in Greenburg.

Theresa told me in February that GreenburgToday.com had not yet turned a profit, but she was building an advertising base. Advertisers included some local radio stations (one of which she partners with to produce local news segments), a church, some local businesses in Greenburg. A local bank holds the largest advertising spot (the bank is also one of the *Star’s* major advertisers). GreenburgToday maintains an active Facebook account, where Theresa posts links to stories and announcements about breaking news such as winter school closings and traffic accidents that, in most cases, are later integrated into posts on GreenburgToday.com. Readers rarely comment on
GreenburgToday’s Facebook posts.\textsuperscript{44} However, locally produced copy on the website, such as submitted sets of photos, time-sensitive local announcements, and stories about local arrests and fires, take on a social media life of their own. Some of those stories were “shared” on Facebook one hundred times or more. Most press releases published on the site were not shared to Facebook by GreenburgToday’s readers.

As was the case with the \textit{Star}, Greenburg Today rarely addressed local need in the community. Of the 197 articles posted on the site between November 1, 2013, and February 28, 2014, only eight addressed local need, and most with four of those fitting into the community response frame. The website posted stories about the local Knights of Columbus chapter donating coats for local children, deer hunters giving venison to area food banks (this was a statewide story with no local angle), and a bank-sponsored fundraiser for a local food pantry. Although it did not provide standing information about community resources as the \textit{Star} did, Greenburg Today did publish two resource-related stories. One was about a local job fair. The other, posted during a period of extreme cold in early January 2014, told readers that a local church had opened its doors to provide a warm space for local residents who did not have heat in their homes, or had no place warm to go that week. The response to that story on social media shows the impact that such information, rare as it may be, can have in Greenburg. The story about the local church warming station was shared on Facebook 315 times. Only one GreenburgToday.com story\textsuperscript{45} got more exposure on that social network in the fall and winter of 2013-2014.

\textsuperscript{44} The same was true of the \textit{Star}’s Facebook page, which was updated less frequently.  
\textsuperscript{45} The story that got more “shares” was about a serious snow emergency in the county.
Priorsville: Discouraging Numbers, Optimistic Stories

The *Priorsville Post-Examiner* and *The Prior County Record* are run by different sets of men with different professional backgrounds and, as the next chapter will show, somewhat different views of their newspapers’ roles in the community and their own jobs as editors and publishers. However, they both cover a fairly small number of groups that are active in local affairs, so there some overlap in the information they provide about social life, and it was not unusual to see some of the same stories and photos published in both newspapers on the same week.

The *Prior County Record* published 117 front-page stories between October 3, 2013 and March 27, 2014. Of those stories, 12 (10%) directly referenced economic hardship in the community. Four stories reported state unemployment figures, providing numbers in stories that were only a few paragraphs long, and a fifth referenced local government layoffs. Five front-page stories addressed philanthropic efforts in the community (the community response frame). One front page story, about free medical clinics for rural individuals, fit into the community resources frame. Only two of the stories directly quoted sources speaking to need in the community (one nonprofit spokesperson and one local citizen, who described the reasons she donated to charity).

Of the 99 stories that appeared in the *PPE*’s front page between October 2013 and March 2014, nine (9%) addressed economic hardship directly. Although the percentages are similar, the nature of the *PPE*’s front-page writing on poverty was different from its across-town competitor, the *Record*, and the *Greenburg Star*, which is produced by journalists similar to those at the *PPE* in terms of education, background and experience. The *PPE* did not publish check presentations to nonprofits on its front pages. In fact, it
did not publish any stories about philanthropic efforts related to poverty on A1 during the study period. The region’s economic status instead was referenced in stories about local elections, crime, education, and agriculture. The PPE called upon a slightly larger and more diverse set of sources in those stories: politicians, a police officer, the chamber of commerce director, and a nonprofit agency manager.

*The Record* relies on reader submissions for much of its content. Several residents I interviewed had submitted information for the newspaper for publication; many told me that it appeared in the newspaper pretty much as they wrote it, with minimal editing or cuts for length. The PPE also publishes a great deal of submitted content, but it was more likely than the *Record* to edit content for length. Many of those submitted news items illustrate this study’s community response frame. Shortly before Christmas 2013, the *Record* ran a six-paragraph, front-page, above the fold story about a toy giveaway at a local community center. The story, which included three photos and took up much of the top of the front page, lead with this paragraph:

> When help is needed, people do come through. For the Saturday night and Sunday afternoon Toy Event at [location], a total of 137 volunteers showed up ready to do whatever was necessary to provide each parent with two toys per child for Christmas. That was twice the volunteers we had last year—and the committee is so very grateful.

The story went on to note out-of-town groups that came to help with the distribution, to tell readers how many children “were served” by the event (1,984 from 432 families), and to compare that number to the previous year. From there, however, the *Record*’s submitters provided a rare glimpse into the life of one of the recipients of the toy giveaway:

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46 Check presentations and other philanthropic achievements were published, but they appeared on inside pages of the newspaper.
A personal story from [event volunteer] – Jane Doe had waited in the long line outside the [location] on Sunday morning. Jane was somewhere around #200 in line. She told the lady waiting in line behind her that she was praying for a bicycle for one of her two children. They prayed together. In years past, bicycles were distributed first come first served. However, a new system was implemented this year hoping to make distribution of the limited number of bicycles fairer. The parents standing in line had no idea of the change. When it was Jane’s turn at the registration table, she was asked if she could use a bicycle for her 6 year old. Her eyes filled with tears.

One of the three photos accompanying the story is of Jane, standing with the woman who relayed the anecdote, another event volunteer, and the purple bicycle with white wheels. The PPE also ran the photo of Jane Doe, but did so without the lengthy press release and anecdote; only the photo and a caption were published, and they appeared near the back of the newspaper.

The story of Jane Doe’s Christmas gift is a typical example of the community responses frame to poverty coverage. It shows that the work put forth by community volunteers (who, the reader may presume, are not in need of the program’s services) is making the desired impact. It is atypical in that it includes information about an individual who was on the receiving end of the effort. In most cases, those who are donating their time, food, clothes, or money are featured in stories and photos. As will be noted in Chapter 7, several journalists I interviewed for this study (including the publisher of the Record) said they would be reluctant to publish the names or photos of individuals who received such services for fear that the readers would look down upon the subject of the story. I showed the story about Jane Doe to four of the people I interviewed. All of them said they believed Jane had been treated fairly by the newspaper, and that she would have no reason to be embarrassed. Inside the same copy
of the *Record* that highlighted Jane Doe’s story, the newspaper featured another group of local residents who were giving to the needy. The article, in its entirety, read:

1,924 food items were collected during this year’s [vocational training program] food drive sponsored by the Student Government Association. Thanks to everyone who contributed. The food items will be donated to our students who have a need during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. Any remaining food will be donated to the [local nonprofit]. [Local nonprofit] collects food throughout the year to help needy families who have a need in [neighboring county] and Prior County.

The article about the food collection was accompanies by two photos, featuring the individuals who were responsible for collecting the food items standing in front of cardboard boxes filled with canned goods. The *PPE* also published the photos and accompanying information. The food donation story is a much more typical example of a community response story in that it praises the efforts of the non-poor to help the poor, who remain largely faceless.

The *Record*’s first issue of 2014 featured 11 color photos taken during an event that paired low-income children with police officers at a “Shop with a Cop” event, where officers took children to the local Walmart to pick out a toy that was purchased with money donated for the event. Photos from the event tended to focus more on the volunteer police officers than on the children and families who were taking part: Officers were the prominent subjects in eight of the 11 photos (two of the remaining three were group shots, and the last was a line of police cars driving to the store). Children or families with children were often noted as the recipients of community support in community response stories. Interestingly, the program that received more coverage in

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47 Families who received toys as a result of “Shop with a Cop,” including young children, were also featured in the photos. I showed the “Shop with a Cop” photo spread to the same four interview participants who saw the story about Jane Doe and asked their opinions on the coverage. The fact that the children were pictured often resulted in negative reactions from the interview participants. This reaction will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 9. The *PPE* did not publish photos from the “Shop with a Cop” event.
both Priorsville newspapers than any other single effort was a community response effort designed to collect clothing and other goods to be delivered to children in other countries.

The Record also published many (mostly short) news items and stories using the resources frame for those in need. A typical example, from the Record: “[State agency] will be distributing USDA Commodities on Thursday, [date], at [local church], from 8:30am-1:00pm, weather permitting. Please bring your own bags or boxes, and you may pick up for 3 households only.” Another example, from a spring edition of the Record, reads, in its entirety: “[Local church] has free clothing giveaway every Thursday and Friday 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Prom dress ministry Thursdays at church, speak to Freda.” Announcements about resources for the needy in the Record sometimes told readers about opportunities that were a county or two away, and they occasionally appeared months in advance of actual events. Community organizations that were in need of donations that would be used to aid low-income individuals also received some attention in The Priorsville Record, often through short (one to four paragraphs) announcements published inside the newspaper. These announcements frequently ran on multiple days. For example, a call for Salvation Army bell ringers appeared in most issues in November and December. Occasionally, larger stories about agencies experiencing need were published, such as an article about a local children’s center that published in late 2013. The article, which was about 24 column inches long, also included a six-column-wide color photo presumed to be the center’s board of directors (it did not include a caption). The article profiled the various programs executed by the center, with frequent calls for donations in the form of quotes from its director. The article ended with this paragraph:

[The center director] ended with these words, “Our needs are many and our funding is few. We really just have to look at the community for support. If you
can give and you do we appreciate it and thank you so much, but if you can’t then we understand just [sic] keep the Children’s Center and the children that we serve in your prayers.”

It is interesting to note that programs to help individuals often received coverage over several issues of the Record, but in most cases, that coverage consisted of a paragraph or two tucked away inside the newspaper. Campaigns to help organizations such as the children’s center, on the other hand, received much larger spreads, with long stories and photos. It is likely that the difference is the product of the Record’s tendency to rely on submitted content. In the Record, organizations that have the resources and wherewithal to produce photos and long write-ups will get more attention than those that do not. Such an arrangement favors the larger nonprofit groups, which already dominate much of the poverty coverage in the four local newspapers I studied.

Both newspapers in Priorsville published hard facts stories about the county’s unemployment rate every month between October 2013 and March 2014. No quotes appeared in any of the stories about local unemployment in the Priorsville newspapers. The PPE told its readers on two occasions that it had asked the state agency that compiles and releases unemployment numbers for clarification on unexplained fluctuations in the numbers. The newspaper did not receive answers to its questions, the stories noted.

Stories about unemployment rate increases and decreases were reported monthly in the PPE, the Prior County News, and the Greenburg Star, and they constitute the only stories in this study’s sample to use the “hard facts” frame. None of the three newspapers quoted a local source, and only the PPE reached out to any source to speak to local numbers, instead relying only on government statistics to tell the story of

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48 Unemployment is less of an issue in Deer Creek, and the newspaper there only published one unemployment story over the six-month study period. That story, which included state numbers and no quoted sources, was similar to the ones that appeared in the other newspapers.
community joblessness. Record stories about unemployment appeared on the front page of the newspaper four times over the six months’ worth of papers reviewed for this study. The stories tended to be short and to the point, often using phrases from the state government announcements verbatim. The PPE often provided more context. For example, the first five paragraphs from the PPE’s February 2014 story about the unemployment rate read:

Prior County’s unemployment rate was 15.4 percent in December, unchanged from November’s jobless rate, according to data released last week by the [state agency].

The state’s data showed that unemployed persons declined to a five-year low, but employment and the estimated local work force also tumbled, the state said.

Total unemployment in December was 1,200 in Prior County, according to the state’s data, the lowest since it stood at 1,130 in October 2008 amid a still-young and deepening economic recession. But the total number of employed workers in Prior County dropped from 6,590 in November to 6,480 in December, the same data showed. That number of employed workers is the lowest in Prior County since July 1993.

The estimated local work force also stood at a 20-year low, according to the state, falling from 7,810 in November to 7,680 in December.

The separation of hard facts from stories about resources or community responses serves to dehumanize issues such as poverty and unemployment. Unemployment is a critical news issue that impacts many people in Priorsville and Greenburg (which has, in the early 2010s, had occasionally held its states highest unemployment rate). However, the three newspapers cover the issue of unemployment in formulaic ways, sometimes using the same language to describe the issue month after month. For example, the following passage appeared in a front-page Greenburg Star story written by Susan about unemployment in early December (reporting September’s unemployment numbers):

When it comes to unemployment rates — in terms of rankings, it’s a good thing when a county’s number rises with the higher the ranking, the lower the unemployment.
Counties with an unemployment rate above 10 percent (in addition to Green and [other county]) were [other county] at 11.6 percent, [other county] at 11.2 percent, [other county] at 10.3 percent.

Later in December, Susan wrote another front-page story about unemployment rates, in which she included this very similar passage:

When it comes to unemployment rates — in terms of rankings, it’s a good thing when a county’s number rises with the higher the ranking, the lower the unemployment.

Counties with an unemployment rate above 10 percent (in addition to [other county], Green and [other county]) were [other county] at 11.2 percent, [other county] at 11.1, [other county] at 10.7, [other county] at 10.4 percent and [other county] and [other county] at 10.1.

The same language (with different numbers) appeared in a February story, again by Susan:

When it comes to unemployment rates — in terms of rankings, it’s a good thing when a county’s number rises with the higher the ranking, the lower the unemployment.

Counties with an unemployment rate above 10 percent (in addition to [other county], [other county], [other county], [other county] and Green) were [other county] at 10.8 percent, [other county] at 10.8, and [other county] at 10.5

Record and PPE coverage of Priorsville’s economy and local needs are different in other important ways. Many of those differences stem from differences in writing and production practices at the two newspapers. With no full-time editorial employees, the Record relies heavily on community members to write and submit editorial content. At the PPE, editor Nick and publisher Bill, both of whom have journalism degrees and experience in the industry, produce content that is more in line with journalistic norms. For example, PPE stories use quotes from community sources (quotes were often absent from Record stories) and included the bylines of the authors (the Record rarely used bylines). As Chapter 7 will note, editors and publishers at the two newspapers also have different views of their roles in the community. Those factors contribute to a key
difference in the two newspapers: While the Record was often content to let others in the community (normally government officials or business leaders) set the public agenda as it appears on their pages, the PPE was more likely to stake out its own position on public matters and to attempt to present more community views on local matters. The Record takes a reactive position within its community, providing a platform to the voices who send in material deemed “newsworthy” (the process by which newsworthiness is judged will be discussed in the next chapter).

As noted in Chapter 5, Nick, the PPE’s editor, is also a member of the Priorsville Chamber of Commerce’s board of directors, and he has taken an active role in promoting business development in the community. That effort includes a regular “Business Spotlight” page featuring a single advertisement (paid for by the chamber of commerce) and a long story (typically accompanied by one or more photos) about a successful Priorsville business. The story about Sally described at the beginning of this chapter was a Business Spotlight story. The spotlights sometimes allude to the area’s difficult economy, pointing out that, through endurance and hard work, the businesspeople profiled have been able to succeed despite the economic hardships they have faced in Priorsville. For example, Nick wrote the following passage about Derek, the son of a local coal miner who opened his own auto repair shop:

Like virtually every other business, [business name] has been forced to weather the storm of economic hardships that have struck Prior County over the past six years. While retail isn’t a primary part of Derek’s business, he says that declining household income due to shrinking paychecks or layoffs still has an impact.

“People will carry higher deductibles that they can’t afford (to keep their insurance premiums lower), they’ll drive damaged cars because they don’t have the money to repair them, and they’ll drive with only liability insurance, which doesn’t pay to repair your car if you slide into a ditch,” he said.

But, he adds, there is light at the end of the tunnel.

49 Derek is a pseudonym.
“The working people of Prior County are tough,” he said. “We didn’t get into this overnight and we aren’t gonna get out of it overnight. We’re seeing some job growth in our county, our jobless rate is shrinking, and the return of the hospital is exciting because it gives us hope for tomorrow that new and better jobs are coming back.

“The opportunities are there if we’ll just work at them and work with each other to grow this county,” he adds. “We’re not in it alone. We’re in it together, and it takes all of us — businesses, consumers, retailers, all of us — working together and keeping our money in Prior County in order for the county to thrive. And I see that. People are trying to shop at home, they’re trying to keep their dollars in Prior County. It’s exciting to see the potential and opportunity that is there.”

In another profile, which coincidentally featured Harold, another auto mechanic, Nick pointed out the businessman’s simple beginnings and early struggles, suggesting that those who may be dealing with economic hardships in their own businesses need not give up:

From its humble beginnings in 2010 with a single employee — “we just started with nothing and tried to keep the rent paid,” Harold says — Hatcher Automotive recently celebrated its third anniversary with five trained and certified mechanics or technicians.

The profiles acknowledge the difficult economic realities people in Priorsville face. However, they also suggest that those problems can be overcome. Optimism about the future also comes through in other stories in the PPE. An unbylined story that appeared as part of a year-end wrap-up in early January began this way:

While Prior County’s unemployment rate has been the state’s highest for an improbable 45 consecutive months, shattering the record for longest stays atop that dubious list, there has been a sense of cautious optimism that things might be improving.

Later in that story, the newspaper quotes the local chamber of commerce director, who said the community is “continuously being looked at by retail and restaurants and we

50 Harold and Hatcher Automotive are pseudonyms.
51 Nick’s general view of himself as an advocate for the community and his role with the local chamber of commerce heavily influence his writing. The next chapter will explore those influences in more detail.
have several interested parties. It’s nothing but positive, assuming our current employers holds steady” [sic].

In the *PPE*, success—for individuals, for businesses, and for the community as a whole—seems to hinge on the ability to keep pushing ahead despite economic and social hardships. Success is shown to be in reach for those who have the gumption to persevere, but local news coverage does little to reflect the lives of the large number of people who *cannot* get ahead. The notion that perseverance, resolve, and positive thinking are the key to economic and social achievement may sound great to those who have already attained both, but they also place a great deal of the impetus for change on individuals. That approach is a hallmark of the “culture of poverty” argument—considering success as first and foremost an individual trait can be seen to have the same effect as viewing poverty as such.

Deer Creek: “Folks Who Shine”

During our first meeting, *Deer Creek Chronicle* owner and senior editor Gregory told me I would find little news about poverty and related issues in his newspaper. He was right: Of the 182 stories published on the *Chronicle’s* front page between November 2013 and April 2014, only eight (4.4%) referenced poverty or local economic need, fewer than any other newspaper in this study. Most weeks, the front page was dominated by human interest stories, and the newspaper’s cover always included at least one photo under the header “Folks who shine,” a weekly feature that recognized individuals for good deeds in the community. Folks who shined were recognized for a variety of things, from assisting motorists involved in car accidents to thawing out pipes during cold

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52 As noted in the preceding chapter, Gregory often includes information about his personal life in his newspaper. Interestingly, there were almost as many photos of Gregory in the newspaper (seven) as there were stories that referenced poverty over the six-month study period (November 2013-April 2014).
weather to serving as elected officials. Only one of the “Folks who shine” packages published over the 25 issues I studied featured someone who was identified as struggling financially. That item was about a benefit dinner for a local government worker who was struggling to pay his son’s high medical bills following a series of surgeries. That feature and a series of identical news briefs promoting the dinner beforehand accounted for four of the eight front-page references to poverty and economic need in the Chronicle. Inside pages of the newspaper contained a mix of local sports, community news columns, opinion pieces by Gregory and others, and photos and news releases submitted by local groups and state agencies. As was the case with the front page, few stories inside the newspaper described local poverty, its causes, or its consequences.

Most of the articles in which poverty or charity was mentioned described efforts to raise money or collect donations, signifying a community response to need. For example, the newspaper published a pre-Christmas letter to the editor from a nonprofit volunteer who encouraged residents to donate to a program that ships gifts to children overseas, and in April, the newspaper published an announcement about a food drive to help stock the shelves of a local food pantry. Other community response articles included a December brief telling readers about a food and clothing giveaway, a New Year’s resolution piece in which a local woman said she resolved to give more because “there’s a lot of people who have a lot less,” and the four news items about the local government worker who was struggling financially due to the illness of his adult son. A brief article published three consecutive weeks in December noted that “the hospital bills and days off of work have put a big financial strain on his family.” In early January, a few days after the benefit dinner, the newspaper published a photo from the event and a four-paragraph
story detailing the medical condition of the government worker’s son and his father’s response to the community’s charity.

The story of the government worker’s son illustrated a response to a financial struggle caused by a specific event. A few other Chronicle writers submitted articles to the newspaper describing their personal emotional responses to the systemic economic distress they witnessed, a type of response that is different from most other community response stories but, in a sense, still results in the same effect. Poverty was addressed on two occasions by a freelance writer who frequently submitted personal columns for publication. In the fall of 2013, the writer (who graduated from the college in Deer Creek but never wrote specifically about the town) authored a piece about a trip to the grocery store that included this passage:

I walked to the checkout line with my bread and cans of soup. I was looking forward to a warm lunch when I noticed the food pantry bin near the wall. It wasn’t empty, but it wasn’t full either. I thought for a second of all the loving Moms in the area with no cans of soup to give to their own children. I glanced upward and thought of my own Mom smiling down on me. Then I paid for my food, grabbed my bag full of soup cans and placed it in the collection bin.

As I walked outside, the cold air did its best to bite into me, but it couldn’t chill the God-given warmth I felt inside. I drove home with a heart full of love happily remembering the words “I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you have [sic] me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me.” May all your days here be warm ones full of love, giving and God.

A week before Christmas, the same freelance writer wrote a similar piece about feelings he experienced when he saw a homeless woman while out shopping for gifts. He wrote that he initially drove by the woman, who he described as “an older woman in worn, dirty clothes with an incredible sadness in her eyes.” Feeling guilty about driving past without stopping, he wrote, he later drove back to the interstate interchange where he saw the woman and gave her some money and snacks. Concluding the piece, he wrote:
We pulled back out on the highway and made small talk for the rest of the way home. None of us felt proud or even happy with what we had done. We only wished that we could have done more.

I found myself praying to God for the sad eyed lady without a home. I asked him [sic] to wrap his loving arms around her, to send her the help she needed and to be with her always. In the end, I trusted that he would in his infinite love see her home again.

I remembered that Jesus was born in a manger not a mansion, that he too often had no place to lay his head and that he asked us all to love each other as he loved us. And that is what I will continue to strive to do at Christmas time and always.

The issue that carried the freelance writer’s story about his encounter with a homeless woman also gave readers a submitted piece by a man whose son, a police officer, had volunteered for a “Shop with a Cop” program (the article did not specify where its writer or his son lived). In that article, the writer’s son was helping a child who wanted to use his gift money to buy a coat for his sister. The officer was so moved by the boy’s generosity that he pulled money out of his own pocket to buy the boy a coat as well.

In all three of those emotional narratives, the economically disadvantaged people—the young boy shopping for his sister, the homeless woman on the side of the road, and the abstract mom who cannot afford food—serve not as main characters to be known and understood. Instead, the narratives revolve around the writer himself (in the case of the first two stories) and the writer’s son (in the third), people so moved by the plight of others that they decided to do something to help. While their charity is admirable, it does little to challenge the perspective that poor people are helpless and merely awaiting a handout.

Three articles published in the Chronicle provide a somewhat more provocative look at poverty and suggest solutions, a rarity among the newspapers reviewed for this study. In late January 2014, Gregory wrote a personal column in which he discussed
presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson and the 50th anniversary of Johnson’s declaration of a “War on Poverty.” The column was largely a historical account of the federal programs installed in the region at that time. However, late in the piece Gregory wrote:

On this 50th Anniversary of the War on Poverty, we editors would hope that President Barack Obama will, once more, take up, advocate and give new life to this important national goal and to run with it. Stressing the need to end joblessness would be a good start.

Obamacare is a good start to help the 40 percent of medically uninsured and uninsurable Americans, but a little old-fashioned creative thinking, like President Kennedy did, could lead to programs for improving the lives of the chronically poor. In part, a little “couponing education” and tech training might be helpful, too!

The call to action in Gregory’s column, as vague in places as it may be, was rare across the four newspapers and two news websites studied for this dissertation. Although mention of poverty was uncommon in the Deer Creek Chronicle, the newspaper occasionally provided content that not only described a community need, but also suggested social changes that might address that need. In November 2013, the Chronicle published an article under the headline “Growing Up Poor Can Impact Adult Brain Function.” The story, produced by a state news service and distributed to local newspapers, covered a study produced by a team of researchers in another state. The short news article, which ran near the back of the newspaper, noted that “the research suggests that there needs to be more attention given to low-income children, perhaps through screenings at school or at their pediatrician, to look for indicators of stress.”

53 Gregory often used the phrase “we editors” to state the newspaper’s opinion on issues, even in his own personal columns. Others at the paper who write and/or edit copy told me that Gregory made the decisions about such matters.
54 Another columnist featured in that issue of the newspaper had written a column about a couponing class she had attended.
constituted a “particularly vulnerable population.” Later that month, another story from the state news service provided another brief but informative article about children living in poverty, this one detailing evidence that parents who have insurance are more likely to raise healthy children. The article included information about how low-income parents could sign up for Medicaid. Unlike most of the other stories published in the four newspapers examined here, these three stories suggest broader social responsibilities associated with addressing poverty. They also connect the issue of economic distress with matters such as poor health and poor performance in school, which are often exacerbated by poverty.

The Deer Creek Advocate, the local news website mentioned by local residents as a source for credible (albeit sometimes biased, in their views) local news, provides a wide variety of content. The quantity of information on the site is somewhat overwhelming—editor Lance often updates the website 20 or more times a day, publishing information about local events, obituaries, movie reviews, state government press releases, business announcements, political cartoons, yard sales, winning lottery numbers, along with a litany of other topics. Although Lance works in computers, technological aspects of the website seem to limit the reach of the Advocate: Animated GIFs and large numbers of high-resolution photos often make pages load slowly, even over high-speed connections. Deer County residents who do not live in the town said they have limited access to high-speed internet connections. They either do not read the Advocate, or they only skim it at work computers. As noted earlier in this chapter, the quantity of daily posts and technical limitations made date-based sampling of the Advocate impractical. Instead, I drew a sample of stories for this secondary qualitative analysis using keywords that were likely
to produce stories relating to (or at least mentioning) poverty. Because I used this alternative sampling method, I did not record frequencies.

The Advocate did publish some hard facts articles (mostly gleaned from government data), community response pieces (mainly announcements about upcoming philanthropic events), and community resource information. In addition, the content of both news articles and comments on the Advocate reflect a tone that was much different from the other news organizations studied for this dissertation. Poverty was addressed more often, and its causes and impacts were described in much starker and more emotionally charged words. For example, one passage appeared in a post about state intervention in the struggling local school system echoes understanding of powerlessness in the region discussed at length in sociological literature about Appalachia:

Any wonder that the State has caused too many citizens in the County to believe that their personal participation in decision-making processes with the State is a sham? Accept it or not [state capital] officials, fear lurks in the County too of speaking out freely at meetings because of potential for reprisals. That exercise of personal caution to waive freedom of speech and opinion rights is driven by instincts for economic survival. This behavior is typical in poverty stricken areas similar to Deer county [sic] where jobs and other opportunities are scarce under the strict control of a powerful few.

The Advocate also published a column about income inequality on college campuses by American historian Lawrence Wittner, and a separate piece by a peace activist from Massachusetts about Martin Luther King Jr.’s views of poverty and efforts to eradicate it.

The columns, and comments such as the one quoted above, begin to shift the tone in discussions of poverty. In those pieces, the Advocate provides an outlet for writers to

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55 I used the following keywords in that search: poverty, poor, welfare, unemployed, unemployment, and homeless. The search focused on stories posted between November 1, 2013, and April 30, 2014 (the same period used in my analysis of the Deer Creek Chronicle). I filtered out news items that included those words but were not relevant to the study (for example, horoscopes, movie reviews, and reports on fishing conditions). This approach yielded 99 posts for analysis.
express their views of the causes of poverty in a way that empowers writers (such as the anonymous commenter) and offers views of social responsibility and inequality that diverge from the “culture of poverty” mindset reflected in much of the community response coverage observed in the other news outlets I studied.

Comments on the local stories posted on the Deer Creek Advocate were mentioned by some local residents as particularly salacious, gossipy, and unbelievable, and some of those I reviewed for this study lent credence to those concerns. A few commenters, using names such as “No Name Please,” “Concerned,” and “Also Concerned,” lobbed charges of cronyism, government ineptitude, and bias against local government officials, businesspeople, and the local newspaper (and Gregory specifically). Other comments, written by anonymous posters as well as some who included names, lead to civil discussions about community matters. Poverty was mentioned in some comments, and was often discussed from the standpoint of those who struggled with poverty. For example, one reader, using the screen name “Reality,” made this comment at the end of a post recognizing high school graduates: “Great job to all! I can’t give you high enough praise for working so hard!!! My concern is that you will have to leave Gilmer County to get a decent waged job. “On a story about school consolidation, another commenter made the following observation:

Our biggest problem with our economic problem is politics and greed. These two elements are the biggest threats to our poverty and democracy. Seems to me some of us still have the pre-civil war egos. Can it be changed? The greedy and politicians brainwash the people to be patriots. As a result, we volunteer to do their dirty work with inadequate compensation, go to wars we don’t have and put up with their continuous brainwashing that we have democracy. Bullsh**! Are we idiots? Why do we do this? Why do we always watch the media sources with all their lies catering their financial supporters, spreading their garbage? Why do we support their agenda knowing the only beneficiaries are them and not us? We need to use our god given brain and stand up. We thought our boe [board of
education] would improve with new members. Are we? Heck No! All we hear on the street from them is nothing and nothing but political agendas rather than education. Teachers and students are just the pawns in their game.

One reader of a story about population losses in rural counties posted this comment, using the screen name “just saying”:

People moving out?
   Poor job market. Jobs simply disappearing.
   Poor business climate. State median income low.
   Poverty level high. Getting higher every year.
   Younger generation doesn’t stand a chance.
   [State] educates them and they leave. No choice.
   Fifty years ago [former governor] and others talked about the [state] “brain drain”.
   Nothing has changed. Or has it? Got worse?

Again, the comments and post passages described here suggest a narrative about poverty and inequality that differs from those that appear in the newspaper. One Deer Creek man I interviewed suggested that the Advocate could facilitate and take part in this counter-narrative about rural Appalachian poverty because, unlike the newspaper, the Advocate’s success was judged by page views rather than advertising revenue. At the time of my study, it was unclear exactly how important the Deer Creek Advocate’s financial success was to Lance, its founder. There was only one advertising spot on the Advocate’s website, and Lance told me by email that the site was “not all I do” professionally.56 Chapter 7 will rely on a reading of the site to suggest that Lance’s motives have less to do with turning a profit and more to do with creating a forum for the public to voice its concerns.

Agency and the Framing of Local Poverty

On the whole, local news coverage exemplified by the three frames discussed in this chapter do little to encourage economically disadvantaged individuals to take part in

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56 Lance initially agreed to answer questions for this study but later decided not to participate.
social, economic, or political activities that could lead to the social opportunities economist Amartya Sen (1999) found so important to the alleviation of poverty. To the contrary, the agentic action possessed by the poor is stripped out of these stories. The nature of the community response frame also may have the consequence of reinforcing the regional stereotype of the unmotivated mountain resident with his or her hand out. Very rarely are the poor doing for themselves. Rather, they are being done for by other parties in the community: nonprofit organizations, the government. There are low-income individuals in the three communities I studied who are doing for themselves, and others, despite the economic and social barriers they face. For example, an hour of journalistic sleuthing led me to Grace, a Greenburg cook in her mid-40s who uses her meager salary to care not only for herself, but also for her aging mother. Dumb luck led me into the Deer Creek discount shop owned by Chad, who ekes out a living in retail even though he could draw disability for a leg injury. News about their struggles and successes would tell a story about need and success that differs greatly from the narrative of clothing giveaways and faceless unemployment statistics. In Chapter 9, the story of Dan, a coal miner-turned-janitor whose social standing changed as the result of a simple profile in the Greenburg Star, will show the practical impact those types of stories may have.

At a theoretical level, the three frames, and in particular the community response frame, reinforce the monetary understanding of poverty. That monetary approach in turn supports a key understanding associated with the long-held notion of an Appalachian “culture of poverty”—that the poor are individually responsible for their conditions. That understanding of poverty largely absconds the non-poor from any social responsibility for poverty, instead encouraging them to act when it makes them feel good or gives them the
opportunity to build social capital. The dominance and nature of the community response frame suggests that dropping money into the Salvation Army jar or delivering canned beans to the local food pantry represent the lion’s share of the community’s responsibility to the poor. The sample drawn for this study was purposively selected to include the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays—times when public (and media) attention are especially focused on giving. Stories about the poor during that period revolved around the ability of children to have a Merry Christmas, or the ability of their parents to provide the means (i.e. toys and gifts) for that to happen. After Christmas, coverage of poverty became less prevalent in all four newspapers. That coverage pattern, coupled with the fact that issues such as a lack of rural transportation, healthcare, affordable housing, or jobs were largely absent from local news coverage, reflect a broader emphasis on what individuals have as opposed to what they have the opportunity to do. Editors, publishers, and reporters in the three communities understand the impact of the latter, but that understanding often was not present in their stories or photos.

The news frames associated with stories about poverty in Deer Creek, Priorsville, and Greenburg are vital to a deeper understanding of the ways media contribute to the overall view of local need in those communities. The overall lack of poverty coverage provides insight that is just as important, if not more so. As Chapter 8 will show, regular and sporadic readers alike recognize the fact that the economic hardships faced by many members of their communities are rarely reflected in the pages of their newspapers, and they read certain meanings into that absence. Before explaining those interpretations, however, it is important to note that the absence of poverty coverage is not a mere oversight on the parts of the men and women who fill those news pages. Journalists from
the three communities have philosophies, outlooks, and life experiences that shape the content of their newspapers, determining what facts get in and—just as importantly—what (and who) gets left out. The factors that influence those decisions are the subject of the next chapter.
CHAPTER 7: PRESSURES, PHILOSOPHIES, AND THE ENCODING OF MEDIA MESSAGES

Just prior to our first face-to-face meeting, Gregory wrote a column for the Deer Creek Chronicle in which he criticized his state’s open-carry gun laws. When I sat down in his office for the first time, conversation quickly turned to the fallout from that column (two fairly pointed letters to the editors), which led him to reminisce about other columns and stories he’d written that moved people to voice their (typically oppositional) views on the subjects at hand. Gregory viewed critical letters to the editor, like the two he’d published that week, as good for the community and good for business: If people were talking about what was in the newspaper, he reasoned, then the newspaper was relevant and would continue to be profitable. I asked him if he could remember specific stories about poverty-related issues that stirred local passions, and he recalled a profile he’d written about 15 years ago about a homeless man named Albert Hodgekins. I relay Gregory’s lengthy reminiscence of that story here in his own words because his recalling of it provides valuable insight into the way he views poverty in Deer Creek and, by extension, how it is covered in the Chronicle:

Gregory: We do not have, uh, when I first came here in [mid-1990s], of course, there wasn’t a prison and so forth, and the economy wasn’t as buoyant, so we did at that time have, uh, a couple of homeless people. And you would find them maybe sleeping inside the post office on cold winter nights, that sort of thing. Since then, they have gone on to homeless shelters in other cities, which were not available back in, let’s say, the 1990s. So there’s that. What was the newspaper’s responsibility? I will say this, that I did do an article on one of the homeless people, and the general reaction was furor at me [laughs].

Me: That’s really interesting. Tell me about the article, what was it about?

57 Albert Hodgekins is a pseudonym. Gregory told me he was unsure what happened to Albert Hodgekins after he left Deer Creek. Eric, Gregory’s son and the general manager of the newspaper, told me he believed Albert Hodgekins had died several years after the article was published.
G: It was about this one person, Albert Hodgekins [he spells the name for me]. He was essentially, he had many disorders, uh, he was probably partially a mental case. He was a beggar, he would go down the street and go into businesses and, you know, ask for money to go out and buy a sandwich or whatever, and then he would of course head into the nearest bar [laughs]. And, you know, he was a man about town. To me, it was a story. And I wrote his story, and people just didn’t think that that fit the, uh, persona of Deer Creek, the nice little college town, uh, that is progressive. We shouldn’t have, uh, these type of people living here. Eventually, the sheriff, who was his power of attorney, had him, you know, placed in a, uh, you know, halfway house, assisted living farm, people that have, you know, varying degrees of mental problems and homelessness.

Me: Do you know if he [Albert Hodgekins] read the article?

G: Yes, he read the article, and he didn’t like it. He told me that.

Me: Why didn’t he like it?

G: He said it was, uh, it made him look too bad [laughs]. Yes, he threw [pause] he yelled out a few curses at me.

Me: What did you hope to accomplish by writing it?

G: Well, you know, you’ve got a homeless person, or two homeless people. And it’s just like the current issue of stray dogs and stray cats. Uh, is the community just going to turn its back on the stray dogs and stray cats, or is it going to start a bona fide humane society and have a no-kill shelter, and try to adopt them out? We’ve taken the stand over the last 19, 20 years, “well, we’ll let other counties, shelters, take care of our dogs and cats.” And that’s, to me, a vital service. And so we [the newspaper] would promote anybody who goes out there and says, “let’s form the humane society and get a shelter here.” I’ve heard, at county government commissions, about killing dogs and all of this. It’s really pretty grisly, to hear the sheriff report what they do to the dogs after a certain number of days. Dogs are man’s best friend, I know that. But, when it comes to homelessness, it’s the same thing: Do we as a community just let it happen? “Sure, it’s alright for these people to walk around town and get a couple bucks here and a couple bucks there and go and get drunk and go out in the street and yell at people, you know, and do all kinds of foolish things.” Or should we take some kind of responsibility for them and say, look, these people need help. Where is that help going to come from? Are we going to just turn our backs? So that was my, the reason for writing the article was that I thought there was something that could be done to actually help Albert Hodgekins. But, uh, I don’t have that expertise, I’ll tell you that right now.
Later, I asked Gregory if the criticism he received from the community following the publication of the Albert Hodgekins profile changed the way he thought about the issue of poverty, or the way he wrote about it in the newspaper. He said it did not:

I mean, you know, the people [in the community] were so angry, three or four that expressed themselves to me, that, you know, I could tell that they were, there was no changing their minds. And, but you had to look out there and say, you know, there’s got to be some good people out there who see that some fix has to be made for the homeless people here. See now, I have not, since the prison came, I have not seen any homeless people here at all. And I get around. Now I’m not saying they’re not there. Because, you know, well, [at this point, Gregory described a book he read once that suggested that “some people just want to be homeless”].

Gregory does “get around,” as he noted in the last passage. He attends government meetings, hosts business socials, and presides over meetings of the Deer Creek Historical Society. Even on days when we were not scheduled to talk, he and I would often pass each other on the narrow streets around downtown Deer Creek.

However, the company he keeps (local business owners, politicians, and well-to-dos in the community) isolates him from those who make Deer Creek’s 27% poverty rate a reality. He understood homeless in a stereotypical way that was so foreign to him that he was comfortable comparing homeless people to stray dogs. Because he no longer saw that stereotype in Deer Creek, he believed the problem was no longer relevant. Two social service agents who work with different organizations just blocks from the *Chronicle’s* office described a different Deer Creek, one in which many people without homes were staying on their neighbor’s couches or living with a dozen other people in a small mobile home. Gregory’s attempt to “actually help Albert Hodgekins” by profiling him as “a man about town” appears to have had the opposite effect—neither Albert nor Deer Creek seems to have benefitted from the story.
This chapter explores the factors that influence journalists at local newspapers as they decide what their communities’ news, particularly news about poverty, will look like. The interview approach used to address this question is reminiscent of the one used by George Donohue, Clarice Olien, and Phillip Tichenor in their important 1989 study on gatekeeping at local newspapers. Today’s media landscape is vastly different from the one Tichenor and his colleagues saw when they first explained the effects of structural pluralism and gatekeeping on community journalists in Minnesota in the 1970s and 1980s. Internet and mobile technologies have put information in the hands of many more people and allowed regular people to become news publishers, challenging the core economic model of the traditional newspaper company. At the same time, rural communities in many parts of the country are being left behind by regional newspapers that once covered them but, due to financial pressures and the desire to reach wealthy urban and suburban markets, no longer report on (or, in many cases, circulate in) their country hinterlands (Simpson, 2012; Carey, 2011). Despite the dramatic differences in the industry, many of the core factors that influenced journalists in structural pluralism and gatekeeping studies of the 1970s and 80s remain relevant today. This chapter will show that coverage of poverty, unemployment, and related issues in Priorsville, Deer Creek, and Greensburg was influenced by reporters’ relationships with others in their communities, by the limited parameters of news production, and by a desire to make their community look good for the sake of social cohesion and business recruitment. Other important and perhaps more personal factors, such as class isolation, the desire to push for substantive change in their communities, and philosophies about what journalists

58 Certainly, this study executes that method on a much smaller scale than the 1989 study, for which 155 newspaper editors were interviewed.
generally and community journalists specifically should strive to accomplish also heavily influence the presence and tone of social issue coverage in the three communities studied here. Stuart Hall would recognize those influences as the “discursive aspects” of news production that dictate the dominant meanings encoded in media messages. An understanding of those discursive aspects and how they contribute to the encoding of dominant messages in stories about poverty provides important context to the frames and general absence of coverage discussed in Chapter 6.

Greenburg: Servants and Advocates

The three current and former Greenburg Star journalists interviewed for this study interpreted their social roles in somewhat different but at the same time overlapping ways. Sandra, who has worked with the Star for more than 40 years, described herself first and foremost as a promoter of the community. “I think that when people think of me, the first thing, they think of me as the newspaper person. I hope they see me as a contributor, as an asset,” she told me near the end of our second conversation. When I asked her if she thought her work made a difference in Greenburg, she answered that she hoped it did, adding “I do the best I can do to promote and to work with the [local] organizations.” Susan, the newspaper’s reporter, more often spoke of herself as a helper within the community rather than representative of the community. When asked about the responsibilities of working for a local newspaper, Susan said, “It feels like you’re actually making a difference because you’re doing things that can benefit the community, getting the word out or just different stories about things that are going on that can help people.” Nancy, who was the managing editor in charge of Henderson News’
newspapers, including the *Star*, at the beginning of my fieldwork, emphasized both the advocacy and public service aspects of journalism more directly:

It became clear to me early on (in college) that the role of advocating for a community and for my family, my neighbors, the people I know and love, and the area in general, is something that we can’t do too much of. And I think that journalism has this wonderful yet frustrating model of being a private sector position, but also sort of being a hybrid into the public sector because there’s a service element of it.

Trying to keep Greenburg involved in discussions about state government spending was an important part of that advocacy, Nancy later told me. Because Greenburg is in a rural area, she said, “I think we have to scratch and claw for that a little more than the urban areas, in part because of our population, and I’m sure there’s a million other reasons.”

She said she believes the *Star* and similar newspapers can aid in the scratching and clawing necessary to ensure that small towns receive the attention they need:

If the local community newspapers, these entities that have been in place for in some instances hundreds of years, if they’re not going to advocate for these communities, who is? So I think I would argue they should advocate for their communities, but I think that needs to be done with great journalistic integrity.

The notion of speaking for someone else is inherent in the ideas of “advocacy” or “promotion.” When Nancy, who now works in public relations, spoke of advocacy, she did so in a broad sense. Statements like the one above suggest that the newspaper advocates for the community as a whole, with the best interests of all of its residents at heart. For Sandra, promoting the community largely seems to mean promoting local businesses. When Sandra spoke about poverty and the local economy, the conversation often turned to Greenburg’s downtown business district. Improvements to Oak Avenue’s infrastructure and general aesthetic, such as sidewalk repairs, water line replacements, and the baskets of petunias hanging from downtown lampposts were all indicators that
Greenburg’s economy is improving, she said. “The emphasis is on getting the downtown looking right,” Sandra told me. “ Beautification is a big thing.” Through the newspaper, Sandra heavily promotes the Oak Avenue business district, with the thinking that economic success there will trickle down to the rest of the community. As we will see in Chapter 8, some local residents are skeptical.

*What Makes Poverty Newsworthy in Greenburg?*

When asked what circumstances made poverty newsworthy, Nancy told me the actions of other agencies or organizations give it news value. For example, press releases from social service agencies were news. Families who found themselves in need due to fires or other crises were news. Meetings of the government or other organizations that might discuss local need were news. Deadlines to apply for assistance were news. Community-driven events to discuss issues tied to poverty, such as drug abuse, were news. “It [news about poverty] isn’t constant,” Nancy told me. “You see things like that pop up at certain times of the year, or randomly.”

Speaking about coverage of poverty specifically, Susan said, “I think we inform people that there is the issue, but we also provide them with the information of places that can help them.” She described a story written in early 2014 about a school program that sends food home with students who need it:

I think us getting the word out has brought them quite a bit of donations, and I know they’re very appreciative of it. And it seems like once the story ran, the community jumped on it. They’ve got enough at this point [early March] to get them through this year and maybe start on next year.

Both Sandra and Susan told me that the Star’s poverty coverage focused mainly on the agencies that attempt to help disadvantaged people in Greenburg, observations that were
consistent with my own analysis of the newspaper’s content in late 2013 and early 2014.

Sandra, the editor, told me regular newspaper readers will find lots of stories on the activities at the [large faith-based nonprofit organization] and the various activities that are out there. You’d read stories about what the senior citizens center is doing to help those residents, residents over 60. Uh, you’d see all these stories on what’s happening in the schools, the free lunches, the summer programs. . . . I think we do a great job on presenting not only the problems in the community and the, the story of the disadvantaged, but of the other good things that are happening in the community.

The emphasis on coverage of agencies that help the town’s disadvantaged population extended to sourcing as well. When I asked Susan and Sandra who they would feel most comfortable turning to for information about poverty in Greenburg, they provided an almost identical set of names: the town’s economic development director, the mayor, executives at nonprofit aid organizations, and church groups. All three Star journalists viewed poverty coverage as a reactive exercise: A story about Greenburg’s economically disadvantaged population appears after something happens (i.e. the donation of a check, the loss of a home in a fire, the announcement of unemployment numbers). Columns and editorials about the issue would only be appropriate, Nancy told me, if they were a response to a present community issue; that is what she meant earlier when she said stories should be “done with great journalistic integrity.” “I guess what keeps popping into my mind as we talk is the difference between a news story and an editorial,” she told me. Editorial page advocacy on matters such as changes to government aid programs would be appropriate, Nancy told me, only “if it was written in the context of an editorial that maybe was pointing back to something that has happened, you know. Because usually editorials come as a response to something that has happened, not just some random thought.”
In one of our more interesting conversations, Sandra, the Star’s longtime editor, said her newspaper and others like it have a social responsibility to try to address matters such as poverty but that doing so required a great deal of care for those who were dealing with poverty firsthand. She continued: “I think we have to do it in a way that doesn’t make those who are disadvantaged, which we don’t use the word poor, but those who are disadvantaged, feel comfortable about seeing that in the paper.” When I asked her why she prefers “disadvantaged” to “poor,” she answered: “I just think they’re disadvantaged. [pause] I think you have to be careful about putting people in a bloc. I think it requires some tact in how you address those issues.” Sandra said she was very mindful of how a reader would feel if s/he was in the situation the story described. She continued:

I’m very careful about that. And you know, lots of times when I’m helping distribute food, I know a lot of those people who are walking through those lines. And you have to be, I think you have to be tactful and not make them feel bad. Although she is concerned about making disadvantaged people in Greenburg “feel bad” about taking charity, Sandra said she didn’t believe there was a strong stigma associated with taking assistance in the community. She recalled one experience at a food distribution event in which she participated as a volunteer:

It was just amazing the number of those people who would walk up to me. I knew they were there to get food. They would just walk up to me and say, “Hello, I haven’t seen you in a long time.” They knew that I knew they were there getting food. They weren’t embarrassed to come up to me and make conversation. And I think that’s important, you know.

Sandra’s concern about isolating the economically disadvantaged people in her community was expressed by other journalists interviewed for this study. It is ironic that

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59 Nancy and Susan generally agreed with this assessment, as did some of the community members I interviewed for this study. Nancy observed that a stigma “exists to a point, but I think that Green County, for whatever reason, it seems to be a little more friendly, for lack of a better term.” Susan suggested that the prevalence of government aid contributes to the lack of a stigma associated with taking charity: “I think there’s just so much of it here that it’s probably the majority instead of the minority.”
the most common safeguard against socially isolating the poor is to wholly exclude them from coverage of local poverty. That exclusion does nothing to change their stature in the community. It largely abdicates journalists from thinking about how they themselves view their economically disadvantaged neighbors (and, sometimes, co-workers). It also relieves them of any duty to challenge notions in the community about what poverty “looks like.” Other sources, such as representatives of nonprofit groups or economic development directors, stand in for the poor in stories about local need. This approach shifts the attention away from those who live with poverty and to others in the community who, in many cases, already benefit from the local standing and social capital associated with being the pastor of a big church or the president of a local civic club.

Making Do with Limited Resources

The Greenburg Star is the only newspaper in this study that was not locally owned, and its corporate ownership dictates what kind of news is produced, and who produces it, in both obvious and subtle ways. Nancy, who was once part of Henderson Media’s larger company hierarchy, said corporate influence rarely took the form of direct mandates from above. Rather, the biggest corporate constraint on news content came in the form of resource limitations. Henderson Media ran its newspapers in such a way, she said, that larger projects and in-depth pieces had to take a back seat to the never-ending stream of what she called “lesser stories” needed to fill five newspapers every week. “Staffing can’t be ignored in terms of what messages go out and to where and exactly how that takes place,” Nancy observed. On several occasions, Sandra noted that the Star does the best it can with what it has: one editor/general manager and one reporter.
Love for the area is the only real incentive for many small-town reporters to stay at their jobs. Nancy told me she knows a local reporter in a village near Greenburg who has been with her newspaper for 10 years and still makes only $11.25 an hour. Because of the low pay and long hours—Susan told me she often works 14-hour days on Mondays—staff burnout is a concern at the Star (and other Henderson newspapers in the area). Nancy said it was one of her biggest managerial concerns, because once reporters and editors started to burn out, they cared less and less about the product they were producing. Low pay also leads to staff turnover, which Sandra and Nancy both noted results in a loss of institutional knowledge. Sandra observed:

> A lot of people move around a lot in the newspaper business. But I think someone who stays long enough to get well-acquainted with the community, acquainted with the people involved in what’s happening there, I think that’s better for newspapers, you know. But I also know that in the newspaper business you have a lot of moving around.

In the case of the Greenburg Star, Sandra acknowledged, pay was one of the primary reasons reporters have decided to move on. Both Sandra and Nancy also noted that it was difficult to find qualified reporters who would stay at the newspaper for what Henderson was willing to pay.

Susan, who had been a Henderson reporter for four and a half years at the time of our interview, told me she lives “paycheck to paycheck.” Although she writes about need much less often than Sandra, Susan said her economic position helps her to relate to those in poverty when she is called upon to interact with them:

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60 Susan told me overtime is discouraged at the Star. She said she is routinely sent home early on slow days to account for extra hours she has already worked, or in anticipation of long hours later in the week. The day before I interviewed her, for example, she only worked four hours in an effort to balance out her timecard. That is not an uncommon approach to lessen the costs associated with overtime pay—as the editor of a corporate-owned community newspaper in Tennessee in the mid-2000s, I often reduced overtime expenses the same way.
I think I can associate more with the situation, so that helps with the compassion and care to report on things like that. Because I think if you don’t understand where people are coming from, it makes it a lot harder to report on the situation. I think you have to be able to put yourself in the other person’s shoes. And if you’re from the big city and have always lived in a million-dollar house, a maid, good money, then you’re not going to be able to associate. You have to be able to connect with your person—with your reader and with the subject of your story.

In the sample of newspapers reviewed for this study, Susan’s stories rarely reflected those connections, in large part because of the conditions under which they are produced. Sandra and Susan both told me that stories about social service activities that account for much of the newspaper’s poverty coverage largely fall to Sandra. Susan told me she sees the links between poverty and the law enforcement issues she covers. For example, she said, the use of heroin is becoming more problematic in Greenburg in large part because heroin is a more affordable alternative to illegally-obtained prescription drugs.

“Then you also hear it brought up in court: do people have the money to pay their attorneys? Do they not? And a lot of people will say that the money situation has led to their [legal] problems,” she told me. But addressing those links often takes time, and time is in short supply for the Star’s small editorial staff.

Henderson Media’s remote pagination plant also limits the newspaper in some ways. Sandra and Susan determine what content gets into the newspaper, the editor told me, but “we sometimes don’t have the say-so on how it goes in there.” When I asked Sandra if the page design system had caused any problems, she responded laughingly: “That’s the reason I have a daughter who I con year after year to do the artwork in the visitor’s guide. It works out. It works out really well.” Sandra told me readers sometime

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61 Sandra, the editor, justified the division of labor this way: Young reporters like Susan, Sandra said, tend to be more interested in covering “exciting” stories involving law enforcement. “As you move along [in your journalism career],” Sandra told me, “you change your perspective somewhat. And you let the younger reporters who can get excited about this stuff [crime] do it. I don’t want to do it [laughs].”
notice the lack of creativity and occasional design hiccups, but few complain. One Star reader told me that she once submitted materials for publication in the Star, and that the layout artist cut off part of her submission. That experience, the reader said, made her less confident in the Star and less willing to contribute information for publication.

Greenburg Today: “That’s Not All We Are”

Theresa, editor of the hyperlocal GreenburgToday.com, said that when she covers the news, “I see people, not stories.” She told me she is mindful of the impacts of news coverage on local people’s lives, and said she takes special care to consider others. For example, she often covers car crashes but does not take photos of crash scenes in which injured people are visible, because she would not want images of her loved ones to be on the Internet in that scenario. “I’m not out to make money off somebody else’s misfortune,” she said.

As noted earlier, Theresa conceived of GreenburgToday.com in response to community image problems—problems, she told me, that were caused by Greenburg’s negative reputation in the region, the inattentiveness and irresponsibility of local leaders (“what you had was an old guard that didn’t want to create opportunities”), and the laissez-faire attitude the Greenburg Star had toward those matters. “I wanted, when people Google Green County, I wanted them to see something positive come up,” she said. Theresa, who is in her late 30s, grew up in Green County, received a bachelor’s degree in communications from a small regional college nearby, and recalls a generally negative mindset involving local problems, such as coal mine closures. “I see it [that

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On at least two occasions over the four months I read the newspaper regularly, I noticed stories accompanied by headlines that were clearly written for other stories (for example, a headline for a soccer game story appearing over a government story). Problems tended to occur on wire service stories that appeared on the newspaper’s inside pages.
negative mindset] changing,” Theresa told me over lunch at a Greenburg restaurant. “Just because we live in a depressed area doesn’t mean we have to act like it.”

She is particularly bothered by television news coverage of the region, which she said often depicts Greenburg negatively. To her, for the most part, local TV news coverage that comes from a major city about 50 miles away “perpetuates the poverty mindset, especially in Green County” by focusing on that negativity. “When they talk about meth busts and things like that, it’s like that’s all we are. That’s not all we are,” she told me. Even positive stories on television news can be problematic, she said, because they suggest that Greenburg residents (and the region as a whole) are somehow abnormal. She recalled one television news segment about a local volunteer program (she was one of the volunteers) that provided an after-school program for local children. The program had struggled financially, she said, and “the finished [TV news] product is like we’re all bums and our kids are running around wild in the streets.”

Although she is bothered by the way government in Greenburg operates and the lack of local job opportunities, Theresa said, “I made a conscious choice to be positive [on the website]. That’s who I am. That’s what I hope for out of this area. My faith plays a role in that. . . . I’m not trying to shine a light here. I’m looking to reflect the light we already have.” In doing so, she said she hopes she can contribute to what she calls a “generational change” in the pessimism about economic opportunities in Greenburg, although she acknowledges that such a change would not come easily. Theresa was critical of what she calls the “Appalachian attitude,” which she sees as a belief that the best years of one’s life come during high school. Theresa told me she believes the Internet can change that mindset by allowing people to connect with one another,
exchange stories and ideas, and see new opportunities. “Technology changes everything,” she told me.

Theresa was more concerned about outside perception of her community than any other journalist I interviewed for this project. Her effort to counter that image demonstrates the ways an individual can use the Internet to create a counternarrative about her community. It was not clear based on my study that GreenburgToday was causing people to rethink social issues in the town, but the site was relatively new (when Theresa and I spoke, it had only been online for about four months). GreenburgToday.com does not have the same reach and status that the Star enjoys in Greenburg, but many people in Greenburg told me they read it.63

Priorsville: Trained Journalists and Circumstantial Newspapermen

In Priorsville, local residents have two weekly newspapers to choose from: the Priorsville Record and the Priorsville Post-Examiner (PPE). While some of the news contained in both papers is similar, the style of the publications and the life experiences and journalistic philosophies of those who produce them are quite different. PPE publisher Bill and editor Nick are both Priorsville natives who have lived in the community for most of their lives. Both studied journalism at the same regional college about two hours west of Priorsville, and they have ideas about news values and journalistic philosophies that, for the most part, align. Ed, the publisher of the Record, also grew up in Priorsville, but Record editor Jim moved to the area from the western U.S. with plans to retire. Neither Jim nor Ed has formal journalism training, and both men came to the newspaper from other fields (Jim is a retired government employee, and

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63 Theresa also operates another hyperlocal news website in a neighboring town. Both sites are supported by advertisers and between the two, Theresa told me, she makes a modest living.
Ed has held several other jobs). The differences in the training and backgrounds of the two staffs, I believe, is the primary reason the two newspapers look so different. Nick is skilled with computers and uses contemporary newspaper design principles to lay out the pages of the PPE, and the newspaper includes many bylined stories written by Nick, Bill, or others who submit material to the paper. The Record relies more heavily on submitted materials for its front page, rarely uses bylines to indicate that stories were written by someone on the newspaper’s staff, and assembles the newspaper column by column using the manual “cut and paste” method of newspaper production that has been replaced at many newspapers (including the PPE) by computer design. Most importantly for this dissertation, the two staffs also have distinct philosophies about the purpose of a local newspaper and attitudes toward local poverty that shape their coverage in important ways.

*The Priorsville Record: ‘You’ve Got to Watch What You Say’*

Jim, editor of the Priorsville Record, said he viewed “local coverage” as his newspaper’s primary job. He elaborated:

A lot of the people around here want to see the pictures of their grandkids or kids playing sports, or getting the reading award, or attending the picnic, or whatever. They can get all the other news they want from TV or the [metropolitan newspaper that circulates in the area] or whatever. They’d rather see the local paper stick to local events and things.

When I asked Ed, the Record’s publisher, to define news, he struggled to formulate an answer. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the fact that he fell into journalism somewhat unexpectedly and does not consider himself a “journalist.” Heritage and local traditions are important, he told me. Beyond that, if people care enough to read a story, then it is news: “The newspaper’s job is to keep up with the community.” When it comes to
deciding what is published in the *Record*, however, Ed indicated he ultimately relies on
two of the traits journalism students are commonly taught to look for in news: impact and
novelty. Ed told me he makes decisions about what will go on the front page based on
how many people he believes the information will affect, and on how interested he thinks
people will be. Arrest records appeared on the front page of all 25 issues of the *Record* I
reviewed for this study, and other stories about crimes were common. Ed said he views
the prominent publication of those records as a public service. “We’ve got a bad drug
problem in this county,” he said. If a Priorsville resident finds out through the newspaper
that someone he or she knows was arrested on drug charges, Ed reasoned, then the
innocent person can distance him/herself from the offender. Jim offered this explanation
for the popularity of crime stories: “It generates a lot of buzz because a lot of the drug
users are wanting to know who they can’t go to anymore.”

Ed’s role in the production of the *Record* is fairly simple. The process begins on
Mondays: “I’ll look over the stack and see what’s in there,” he said, referring to the
stacks of materials that have been submitted for possible publication. If he approves of
what’s in the stack, which he usually does, it is cleared for publication. “If I see
something in there I don’t like, I’ll have ‘em pull it,” he explained. Ed gave Jim most of
the authority to determine what goes on the front page in 2013. “Ed has some input” but
rarely intervenes, Jim told me. “He knows people around here, and sometimes there’s a
particular story he’d like to see on the front [page].” Jim said stories about crime and
county government generally tend to draw the most reader interest. When he writes about
those things, Jim told me, he makes a conscious effort to stick to the facts and to avoid
publishing a great deal of background. “I basically say so-and-so is coming up for trial,
and maybe give some basic information and not rehash everything way back,” Jim said. This approach leads to a very reactive news product in which social issues such as poverty are discussed when they come up in government meetings or appear on the fax machine in the form of a press release. It also reduces the likelihood that connections will be made between poverty and local problems such as health care issues, drug abuse, or teenage pregnancy. There are strong latent ties between poverty and those issues, but if a newspaper actively strives to avoid deep context, then those ties are unlikely to be reported.

Ed told me he is very mindful of how people will react to the information he publishes, and that he is reluctant to publish anything that might appear controversial. He compared his journalistic life to his barber shop—he said he has seen men come in for haircuts and insult other members of the community while they wait, not knowing that the person in the next chair is the cousin of the person being insulted. “You’ve got to watch what you say because you never know how it’s going to affect people,” he said, referring both to idle chatter in the barbershop and front page news in the paper. Ed told me he is very sensitive to “bad news,” such as wrecks and fires. “I wish I didn’t have to put any tragedy in my paper,” he said, because he does not want the people involved to have to relive those tragedies when they see images of them in print. Later in that conversation, Ed volunteered that “we try to be a Christian newspaper.” When I asked him what that meant, he told me that “we try to have dignity in our news. With things I am totally against in terms of religious views, I try not to put that in the paper.” He’s never had to deal with such a conflict, although he said he has thought about situations where he might, and what he might do. For example, he said he would refuse to publish a
marriage announcement for a gay couple. If someone (presumably a judge) told him he had to print it, he said, he would run it very small, a decision that would likely result in poor photo quality. He said he would tell the engaged couple that the announcement was published, but that he had little control over the poor quality. “Sometimes printers make mistakes,” he said facetiously.

Poverty certainly falls into the category of topics Ed would cover with care, he told me. When it comes to writing about people who deal with poverty firsthand, Ed said, “I would never put nothing in there about a poverty family. I wouldn’t put their names in there because I don’t want to embarrass them.” If someone came to him and asked for their names and story to be published, he said, he would probably agree to do it. But he said he would not approach an individual or family and ask them to do such a thing for fear that the story subject would be ostracized because of the attention. Jim, the Record’s editor, said poverty is rarely a story topic, although unemployment numbers will get press when they are released by the state. Jim said he takes the same approach to unemployment that he takes to court cases: Let the facts speak for themselves.

Unemployment numbers, the editor told me, are “basically published with a little bit of a local [slant]. It comes out of the state pretty generic, so we direct it toward Prior County: the rate is this, and it went down or it went up, that type of thing.” Beyond that, the newspaper does not seek out stories about the negative consequences of poverty. When I asked Jim why that was the case, he answered:

We just don’t, or haven’t. I guess probably a lot of my thought process is people don’t want to be reminded. You don’t need to tell people they’re living in poverty. They know they are. They want solutions to poverty.
The newspaper’s managers do not see themselves, or the *Record*, as a generator of those solutions. Both Jim and Ed said they believe the duty of addressing local poverty falls primarily to local government.64 “The poverty situation, you basically have to go through the county commission because it’s the leaders of the community who are responsible for helping people with their poverty,” Ed told me.

Ed at times seemed largely unsure of how news decisions should be made—he knows news when he sees it, and he knows what he likes. His interest largely seems to be in selling newspapers and printing a publication that fits his personal tastes, and he believes in the formula he has. The *Record’s* approach to social issues is basically “do no harm,” and Ed and Jim execute that approach by leaving the public discussion of those issues to other people. Ed and Jim do not want to hurt, but they expressed no thoughts or plans on how to help matters either. Ed in particular sees that as the government’s job, not the newspaper’s. That position is reflective of the fact that Ed and Jim seemed to have no real social agenda for the newspaper they produce every week. They see the newspaper largely as bulletin board where the previous week’s happenings can be preserved, either for posterity (in the case of positive news) or as a warning (in the case of crime news). The local newspaper can, and should, do those things. However, the “stick to the facts” coverage Ed and Jim provide is reactive by design—they do not proactively seek out alternative opinions on poverty, or any other topic, for fear of disturbing their readers’ sensibilities. Such an approach may be a safe way to publish a newspaper (albeit one that struggles to break even financially some weeks), but it does

64 Nick, the editor of the *Priorsville Post-Examiner*, told me this is a common attitude in Priorsville, and one he has tried to change. That effort will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 9.
little to foster meaningful community dialogue about matters such as poverty that are sometimes difficult for communities to address head-on without leadership.

*The Priorsville Post-Examiner: Trying to Get People “Riled Up”*

During my time in Priorsville, people (usually influential people in the community) would sometimes tell me that there were jobs in this town, which sits in the county with its state’s highest unemployment rate. People can get work, I was told, but employers could not get people to work. Nick, the *PPE*’s editor, heard these same stories all the time. So he decided to make something of it in the newspaper:

I kept hearing community leaders say, “There’s jobs. People won’t take them, but there’s jobs.” So I did a story where we identified the top 10 employers, by number [of positions], and I called every one of them and said, “are you hiring,” and surprisingly found out that eight of them were hiring at the time. And most of them said, “We just can’t find people who, number one, are willing to work, and number two, can pass a drug test.”

When the story about the positions available with the community’s top 10 employers was published in 2013, Nick said, the response was “all negative.” He explained:

People [readers] didn’t want to believe there were jobs. They thought we were making numbers up. I heard that once from somebody. But generally it was a sense of disbelief. And most of those jobs were low paying jobs. I mean we’re talking $8 an hour, and I think at one time that might have been enough money for people to be happy with, but not anymore.

Nick shared his experience about his coverage of Prior County’s unemployment problem during our first meeting. It illustrates not only his willingness to write about local issues in a way that may ruffle feathers, but also a somewhat conflicted view of poverty that is shared by many in Priorsville. When I asked him what causes poverty in Priorsville, he said that a lack of jobs in general, and good jobs in particular, were to blame. Then, he added,
The other side of it is an unwillingness to work. We’ve got a generation, actually we’re on the second generation now, of people who have developed this mindset of, I don’t know the right way to put it, but basically a welfare generation for lack of a better way to put it.

He’d heard the argument about the welfare generation before, he said. His wife teaches elementary school and comes home with stories of young boys and girls whose primary aspiration is to get on government assistance. But the story about how many local jobs were available was “an eye-opener,” he told me, that has influenced the way he thinks about—and covers—the issue of joblessness.

Unemployment and the poverty that accompanies it are big problems in Prior County. “It’s pretty bad . . . as bad as you can imagine it being,” said Nick, who graduated from Priorsville High School and is in his mid-30s. “Longer term, even before this recession started, poverty was a problem here,” he added. “When you picture poverty in Appalachia, poverty in rural middle America, I mean we’re pretty much top of mind.”

When I asked people in the community what types of stories were most likely to get Prior County on the evening news or in the region’s metropolitan newspaper, almost all of them said unemployment or poverty, a fact that bothers many of them, including Nick. “I expect it [regional news about Priorsville] to be negative. Cringe—that’s my first reaction. Cringe,” Nick told me. He continued:

The storyline about Prior County’s highest unemployment rate in the state has been absolutely beat to death. I mean, it’s not something you sweep under the rug and it’s not something you try to cover up or anything. But I mean, there’s only so many angles you can hit it from. And it seems like everything, even positive things that happen here where people are trying to make a difference, the [regional metropolitan] media will come up and portray it as, “well, poor old Prior County again.” Sometimes it’s alright to look at the positive side of things.

The regional media’s mention of unemployment in routine stories about a cultural festival hosted by the chamber of commerce about six months prior to our interview really
angered him, because the unemployment rate had nothing to do with the festival. He explained:

It was something to the effect of, ‘Prior County has the highest unemployment rate in the state, and, uh, here’s what they’re doing about it.’ The festival had nothing to do with the highest unemployment rate in the state—those are two completely separate issues. But it [the television station] was tying them together.

Because local people read those stories and see them on television, Nick said, some residents develop a sense of hopelessness:

As a community, you’re beat down and you’re beat down and you’re beat down, and it becomes your mindset that there’s nothing we can do about it, we might as well accept it. And sometimes a little bit of optimism can go a long way. Perception’s everything, and if the community is beat down to the point that they don’t think they can pick themselves up by their bootstraps and improve their situation, then they’re probably not going to.

Nick told me he sees the provision of that “little bit of optimism” as an important role newspapers like his fill in struggling rural communities. It becomes difficult for a community to be vibrant, he said, when all the news its residents receive is negative. The responsibility to create a strong community environment is especially poignant coming from Nick and his boss, PPE publisher Bill, who, of the 11 journalists I interviewed for this project, were by far the most likely to publish stories that challenged local officials and the local status quo. Unlike Greenburg Star editor Sandra, who thinks of community promotion in terms of building up local businesses, Bill and Nick view community promotion in terms of generating conversation. “We think people have a right to know,” Bill, who founded the PPE in the mid-1970s, told me. Bill’s journalistic philosophy has not been wholly embraced in Priorsville, he said:

That’s got us in trouble a few times through the years. We had a mayor of this town at one time that called down here and said “I’d like to buy that paper. How much? How much do you want for it?” I say, “Well, it’s not for sale but why would you want a newspaper?” She says, “so I can close the damn thing down.”
[laughs] It rubbed people the wrong way, telling the truth. And it’s been painful sometimes. ⁶⁵

Telling the truth about poverty can sometimes be difficult. A lack of time is not the reason for the difficulty at the PPE. Nick said he has never felt so rushed to meet a deadline that he could not make time to report a deeper enterprise piece. To the contrary, he said, he sometimes has a hard time finding news during weeks when there is not much “spot news” going on. “If it can fill column inches, generally it’s going to be a story,” he told me. News about poverty will often generate criticism from local leaders, they said, but that that does not seem to serve as a deterrent—at times, both Nick and Bill seemed to relish in their ability to rile up the town’s leadership. The challenge they face is writing about social conditions in a way that builds up the community, rather than discourages it. Some stories about joblessness and local need that were published at the start of the recession probably would not be written now “just because it’s been beat to death, you know,” Nick said. He continued:

You write something over and over and over and eventually you get tired of it, and people get tired of reading it. But I mean, a lot of it still gets covered. The job numbers come out every month, and that’s always a story, usually a front-page story. Every month it mentions that we’re still the highest unemployment rate in the state and that we’re not making the same progress that a lot of other communities are making. Every month that makes our mayor mad at me. But it is what it is, and he’ll get over it. ⁶⁶

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⁶⁵ When Bill says “it’s been painful,” he means socially, economically, and at times physically. He told me he was once physically attacked in his office over a story he wrote about a group of Prior County cockfighters. He said he has been threatened many times over his nearly 40-year journalism career. During one conversation, he told me about a local man who once came into his office with a gun in his hand. The man had sued his son over a civil issue (Bill could not remember the specifics of the case), and Bill had written a story about it. Bill recalled the encounter this way: “The old man comes up here and he says, ‘Did you know that he [the man’s son] hadn’t even seen that before you made a major story out of that? He hadn’t even seen the papers yet!’ And I said, ‘No, I didn’t know, but it doesn’t make any difference because what I wrote was the truth.’ He said, ‘The truth don’t enter into this. You’re breaking up a family.’ What are you going to say? So I just kept talking to him and finally he gave up and left. But I thought I was going to get shot.”

⁶⁶ When I interviewed Priorsville’s mayor, he told me he felt the PPE did take an unnecessarily negative position on the local economy. He was the only person I interviewed who raised that concern about either newspaper in Priorsville.
Nick said the community reaction to statistics about poverty is “largely indifference,” which can be frustrating. Nick told me that his efforts to “facilitate a discussion” about “what needs to be done, what needs to be changed in order to make the community better” are often unsuccessful, a challenge he’s faced both in his role as editor of the newspaper and as a member of the chamber of commerce board of directors:

Sometimes it’s difficult to get people to be proactive. You can run a story every week, in every edition of the paper, about shortcomings the community has and things it needs to improve on, but if people aren’t willing to stand up and do anything about it, after a while you start to feel like you’re kind of wasting your breath, or wasting your ink, or whatever. That is a problem, I guess the apathy of the community is a problem. . . . You write stories where you think, ‘man this is important, this is going to draw a reaction.’ And you hear nothing. And that can be frustrating. And then you see a story on something like, for example, we did a story about [a retail auto parts chain] came and tore down an old fast food building and built a new building. I heard so many comments: Why do we need a new auto parts store? People were so angry about that, that we were getting a new auto parts store, because we’ve already got three others, as opposed to getting something else. And my take on it is that jobs are jobs, tax dollars are tax dollars, and you take what you can get.

When it comes to writing about poverty specifically, both Bill and Nick said the voices of individuals who experience poverty firsthand are not sought out for stories. Nick, who would be more likely than Bill to take on such a reporting project, told me, “We don’t go out and talk to a lot of people in the community to talk about that aspect.” When I asked him why, he said “there hasn’t really been a need to, to do the stories we’ve done.” Nick said the director of the chamber of commerce was the first source he would contact for a story about poverty. Bill, the PPE’s publisher, said the newspaper does not actively seek out stories about poverty in the community at all. “They come to us. Because there is a lot of pride, and some shame in being in that position [of being poor].” Poverty in and of itself, he said, has little news value because it is a part of
everyday life: “I don’t look at poverty. We live with it. I don’t look for it. It’s just part of our, part of our lives here.” Both Bill and Nick said community organizations and individuals in Priorsville were quick to come to the aid of neighbors in need. But Bill expressed little optimism that any institution in Priorsville could materially change living conditions for the poor:

We’re always looking, in the newspaper and the chamber of commerce and the school board and the county commission and the city council members, we’re always looking for some way to get out of poverty [largely through the recruitment of industry]. And little by little you do, but it doesn’t last long.67

Bill said he wants to see the newspaper crusade for jobs, but “I don’t know how you do that.” He believes Nick is “in the process of cultivating Prior County. What I mean by that is its image, not just for the people who live here, but for the people who visit here.” Bill and Nick’s position on the PPE’s ability to act as an agent of change is particularly interesting compared to the stance of Ed and Jim at the Priorsville Record. Ed and Jim do not see pushing for change and discussion in the community as an important part of their jobs, and they (especially Ed) are wary of disturbing the status quo. Perhaps because of their training and socialization into journalistic norms, Nick and Bill were more likely to see advocacy and the promotion of possibly-contentious discussion as part of their jobs at the PPE, although Bill’s optimism about the potential results of that work seemed to be waning. Bill and Nick see themselves as agents of change, but to achieve that change, they are more inclined to partner with local officials and business leaders and less

67 Bill was much more optimistic about the newspaper’s ability to change the community when he founded the PPE in the mid-1970s. He acknowledged experiencing professional burnout and said that was the main reason he decided to hire someone to take over the newspaper’s editorial duties. He clearly wanted to hire someone who would continue to push the community to change; he said the main reason he chose Nick was because of his sense that Nick had “a fire in his belly.”
inclined to empower poor people in the community to become agents of change themselves.

When I spoke with Nick in March of 2014, his short-term plans for the PPE included some “thought-provoking pieces that will get people to just start talking about how they can make their community better.” He elaborated:

We’ve talked for so long about how we don’t have any jobs, we don’t have any jobs, but at some point you’ve got to start talking about things you can do to pick yourself up, stop waiting on the guys from the state or Washington to come in and do it for you, but pick yourself up and put yourself back on a road to a brighter future.

Most of those stories, he suspected, will draw the same kind of negative reaction his 2013 piece on jobs received. He mentioned several times plans for a story about food stamp fraud (“that’s not going to go over well”), and he was also planning a story about litter, which will take the angle that roadside trash is bad for the area’s tourism economy (“That does tie into poverty,” he told me, “because you don’t see that if you go into more affluent communities”).

Bill and Nick were, by far, the most socially progressive journalists I interviewed, in that they recognized problems in their community and wanted to address them, even if that meant occasionally incurring the ire of local leaders or alienating readers or advertisers. Both men suggested that influencing people’s attitudes toward change in Priorsville was key to creating real social change in the community, and Nick thinks about the community’s joblessness in that context. Still, they seem to see poverty mainly in the ways it impacts people who are not poor. Addressing issues such as food stamp fraud or litter are worthwhile from a journalistic perspective. But Nick and Bill seem to be at a loss when it comes to taking on the underlying problem of quiescence in
Priorsville, which, they see, is tied to the lack of economic opportunity that exists there. It appears that, in the short term at least, their approach will be to continue to fight the good fight, largely relying on the same sets of voices to address local issues.

Knowledge of the professional backgrounds and educations of the four men who provide Priorsville’s local news can help us understand why they make the coverage decisions they make. Bill and Nick have thought about what journalists should try to accomplish for a long time and see their work as a social service of sorts. Ed and Jim see the newspaper more as a place to work and were less likely to relay a sense of social responsibility. However, this comparison of the staffs at the Record and the PPE should not be understood as an indictment of journalists who do not receive formal journalism training. Of the four newspapers in this study, the PPE takes the most aggressive role as an advocate for change in its community, and its publisher and editor are both career journalists with college degrees in the field. However, concerned individuals with backgrounds in other fields can use media to attempt to generate conversations about social problems in their communities. The Deer Creek Advocate website described in the next chapter is perhaps the best example of that in this dissertation.

Deer Creek: “I’m Essentially a Positive Person”

Just before he told me the story of his poorly received report on Albert Hodgekins, the homeless man who walked the streets of his town, Deer Creek Chronicle owner and senior editor Gregory made this observation about local poverty: “Poverty, poverty is a problem everywhere I think in [this state], and there’s [pause] it’s much more dramatic, uh, in other areas than it is right here.” When I asked him why he believed that was the case, he responded:
I think there’s less poverty here because when people go through school, grade school and high school in Deer County, they’re just expected to go to college since traditionally there’s been a college here. So there’s a lot of college-educated people. Now most of them do not stay here. They go elsewhere, where the jobs are. But I think it’s mainly the education factor.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the percentage of Deer Creek residents who have at least a high school diploma (77%) or a college degree (15%) are below the state average. At the end of the story about Albert, I inquired about local need again, this time asking Gregory whether he had written many other stories about poverty. His answer reflects the core reason readers of the *Chronicle* get so little news about the community’s poor economic conditions:

> No, we do not. We, we have lacks in this community. I think you’ll read about the lacks—maybe the lack of affordable good housing, and the lack of certain community services—but you will not read a lot about it. Because the Albert Hodgkins incident happened probably about 15 years ago, and since then, as I said, I just haven’t seen the homeless.

Gregory repeatedly told me that poverty in Deer Creek was less of a problem than it was in other areas, but as noted in Chapter 5, income statistics tell a different story. So do many of the people who live in Deer County, including Gregory’s secretary Trish, a college graduate who, in her mid-20s, still lives with her mother because neither can afford to live alone.68 There is a great deal of dissonance between what Gregory sees in his community—be it local poverty rates, homelessness, or educational attainment—and what others in Deer Creek experience. That difference influences the way he covers economic matters in his newspaper, and as the next chapter will show, it also influences the ways people in the community react to the *Chronicle*.

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68 Trish’s story is told in more detail in Chapter 8.
Gregory told me early on that he was “essentially a positive person,” and he often noted that he felt it was important for the newspaper to reflect Deer Creek in a positive way:

We try to represent the community in the most unbiased way. If it’s good happening in the community, we say it’s good. If we perceive it to be bad, then we say that this isn’t a good thing. But in general there’s a lot of good people and they’re doing a lot of positive projects to move us ahead.

Recognizing the people behind those “positive projects,” particularly “regular people in a small community who are doing good deeds,” is one of Gregory’s top priorities. He told me he initiated the “Folks who Shine” feature because he identified a core group of 40 or 50 local leaders and civic club members in the community who were in the newspaper all the time. He wanted to create a space for others to be recognized.

The newspaper’s emphasis on the positive, especially as it related to economic conditions, was echoed by others involved in its production as well. “We go out of our way here to print the positive of everything we can, you know, except for obits and courthouse news,” said Eric, Gregory’s son and the newspaper’s general manager. “Other than that, we try desperately to print the good stuff, the happy stuff, the stuff that makes people go ‘Yeah, it’s nice living in a small town,’ and things like that,” he said, later adding:

We try to keep it positive because we get enough negative by turning on the nightly news. You flip on the nightly news and see what’s going on in Thailand and what’s going in Crimea, every time I flip on the Internet there’s some new disaster. And it’s just nice to know that Deer Creek’s going to move on and we’re doing as well as we possibly can.

Quinn, a former reporter at the Chronicle told me, “When the community would come together [to help an individual in need], that kind of stuff we covered. But as far as the downside of things, or how dreary it was, we didn’t cover stuff like that.” Eric told me
coverage of poverty largely consisted of publishing press releases from local service agencies. “As to Dad saying, ‘Eric, we need a story about the poverty over on River Street,’ he’s never given me that kind of a broad story to do something on,” Eric told me. “As a matter of fact, I’m sitting here thinking, ‘how would I start that story?’” When I asked Gregory if it was possible to discuss negative aspects of social life in a positive way, using prescription drug abuse as an example, he responded: “To be honest with you, I don’t follow it that much. I mean, we report on meth labs and things like that that the police give us.”

Other Chronicle employees (who, with the exception of his son Eric, usually refer to Gregory as “Dr. Lastname”) told me Gregory makes all major decisions about what will be published in the newspaper. He told me he has “some general parameters of what we want” in each issue: Political news (usually in the form of columns from the area’s U.S. senator or congressman), social news (“we have a lot of very nice ladies who live in small communities” and send in updates from those places, he told me), sports news (produced by a new sports editor who also works full-time as an agricultural extension agent in another county), news about local government, and cultural news such as historical re-enactments, concerts, and plays in other parts of the state. The cultural news, Gregory told me, is of particular interest to people who work at the college and in the oil and gas industry (he often returned to those segments of the community when he spoke of his most important constituencies). Gregory publishes many press releases from state government agencies, mainly because he often struggles to find local content to fill the pages of his newspaper. “I like to try to stick at, like, 16 pages, even though it should be like 12 pages [because of advertising sales]. I do like to stick at 16 pages because it gives
more for the reader to read,” he explained. “I realize that I’m paying more, but I think that the more you put into something, the more you’re going to get out of it. This is what the readers tell me: that they appreciate getting a statewide view.” Much of the information published inside the newspaper is pulled from the Internet, he told me.

When I asked Gregory what his newspaper’s core mission in Deer Creek was, he answered:

I think the newspaper, more than anything else, should number one, reflect the community, the various components of the community. And that’s why we put a lot of college news in, we put a lot of oil and gas industry news in, if we get anything about prisons or corrections or new concepts on how to prevent recidivism among the inmates, we put it in. And we put in, of course, all of the basic community news, and that’s very important. And the other thing is, uh, I don’t like to sound moralistic, but it’s the job of the small newspaper to be a leader within the community, to bring progress. And we do that mainly, here, through editorials and news stories.

When I asked him how a newspaper editor or publisher might go about becoming a leader, he answered this way:

I would say go to it. The Local Millionaire 69 here, every time I see him, and I see him about once a month, he always tells me the same thing. I always ask him the same question: “Would you give me a news story? Would you give me an update?” He always says, “Oh man, you’ve got the power with the newspaper. You just keep writing. You’re going in the right direction.” Of course, one of the things is that, in a community, in reflecting your community, you have to, whether you like it or not, you have to defend the local big industry, and that’s oil and gas here. Before that, it was coal. If I had been in [Appalachian town where he previously worked] and had been against coal, all of my windows would have been broken down there. And occasionally, small problems came up with coal, mainly that, you know, the tearing up of roads by the coal trucks. So I would write an editorial, you know, that truck drivers have got to be more careful and all of that. Well, when I’d write an editorial about that, when the coal trucks would come by the newspaper office, they would just lay on their horns, ERRRRR, ERRRRR. And the staff would come back: “They did it again, Dr. Lastname, they did it again.” It was their way of getting back at me, you know. But I was

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69 Several people in town, including Gregory, refer to the owner of Deer Creek’s largest oil and gas company as “the Local Millionaire” in casual conversation. I reached out to the Local Millionaire but was unable to get in touch with him. At one point, Gregory suggested that he might be able to arrange a meeting between me and the millionaire, but he was not able to follow through on that suggestion.
essentially for the coal industry. Of course, those were the days before global warming. I’m sort of wavering on that issue now.

I really think that most people would be like our millionaire here, that they think that the newspaper has a lot of power. So you don’t have to write an editorial, but you can go out there as a community journalist and write stories, and you can really almost win a Pulitzer Prize just by, let’s say, writing stories about poverty. If I had the time to do it, I would go out here and find poverty and do stories about families living in poverty and how they got there, and I might win a Pulitzer Prize. You never can tell. But the community journalist has the ability because of the public perception of the newspaper, that the newspaper is influential and it is powerful. And those journalists can make a difference.

Gregory’s description of the local journalist as a community leader is revealing on several levels. It shows the pressures that newspaper professionals face in communities where resource extraction (or any other industry, for that matter) is the major source of jobs and income. It reflects the constituencies he recognizes as important: the three main employers in the community. It also betrays the company he keeps, and gives us some clues as to how that company influences his attitude toward the community. Gregory sees the local college and the oil and gas industry (and in particular the Local Millionaire who owns the largest oil and gas company in Deer Creek) as central to the betterment of the community for which he advocates. He told me:

I’m very idealistic, but I’m saying what we’re doing is working toward, by these various improvements being made, and the fact that we do have this millionaire philanthropist who’s doing this this, we are working really toward becoming a little utopian community, you know.

To suggest that most people in Deer County, which experiences more poverty than 90 percent of the rest of the United States, would be “like our millionaire” in any way is a stretch. The millionaire has access to powerful people locally, but many Deer Creek residents said they do not. The millionaire’s concerns and interests are reflected in the

70 I asked Gregory if he believed that perception was accurate. His answer: “To some degree. As you know, we can sometimes write until we’re blue in the face about an issue and it seems like no progress is ever made. On certain issues, yes, you can really make a difference.”
local newspaper, but middle-class and low-income community members told me it does not reflect their concerns. Gregory talks to the millionaire regularly—they see each other. Gregory does not see Deer Creek’s poor. He suggests that to find extreme poverty, he would need to spend a large amount of time exploring the darkest corners of Deer County. In reality, he could walk out of his office and find it without getting into his car.

Gregory told me many of his efforts to make a difference involved trying to overcome a general resistance to change. One of the best ways to do so, he said, was to offer contextual information about current news events that is often overlooked (or, in the case of the Priorsville Record, actively eschewed) by local newspapers. He suggested that his education helped him make context-reliant cases for change in a way that was sometimes effective:

> With my background being so general in the liberal arts, it gives me an opportunity to bring some thought to current problems in our community of Deer Creek to the people. It gives them an alternative to look at. I think in any small community, there’s a great resistance to change. If you can take new thing like the building of a downtown community park, which there was much opposition to here in Deer Creek, and if you can say, you know, ‘the history of parks is this: They provide places of recreation and entertainment and relaxation for people and families and for individuals for lunch breaks and stuff like that.’ If you can bring that out, the history of parks, then it helps the good progressive people in, like Deer Creek, to push forward and get this park done. And they did.

Gregory’s contextual exploration of local news issues such as the park controversy was largely absent from local coverage in Greenburg and Priorsville during my study period. Although Gregory rarely applied it to social need because he rarely wrote about social need, it was evident in some of the syndicated material he published, as noted in Chapter 6. In the cases where that context was present, the writers were able to make effective arguments about broader social impacts of poverty on issues such as health and school achievement.
Later, Gregory returned to the topic of battling a resistance to change, which he referred to in that part of the interview as “the Appalachian Way”:

I think the slowness to accept new ideas is one of the things I’m working on right now. You know, let’s accept some new ideas and let’s back these new businesses that are starting up. Because, you know, the Appalachian Way is we’re going to stay back in our hollow and we’re going to do what we’ve been doing for the last 20, 30, 40 years, and we’re not gonna do anything new. And, you know, this is not good for new businesses, especially new small businesses like the new restaurants in town. So many new businesses have gone out of business because people haven’t given them a chance and it’s because of this hollow mentality. So, you know, I am critical of that.

Overcoming the “hollow mentality” could mean many other things: impressing upon people the benefits of education or entrepreneurship (which, Gregory could argue, he does through news about the local college), or creating a platform where their voices, concerns, and experiences could be addressed. But overcoming the “hollow mentality” in Deer Creek, in Gregory’s mind, involves getting people to come out of the woods to spend money (which he presumes they have).

In my 10 years as a newspaper reporter and editor, I often interviewed people who were clearly telling me what they thought I wanted to hear, a problem also sometimes encountered by qualitative researchers (Bourdieu, 1999). I experienced that in a few of the interviews I conducted for this study. But my personal sense was that Gregory genuinely believed the things he told me, and that he usually did not recognize the social problems around him. The people who influence him seem to be a fairly small group of affluent people. He does not see local poverty in the way that the numbers bare it out, or in the way that others in the community described it to me. Gregory talked often about being a community leader and setting an agenda for Deer Creek, duties a newspaper publisher should be willing to accept. However, because of his limited exposure to others
in Deer Creek, he ends up with a good natured but very tunnel-visioned approach to community leadership

*The Deer Creek Advocate: “The Messenger of Citizens”*

Several of the people I spoke with in Deer Creek said they saw the online Deer Creek Advocate (DCA) as a viable news alternative to the local newspaper. Lance, the founder of the Advocate, also runs a local computer company. After some initial contact, Lance decided not to take part in interviews for this study. However, some story posts and comments on his website offer clues to his journalistic motives. In a 2011 response to criticism of his site, Lance wrote that DCA “is just the messenger of citizens.” In a separate response to another set of criticisms in 2010, Lance told readers that the site intends “to provide a much needed platform for our community” so they can “express themselves without fear of retribution.” While Lance readily provides his own views of local issues, he wrote in the 2010 column that opposing comments are also welcome, as long as they meet the site’s commenting policies:

> On DCA, one can say what one wants. You don’t have to pay for it or use your power to use it. Thoughts are printed without editing. Anyone, rich, poor, black, white, red, yellow, domestic, foreign, educated, non-educated, has the same chance.

In early 2012, a post entitled “Forces at work to stop the DCA’s Advocacy for Transparency and Accountability?” called Lance’s website “a formidable champion for good in the County [sic].” The writer of that piece noted that the local newspaper was unwilling to “root out corruption” in Deer Creek and praised the DCA for giving people a

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71 This post did not include an author’s name, and there is no indication that Lance himself wrote it. A line at the end of the story reads: “author and source on file.” The practice of withholding bylines is not uncommon at DCA—Frank wrote in another online column that he knows the identity of all writers and commenters but allows some to write anonymously so that they can speak freely without fear of retribution.

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platform to voice their concerns. Some community members said they read it more often than the *Chronicle*.

Like Theresa at GreenburgToday.com, Lance offers through the DCA a platform for the establishment of a counternarrative about the local community. Both online entrepreneurs launched their websites in part to fill a void they saw in their local media ecosystems: Theresa wanted to create an outlet for positive news about Greenburg, and Lance developed a place where individuals could gather to voice concerns and criticisms that seemed unwelcome in the local newspaper. What sets the DCA apart from GreenburgToday.com, and from the four newspapers studied in this dissertation, is the public engagement that it facilitates. Individuals who say they have no other local voice can post their opinions and ideas on the site with little concern about social or political retribution. Because of that freedom and engagement, the DCA’s posts and comment sections present narratives about social issues in Deer Creek that differ dramatically from those expressed in the *Deer Creek Chronicle*.

The engagement the site facilitates also produced the greatest criticism of the DCA. Gregory, who was often criticized on the DCA, said he believed the site was damaging to the community in that it allowed salacious gossip to spread, but he said he took no umbrage at the personal attacks he experienced there—“I just laugh at them,” he said. Quinn, a local secretary and former *Chronicle* reporter, said the DCA site was “good and bad.” She explained:

I mean, it is good to get news, you get news out of there you don’t get in other places. But as far as the comments that they put up, if you say a comment that is in favor of someone they never like, they’ll never post it, or vice versa, if you’re saying something bad about something they do like. So you get a one-sided opinion. The news is pretty good, but if you read the comments, you’ll get a one-sided kind of opinion.
Quinn’s suggestion that Lance selectively edits comments was made by others interviewed for this story, and occasionally referred to by people who comment on the site. As Chapter 8 will note, other residents voiced concerns about hostility in the DCA’s comment sections as well.

Attempting to understand the journalistic encoding of individual stories about poverty that appear in local media in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek is perhaps a futile task because there are so few of them and because news staffs take a hands-off approach to the production of much of the content that does make it into the newspaper. However, journalists’ routines, priorities, and attitudes toward their work and the need in their community provide important insight into the encoding of the overall news product, which is just as valuable, if not more so.

Some journalists interviewed for this project said they recognize the ties between poverty and other newsworthy matters, such as local drug abuse in Greenburg or community pride in Priorsville. However, those matters are rarely connected to poverty in stories. There are several reasons. In Greenburg, the limitations are largely corporate practices (what Stuart Hall called “the routines of production”), but philosophies also come into play in important ways. Sandra’s attitudes toward community development and her desire to shelter the poor from public ridicule lead to the absence of news about realities that many Greenburg residents see daily. The same could be said for the Priorsville Record and GreenburgToday.com, where journalists for the most part provide a platform for others who have the time, resources, and initiative to provide news to them. Dominant local attitudes related to poverty will remain dominant until they are challenged, and neither GreenburgToday.com, the Record, nor the Star do much to
challenge dominant attitudes by going out and finding alternative voices, or by inviting those voices to come to them. At the news outlet in this study that seemed most poised to explore social alternatives, the *Priorsville Post-Examiner*, journalists seemed willing to challenge the status quo. However, they seemed unsure of how to do so in a way that will move people to action. At the *Deer Creek Chronicle*, Gregory simply is simply isolated from the economic realities many of his neighbors face. One day over lunch at a small diner two blocks away from his office, Gregory told me:

> You are derelict of your duties as a newspaper publisher if you do not consider the work that you do in part, in greater part, as a public service, rather than just strictly as a business. This is a public service, to be in the newspaper business. We are held in high esteem by the general public because we print social benefits that people can do.

Gregory provides a great deal of service in Deer Creek, but relatively little of it applies to those in his community who look to the newspaper to help them understand or address poverty.

To wholly understand the approach of the journalists here, we must balance their professional philosophies against the outside factors at play in the region in which they work. In Greenburg and Priorsville, local journalists compete with a regional narrative that places them squarely in Jeff Biggers’ “backwater Appalachia” and “pitiful Appalachia” frames, respectively. Over the course of my interviews, I asked people how their local communities were typically portrayed on television news or in regional newspapers. Their overwhelming response was that if Greenburg or Priorsville was going to be featured in the regional news, the story was probably going to be negative.\(^2\) Almost everyone in Greenburg told me they would expect a regional news story featuring the

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\(^{2}\) Likely because of its size and relative geographic isolation, most people in Deer Creek told me their community rarely receives attention from regional media outlets.
community to be about drug abuse. Most Priorsville residents said they would expect the story to be about job losses or poverty. The community journalists I interviewed recognized this coverage as incomplete and detrimental to their communities and saw themselves, to varying degrees, as counterbalances to that narrative. They also face a much broader negative narrative when media report on Appalachia. PPE editor Nick, who has lived in the region his whole life, explained his feelings about Appalachia’s media portrayal this way:

Someone, I think it was in east Kentucky or somewhere, wrote a really good piece, thought-provoking, about how every time the national media comes in [to Appalachia] and covers a story they look at it from the standpoint of the negative. And that’s what they’re after: they’re chasing the things with the poverty, they’re going out to the old coal mining towns and getting pictures of the clapboard houses. And they [the author of the story] say, “you really don’t stop to think about it.” And, a friend of mine who is a veterinarian in town said the same thing. And I don’t remember the story that she was referring to, but it was a story, I think, in the Wall Street Journal, I could be wrong about that, but they did this tour through eastern Kentucky, West Virginia, down into Tennessee, and she said “They’re totally ignoring, you know, they may be pockets, but there are pockets in Appalachia where people are working hard and trying to change their community for the better.” People aren’t necessarily just willing to sit around and be on the government draw. But that seems to be the big thing. When The Washington Post, or one of the big papers, comes into Appalachia, they’re focusing on the high rate of government assistance and things like that, and it seems like they always find the person who’s sitting down at the store, down at the hangout, just sitting there waiting for their check to come. That seems to be what they focus on: it’s not just the poverty, it’s the high welfare rates, the high disability rates, things like that.

The community journalists I interviewed for this dissertation were largely in agreement that counteracting negative reports about Greenburg and Priorsville specifically was part of their job. Theresa said she started GreenburgToday.com in response to regional and national coverage of a local political controversy that she believed was unfairly critical of the community. As noted above, Nick believed the PPE could provide a positive counterbalance to media messages about Priorsville’s suffering economy. There was
much less agreement on the impact of negative media images of Appalachia. Nick said he took personal offense to negative mountain stereotypes, but he reasoned stories in the Wall Street Journal or the Washington Post make little difference locally because few people in Priorsville read those stories. Nancy, the former Henderson News editor, took a different position:

It’s bizarre to think that we’d all fall under some umbrella of, you know, I don’t know, just that we would be completely culturally different from the rest of the world. I mean, there are some things here that are different here than other places, but I don’t think it’s any reflection on intelligence or creativity, you know. It’s important to me to change the way people perceive us here.

Gregory, Bill, Nick, and Sandra all see themselves as part of a leadership structure that includes local government and business leaders, a leadership structure that often excludes people at the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder. Journalists’ reluctance to write about poverty, and to interview and feature the poor in their communities, also is rooted in most cases in the rather large assumption that the economically disadvantaged will experience shame or embarrassment if they are “outed” in the newspaper. The compassionate thing to do, some of the journalists I interviewed reasoned, is to let them be and focus on other matters. The ramifications of that assumption are many: class-based social isolation and voicelessness remain unchallenged, understandings of poverty as first and foremost an individual responsibility are reinforced, and public discussions about solutions to economic conditions remain largely one-sided with the wealthy and middle-class talking to or about, rather than with, their less-wealthy neighbors.

But what if those struggling to make financial headway in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek are not ashamed of who they are, what they have, or the choices they have made? What if the telling of their stories serves not to isolate them, but rather to
integrate them into a community that often *sees* them but rarely *knows* them? Do those who cope with financial hardships firsthand, those who work to help the poor, and others in these communities where need is prevalent understand the dominance of the community response frame and the absence of personal stories acts of journalistic compassion, or as the ongoing maintenance of a status quo in which some voices matter more than others? The rest of this dissertation will explore those questions. My interviews with local residents in the three communities suggests that the decoding of local news coverage of poverty results in an interesting collection of what sociologist Anthony Giddens called “unintentional outcomes” (1984, p. 8) that feed back into the problems of apathy and stratification present in Greenburg, Priorsville, Deer Creek, and other rural communities in Appalachia and elsewhere.
CHAPTER 8: THE DECODING OF LOCAL POVERTY COVERAGE AND BROADER IMAGES OF APPALACHIA

At a nonprofit thrift store that operates out of an old school about a mile from downtown Greenburg, I met two local women, Jenn and Brandy. Jenn was operating the cash register behind the U-shaped counter, where men and women of all ages came to pay a dollar or two for a pair of pants, a used child’s toy, tennis shoes, window treatments, a toilet seat, or any other item chosen from the menagerie of gently (and at times not so gently) used items donated for the shop to sell. Brandy was nearby, sweeping the tile floors between racks of donated blouses and slacks.

In some ways, Jenn and Brandy fit the stereotypical mold of the Appalachian generational handout-taker. Brandy, in her mid-20s, had a 9-month-old daughter. Jenn, in her late teens, had a 2-year-old son and a six-month-old daughter. None of the three children had fathers who were actively involved in their lives (“They [fathers] all run,” Jenn told me). Both women were born and raised in Greenburg and still live with their parents because they could not afford places of their own. Both have tried to start new lives in other towns, but their financial realities and the draw of family keep them in Greenburg.73 Stuck in Greenburg and without the time, money, or training to commute to other towns, both women have struggled to find work (after two years of unemployment, Brandy had been excited to learn the day before we met that she was going to get a job at a fast food restaurant in Greenburg; Jen told me she was hoping to get on at a local pizza parlor). Both recalled receiving free school supplies from a now-defunct nonprofit agency.

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73 Brandy told me she lived in another town about two hours from Greenburg for a year, before her daughter was born. “It drove me insane, because I was used to seeing all my family every day,” she said. “You go eight months without seeing them, or longer, then it’s hard. This place has got a pull on you. It brings you back, no matter what.”
as children. On the March day I met them, both women were working at the thrift shop to earn that month’s $400 welfare check. And both women were keenly aware of how all of those facts made them look to others, particularly Greenburg’s more well-do-do residents. Brandy told me that, at the social service agency where she previously “worked off my welfare,” her supervisor had called her, and all the other women who were there for the same reason, “welfare trash.” “It’s just how it is,” she said.

Brandy told me she sometimes looks at the Greenburg Star when she visits her grandmother, who subscribes to the newspaper. Jenn reads it much less frequently—she told me the news that most interests her is who’s been arrested, information she can get from the website of the local court clerk. When they read the newspaper, Jenn and Brandy told me, they do not see a reflection of their lives, or of the lives of others they know who struggle financially. Brandy observed:

The only thing they put in the newspaper is how they’re trying to make everything beautiful around here. They get grants for beautification in Greenburg. I’m sorry, but if you’re getting money, a grant, to buy flowers for your town, don’t you think you want to fix the potholes so you don’t lose half your car instead of putting a bucket of flowers outside so people can see it. That is the thing that I don’t understand.

The hanging baskets of petunias that, to Star editor Sandra, represent economic advancement are seen by Brandy as a boondoggle, evidence that the concerns of a large segment of the community do not really matter. “These are the issues that drive me nuts, because nobody ever does anything about it, no matter how much you talk about it,” she told me.

Jenn and Brandy see compelling stories about the social contradictions in their lives every day. They watch men who do not pay their child support lose their driver’s licenses in court, and, as a result, they become unable to drive to work and even less able
to support their children (this happened to the father of Brandy’s child). They know homeless people who have been hassled by the police for pitching tents under a local bridge without the required city permit (there is no homeless shelter in Greenburg). They know about situations where three or four families are living in houses built to accommodate one family because there are so few low-income apartments in Greenburg.

“If they actually put in the paper, made a story about how life really is here . . . if they put that in the paper and more people talk about it and talk about it, it might spread and it might actually do some good,” Brandy told me. When I asked her how she thought people would react to that news, she said:

There’s certain people that have money, they’re not going to care. They’ve got money. But the other people, like us, that are on welfare, I think that’s going to help people, because they’re just going to keep talking about it and it might make it into a big thing and somebody might actually do something about it. But I ain’t going to hold my breath on that.

Jenn largely agreed. “If it [news about needs in the community] is lame, people are going to walk right past it,” she said. When I asked her what “lame” looks like, she replied “just the same old stuff.” Most of what is in the newspaper, she told me, is “the same old stuff.”

Jenn and Brandy essentially read the absence of the news they describe as evidence that poverty is business as usual, an interpretation they largely accepted at the beginning of our conversation. That reading reinforces dominant “culture of poverty” approaches, which suggest poverty is the result of individual choices made by the poor. That approach does not suggest that communities, or society as a whole, bare any broader responsibilities to address matters such as opportunity and inclusion. It lends credence to the idea, voiced by Bill at the PPE and others in this study, that poverty is an unavoidable
fact of life in these rural, remote communities. In this chapter, I describe the ways residents interpret the coverage (or lack of coverage) of poverty in their local newspapers and local news websites. Residents told me they recognized the fact that, for the most part, those news organizations were silent when it came to local economic matters such as poverty, unemployment, and homelessness. The lack of reliable news coverage of those matters led some to suggest that there were no real public means in their communities for people to express new ideas or challenge prevailing notions about local poverty, or other social issues, for that matter. This chapter also explores residents’ perceptions of media portrayal of Appalachia. People in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek were largely in agreement that those representations were negative, but there was less agreement on whether they were damaging to individuals or communities in the region.

The interpretation of a lack of local news coverage as evidence that poverty is a natural way of life was not isolated to Jenn and Brandy’s thrift shop. It was suggested by others, rich and poor, in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek. The discussion of those interpretations raises an interesting theoretical question: Can a message that does not exist be decoded at all? I argue that as they decode the whole body of local journalism provided in their communities, readers, especially those who struggle financially, recognize the absence of information about social and financial realities they see around them or, in some cases, experience firsthand. That recognition leads to interpretations and the internalization of ideas and, thus, can be thought of as decoding. Residents in all three communities told me they interpreted the absence of news about poverty to mean that poverty was not a problem that was important for the community to address, an
interpretation that is especially problematic for Jenn, Brandy, and others who cope with it daily. Other residents read into news coverage an understanding that only certain voices are welcome in the newspaper, and that only certain individuals and groups (i.e. churches, nonprofits, or the government) are in the business of discussing solutions. In Priorsville, residents saw positive stories about the local economy as an attempt at community-building through the expression of positive news, although some said they believed those efforts benefitted a few powerful people and not the community as a whole.

However, Brandy (and a few others) saw oppositional readings in the news texts as well. As we continued to talk, their attitudes toward possible change seemed to shift and they seemed, to me, to develop a sense of self-efficacy and confidence that their take on matters such as the flower baskets downtown did matter to someone. Brandy and Jenn stopped, if only for a moment, seeing their condition as an inevitable byproduct of the situation into which they were born. They got angry about the way things were in Greenburg, and felt like arguing. At the end of this chapter, I will discuss the ways that local media (either print or online) can help their economically disadvantaged readers develop a public voice and take part in discussions about possible solutions, and why it is in the local media outlet’s best interests to do so.

Greenburg: Limited Expectations

The 13 non-journalists in Greenburg who I interviewed for this study expressed limited expectations of their daily newspaper and, for the most part, their new hyperlocal news website. For most of those individuals, those limited expectations of local media mirrored their attitudes toward the possibility of social change that would materially
improve the lives of Greenburg’s poorest residents. Brandy’s remarks that negative views of those on welfare was “just the way it is” and that she “ain’t going to hold my breath” waiting for that to change are representative of a broader impression that challenging Greenburg’s status quo was an insurmountable task. Some of the local residents I interviewed expressed the opinion that the town’s wealthy were uninterested in discussing changes in the status quo and enjoyed protections and a voice that would not be available to their less-wealthy neighbors. Frank, a former pastor in his early 60s who had lost his job and had been unemployed for three months when I interviewed him, told me, “Money’s a big thing in Greenburg. If you have it, they will like you and listen to you. If you don’t have it, you’re not going to be a mover and a shaker.” In another interview, Mary, a social service worker in her late 50s, discussed a local political controversy that she believes was downplayed by the Star. “If it was somebody that had no social standing in the community and they get in trouble, then it’s all over the paper, it’s front page, it’s right there,” she told me. When I asked her if personal wealth was the main reason for the difference, she answered, “It’s not necessarily just money, it’s who your family is, and other things. But I think everybody knows those rules and has learned to live with those rules, and around them.” Floyd, who runs the county’s largest nonprofit social service organization, told me many local poor people are suspicious of the motives of the rich, and vice versa. “Communication is the big thing,” Floyd told me. “We don’t communicate well, as groups or newspapers or anything.”

The Greenburg Star and, to a lesser extent GreenburgToday.com, were seen by many of the residents I interviewed as protectors of that status quo. Some residents saw little room for the voices of Greenburg’s working class and low-income populations,
groups that, as Chapter 6 noted, rarely appear in stories or photos. Mary said the newspaper “does a real good job of just reporting on the surface” but does not challenge the ideas or actions of the local elite. But, like others in Greenburg, she sympathized with the newspaper’s staff:

I understand why [the newspaper does not cover local controversy]. But those kinds of things, you feel like you have a right to know these things, and to know the objective details, but the paper’s not going to go in that direction because it would just create too much internal turmoil, and they don’t get paid enough [to deal with the social consequences].

Mary suggested that the newspaper does “as good a job as they possibly can,” but believes coverage is limited to protect social standing. “Sometimes they have to take the safe route. They report, but they’ll err on the side of safety rather than do, like, investigative stuff or bring stuff to the surface,” Mary told me. Grace, a cafeteria cook at the local senior citizens center in her mid-40s, said she believes the newspaper workers “do their best” but, like Mary, she believes they hold back information. “A lot of things, people [namely, the newspaper] just keep confidential. The more people know, the more there is to get upset about,” Grace told me. Dwight, the unemployed pastor, said the newspaper is “just kind of neutral and go-with-the-flow.” Floyd said the Star’s editor and reporter “don’t want to make waves for the county. Sometimes I think waves are good. Let’s get it out.”

Along those lines, some residents told me they believed the newspaper was little more than a mouthpiece for Greenburg’s influential decision-makers, although that determination did not generate the same level of resentment that a similar sentiment in Deer Creek did (as will be discussed later in this chapter). When I asked Kathy what kind of poverty coverage she saw in the Star, she answered, “you don’t [see coverage of
poverty], unless it’s something from a commissioner’s report or a report from a local meeting.” Clint, a middle school teacher in his mid-40s who grew up in Greenburg, observed that “I don’t think they any longer at the Star make it a point to go out and get the news. I think they wait for the news to come to them. I think they wait for somebody to call them.” Often, he said, the “somebody” who calls provides information with limited utility:

> It’s very, whenever a report comes out at the state level, they’ll have something in the paper, and it’ll be very statistically driven, and there’s never an answer to the problem, so they’re just telling us what we already know. Occasionally they’ll say the level of unemployment has gone down and we’ll all cheer. But they never really offer any suggestion or they never really have any news about what anyone’s doing to keep it down. They’re just telling us facts. They’re reporting what they’ve been given.

The reliance on submitted materials was also mentioned by Floyd and Mary, two of the local people Sandra and Susan mentioned among their best sources for news about poverty. Matthew, another frequent source and the manager of Green County’s state welfare office, told me that, “generally, the Star is not publishing anything [about welfare] unless I’m sending them the story.” Matthew had strong feelings about the way welfare recipients were viewed in Greenburg: The “vast majority” of Green County residents who get government aid work and follow the rules, he told me, but they still face a stigma because “people only see the bad apples, the ones that are milking the system and cheating us.” However, Green County officials (Matthew’s bosses) tend to be politically conservative, he told me, and not interested in opening up a public dialogue about welfare locally. In a neighboring county where politics tend to be a little more liberal, Matthew told me, the person in his position (with the support of local leaders there) writes press releases about how hard it is to pay for basic necessities when your
income is at the poverty level, or rebuttals to state or federal reports on poverty. Those press releases usually are published in the neighboring county’s newspapers. “I have no problem with what he’s doing, because he does keep poverty on the forefront, and on the front of people’s minds and eyes,” Matthew told me. But Matthew did not believe he would get support if he wanted to do the same in Green County. “There’s not anybody out there [in Green County government] pushing the welfare angle,” he told me. “I just don’t think it comes up that often [among county commissioners].”

Readers’ perceptions of the Star’s lack of coverage on the community’s economic hardships often relate back to a lack of faith in the newspaper’s ability to generate positive dialogue about those problems. That lack of faith exists not because they do not trust the journalists that work at the Star—in most cases, Sandra and Susan were viewed positively. Rather, interview participants suggested that they had little ability to introduce more voices into social discussion because of journalistic barriers. Dwight suggested there was little the paper could do to address poverty “and still stay within the confines of the paper.” When I asked him what he meant by that, he explained:

They can only write what they see, the facts, you know. Philosophy is the domain of philosophers. If you want to theorize, bring theoreticians. If you want to philosophize, bring in the philosophers. But otherwise, report the facts. And there’s not a whole lot of facts to report.

Others in the community made connections between their understanding of journalistic conventions and the newspaper’s lack of proactive reporting on poverty. Clint, the middle school teacher, expressed concern that proactive reporting could develop into bias: “I know how it is with papers—you want to report the news, you don’t want to make the news.” Interestingly, while they would criticize the Star for lackluster coverage of social issues and a general unwillingness to challenge the status quo, residents who knew her
generally tended not to blame Sandra, the newspaper’s editor and general manager, for its shortcomings. This finding is particularly interesting given how synonymous Sandra is with the Star—Robert, a local bank executive in his mid-40s, told me that “Sandra personally is the paper, to me.” Sandra had visited the nonprofit thrift shop where Jenn and Brandy worked a few days before my visit and had written a community response story about one of its programs. When I asked Brandy if she felt the newspaper cared about the poor in her community, she said:

   It really depends on who the person is. I don’t know what her name is, but the lady who came in here and took our pictures and stuff [it was Sandra], her, I would say, she’s closer to us. She’s doing stuff to try to help us, the poor. Then there’s other people there who don’t care.

Other residents who had more experience dealing with the newspaper (and, in some cases, who knew Sandra better), said the coverage shortcomings were the result of a lack of resources at the newspaper, a problem Sandra herself alluded to in my interview with her. Kathy said she had sent the newspaper announcements from a community organization with which she works, but never saw them in the paper. She believed that was a production problem associated with the newspaper’s out-of-town design desk.

“You can’t rely on our local paper for local news,” Kathy told me. She held Henderson Media, not Sandra, responsible. “They’re constantly changing the [corporate] manager. . . . We have no local clout,” she told me. “We have no local input in that newspaper.” Clint, Grace, and Robert alluded to the fact that the Star probably did not have enough people to do the kind of reporting that the editor might want to do. Dan, a local janitor in his late 50s, said the newspaper “is what it is. I’m sure there’s more stories [about poverty and local need] out there. Maybe they don’t have enough people to do them, I don’t know.”
Among the 13 local residents I interviewed, the Star’s most vocal critic was also one of its most commonly-used sources for information about need in the community. Floyd, the manager of the county’s largest nonprofit aid agency, told me Sandra often comes out to his agency for stories, which he described as “all feel-good stuff.” When I asked Floyd, who is in his late 50s, whether that coverage made a difference, he rolled his head and said it did not. “It’s been the same old story for so long,” he told me. He said the frequent coverage given to donations, food drives, and fund raisers—the stuff most community response stories are made of—glorified individual efforts and made it difficult to organize larger community-wide help programs for which no one would get credit. He said the newspaper’s reactive coverage did little to challenge the dominant ideas about poverty, or about poor people, in Greenburg:

We know that we’re poor, we know that we don’t have jobs. Get out there and see—maybe somebody out there might come up with an idea or opinion that would turn things around for us. I’m tired of hearing how poor we are. I know how poor we are.

I found it interesting that the other voices that spoke most loudly of a desire for more in-depth reporting were also the voices that the Star’s staff often turned to for quotes or story ideas. Mary said she believed the newspaper should be more of an advocate for “things that could have a positive impact on the community, but you need to know about them,” such as federal laws that limit or expand welfare. The newspaper would not have to take a strong stand on these issues to make a difference, she argued: “They just have to present what they know and let people make their own decisions about it.” Matthew told
me stronger analysis of poverty and unemployment news, which would be difficult for him to provide given the political climate in which he works,\textsuperscript{74} would help:

I think it would help to break some of that stereotype of welfare if there were more stories and the reporter actually understood what the numbers meant, what it means to have this many people on assistance, what the poverty guidelines are, what levels they’re actually set at.

Matthew suggested that while he did not feel he could initiate more proactive coverage of poverty, he could certainly provide the context reporters would need to execute that coverage themselves. If the journalists at the \textit{Star} decided to write more aggressively about poverty in their community, sources such as Matthew, Mary, and Floyd would be key allies. The support they expressed for deeper, more proactive reporting suggests they would be willing to provide information needed to make that reporting a reality, if they were asked for it.

Eight of the 13 people I interviewed told me they had read GreenburgToday.com. Floyd said he liked the site because it took the approach that “this is what it is, and [Theresa] doesn’t try to smooth it over.” Jerry, a local native in his mid-20s who works at a radio station, said he believed Theresa “has the desire to be” different from the \textit{Star}, but does not have the resources. When it came to poverty and local need, most of the local residents said they saw little real difference between the reporting they read on GreenburgToday.com and the stories they saw in the \textit{Star}.

While Greenburg residents generally felt their news organizations, especially the \textit{Star}, provided lackluster coverage of local need, most were not especially upset about it.

To most, the factors that seemed to control what news was included in the paper seemed

\textsuperscript{74} Mary, whose organization is funded by the county government, and Floyd, who depends on church money and private donations to keep his agency’s doors open, face similar restraints. Mary told me that she plans to become a much stronger community advocate when she retires.
out of reach or cryptic: Henderson Media’s out-of-town executives, journalistic conventions such as the need to avoid bias, or a conservative political climate that limited sources’ abilities to say what they might want to say about poverty. Those limitations could not be challenged by folks in Greenburg, some interview subjects told me, so there was little to do but accept them.

Priorsville: Cheerleading for the Community

Like those in Greenburg, the residents I interviewed in Priorsville told me poverty coverage was noticeably absent from their local newspapers. However, most of the 13 people I interviewed in Priorsville interpreted that absence in a very different way, and that difference relates to the way they view the Priorsville Post-Examiner and the people who produce it. This analysis largely focuses on the PPE and not the Priorsville Record because the PPE was the newspaper on which the vast majority of the people I interviewed focused. All 13 interview participants told me they read the PPE with some regularity. Those who saw significant differences between the two generally said the PPE was the more interesting of the two, and the one they were most likely to read.

While some pointed out that the PPE (and Nick specifically) had started to focus more on social problems in the community over the last few years, 12 of the 13 local residents in interviewed told me poverty was rarely discussed in either newspaper. This is in keeping with data presented in Chapter 6, which found that of the 99 stories that appeared on the front page between October 1, 2013, and March 31, 2014, only nine referenced poverty in the community. Nine Priorsville residents told me their local newspapers took great efforts to focus on the good things going on in the community, and that they interpreted the absence of regular news and information about poverty as an
effort to build community confidence.\footnote{Carson, Priorsville’s mayor, was the only person who said poverty was a regular focus of local media, and he thought the newspapers there reported on unemployment specifically in an unfairly negative way: “It seems like they try to make it very negative. When there’s a positive side, they try to offset the positive side with negativity.” For example, he told me the PPE had at one time suggested that the local unemployment rate was falling because jobless people were dropping out of the workforce once their unemployment benefits ran out (the story he referenced did not appear in the sample of stories I read for this study). He argued that suggestion was incorrect, and that the real reason the rates were dropping was that the county’s population was aging. Of the people I interviewed in Priorsville, Carson was the strongest critic of the local newspapers, although he did say that he had a good relationship with both. He also acknowledged that the PPE’s Business Spotlight feature was helping to portray the town in a more positive light.} That effort, which some people referred to as the newspaper’s “cheerleader” role, was seen as both good and bad, with the difference largely hinging on perceptions of who might benefit from the agenda for which the newspaper was cheering. Tom, a former politician in his early 60s who runs a local trade school, told me he liked the Priorsville newspapers because they focused on positive news and did not try to “create scandal.” Melody, a Priorsville native in her early 20s who works as a collection agent at a local payday lender, said the newspaper’s coverage of poverty “comes and goes. I guess they’re trying to stick to the happier news in the county, instead of that we’re suffering.” Kevin, a pastor in his early 50s, said the newspapers should and do “do things that can help build a community and not divide a community.” Molly, a local veterinarian in her early 40s, said “self-promotion” of the community was an important part of the local newspapers’ jobs: “It’s very good to be a cheerleader for the things that are going right.”

Sharon, the director of the Priorsville Chamber of Commerce, is perhaps the town’s biggest social cheerleader—“I’m essentially a positive person,” she told me during our first telephone conversation. One of Sharon’s main job duties is to build Prior County’s commercial and industrial bases, and she told me developing the community’s confidence in itself is an important part of that responsibility. “We say, ‘we believe in
you [the community and residents]. Yes, we do have problems, here they are.’ We identify them. But we have things in place to work on those,” she told me. “If you’re told all the time that you’re a failure, you believe that whether you are or not.” Sharon said she started establishing a strong working relationship with PPE editor Nick, who is on the chamber’s board of directors, about two years ago. “There was never a time when we went to Nick and said, ‘This is what we want to say,’ that he didn’t far exceed our expectations,” Sharon told me. “It doesn’t’ matter what kind of song you write if there’s nobody there to sing it.” Despite the close relationship between the newspaper and the chamber, both Sharon and Nick insisted that there was no pressure on the newspaper to portray Priorsville in a Pollyanna way. Sharon told me:

Now, Nick is still a news reporter, so when the hard facts come out, he says them. And it hurts, it stings. But we have a chance to come back and say, ‘OK, that’s true, here’s why. But we have a plan to fix that.’ And Nick always sings that story for us.

Later in our conversation, Sharon said Nick does a good job of “digging into the roots of Prior County and finding out why this [the community’s economic trouble] is the way it is” and trying to promote a public conversation about those findings. She said:

If you want just a feel-good paper of encouragement, those are good and those are important and there are sections in the paper for that. But the newspaper, the local newspaper, especially for a rural community, it’s like a portrait of our county every single week. It’s a way to say, “This is who we are—good, bad, ugly, flawed, indifferent. This is who our county is. . . It tells the community, “This is what you are. Do you like this? If you don’t, then change it. If you do, then keep going forward.”

Other residents were more skeptical of the motives behind the cheerleading efforts they saw in Priorsville’s local newspapers. Scott, the director of a large health care provider in Priorsville, saw the promotional efforts as benefitting a few affluent people in town: “Our local papers are careful, more careful to only show the good things about
their sector, or where they have influences. Uh, our local papers aren’t completely, they’re not without prejudice. Our local papers are not completely without bias.” That bias, he said, “comes from man’s basic instincts,” namely greed and selfishness. “They don’t write real news” about how pervasive poverty affects the area’s youth, Scott told me. “I think we just want to tell people about the ballgame on Friday night.” Sally, the nonprofit thrift store manager, told me that promotional efforts are important, but that they too often overshadow the realities that Priorsville’s needy residents face:

I want people to understand truth. I don’t think there’s any shame in the things that have gone wrong here. But we cannot change them until people begin to understand them and see what the issues are. And we do it ourselves—we pretty it all up for the media and try to make it look so good and sound so good, when the truth of the matter is, we’re in trouble here. And I know people who will get on me and say, “Do you really have to tell it like that?” Yeah, I really do. Because there’s no shame in it.

The PPE, Sally suggested, was beginning to talk about those issues “gently and kindly,” a welcome change, she said, to local news that has often been unrealistically positive:

We’ve all been really afraid to admit, you know, some of the things that are going on here. We know them, but we don’t always want to talk about them or read about them. But I think if sometimes people knew the truth, if people would just hear other people’s hearts, you know, I think we could get a lot more done.

Four residents suggested the newspapers were fulfilling a responsibility to protect the poor from social alienation by keeping their names and stories out of the newspaper, an idea that came up in other communities as well. The identities of poor children were of particular concern. Amanda, a social service worker in her early 70s who works daily with individuals and families in need, found this protection particularly important. She

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76 Sharon, the chamber of commerce director, is one of those people. Because of her work with local organizations, Sally has a social platform, and she is not shy about using it to express opinions like the ones she shared with me. Sally and Sharon both told me they’d had amicable discussions about whether Sally’s position was helping or hurting efforts to improve morale in the community. Both women told me they worked well together, but it was clear that neither fully bought into the other’s point of view.
was mindful of making the poor “feel different” and saving their dignity. “You can’t talk
about certain families,” referring to poor families with children, Amanda told me:

> You don’t want to embarrass them. You don’t. They’re innocent kids. Yeah, if
Daddy’s in jail and Daddy’s done this, yeah, that’s news, it’s no problem. But to
go in and talk about how poor they are and what a rough life they’re living and so
forth, it’s demeaning to a lot of the kids.

She recalled an episode where she believed a large charity’s advertising had violated the
privacy and dignity of a local family:

That’s just like [large national charity], when they came in here they brought us a
truckload of boxes, 400 boxes of food and 400 boxes of hygiene [products]. And I
asked the local agencies to give me fifty names. And then I made sure they didn’t
double up. OK, those who were the neediest in this three county area here came
and got these boxes. These people aren’t written about. They don’t want their
name and picture, uh, posted anywhere because they’re poor. [Large national
charity] came back and wanted families for advertisements, poor families—go in
and take a picture of their, their children. I did it, I helped them. I got permission,
I took them in and I got these children. But did that make me happy? No. You
don’t like to stick a camera in someone’s face and them knowing that, ‘hey,
you’re poor and we want to take your picture.’ I feel rotten when I do it.

The large national charity gave the family some money and food, “helped them out,”
Amanda said, and the subjects of the photos did not seem troubled by the attention.

“These people [the poor family] were glad to do it, didn’t care at all. So if they don’t
care, then I’ll do it for them,” Amanda said, but it still makes her uncomfortable. Steven,
a Priorsville native who runs a small organization that promotes awareness of substance
abuse, agreed that coverage of the poor could have damaging effects:

> I think it’s a fine line you cross. You don’t want to take a, even though it’s a
struggling people, a proud people and try to beat them down more, OK? So
there’s not a lot [of news] about poverty.

Unlike Amanda, who told me the poor in Priorsville would be better off if they were not
identified in stories about poverty, Steven suggested that, with great care, it would be
possible to cover them in a respectful way:
It would, if they did it in a way that was not derogatory toward anybody, any culture in this area, any economic background in this area, and they did it in a way that would lead someone not to better themselves, but to find a different way. Our people, like I said, are proud, and they can make it. But they don’t need to feel like they’re stupid or inadequate the way world media portrays them.

Although residents generally spoke positively about the newspapers in Priorsville, several recognized that coverage of social issues generally, and poverty and unemployment specifically, tended to be reactive rather than proactive in a way that limited the impact news about those issues might have. Molly, the local veterinarian, acknowledged that difference and said that the nonprofits that generate much of the news about poverty in Priorsville generally fall into the same rut. “I feel like that [poverty] is one of the stories that gets done around Christmastime” when charities become more active, she told me. Some “preventative medicine” in the form of news about the causes of Priorsville’s need rather than the reactions to that need, she argued, would be a more effective way to shape people’s attitudes and challenge generational poverty. Micah, the owner of a local textile factory, said coverage of unemployment and poverty rarely provides any detail on why things are the way they are: “Usually what happens on the poverty side, the loss of jobs, they [the newspapers] pretty much duplicate what comes from the state.” Scott, the manager of the local healthcare company, told me more proactive coverage would help locals focus on issues:

If we do have bad things in our community, I don’t think we’re supposed to hide ‘em, but we ought to, those things ought to be revealed. And people need to discuss it and be aware that it’s going on. I don’t think the bad should be hidden, but I don’t know, news is just news. We need some direction.

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77 Media narratives that focus on getting someone to change a behavior in order to improve their lives place blame on individuals, Steven reasoned. “Finding a different way” involved the development and expression of a broader community approach to opportunity and education, and showing individuals how they could benefit from those approaches.
Scott’s suggestion that “news is just news” is a telling critique of the reaction to response-driven coverage that generates much of the poverty news that appears in Priorsville’s newspapers, and in the other news outlets examined in this study. Reactive coverage puts the power to speak in the hands of those who make the news, such as local government officials, charity groups, and business leaders, who already dominate local discussions about poverty and who, in Scott’s view, do so with an agenda. Direction in the form of proactive news coverage and an open attitude toward alternative views and voices could provide an alternative to that dominant discussion. For example, if newspapers actively sought out the voices of the unemployed and incorporated their views into stories about chronic unemployment, then those views could add important context to stories and challenge the often-expressed view in Priorsville that unemployment was high because low-income people were unwilling to work.

Deer Creek: Whose Voice Is Heard?

In Priorsville and Greenburg, I encountered a fairly wide range of opinions regarding the local newspapers and their coverage of social issues. Some people loved their newspapers, others disliked them, most fell somewhere in between, and their opinions were based on a variety of factors (such as ability to get information published, the attitudes toward community promotion, or their personal opinion of newspaper workers). In Deer Creek, local reaction to the Deer Creek Chronicle and interpretation of the newspaper’s coverage and motives was much more negative and much more uniform. Of the 14 non-journalists I interviewed in Deer Creek, only three were not critical of their local newspaper, and I met all three of those people through Gregory, the newspaper’s owner and senior editor. The reasons for their distaste largely boil down to one main
theme: The Deer Creek Chronicle is seen as a publication that is only interested in a certain set of voices. Some residents told me the newspaper exclusively covered the aspects of community life that interested Gregory. Others suggested local coverage reflects the interests and desires of the town’s wealthiest residents. Both sets of concerns culminated with the understanding among local residents that there was little space in the newspaper for their concerns or opinions. The newspaper’s approach to community journalism, some residents told me, left them with a one-sided picture of social life in Deer Creek. The online Deer Creek Advocate (DCA) was seen as a valuable alternative because it provided a forum for local residents to voice their concerns freely, although that freedom resulted in a degree of negativity that bothered some interview subjects. The DCA will be discussed in more detail later in this section.

The idea that Gregory’s personal and social interests drive the bulk of the Chronicle’s content was expressed by five of the 14 non-journalists I interviewed in Deer Creek. Frank, a participant in a publicly funded work training program in his mid-60s, observed that Gregory “has his own version of what’s important, which is probably very typical of any owner/editor.” Later, he noted that Gregory “likes to cover all the ‘Mr. such-and-such is in for this and that,’ you know,” as opposed to the “real news” he reads.

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78 It is worth noting that while they were very willing in interviews to criticize the newspaper and, to an extent, the town’s more powerful residents, the people I interviewed in Deer Creek tended to be more concerned about the preservation of their anonymity in this study than those in Greenburg or Priorsville. A few residents specifically told me they feared social and/or economic repercussions if their identities were compromised, something I did not encounter in either of the other two towns. In two cases, residents told me things during interviews and later asked me not to include those statements in this study, even though they knew they would be reported using pseudonyms. I complied with those requests. It also is interesting to note that Gregory, the owner and publisher of the Deer Creek Chronicle, was the only person among the 51 people I interviewed for this dissertation who actively campaigned to appear in this study under his real name—he told me he thought any attention it might bring, positive or negative, would be good for the newspaper.
on the DCA. Juanita, a local librarian in her early 60s, made a similar observation: “He owns it [the newspaper], and he can do what he wants to do.”

Other residents said Deer Creek’s upper class, but not Gregory specifically, seemed to direct coverage. Stacy, a clerk at a discount shop in Deer Creek in her mid-30s, said that when she picks up the Chronicle, which does not happen very often, she sees stories mainly about the wealthy, including the Local Millionaire, who she mentions by name. “He’s a multi-millionaire, so it’s all about him. Which, he’s probably the one that started the newspaper,” Stacy said. She does not see her own life, which includes financial struggles as the single mother of two teenagers, in the Chronicle. She grew up in a neighboring county and said she related better to her hometown newspaper, which she still receives via mail. It included stories about the place she worked and events in which she was interested. A newspaper editor, Stacy told me:

should not pick what they want to do. They should be aware of a lot more that’s going on in a community, [brief interruption] more things going on versus what they personally want to have in that paper, or what they want to, what they’re interested in. It should be more of what the community needs to know, more than just personally.

Jennifer, a social service worker in her early 30s, told me the newspaper “focuses a lot on, in my opinion, some of the higher-class functionings and what they’re doing. It doesn’t really hit anything I’m interested in.” Andrea, a tobacco shop clerk in her late 40s who moved to Deer Creek from the East Coast, said she feels more connected to Deer Creek when she reads the Chronicle, but sometimes feels the newspaper “is more pointed toward a different audience than, maybe, people that think like me.” When I asked her who she thought that audience was, she answered, “People that probably have been here

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79 Stacy and Chad, who runs the store where Stacy works, were the only people I interviewed in Deer Creek who did not know who Gregory was.
all their lives.” Rebecca, a social service worker in her late 60s, told me she let her subscription to the Chronicle lapse several years ago. “I would subscribe again if there was something to see, not just [the newspaper] trying to build up the higher-ups, the people who have millions of dollars. I don’t have millions of dollars—what I do, they may not notice,” Rebecca told me. The newspaper, she told me, “is only about a few businesses, a few people and their families. It doesn’t benefit the community as a whole.”

The feeling of isolation from the newspaper expressed by its critics was accompanied by the opinion that they had no power to influence its content. Juanita and Frank both said they believed there was little they could do to change the content of the newspaper. “It matters, but what choice do we have? He owns it,” Juanita told me. Suzie, who owns a restaurant in Deer Creek, had a similar complaint. She has had problems with errors in newspaper ads and found little editorial value in the newspaper, but she expressed no sense that she had any stake in what was being written. “You know, we’re customers [of the newspaper] and they’re our customers, so some things are just better left unsaid,” Suzie, who is in her mid-30s, told me. “It’s a small town. You’ve got to be careful.” When I asked about poverty coverage, Suzie said the newspaper rarely addressed the issue. “I think it’s one of those things that nobody really wants to talk about. They don’t want to be honest, in my opinion, about the situation or how it can get better.” When I asked her why she thought that was the case, she said, “I don’t know. It’s just, because I think it’s a conversation that would just continue, because no one’s going to come up with any answers.”

The online Deer Creek Advocate came up in 11 of the 14 interviews I conducted with residents. When the DCA came up in conversation, discussion almost always turned
to the comments that readers (at times prolifically) post at the ends of stories. No one I interviewed for this study told me they had commented on the DCA, but some said they would be comfortable doing so if they felt passionate about an issue. Residents’ opinions of DCA as a local news source seemed driven largely by how they viewed the reader comments. Some people, such as Suzie, said they were bothered by the tone of comments, which to her came across as unnecessarily cruel or gossipy. Suzie said she reads articles on DCA but never looks at comments because “they’re mean, some of the comments. They’re mean-spirited. It’s not right.” Crystal, who, in her early 60s, was a participant in a job training program for older residents, told me she was turned off by the “rumor mongering” that occurs on DCA, and that she considers it “biased news.” Most other residents who read DCA spoke positively about the site because of its policy of allowing people to comment on news stories. “I think the free trade of information is good, regardless of what people say,” said Blake, a college librarian in his early 30s. “It [DCA] gets a lot of flak because they allow people to comment anonymously on stories. But they also publish a lot of news” that the newspaper will not publish. For example, several stories and comments on the DCA often were critical of spending practices at the college in Deer Creek, which largely received favorable coverage in the newspaper.

Community participation is perhaps the main factor that sets the Deer Creek Advocate apart from its print competitor, the Deer Creek Chronicle. Many local residents told me they saw the Chronicle as out of touch with a large segment of Deer Creek, and they expressed pessimism at any suggestion that the newspaper might foster some type of dialogue that would engage the whole community and not just the affluent. The Chronicle was seen by some as a vehicle for a certain class of Deer Creek. The DCA was seen as a
more inclusive space for discussion and education, even among some who were bothered by the hostile writings that sometimes appear in its comment sections. When I asked local people whether they thought local media could help improve living conditions for Deer Creek’s poorest residents, no one expressed optimism that the newspaper could do so; a few said they thought the DCA might be able to. Blake, the college librarian, put it this way:

As far as newspapers go, it’s such a sticky situation because if you anger the wrong people, you’re shut out from those avenues to get your news. It’s not just that, but if you anger the wrong corporate interests, this and that, you’ll lose your advertising funds and go under, you know.

The DCA, Blake said, “is not reliant on outside forces” and therefore is in a better position to challenge the status quo and create meaningful discussion. “I think they do, I really do,” Blake said. “I’d like to hope and I’d like to think there’s a way to improve these things.” However, he was not especially optimistic that any local media, print or online, could prompt real change: “I just don’t see this area ever doing anything for itself, sadly.” Blake’s pessimism about Deer Creek’s future is a direct commentary on powerlessness that was expressed more subtly by other Deer Creek residents, by many in Greenburg, and by some in Priorsville.

Interpreting the National Image of Appalachia

As noted in Chapter 7, many of the 51 residents I interviewed told me they felt their communities were unfairly stereotyped by regional media outlets. Residents in Greenburg and Priorsville80 told me the metropolitan media outlets that cover their community focus only on the bad things (drugs in Greenburg, unemployment in Priorsville, and poverty in both communities) without describing any of the good things.

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80 Residents in Deer Creek said they were rarely covered by the larger metropolitan newspapers or television stations in their area.
happening in those places. They also live in a region that, as Chapter 3 noted, is often stereotyped by national news and entertainment media as backward, uneducated, poor, and dangerous. As part of my fieldwork for this dissertation, I asked interview participants about that coverage, and how it compared to their lived experiences. Forty-two of the fifty-one people I interviewed in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek discussed images of Appalachia and, at times, rural life generally in major news outlets such as the *New York Times* and nightly news broadcasts, television programs such as MTV’s *Buckwild* and The Discovery Channel’s *Moonshiners*, and films such as the 2005 film adaption of the television show *The Dukes of Hazzard* and the 2009 documentary *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*, which followed the outlandish lives of a family in West Virginia. Their opinions of Appalachia’s portrayals in those media were fairly uniform: thirty-six of the forty-two people said outside media portrayed Appalachians in mockingly negative and inaccurate ways. However, as this section will show, there was less agreement when I asked people whether those media images bothered them personally, or if they thought the portrayals were damaging to their communities or the region.

*What does Appalachia Mean to You?*

Before I asked residents of Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek to discuss media coverage of Appalachia, I first sought out their opinions on what that word means to them through a very broad question that usually something like this: “What does the word *Appalachia* mean to you?” Residents answered several different ways. Some considered the idea of Appalachia to be central to their personal or community identity. Others viewed it as something that meant little to them. A few told me their communities
were “on the fringe” of Appalachia, or that while their towns were part of what the
country considered Appalachia, they did not think of themselves personally as
Appalachians. Responses to that question, however, can largely be classified into three
categories: Understandings of Appalachia as a *geospatial location*, as a *culture*, and as a *challenging experience*. Several residents gave detailed answers that incorporated two or
even all three of those frames, which are discussed in more detail in the sections that
follow.

*Appalachia as a Geospatial Location*

Ten of the forty-two people I interviewed discussed Appalachia in terms of
geography, defining the area as a space on a map, or associating it with the Appalachian
Mountains. Several people used this understanding of Appalachia to suggest that their
communities were not truly part of Appalachia—they were “more or less on the fringe”
of Appalachia (Priorsville Post-Examiner editor Nick), or “on the border of it” (Kevin,
Priorsville resident in his early 50s). Clint, a Greenburg middle school teacher in his late
40s, said “I don’t think of myself as an Appalachian at all. I know Green County is part
of Appalachia," but he identified the region with communities that were more isolated
and deeper in the mountains. He recalled the frustration he felt several years ago when he
received a survey from a group of academic researchers who was doing a study on
“Appalachian kids”: “I don't even know what that [an Appalachian kid] is. Appalachia is
a region of the United States. They wanted to know if my kids were Appalachian. I don't
know. When a group of kids is sitting in an eighth grade class, I don't know where they
were born. . . . I can't look at a kid and say, that person's an Appalachian.”
Appalachia as a Culture

The understanding of Appalachia as a culture was the most often-referenced meaning of the region, coming up in 28 of the 42 conversations I had about the region. Residents identified several personal values with that culture, including a strong work ethic, perseverance, independence, kinship, and an appreciation for close family ties. Micah, a Priorsville resident in his early 60s, summed the traits up as “mountain grit.” Crystal, a Deer Creek resident in her early 60s, said, “Appalachia to me is more that self-sufficient, proud, traditional values, and crafts. I'm really an admirer of someone who can go out into the woods and cut down a tree and make a basket out of it.” Suzie, a Deer Creek resident in her mid-30s, said, “To me, it [Appalachia] means home. It means trees and just the history, the roots of the struggles of the people that have always been here.” Family history is an important part of that, Suzie told me: “I'm a firm believer in you don't ever forget where you came from. Because once you do, you're lost.” Eric, the general manager of the Deer Creek Chronicle, told me that in general, when I think of Appalachia, I think of people more than location. I think of people that are hardworking, but they know that work isn't everything. They've always got something to do. They're religious, at least enough in their own minds, they're religious.

Mary, a Greenburg resident in her late 50s, told me that Appalachia is “that pride in yourself and being able to do no matter what—that Hank Williams Jr. “Country Boy Can Survive” thing. No matter what happens, we can take care of ourselves here.”

Most of the people I interviewed spoke fondly of those traits, but not all of the cultural aspects attributed to Appalachia were positive. For example, Dwight, a Greenburg resident in his early 60s, defined Appalachia as a place that was rigid, unwilling to change, and “mostly stuck in the present” with no willingness to think about
the future. Rick, a Deer Creek resident in his mid-70s, said that when you think of Appalachia, “you think of people that are isolated, very rigid in their beliefs, rednecks and this and that, whatever.”

Some residents said they relate less to the idea of Appalachia than to the cultural idea of being a “hillbilly” or a “redneck.” When they spoke of what it meant to be a “hillbilly,” they alluded to many of the same traits others used to describe the aspects of Appalachian culture that they valued. Linda, a Greenburg resident in her mid-30s, said she proudly associated herself with those ideas, which she associated with living on a farm, enjoying outdoor recreation, and being able to live a self-sustaining life. Linda told me she did not see “hillbilly” or “redneck” as derogatory terms: “I've lived here my whole life. That's how we were raised,” she said. Steven, a Priorsville resident in his mid-40s, offered a similar answer:

Appalachia means a lot to me. I take pride in being called a hillbilly. A hillbilly is somebody that has been forced to make their own way. When in the worst of circumstances, they will figure out a way to feed their family. They have all kinds of family around them. They will figure out a way to survive in the worst of circumstances.

The cultural identifiers associated with Appalachia seemed to be the aspects of the region around which people most easily coalesced. In describing what they valued about their lives and experiences in the region—family ties, simple lifestyles, connections with the outdoors, and other aspects of country life—residents described aspects of the region to which others could relate, regardless of their geospatial understandings of where Appalachia starts and stops.
Appalachia as a Challenging Experience

Nine of the residents I interviewed focused on the challenges associated with living in Appalachia as an indicator of regional identity. These expressions were often voiced alongside discussions of the more positive aspects of the region’s culture. They were also more common among people who had always lived in the region. Nancy, the former Greenburg media company executive in her late 30s, said:

Maybe I would have greater insight [on what Appalachia means] if I’d ever lived anywhere else and come back to it. I think I’ve always been a person that kind of fights for the underdog. I think I kind of wear the Appalachian thing as a badge of pride.

The aspects of the region she most relates to, Nancy told me, are its work ethic, the endurance of the people who live there, and the region’s “untapped potential.” Others spoke about the challenges associated with the region in less romantic terms. Frank, a Deer Creek resident in his mid-60s, referred to the region as an “internal colony” because of its history of economic and environmental exploitation. When I asked Scott, a Priorsville resident in his late 60s, what Appalachia meant to him, he told me that “for some reason, the people right up the Appalachian Mountains have always been in poverty.” Trish, a Deer Creek secretary in her mid-20s, said that Appalachia “is where I’ve always been. I hate to say it seems to be the perpetuated stereotype that we're poor, you know. But we are. . . . We’re kind of stuck.” Nancy was the only person I interviewed who viewed the region’s underdog status as an aspect of life worth clinging to. Others spoke of the hardships as something that bound residents together in a rather unfortunate way.
Dominant Media Images of Appalachia and Their Impact

Thirty-eight of the forty-two residents I interviewed about Appalachia said that the dominant images that the country receives about the region do not do it justice.\footnote{Two of the four residents who did not believe media portrayals of the region were unfairly negative or stereotypical, Dwight in Greenburg and Priorsville Record editor Jim, were transplants from other parts of the country who expressed negative opinions of the region and its people. Greenburg resident Dan said he associated Appalachia primarily with coal mining, and that he did not think coal mining was portrayed poorly in the media. The fourth person who did not raise complaints about media coverage was Scott, the healthcare company manager from Priorsville, who said: “If it’s the truth, we need to face up to it, don’t we? That doesn’t bother me, but I think it would bother a lot of people.”} When residents discussed those images, they were sometimes describing news products, such as national newspaper articles or segments that appeared on network news programs. More often, they described entertainment media: televisions, movies, and documentaries. No matter what the media, most residents said they expected Appalachia and its residents to be portrayed poorly. “I really hate all of the reality shows that are portraying us in the manner that they are,” Greenburg resident Mary told me, specifically mentioning the television show Here Comes Honey Boo Boo.\footnote{Here Comes Honey Boo Boo first aired in 2012 on TLC. The program, set in rural Georgia, follows the family of a young girl who participates in pre-teen beauty pageants (“Here Comes Honey Boo Boo,” n.d.).} Shows like that “disgust me. People are selling themselves out,” Mary said. She continued:

To me, it’s kind of like selling your soul. Instead of making fun of our culture, we should be proud of our culture. There’s nothing wrong with it. Call us a hillbilly, whatever you want to call us—there’s a lot of good things that have happened in Appalachia and a lot of good things that have come out of this area. But to allow this to happen to ourselves is disgusting to me.

Many residents told me the lopsided view of Appalachia presented to the general public does not appreciate the diversity, education, and resources that do exist in the area.

Crystal, a Deer Creek resident in her early 60s, told me that some Appalachian communities are home to centers of learning and diversity, but in the media, “it’s all
lumped together as poverty-stricken.” Trish, a Deer Creek resident in her mid-20s, observed:

I have watched some of the shows like *Mountain Monsters*83 [which airs on the network Destination America] and [laughs] some of those other ones [shows] where it’s just a bunch of barefoot backwards talking, plaid-clad, unkempt gentlemen roaming through the woods looking for things that aren’t there. That’s what people see and think of when they think of us.

Those images, local residents told me, shape the ways people who live in Appalachia are viewed. Priorsville resident Steven noted that

if somebody says Appalachia, they're going to think of a toothless hillbilly that don’t know how to read. That's what's going to pop into 90 percent of people in the country's minds. That's not true, you know. That's not true at all.

Study participants such as Eli, a factory worker in his mid-20s from Priorsville, and Clint, the middle school teacher from Greenburg, told me stories about leaving the region and being made fun of because of their accents. Other interview participants shared more stories about instances when outsiders’ perceptions of Appalachia led to uncomfortable situations; those accounts are shared in Chapter 9. Quinn, a Deer Creek secretary in her early 40s, told me she worries about how dominant media images will affect young people in the region. “Right now, I think we are portrayed as being poor and stupid and addicted to either pills or meth,” she told me. Quinn continued:

I've got a son that’s 13 years old. I hope he doesn’t think that’s a normal thing to do because he’s a kid in [an Appalachian state], or that that’s just what kids in [an Appalachian state] do. I don’t want him to feel that way.

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83 *Mountain Monsters* first aired on the network Destination America in 2013. According to the network’s website, the program follows “a band of hardcore hunters and trappers native to West Virginia and known as The Appalachian Investigators of Mysterious Sightings” as they search for mythical beasts such as the Devil Dog, Wampus Beast, and Mothman “in the hope of helping local mountain communities rest more easily when night falls and nature comes out to play” (“About Mountain Monsters,” n.d.).
Quinn also told me she thought the media images made it difficult for communities to attract new residents or industries, a concern shared with others in Deer Creek, Greenburg, and Priorsville. Quinn explained.

If you’re looking to move to somewhere nice and quiet in the country, maybe, you’re not going to want to move somewhere where there’s a big meth problem, or somewhere where there’s a prescription pill problem. . . . If you’re not from the area, you don’t know [how bad the problem is]. You only know what you read in the paper or see on TV, you know. Where are you supposed to get an idea about it? It is legitimate, it is definitely a problem. But there’s just a lot more good things going on. But that [the drug abuse and other bad images] is what you hear about the most these days, I think.

Images of people in places in popular culture can serve to constitute an idea of what is and is not normal in America, helping dominant groups carve out an understanding of who is “us” and who is “Other” (Hall, 1996; Bourdieu, 1984). As discussed in Chapter 3, Appalachians have historically been painted as a national “Other” by media in the U.S., and those I interviewed were keenly aware of the continuation of that practice today. When Appalachian residents are overwhelmingly shown as backward, simple, and lawless, it can leave outsiders (and, as Quinn suggested, people in the region as well) with the impression that poor people in Appalachia are poor for cultural reasons. Historically, that understanding has led to view of a normalized and often demeaning “culture of poverty” approach to need in the region. Some residents I interviewed alluded to the fact that the images of Appalachia generally, and their communities specifically, as poor, backward places gave off the impression that mountain residents were not capable of creating better lives for themselves. The internalization of that idea leads to the sense of powerlessness that has been pervasive in much of the region (Gaventa, 1980).

As noted earlier, most of the people I interviewed for this dissertation agreed that Appalachia was portrayed negatively by outside media. However, there was less
agreement on the question of whether this was something that individuals or communities in the region should be concerned about. Some residents, such as Quinn, voiced worries about how media images and outsiders’ impressions could shape the attitudes of Appalachians and limit opportunities coming in from other places. Jerry, a Greenburg resident in his mid-20s who is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in education, told me media images of Appalachia “infuriate” him because they limit communities’ abilities to attract tourists, as well as the opportunities residents have when they try to leave their communities for professional reasons: “For people that live here, if they try to go away to make something of themselves, they have to fight an uphill battle because they see you're from [region his state] or [neighboring state].” Greenburg resident Mary said the images are “demeaning” and that, by participating in the production of those images, Appalachian residents are teaching the outside world that it is acceptable to mock the region: “If we allow people to view us as second class or third class or third class citizens and we're treated that way, then we've played a big part in allowing that to happen.”

However, many residents suggested that they were not concerned about negative stereotypes affecting their lives or their communities’ livelihoods. Moments after telling me about an instance in which a man from Washington, D.C. made fun of him for being from rural Appalachia, Priorsville resident Steven told me there was no reason to be concerned about the dissemination of negative stereotypes. “They don’t affect our lives,” he told me, adding that he views people who would look down on people from Appalachia as “empty, hollow shells of people that do not have any moral standards or anything like that.” Steven’s view was that the stereotypes and the negative encounters they sometimes cause would not affect his view of himself, a common interpretation of
people who said they were not concerned about how outside media portrayed Appalachia. *Greenburg Star* editor Sandra told me, “I’ve never thought of it [negative stereotypes] as damaging. I just think when you see that type of stuff on TV, if I were watching that, I wouldn’t relate that to Greenburg.” Robert, a bank executive in Greenburg, made a similar point: “I don’t think it matters to me. It's not going to change anything, I don’t think. . . . I don’t think it affects people long-term.” Trish, the secretary at the *Deer Creek Chronicle*, said: “I don’t think you should let what other people think about you upset you any. I don’t think anybody here does, I don’t think they let it bother them very much.” Molly, a Priorsville veterinarian in her early 40s, told me she doubted efforts to combat the stereotypes would change the ways other people think:

> There’s still a fairly healthy level of “I don’t care what they [people outside the region] think of me,” because you do have so many people that never leave this area or couldn’t care less of what so-and-so in a different state thought of them, that I think they [Priorsville residents] embrace that being put-upon and don't let it matter to them very much.

Molly’s comment that some residents “embrace that being put-upon” is consistent with the idea of Appalachian identity as a (shared) *challenging experience*, a version of Appalachian identity she expressed when we talked. It is also a more subtle reflection of an idea expressed more directly by people such as Robert and Sandra: Outsiders’ opinions of the region are inconsequential. That approach is problematic on several levels. It ignores the practical fact that, for some, it actually does matter, in very tangible ways, how others view Appalachians (several examples are included in Chapter 9). In a sense, then, what residents may see as an act of personal agency (deciding not to object to negative representation) actually takes the form of quiescence. From a theoretical standpoint, the view places a great emphasis on the development of *bonding social*
capital, which focuses on relationships within groups, over bridging social capital, which strengthens relationships across groups. The exclusive emphasis on bonding social capital, over time, can create communities that are unhealthily insular (Putnam, 2000; Flora & Flora, 2003).

A few people, particularly in Deer Creek (the most geographically isolated of the three communities I studied), told me that even the most vulgar stereotypes were grounded in at least a little reality. After telling me that she did not let negative images bother her, Trish added, “It does perpetuate the stereotype, but it [the stereotype] is not entirely wrong. It’s the stereotype for a reason—there’s got to be some truth in it somewhere.” Blake, a librarian at the college in Deer Creek in his early 30s, made the following comment regarding television shows about Appalachia:

I hate to admit it, but I watch those things and kind of enjoy them too. I don’t like the fact that people who have never been here probably envision that the populace is like that, but on the other hand, as I said, stereotypes come from somewhere. I’ve lived around this area long enough to know that some of that stuff is spot on, and some of it is entertaining.

Eric, the general manager of the Deer Creek Chronicle, made a similar observation, and also tied it to the political economy of entertainment television:

I’ll watch these programs, like Swamp People, and I’ll be like, “I know people like that.” They’re the extreme minority, super-minority, but yeah, I know people like that. I know people like the Duck Dynasty people.84 I know people like the Whites of whatever it was [the documentary The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia], which I only saw about half of and said, “no thank you.” I think the Appalachian is really skewed in those kind of views. But you know, the TV companies don’t care, as long as a measurable percentage of people are watching them, they don’t care whether it's accurate or not.

84 Swamp People, which first aired in 2010 on the cable network History, follows the lives of alligator hunters (the network calls them “swampers”) in Louisiana (“Swamp People,” n.d.). Duck Dynasty, also set in Louisiana, debuted in 2012 and stars the Robinson family, owners of a company that makes duck calls (“Duck Dynasty,” n.d.).
In statements such as these, a sense of powerlessness clearly manifests itself. Even if the stereotypes are bothersome, some residents told me, they must be accepted at some level as real, either because they are similar to people who really do live there, or because outside media interests will propagate them no matter what we say. Residents who see no point in challenging negative representations of Appalachia live in a habitus where the image is viewed as a place where the poor are meant to suffer because of their own deficiencies (Bourdieu 1994). If they are empowered with the opportunity and the platform, I argue, residents can develop a counternarrative to that dominant ideal and express their own understandings of what Appalachia is and who its residents are, embracing the diversity and opportunity in the region through a grassroots communication effort. In Chapter 9, I will offer some recommendations that could help empower communities to develop such opportunities and platforms.

Decoding, Optimism, and Powerlessness

Almost all of the forty non-journalists interviewed recognized a difference between the poverty they knew existed around them and the poverty they saw in their community newspaper or on a local news website. Residents expressed preconceived notions about the motives for that difference, and those ideas influenced their decoding of the local newspaper/news website as a voice for the community. As residents expressed the ideas that news coverage about poverty was unreliable because of personal or class barriers or, in the case of Greenburg, the limitations of the news outlet itself, they also expressed a sense that there were no effective vehicles for people who wanted to express opinions, change attitudes, or offer new approaches to addressing local poverty, or any
other social issue. Rural Appalachia has a long history with that type of community powerlessness, as Appalachia scholar John Gaventa (1980) noted.

The two hyperlocal news websites discussed in this dissertation provide possible options for individuals who do wish to engage in public discussions about poverty and need. People in Greenburg and Deer Creek seemed to express more faith that GreenburgToday and the Deer Creek Advocate could (and would) challenge dominant ideas about need in their communities. GreenburgToday had been online for less than a year when this research started, and founder Theresa still seemed to be establishing the website when I spoke with her in March 2014. She expressed a desire to facilitate a more positive discussion about life in Greenburg, and some local residents said they were optimistic about her ability to do so, but as of this writing, it is too early to tell just how robust that discussion might be. The Deer Creek Advocate has established itself in its community and gets a great deal of attention (both positive and negative) from local residents. The site’s founder wrote that he wanted it to be a place open for discussion, and several of the Deer Creek residents said they perceive it as such, although some seemed to feel overwhelmed by the hostility that takes place in the comments section.

*Poverty as a Fact of Life*

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, some residents spoke to an idea that, for some, poverty is viewed as a fact of life there, and some residents seemed to encode the lack of media coverage of the issue that way. Mary, a Greenburg social service worker in her late 50s, said this about poverty: “I don’t think it’s something people in the area want to focus on. I mean, if it’s smacking you in the face every day, you’re living in, so you don’t need the paper to tell you about it.” The view of poverty as routine and
therefore not really worthy of coverage was shared by people in other communities as well. “I think most of the [nonprofit and government aid] programs are standing. The people who need them largely know about them or hear about them from their friend because they’ve been going to them forever,” Trish, the secretary at the Deer Creek Chronicle, told me near the end of my fieldwork. I had spoken to Trish many times before our interview, and it had not occurred to me to ask her to be a participant in the study until Eric told me that she’d experienced poverty throughout her life. Trish and her older brother grew up in a single-parent household in Deer County where food stamps (and the stigma associated with redeeming them at the grocery store) were a regular part of life. Trish excelled in high school and graduated from the college in Deer Creek with a bachelor’s degree. However, because of a physical disability, she is unable to drive, so she had to find a job in Deer Creek. She told me she likes working at the newspaper, but she does not make much money there; she still lives with her mother because neither woman can afford to live by herself. She told me:

I think we’ve all been in the same state for so long, we just know. It doesn’t need to be put out there. We know it [the deadline for aid applications] is going to happen, we know what day it is, we know we have to have it done by this time. I don’t even think it needs to be publicized anymore [laughs]. We all just know. We know where to go and what to do.

The idea that poverty is less worthy of public discussion because it has been around for so long feeds a naturalistic view of the phenomenon that makes challenging dominant views of the poor difficult to do. In order to overcome a “culture of poverty” approach, media and communities must first agree that the issue is something that warrants discussion in the first place. Rebecca, a social service worker in Deer Creek, made this observation: “If you’ve never wanted for food, never wanted for a house, you will look at
people and say they are lazy. They [wealthy people in the community] don’t see
homelessness or poverty. They think it’s a choice.” News coverage is one way those
wealthy people can be shown other aspects of need. But before that can happen, poverty
must be accepted not as a natural state, but as a public issue that warrants discussion.

*Protecting the Poor from Ridicule*

The idea that poor were kept out of the newspaper for their own good was
expressed, either directly or indirectly, in each of the three communities I studied, and
was most strongly voiced in Priorsville, a town where the economy had been under close
regional media scrutiny for five years at the time of this study. The protection supposition
seems to be built on one or more of the following assumptions:

- That poor people themselves would be unable to eloquently or accurately
  express themselves and, if given the chance, would likely say or do things that
  would lead to ridicule;

- That local reporters would twist the words or images of the poor to fit their
  own agenda or that a lack of care on the part of local journalists would result
  in inadvertent embarrassment; or

- That the community as a whole would misunderstand the poor or
  automatically see them as lazy or unworthy of respect, regardless of what they
  said or how they were portrayed.

No one I interviewed for this story suggested that the poor would be unable to express
themselves. The most “stereotypically poor” individuals I interviewed for this study—
Greenburg residents Brandy and Jenn and Deer Creek residents Trish and Stacy—were
thoughtful and eloquent, and had little difficulty describing to me the realities of their
daily lives. The second assumption was very relevant when community members addressed coverage of their communities in regional media or stories about Appalachia at the national level. Many of the 51 people I interviewed expressed little faith in outside media to tell their stories fairly and accurately, and some believed reporters, filmmakers, and television producers came to Appalachia primarily to *exploit* rather than *educate*. However, in Greenburg and Priorsville, residents seemed generally confident in their local reporters’ and editors’ desires and ability to deal accurately and fairly with story subjects.

That leaves the third option: concerns about the community’s preconceived notion about their local poor. That concern seemed to underlie much of the hesitation local residents (and, for that matter, local journalists) had about putting the faces and voices of their neediest resident on the front page. But as Rebecca in Deer Creek noted above, the absence of those voices results in the maintenance of a status quo that restricts their ability to develop social capital in their communities. Keeping the poor “under wraps” because of fears that they’ll be subjected to scorn in communities that often already scorn them does nothing to improve their social condition. A few residents, including Molly, the veterinarian in Priorsville, spoke to that idea during interviews. Stories about pulling yourself up by your proverbial bootstraps are great, Molly said. Stories about welfare fraud are useful. But stories about people who really need services and are using them correctly are important too. “Those stories need to be told,” Molly said. She continued:

> I think it would have to be done in a certain voice. I think it could be either one [helpful or harmful] it could be harmful in the fact that, like I said, with the larger outlets what we got a lot of the time is “look how poor these people are.” I think that it would have to be done in a certain voice that spoke to the struggle and the opportunities that are there without laying blame on anybody. It’s nobody’s fault.
Matthew, the manager of the state welfare office in Greenburg, expressed optimism that such stories, if told with compassion, could make a difference in the way low-income people are viewed:

> I think stories like that that are positive where this person is working, trying to get by, doing the best they can, makes a difference with reasonable people who are reading those stories. I don’t think it makes any difference to the person that is just absolutely against any kind of government handout, welfare, regardless of what it might be. But you’d hope that most of the people are the reasonable type where if they had some information about this poor person that’s struggling to work 30 hours a week and get their kids to daycare but still needs $200 in food stamps to get by, I think most people are fine with that, and understand that that is the way it is, especially in this area. But I have seen that, exactly what you’re saying, backfire.

The story Matthew referred to that backfired was a segment that ran on a national network news broadcast a few years before our interview about poverty in the communities around Greenburg. The program was criticized by some in the region for its portrayal of rural poverty. Matthew continued:

> With that story, the intentions were good, show these individuals and how they were struggling, but it just didn’t come across very positive on the TV, and I think that just reinforced some of that stereotype that these people don’t want to work, they just want everything given to them, and I don’t think that was the case with that story or with it in general. I think most people that are getting it truly need it. Most reasonable people, I think, understand that.

_Focusing on the Good News_

Some people in Greenburg and Priorsville saw a clear difference between stories about _poverty as an issue_, which were rare in the newspapers I read, and stories about _community responses_ that dominate local charity coverage. When I asked Amanda, a Priorsville social service worker in her early 70s, about local stories about poverty, she said, “You know, you just don’t see them. I don’t see them. You see [stories about] special programs.” Even the people who run those programs, such as Amanda in
Priorsville and Floyd in Deer Creek, saw the limits of coverage that focused exclusively on things community members were doing to help those agencies. One of the likely reasons is that it is easy for community response stories to be viewed as *positive stories*, and easy to criticize issue stories as *negative stories* that journalists might be hesitant to write.

Some residents had little concern about whether news about the community was positive or negative, as long as it was true. Others acknowledged that the binding of community members through the expression of common, positive experiences and beliefs was one of the important responsibilities of a local news outlet. When I asked Blake, the college librarian in Deer Creek, what he thought a local newspaper should accomplish in the community, he answered this way:

I’d love to think that it’s there to spark debate, but it’s not. That could probably be the most important aspect that it can do, but none of them do it, um. The second most is basically support the community, and that’s what they do. The realistic part of it is they give people a sense of self-worth, the good aspects of it, reports on children’s activities, you know. People love seeing themselves in the paper, whether it be a baseball accomplishment, an academic accomplishment, you know, winning the spelling bee. As corny as it might sound, I think the fact of the matter is that these local newspapers basically just help prop people’s egos more than anything. And that is important, you know, in a way, because a depressed populous isn’t exactly what we need either.

Can a newspaper share the stories of the poor who are struggling in a community in a way that empowers them rather than shames them? Can stories about social issues in a community be told in ways that express the true gravity of the problem and still be constructive? I believe the answer to both of those questions is yes, and in the next chapter, I will lay out some best practices for journalists and community members who want to try to accomplish those goals. My suggestions are based in part on my academic study of community journalism and the knowledge gained from 10 years as a newspaper
reporter and editor. But mostly, they are based on my discussions with men and women in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek, some of whom had excellent insight into how media could begin to make a difference in the local discussion of poverty.

But if newspapers and websites actually do these things, will it make a difference? I cannot honestly say. But the time I spent with Jenn and Brandy at the counter of the Greenburg thrift shop makes left me optimistic about the prospect of change and where it can come from.

“If You Write It, We Will Advertise”

When Jenn, Brandy, and I first started talking, they were not especially optimistic about the possibility of changing things in Greenburg, nor did they seem especially interested in my project. My sense was that they were unaccustomed to people like me expressing an interest in and appreciation for their thoughts or opinions. As we continued to talk, they became very interested, more opinionated, and more animated. At one point, Jenn asked if I was writing a book. I told her about the dissertation process, and Jenn asked me if I would bring her a copy when it was finished. She wanted to post it in the thrift shop. “If you write it, we will advertise,” Jenn told me. When I asked her if it would make a difference, she had a simple answer: “I don’t know. Nobody’s ever did it before. It’s worth a shot.”

The more we talked, the more willing they said they might be to try to be a part of local change. They did not express themselves as people who were content to scrape by, or as folks who were satisfied with the “that’s just the way it is” response to poverty. At one point near the end of our discussion, Brandy said:

I do think if we could get more people around her to quit being afraid and speak up, then we could make changes around here, instead of everybody just hiding
behind their shadow bitching and complaining about it, actually get out and try to do something.

When I asked Jenn and Brandy if they would ever feel comfortable writing about their experiences and opinions in the newspaper, Brandy quickly said she would:

I mean, I think if we could get, like the girls that work here [referring to the other women who “work off their welfare” at the thrift store], if we could get all of us to write it out and actually sign it, stating that we all believe that this is the way it should be, then yeah, I’d feel very comfortable doing that.

I followed that question by asking them if they thought such an act might make a difference in Greenburg, Jenn responded, “It might, as long as we keep talking about it.” Brandy chimed in:

Yeah, don’t just put one thing in the newspaper and just leave it, you know, and let it [gestures as if she’s throwing something out the window]. Because people’s going to forget about it. Every couple of weeks, once a month, something, put something in the newspaper about it. If we keep talking about it, eventually, something might happen.

In that moment, Brandy and Jenn hardly sounded like women who did not have voices, or who needed to be sheltered from a community that might ridicule them. The truth is, they already faced stigma and social and economic isolation. They were capable of standing up for themselves, and for others they knew who were experiencing the same hardships.

They did not need a reporter from the Star, or from a metropolitan television station, or even me, to tell their stories. Given the platform and opportunity, they were, and are, perfectly capable of telling those stories themselves.
CHAPTER 9: SHINE A LIGHT

When you are working deep in a coal mine, you should never look a fellow miner in the eye when you talk to him. If you do, the light from your headlamp will blind him. Committing this blunder, former coal miner Dan told me, is a very good way for a novice miner to get “knocked on your butt.” Shine your light in a different direction when you are talking to your co-workers, on the other hand, and everyone will get along just fine.

Dan, who is in his late 50s, told me story after story about mining life when we talked in the spring of 2014. He told me about growing up the son of a local mine boss in the 1960s, about taking classes in coal mining as a student at Greenburg High School, about his first day as a miner when he was 19 (he spent most of that day unloading 50-pound bags of rock dust), about accidents and close calls (“I almost got killed several times. . . . The man upstairs was looking out for me”), and about how much he enjoyed (and sometimes missed) working in the mines. He worked in the Green County mines for just over 20 years, right up until they shut down in the late 1990s. Some of his former co-workers found jobs above ground hard to come by, so they left for other mining towns. Dan had managed to land a night job as janitor at one of Greenburg’s schools as local coal production was winding down, a position that turned into a full-time job shortly after Dan’s mine closed for good. He worked at the school in relative anonymity during his first year, until he got a visit one day from a Greenburg Star reporter.

The reporter, a popular figure in town who died in the mid-2000s, wrote spotlight profiles about everyday citizens on a regular basis. He interviewed Dan and took his photo for one of those spotlight stories. “It [the story] said, ‘After coal mines, there is work out there,’” Dan recalled as we talked in an empty classroom at the Greenburg
school where he now works as a janitor. The newspaper profile basically covered Dan’s life story: growing up in Green County, aspiring as a boy to be a radio personality and later a miner, working underground, and adjusting when the economics of mining made the only career he had ever known vanish, and what he did at work now. In the story, he described a knife fight he had been in at a local bar when he was in his late 20s, and how he believed a miracle saved his life that night. The story was “excellent,” he said, and it got him some attention from people at the school who had previously viewed him simply as Dan the Janitor:

The first thing was that they didn’t know I worked at the coal mine. We had a former assistant superintendent . . . she come up and hugged me and said, “That was just a wonderful column,” it really got to her. This person, she hardly ever talked personally to me, other than business, and it [the story] got to her, because there was some good stuff in there.

People in the community reacted to the story as well. “They’d seen me up at school and knowed I was the janitor, and they said, ‘I bet you worked with my uncle.’ Chances are, if they’d worked up in these mines, I knew who they was,” Dan said.

Dan told me he was somewhat surprised by how much people cared about the story of a man who, in the grand scheme of Greenburg social life, might not have seemed all that newsworthy. “I think a lot of them, they don’t know you. They don’t know what you’ve done, and what you’ve survived,” he told me. “They think, ‘Wow, this guy’s just like me. He puts his clothes on just like me.’ I got a lot of response from that [story]. That touched me.”

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85 Dan still has a six-inch scar from the fight just to the right of his navel. After the *Star* article came out, he said, people who knew him asked him why he decided to share that particular story: “I had nothing to be ashamed of. It was a stupid mistake, what I done, getting in a fight.” The hospital where his friends took him that night normally did not have a surgeon on duty, he told me, but one happened to be there on a visit when he came through the emergency room. Had that surgeon not been there, he told me, he believes he might have died from his wound.
In recalling the article the *Star* published about him 15 years earlier, Dan remembered a moment in which a writer helped him share his story with people who knew of him, but did not know him, a story that transformed his relationship with some of the people around him. As noted in Chapter 6, Sally, the nonprofit thrift store manager in Priorsville, experienced a similar increase in local acceptance when her story was told in the *Priorsville Post-Examiner* (she was in a better financial position than Dan, but still viewed as a social outsider). Both examples illustrate local media’s ability to paint portraits of residents that help them build social capital and integrate more fully into their communities. As the last three chapters have shown, however, the stories of people like Dan were largely absent from local media in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek. Journalists (and a few of their sources) told me they feared they might embarrass the subjects in such stories. Some implied that coverage of the poor might cast their community in a negative light, making it harder to build social cohesion and attract new jobs and businesses. Others simply do not see news value in telling those stories—their limited time and resources were better spent on other things. The result of those concerns and attitudes is a relative silence on the issue of poverty in those three communities, a silence that, as Chapter 8 showed, was interpreted by some readers as exclusion and evidence of a lack of power or social standing. That outcome, I argue, is problematic and should be a concern, even if it is not the one journalists intend to create. Sociologist Anthony Giddens defined an intentional act as an act “which its perpetrator knows, or believes, will have a particular quality or outcome and where such knowledge is utilized by the author of the act to achieve this quality or outcome” (1984, p. 10). I never got the sense that any of the 11 journalists I interviewed wanted to disenfranchise residents in
their communities. Rather, the powerlessness and exclusion amplified by journalistic conventions are unintended consequences that, as Giddens observed, still can systematically and unconsciously feed back into further acts—in the case of this study, future news coverage and journalistic practices (1984, pp. 8-10).

In this chapter, I will lay out some alternatives to that silence and exclusion. The suggestions that follow are intended for local journalists who see the need to address the challenging issue of poverty but are unsure how to do so in constructive and compassionate ways. They are also intended for local residents and community advocates who wish to encourage public discussion of issues related to poverty in new directions. The ideal solution would be for journalists with an established platform, community advocates with knowledge, and residents with lived experiences to collaborate on a new public view of poverty that can lead to more robust community discussions. If those three groups can work together effectively, they can facilitate more inclusive public discussions about issues that addresses problems without condemning individuals or communities. To borrow an analogy from Dan’s coal mining lesson, journalists can change their habits to help people talk without blinding one another.

This chapter also addresses Appalachia’s public image, which is, in a way, a macrocosm of the public image of its poorer residents. The 42 people who spoke with me about the region for this study expressed their Appalachian-ness in different ways: geospatially, culturally, and based on a shared struggle. It was a core component of local identity to some residents and largely irrelevant to others. However they perceived it, the people interviewed for this study largely agreed on one thing: The picture that the United States receives of Appalachia is usually demeaning and incomplete. Some of the
individuals I interviewed had experienced the fallout of the Appalachian stereotype firsthand in the form of social ridicule and decreased expectations associated with the ways others viewed men and women from the mountains.

Local newspapers live and die by their ability to connect their communities and provide perspective and support for their readers, a role that, from a community perspective, fills a need for *internal communication*. Some journalists and publishers told me they also saw themselves as spokespeople for the community, filling a need for *external communication* to show outsiders that their hometown was, in most cases, a good place to do business. I argue here that this external communication function can, and should, be reconsidered and expanded in a way that would provide a voice for residents in Greenburg, Priorsville, Deer Creek, and other communities in Appalachia who wish to tell stories that set them apart from the stereotypical images of the mountain hillbilly. Nancy, the former corporate newspaper manager from Greenburg, brought up the idea of a local newspaper as both an *internal communicator* and an *external communicator* during our conversation:

I think that primarily, the *Star* is the good old community newspaper that everyone knows and loves that tells you what Suzie Q is doing down the street, and it’s quaint and people like that style of news in rural areas, while we’re still gathering state, local, and international news to educate our readers. But [we] also try to get information about our readers out to the wider audience.

Later, Nancy told me:

I think all newspapers are starting to become more external. That doesn’t mean that their internal is diminishing, especially if they’re getting additional resources. In my mind, that just means we get to keep everything we have and expand. I think with technology the way it is today, you almost have to try to not get things out to a broader audience.
One key line in the above quote is “especially if they’re getting additional resources.” Few newspapers are getting additional resources; most (including all four of the newspapers examined in this study) are instead trying to do their jobs with fewer resources as advertising revenues decline. The external communication recommendations I make at the end of this chapter take those financial challenges into account and attempt to provide a framework for a coordinated counternarrative to the Appalachian stereotype that recognizes the voices of local communities (and their media outlets) without putting unnecessary financial pressures on those businesses.

**Internal Communication: Becoming More Inclusive**

As noted earlier, my interviews with local journalists in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek suggested that alienation caused by approaches to poverty in the news was the unintentional consequence of reporting habits and philosophies. Such unintended consequences are common in social life, Giddens told us:

> I am the author of many things I do not intend to do, and may not want to bring about, but none the less do. Conversely, there may be circumstances in which I intend to achieve something and do achieve it, although not directly through my agency. (1984, p. 9, italics in original)

Giddens understood agency as the capacity to act—motivation was not part of his definition of the concept of agency. Therefore, he was able to separate the idea of “unintentional doings” (such as the spilling of a cup of coffee or the misspelling of a name) from unintended consequences of acts.

> The consequences of what actors do, intentionally or unintentionally, are events which would not have happened if that actor had behaved differently, but which are not within the scope of the agent’s power to have brought about (regardless of what the agent’s intentions were). (Giddens, 1984, p. 11).
When Giddens wrote that the consequences of acts “were not within the scope of the agent’s power to have brought about,” he meant in the occurrence depends on “too many other contingent outcomes for them to be something the original actor ‘did’” (1984, p. 11). For example, while a journalist’s decision to not write about poverty may lead to the alienation of some members of a community, that journalist’s decision alone is not enough to produce that alienation. In the case of poverty coverage in Priorsville, Greenburg, and Deer Creek, a group of actors—certainly reporters, editors, and publishers, but also local officials, chamber of commerce directors, and social service agents—made decisions that, individually, seemed rational, but collectively resulted in a consequence that was irrational for all of them (Giddens, 1984, p. 13).

Giddens argued that most individual action is driven by the knowledge actors have of day-to-day life, and that knowledge, and the action it precipitates, gives form to the structural properties of social life. As human beings, journalists and editors are capable of recognizing the routines and attitudes that give life to those structural properties and, if they choose to, disrupt those routines and create different structural properties that may in turn lead to different outcomes (Giddens referred to this ability as the “dialectic of control”). The ability to break with routines hinges in part on what Giddens called “knowledgeability,” which he defined as “everything which actors know (believe) about the circumstances of their action and that of others” (1984, p. 375). If actors can be made to look at their routines differently, then, change is possible. The previous chapters have laid out a case for looking at coverage of poverty in rural local newspapers differently. In the sections that follow, I will suggest some practical strategies that might be implemented into new newsgathering routines at community newspapers.
Do Not Rely on Spot News for Poverty Coverage

Poverty and local need most often made their way into the media in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek as “spot news”—defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “news reported of events as they occur.” Spot news is, by definition, reactive rather than proactive: An external event (i.e. a car crash, a presidential election, or a city council vote) occurs, and a journalist creates a story that relays news of that event to the public. Much of the community response coverage I encountered in the three communities I studied was spot news coverage, such as photos of checks being donated to food pantries, stories about the release of new unemployment figures, and brief published announcements about welfare program deadlines. Those stories and photos have news value in that they provide information that readers may need. Donation photos, nonprofit social service workers told me, often lead to increased awareness of local agencies and more financial donations.

However, when spot news is the dominant (or exclusive) image of poverty a community receives, there are negative consequences. Daily struggles can come to be seen as the norm, only certain voices end up speaking to poverty in public forums, and remedies to associated problems such as drug abuse or housing shortages sometimes focus on symptoms rather than core problems. “These issues, they’re not going away. They’re not changing,” Sally, the nonprofit thrift store manager in Priorsville, told me. “By not addressing them, not dealing with it, we’re not changing anything.”

Local newspapers can instead look for ways to write about need in a proactive way. Editor Nick at the Priorsville Post-Examiner, a newspaper struggling to find “fresh
angles” to pervasive unemployment and poverty, expressed the importance of proactive reporting this way:

You can go out and seek out information from outside. So many times within the community it becomes just isolated and closed off, people talking in the coffee shop and developing their opinions about what’s going on. And that’s any issue, it’s the same with the economy, things like that. But as a newspaper, you can go outside and get those outside opinions, see what other communities are doing, and separate fact from fiction, that sort of thing. And people don’t want to hear that a lot of times because they want the thing [solution] to be, ‘we’ve got to replace every county official that’s in office with new county officials.’ Never mind if there was complete turnover in the last election, because what’s there obviously isn’t working. And sometimes there’s some truth in that—we’ve got a lot of county officials that do need to be replaced. But when that becomes your theme, you ain’t going to get anywhere. As a newspaper, you can go out and chase those stories and look at what other communities are doing, and bring that back and tell people about that and say let’s try this.

When I asked Nick if the PPE did a good job of that, he answered frankly: “We can do better.” When asked, how, he answered:

Thought-provoking, maybe getting people a little riled up. That’s something we’ve not done a lot of in the past. It’s easier just to, just write a jobless story. Numbers, people are used to seeing. And so we’ve covered it. When you’ve got to step outside of your comfort zone and do a story on, for example, food stamp fraud that might not only get some of your neighbors mad at you but might also get one of your advertisers mad at you too if he’s helping to facilitate that food stamp fraud, you know, especially in a small town, that makes it a little more uncomfortable sometimes. But there comes a point where you’ve got to do it if you’re going to do your job right.

New ideas and proactive stories can come through the efforts of local journalists such as Nick, or they can come from other places. The Deer Creek Chronicle rarely published stories or columns about need during the six months I read it, but it did give readers two stories produced by a state news organization about new research on poverty.

Newspapers can also find new ideas by opening up their pages to the rest of the community, reaching out to regular sources who have ideas but have never been asked (Jennifer in Deer Creek or Floyd in Greenburg), local residents who have strong opinions.
but rarely appear in the newspaper (Micah or Sally in Priorsville or Blake in Deer Creek),
or local residents who deal with the realities of poverty every day (Jenn and Brandy in
Greenburg).

Seek Out Diverse Sources

By reaching out to people in the community who might not normally get their
names and opinions in the newspaper, newspapers can establish a more inclusive and
welcoming discursive environment. “Reaching out” can mean different things. For
starters, it can mean going out and simply conversing with people who experience social
issues such as poverty firsthand. During several of my interviews, I asked local residents
some variation of the following question: If I bought your local newspaper and told you I
wanted to use it to make a difference in the lives of people in this community who needed
help, what would you advise me to do? Trish, the newspaper secretary in Deer Creek,
first told me she’d tell me to talk to the people who run the two largest nonprofit
organizations in town. Then, she said,

maybe, you know, just talk to some of the people around town. Ask them what
they want, what would they like to know or have. Just go straight to the source
and see what it is they’d like to see. People are pretty forthcoming here.

I did find everyday people in Deer Creek, as well as Greenburg and Priorsville, to be very
forthcoming about what they would like to see their newspapers accomplish. But few of
those people seemed to feel they were in a position to relay those desires to the people
who ran the newspaper, either because they thought their ideas were unimportant, or
because they felt there was too much social distance between themselves and the
newspaper. This was particularly problematic in Deer Creek, where many residents felt
Gregory could not relate to their concerns. When we talked, Gregory expressed a strong
desire to lead his community and promote change through the newspaper. I believe he was genuine in his desire to do that, and to help people in his community. But when he tries to lead in a vocal way, he does so almost exclusively through his own voice. His readers noticed this, and it made them reluctant to attempt to engage the newspaper. At some points, it will become important to incorporate the voices of the poor into actual stories about social conditions. The voices of residents who are willing to talk about firsthand experience with issues such as government aid, unemployment, or homelessness will provide deeper meaning and context to stories about those topics. One effective way to build a network of possible sources is to work with nonprofit organizations. First, journalists must effectively explain the goals of their stories or columns to the people who operate those agencies and get the agency heads to support their efforts. At that point, agency workers can work as recruiters of sorts, reaching out to individuals who use their programs and connecting those people with journalists.

Engaging low-income residents and advocates during the writing of local economic and social issue stories not only helps the community understand the issue of need from a different point of view, but it also empowers residents who often find themselves at a social disadvantage because of their social class. Journalists and local residents expressed concern that the poor would be humiliated were they to appear in the newspaper. That view reinforces an understanding that there is something inherently wrong with an individual who deals with poverty. Sally made this observation during one of our conversations:

As a community, as a whole, we’re looking at this [being poor] as, there’s something wrong with this. We believe that those things, it’s like we look at that as a negative instead of looking at it as just what it is. There’s no shame in this.
Based on my work in the field for this project, I would give the following recommendations to a journalist who was concerned about how a poor person might “come across” in a story s/he was writing:

• Have a reason for approaching the sources you approach: Many residents I interviewed, particularly in Priorsville, expressed dismay at their impression that television stations often tended to feature the most stereotypically unappealing members of their communities to appear in stories about poverty. Journalists often want to think that an individual can “be the face” of a story and, as they strive to find the “perfect face,” they pass up others in the community who have insight. In the process, many journalists end up typecasting sources into stories, a practice that only reinforces stereotypes.86

• Show the source how s/he fits into the story: People who agree to talk about their personal experiences for stories about social issues should have an understanding of why they were asked to do so. Journalists should explain to sources what they hope to accomplish in writing (i.e. “I want to write a column that helps people

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86 Academic researchers should also be mindful of why they approach the people they approach, a lesson I was reminded of early on in my field work for this dissertation: I had stopped for gas in Priorsville, and I saw a man burning trash in the front yard of a home in a hollow that backed up to the gas station. There were a few sheds around the yard that seemed to be homemade. My initial thought when I saw the man was, “How can I approach this guy about interviewing him for my dissertation?” This experience was very familiar to me as a former newspaper reporter. As a working journalist, I often came across people and thought, as I recorded in a field note, “there’s the person who is the stereotypical face of this story that I’m working on, because he lives in a trailer, or because he lives in a nice house, or because he’s got crap in his yard, or whatever, or because he works in a certain kind of place.” When I was a reporter, I would not hesitate to approach the person, and do whatever I could to ply that person into talking to me. As I sat at the gas station thinking about the man burning trash in his yard, I experienced one of the more profound personal reflections I had over the course of this project: Why would I go talk to this man? Why is he the face of what I would expect poverty to look like? Why would I ask him to talk to me and, in the process, ask him to either explicitly or implicitly acknowledge that we were talking because he was poor. I recorded the following field note after that experience: “Trying to pick out ‘the type,’ trying to say, ‘here’s the perfect poor person, here’s the perfect representative of how people will feel about this,’ even if I’m trying my best to be sympathetic, even if I do everything to be ‘on their side,’ it’s still just putting them in a box.” To not approach that man and force him into my box ran counter to journalistic instincts I still had.
understand the challenges of raising a family on minimum wage”) rather than offering an abstract description (i.e. “I’m writing about the minimum wage”).

- Empower the source: Make sure the source has a say in how s/he is portrayed. Journalists often recoil when sources ask them to review stories prior to publication. However, if a reporter is concerned about how an interview subject will “come off” in a story, then sharing all or part of the story with the source can ensure that the source is comfortable with her/his portrayal. I suspect it would also build the source’s confidence in the newspaper’s ability to fairly represent his/her issues.

- Think about your role as a journalist in the portrayal of the source: As Stuart Hall noted, a variety of personal and professional inputs can influence the way journalists come to encode messages. A mindfulness of those influences—what social scientists refer to as reflexivity—is important during the interviewing and writing processes.

If publishers and editors open newspapers to people who currently do not get in, they at least acknowledge the presence of diversity in the community. If, rather than exploit those people as “poor folks,” local journalists show that they have the same hopes and dreams as the rest of us (as was the case with the profile of Dan), then newspapers attempt to integrate them into the community.

Be Positive, Inclusive, and Realistic

None of the preceding recommendations should be taken to mean that local newspapers should stop publishing news about the good things happening in their communities. Positive stories about the “triumphs of life” (Lauterer, 2006, p. 26) have
news value and help bind people together in a way that builds community. Defining “positive news” can be fairly easy. Defining “negative news” can be more difficult. Is a story “negative” when we do not like the issue at hand, or when we think the subject of the story reflects poorly on us as a community? I do not believe that was the case in Greensburg, Priorsville, or Deer Creek, because I did not get the sense that people who do want to see issues such as poverty brought to the forefront would view a story about unemployment as inherently negative. It might be more constructive to reconceptualize “negative coverage” of social issues as news coverage that does one or both of the following things:

• Suggests a problem where none really exists. Stereotypical reporting and reporting that is basaly inaccurate falls into this category.

• Discusses the problematic nature of a person or group without explaining the realistic scope of the problem or solutions, or without attempting to help other people develop them.

When I interviewed residents in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek about negative news coverage from outside media, they for the most part acknowledged that a social issue (such as drug abuse or unemployment) does exist, and that it is problematic. What bothered them was the fact that the problem is all they see in media reports. In what Stuart Hall might have recognized as a negotiated reading, they see themselves as stock characters in an urban-centric narrative about poor country folks. Local newspapers can respond to such coverage in one of three ways:
1. Ignore it. That is what most newspapers do. It is easy, and it does not cause conflict within the community because it does not require the newspaper to take a position on an issue such as poverty.

2. Refute it, an option that does take time and effort. Theresa founded GreenburgToday because she wanted to refute negative coverage of a political controversy Greenburg.

3. Recast it. That was the approach Ms. magazine readers did when they submitted articles they found demeaning or offensive for publication in the magazine’s “No Comment” section. Scholar Linda Steiner suggested the submissions represented an outward act of opposition to demeaning representations (1988).

If a local newspaper is going to try to foster an oppositional reading (option 2 or 3) to a negative code that suggests its residents are poor because of a personal or cultural deficiency (a culture of poverty argument), then it must produce evidence of alternative options. Perhaps the alternative argument is that the community has a collective responsibility to try to change things – the way its members see themselves (as a community, not as individuals), as well as the ways that others see them.

*Alternatives for the Public*

The recommendations made to this point operate under a fairly important assumption: That newspaper editors and publishers are motivated to redirect local discussion and, perhaps, reorient the status quo. It would be naïve to think that would be the case in every community. There certainly seemed to be little real interest at the *Priorsville Record* in challenging the status quo, for example. It is important to consider
options for change in communities where the local newspaper *is not motivated* to actively push for such changes.

Community members can attempt to create news coverage by taking advantage of established news routines. Some journalists I interviewed noted that poverty often is not covered because it does not come up in the meetings or other routine events they cover. This reactive coverage, as noted previously, is not conducive to a strong media-centric discussion of poverty. However, members of the public may be able to take advantage of it by creating events at which poverty is discussed in new ways. Such events generate opportunities for discussions that fit more tightly into daily and weekly journalists’ own conception of what news *is*. Journalists who cover those events may feel more inclined to report on what is said without growing concerned that they are inappropriately “editorializing,” a concern that arose when Nancy described the *Star’s* reluctance to develop social issues stories that were not based on a spot news element.

The availability of the Internet has made it possible for active citizen journalists to take root in Deer Creek and Greenburg. Those new online enterprises show that both journalists (in the case of GreenburgToday.com) and non-journalists (in the case of the Deer Creek Advocate) can attract audiences, and at least a little revenue, by providing an alternative to the dominant local narrative about community life. Both sites are valued in their respective communities, although neither was uniformly praised. Some Greenburg residents told me GreenburgToday.com is too similar in tone and content to the *Greenburg Star*. My analysis of the community’s local news largely reinforces that
observation. In the six months I systematically viewed it, GreenburgToday.com rarely reached out to sources that were not also regularly featured in the *Star*.

GreenburgToday.com does not allow readers to comment on stories, which also limits participation. The Deer Creek Advocate (DCA) does allow comments, and readers often contribute a great deal of content to the website. Some DCA readers criticized the site (particularly its commenters) for providing too much negative commentary. The view critics have of excessive negativity on the DCA site largely aligned with the definition of “negative news” I set out in this chapter: Those readers felt many of the personal attacks that took place on the site were unfounded, and some suggested commenters complained too much without offering solutions to problems. Screening critical comments or taking other steps associated with stronger top-down moderation (such as requiring users to include their real names alongside their posts) would not be advisable because it would drive many alternative opinions out of the public discussion (Chua, 2009). It would be more productive to encourage a sense of virtual community on the site by taking active efforts to show commenters their contributions are valued and encouraging interactivity and the exchange of information (Parks, 2011; Blanchard et al., 2011; Blanchard, 2007; Blanchard & Markus, 2004). Research has shown that residents who feel forums are hostile are still more likely to continue to participate in those forums if they feel a sense of virtual community (Meyer & Carey, 2014).

Their weaknesses aside, both websites provide valuable services to community members who long for alternatives to local media narratives that many find unfulfilling. Both are draw readers away from the longstanding print products in their communities;

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87 Professional socialization may play a role. Theresa, the editor of GreenburgToday.com, has a bachelor’s degree in communications and is a former reporter at newspaper owned by Henderson Media, which also owns the *Greenburg Star*. **
two people in Greenburg told me they thought GreenburgToday.com could eventually put the Greenburg Star out of business. I come from a newspaper background, and I believe newspapers can and should be vocal advocates for their community. Because of their established business models and the social capital they already possess, many newspapers are still in a strong position to advocate in the ways I have described here. Unfortunately, many newspapers do not do that. This study is largely newspaper-centric because most of the individuals I interviewed in their communities still found traditional newspapers to be more influential local voices than online news sources.\(^{88}\) That can change, and it very well may in Deer Creek and/or Greenburg. If more residents get an opportunity to voice their concerns as a result, then those communities would be well-served by the change.

In order for those opportunities to be realized, broadband Internet access must become more widely available in rural communities. In each of the three communities studied here, high-speed Internet was available in incorporated areas, but connectivity (even through mobile devices) was extremely limited even a mile or two outside of town. Some residents in Deer County told me that access limitations outside of town were an important limitation on the DCA’s reach and influence. Research has found that, on the whole, rural Americans are far less likely than urban or suburban residents to adopt high speed Internet. Seventy percent of the rural residents who responded to a 2013 survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project reported having either a smartphone or home broadband. Eighty percent of urban residents and 83 percent of suburban residents who responded to the same survey reported having access to either broadband or a smartphone. Household income was also a strong predictor of adoption:

\(^{88}\) Local radio stations in Greenburg and Priorsville do not have strong news presences. Deer Creek does not have a local radio station.
95 percent of the respondents with annual household incomes over $75,000 reported having either home broadband or a smartphone. Seventy-nine percent of those with annual household incomes between $30,000 and $49,000 reported having either home broadband or a smartphone, and for individuals in households that made less than $30,000, adoption dropped to 67% (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2013). Access to high speed internet in the region is limited, particularly in the coal fields of Central Appalachia. Nationwide, 98% of rural Americans had access to some high-speed Internet technology in 2013, but 91% of rural West Virginians and 93% of rural Kentuckians had access. Access to mobile internet is even more limited in those areas. In 2013, 96% of rural Americans had access to mobile broadband, but only 87% of rural Kentucky residents and 79% of rural West Virginia residents had access (National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 2014). A 2011 study of broadband adoption in Appalachian Ohio suggested that access to broadband was a bigger barrier to adoption than the price of the service. Twenty-three percent of rural residents in Appalachian Ohio told the nonprofit advocacy group Connect Ohio that they did not adopt high speed internet because it was not available where they lived; Ohioans as a whole reported lack of access as a barrier only 8 percent of the time. The price of broadband was reported as a barrier by 20 percent of rural Appalachian Ohioans and 25% of Ohioans overall (Connect Ohio, 2011). A 2014 study of broadband access in Ohio noted that broadband networks had developed much more slowly in Appalachian Ohio than in the rest of the state (Feran, 2014).
External Communication: Telling a Different Story

During one of my last field visits, I spent some time with Sally, the owner of a nonprofit thrift shop in Priorsville and a key participant in this dissertation. Sally and I were discussing the ways reporters from out of town covered Priorsville, a rural mountain town about 30 minutes off the interstate and an hour and a half from the nearest big city. Like many other people in Priorsville, Sally told me she often felt regional media—the metro newspaper and television stations an hour and a half down the interstate—provided a negative view of the town. I asked her what she wanted the journalists who made that drive to know about Priorsville. Her answer:

I think there’s a lot of stereotypes about a community like ours. And I know that a lot of people think, as I said, that there are people who just don’t care, and have got this lazy attitude, and just a bunch of hicks up in the hills. And they need to see the difference.

The “difference,” she went on to explain, were the dedicated teachers, the active educational and social programs, and the local residents who volunteer to keep those programs running. If reporters would dig deeper into local society, she said, they would find a community much more complicated than the stereotypes often employed to describe rural Appalachia.

Individuals compete for economic and social capital on what French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called a cultural field, a field on which rural Appalachian residents have for generations struggled to compete. Identities such as “poor,” “Appalachian,” “poor Appalachian,” and “hillbilly” are all, Stuart Hall would have told us, “constructed within, not outside, discourse” (1996, p. 4) and developed to reinforce difference and exclusion. The exclusionary aspect of identity construction helps individuals realize that they “are what everybody else on the globe is not,” Hall wrote, a knowledge that helps individuals
place themselves as well as the Others they encounter (Hall, 1997, p. 174; see also Hall, 1990). The construction of a national Appalachian identity, as Chapter 3 suggested, has been dominated by outside interests with cultural or economic interests in Othering the region. However, identity may be constructed from the inside, and often-Othered groups including the Amish and Mennonites in North America (Carey, 2012), Aboriginal groups in Australia (Rose, 1996), and Iranians in London (Sreberny, 2000) have used print and electronic media to craft their own. The media described in those studies are largely intended to be *internal communications* in that they produce community narratives made by and for members of those groups. However, I argue that such efforts can also be effective tools for *external communication* when members of a group see the dominant narratives about them in outside media as destructive forces.

Newspaper publishers and editors, local leaders, and others I interviewed all emphasized the importance a local media positive narrative to counter regional media’s rural media stereotypes such as the one Sally described in Priorsville. In some ways, the structural aspects that limit low income individuals’ ability to engage their communities in Greenburg, Priorsville, or Deer Creek are microcosms of Appalachia’s struggle to combat negative stereotypes that dominate popular media images of the region. The vast majority of those interviewed for this project acknowledged the negative imagery associated with the region, as well as with monikers such as “hillbilly.” They differed on how representative the idea of “Appalachia” was to their area, and to a degree on how damaging the stereotypes were to their communities. Some took great umbrage and said they believed the rest of the country needs a new Appalachian narrative. Others came to the conclusion that the stereotypes do not directly affect them and thus were harmless.
Almost everyone I interviewed, regardless of whether they found Appalachian stereotypes to be problematic or not, expressed a general sense of powerlessness as it related to those stereotypes. Those who were troubled by the images seemed at a loss for ways to address them. Some others dismissed the stereotypes as *the way it is*, a reaction strikingly similar to the way some interview participants expressed powerlessness about the portrayal of the poor in their local newspapers.

In 1993, Appalachia scholar Jean Haskell Speer wrote a column for the *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association* suggesting strategies that might be used to slow the use of negative hillbilly representations in the media. Most of her strategies involved pressuring television networks, advertisers, producers, and media regulators such as the Federal Communications Commission. Filing FCC complaints about programming, for example, “may be useful for convincing legislators to put pressure on media producers” to end negative portrayals, as could using the threat of eminent FCC complaints to sway local network affiliates, she suggested (1993, p. 15). Speer suggested the Appalachian Studies Association, as an advocate for the region, should take a lead “in highly visible media, such as the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, national magazines, and television” by writing op-ed pieces and offering televised commentary, and then “funnel these same concerns and positions to local media in our own [geographic] areas” (Speer, 1993, p. 17). Speer’s top-down approach to challenging negative Appalachian stereotypes did not take hold, but I believe a bottom-up campaign could, if nothing else, establish a strong counternarrative to the Appalachian hillbilly stereotype found by so many in the region to be offensive. If local newspapers did began to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the lived experience of the rural poor in Appalachia, as I suggest they
should, it would create a new opportunity for the region’s newspapers to contribute to a more robust national understanding of the region and its people. The process of challenging that narrative is, in some ways, quite similar to challenging dominant ideas about poverty at the local level.

In order to attempt to develop a strong counternarrative about Appalachia’s rural communities, and particularly the rural poor, it must be made clear that the dominant narratives described in Chapter 3 are harmful to social life in the region. It is problematic when people assume all poor people in Greenburg, Priorsville, or Deer Creek are culturally or socially deficient and solely responsible for their own poverty. It is equally problematic when people outside the region come to see poor people in the region as culturally backward. Those stereotypes have had tangible social consequences for some of the individuals I interviewed:

You look at the movie Deliverance, which is still on everybody’s mind. You look at different things coming through the media, in comedy, people always make fun of hillbillies, you know, or whatever. I was in Washington, D.C. and was at a bar, a piano bar, just sitting there, and this guy said [using exaggerated accent] “Wow, from [state name]? Did you come out to get you some supplies?” So, that’s kind of what other people out there think about us.
– Steven, nonprofit manager from Priorsville

I went on a date with a gentleman from Texas and one of the first things out of his mouth was, “Are you inbred and have you ever done anything [sexually] with a relative?” I walked out—it was that bad. You experience a lot of that.
– Jennifer, social service worker from Deer Creek

I went to [prestigious private university on the East Coast] when I was 17, and I had my neighbor, my suitemate, convinced that we had indoor plumbing put in that week. She was from Connecticut and she would believe anything. She would literally believe anything I told her. If I told her we didn’t have a car and we drank moonshine with every meal, she literally believed it, because she had no experience with that. . . . In my mind, she, the very sophisticated private school girl from [town], Connecticut, was behaving a whole lot more like a rube than I was.
– Molly, veterinarian from Priorsville
Micah, a textile factory owner in Priorsville, has worked with company executives from major clothing companies. He offered this description of the reaction of business people who came in to Priorsville to meet and discuss contracts with his company:

We might have 10 or 15 of these people coming in here every week. They’re coming out of San Francisco, they’re sometimes coming out of Europe, where the mills are, in France and Italy and different places, very cosmopolitan cities and areas. And here they are coming to a rural community in [state]. You can tell they’re a little bit intimidated, a little bit frightful that they’re going to get caught up in something they’re not ready for [laughs].

Local newspapers and online news organizations in Greenburg, Priorsville, Deer Creek, and hundreds more communities in Appalachia already create volumes of content promoting the positive things going on in those communities. As those local narratives become more robust and more inclusive, the opportunity arises to create broad counternarratives to the dominant picture of Appalachia. The recommendations outlined earlier in this chapter would lead, I believe, to stories that describe the problems and local opportunities in areas without being negative. Stories such as the one about Dan in Priorsville illustrate successes that may fly in the face of what people think about low-income people, both inside and outside the region.

Individually, local newspapers cannot challenge the dominant narrative about poverty in Appalachia. We cannot idealize these businesses and the people who work in them beyond their practical contexts. However, a coalition of news organizations in Appalachia, local activists, universities in the region, and nonprofit organizations such as Appalshop (discussed in Chapter 3) could aggregate content that was already being produced by local news organizations it into a larger body of content that would reflect a different story about Appalachia, told by the men and women who live there. The content
could take many forms: stories written by participating local news organizations such as
GreenburgToday.com or the Priorsville Post-Examiner, films and other media produced
by nonprofit groups, citizen journalism (perhaps produced by local residents who have
received media training from universities, communications students at those universities,
and/or nonprofit groups such as Appalshop), or opinion columns on the region produced
by residents or academics. By providing a space for commentary on the ways outside
media outlets cover the region, the Appalachian media coalition could help residents of
the region find a voice in a nation that often speaks of them but rarely speaks to them.
The aggregated materials, which could be housed on a website managed by one or more
universities, would not attempt to paint a uniform picture of Appalachia, because there is
no uniform picture of Appalachia. Instead, the media initiative would reflect the
geographic, economic, and cultural diversity of the region that is often portrayed by
outsiders as homogenous. Based on my discussions with residents for this dissertation, I
would suggest that such stories focus on cultural aspects of Appalachian identity rather
than geographic aspects or commonality through struggle, because people seemed most
willing to coalesce around those cultural aspects of Appalachian identity. News
organizations can involve themselves by contributing content as they are able, but other
material would be produced by members of the public or the academy. As a result, the
site could be largely unencumbered by concerns of the expression of opinion or advocacy
that sometimes makes local newspaper staffs hesitant to write about broader issues in the
region.
Bridging Social Capital and Bonding Social Capital

The recommendations set out in this chapter would help facilitate the building of bridging social capital and bonding social capital in rural Appalachian communities such as Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek. As author Robert Putnam noted, bonding social capital undergirds the strong communal ties that enable reciprocity and solidarity that hold groups together. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, makes possible relationships among different groups for the exchange of information or resources (Putnam, 2000, pp. 22-3; see also Schulman & Anderson, 1999).

Community news organizations like the ones described in this dissertation are more typically associated with bonding social capital than with bridging social capital, but the suggestions outlined in the section on internal communications could encourage both bridging and bonding social capital. More inclusive outreach and sourcing practices and comprehensive news coverage help encourage bridging social capital by giving more local residents the opportunity to feel they are a part of the community. Bridging social capital is evident when individuals who find themselves on the fringe of social life are able better integrate into a community. Some of the individuals I interviewed for this study viewed themselves as community outsiders. A few, namely Dan in Greenburg and Sally in Priorsville, became more integrated into the community and experienced an increase in personal social capital after they were featured in their local newspapers. As those individuals feel more a part of a community, they develop stronger bonding social capital.

The establishment of a media network in Appalachia, as suggested in the section on external communication, would contribute to the development of greater bridging
social capital in the region. The development of a platform where people from the region could learn about the challenges and successes of communities similar to their own could lead to increased interaction and cooperation among residents of those communities and the exchange of information that could help residents address local problems in new ways. It might be tempting to suggest that the Appalachian media network would increase bonding social capital in a larger regional sense. However, I believe the potential for bonding social capital across a region as large and diverse as Appalachia is limited.

Healthy communities have a need for high levels of both bridging social capital and bonding social capital. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the two types of social capital. As Figure 1 shows, communities with high levels of both kinds of social capital tend to be inclusive, with strong internal connections as well as ties to the outside. Communities that experience weak bonding and bridging social capital tend to be defined by apathy. Communities with high levels of bonding social capital but low levels of bridging social capital (a religious cult, for example) are sometimes plagued by factions and intolerance. Communities with high levels of bridging social capital and low levels of bonding social capital (such as a rapidly suburbanized neighborhood) are often less self-sufficient than communities with higher levels of bonding social capital, and their residents may feel less connected to one another (Flora & Flora, 2003; Putnam, 2000; Schulman & Anderson, 1999).
When he published *Bowling Alone* in 2000, Putnam challenged journalists, media owners, and Internet gurus to develop ways to create more opportunities for communion among a growingly isolated and apathetic public: “Let us foster new forms of electronic entertainment and communication,” Putnam wrote, “that reinforce community engagement rather than forestalling it” (p. 410). Putnam envisioned digital media such as the Deer Creek Advocate and GreenburgToday.com, which hold a great deal of potential to encourage engagement and help communities develop social capital. It is far too early to abandon the notion that traditional community newspapers can promote those
conversations as well. Doing so will require the women and men who work at those newspapers to see themselves as concerned friends interested in developing a stronger, more inclusive community. At times, it will require them to rethink traditional journalistic roles and practices. Importantly, as Priorsville textile factory owner Micah observed, Micah, they will need to view themselves not as a mouthpiece for actors in a community, but as actors themselves:

We can go ‘til Judgment Day reporting all the deficits and all the things that’s wrong in life. But now there’s a great difference in telling a story and then going out and trying to do something to impact that, and change it. And I believe that takes people of character and vision and resolve—people that are not just talking the talk, they are willing to walk the walk. They are saying, “The problem is there, what can we do? It’s ugly, and everybody knows it’s ugly. Is there something we can do to make it better?”
CHAPTER 10: “PAP DESERVED MORE THAN THAT”

In early 1983, Bill, the owner and publisher (and, at that time, editor) of the Priorsville Post-Examiner, wrote a stirring personal column about Ernest Miller, a local laborer in his 60s known locally as “Pap.” Pap Miller, who had died the week before, was the type of man many found easy to ignore. He worked for the city, digging holes and doing other odd jobs for the public works department. He also drank coffee at the same morning hangout spot Bill and his friends frequented and, over the years, Pap had become a member of that group, albeit one who never engaged in much conversation. In the remembrance, Bill wrote, about his early impressions of Pap: “At first, I was taken aback by his appearance,” his “dirty clothes” and his “scraggly, bearded face.” He wrote about the impetus for his column—after Pap died, a friend suggested Bill write a tribute to him, an idea Bill initially resisted, he wrote, because he did not really know much about Pap. In his column, Bill wrote:

As if reading my thoughts, my friend said: “You know, it’s a shame that someone can live sixty-some-odd years and then die and nothing is ever written down about him. He deserves more than that. Pap deserves more than that.”

That made me feel sort of guilty. That made me feel as though, because I had gone off to school and learned the fundamentals of journalism and came back home to edit a little weekly newspaper, that I had a responsibility to chronicle such events like the passing of Pap Miller. And while I was feeling guilty, I decided that, yes, maybe I do have that kind of responsibility. Maybe Pap Miller does deserve more than an obituary notice to mark his passing from this life. And maybe there are a lot of other people who are born and struggle through life and leave it without anybody ever taking much more notice of them, much less recording it for the sake of history.

In the column, Bill described his personal interactions with Pap, which mostly consisted of Pap listening as other men at the coffee spot chatted. He wrote about watching Pap at work, as he dug holes for street projects. He wrote about the time the

89 Ernest “Pap” Miller is a pseudonym.
coffee crowd got him a surprise birthday cake (“I wasn’t the only one who noticed the tear come to his eye and I don’t suppose I was the only one who almost cried along with him.”). The point Bill made in his column, which won a state press association award the year after it was published, was the fact that men and women like Pap were seen but rarely known in Priorsville. At the conclusion of the article, Bill wrote:

Because of his appearance, because he was from the other side of the tracks, because he was born and died a poor man, there were a lot of people who ignored Pap Miller. There were a lot of people, I guess, who knew of him, but thought little about him. And, I suppose, there were a lot like me who were sorry the day he died because they hadn’t got to know him better. Pap deserved more than that. Pap deserved better than he ever got.

Bill’s column has been reprinted in the *PPE* several times since 1983. When I first met Bill and told him about this dissertation, he printed off the most recent iteration of it (from the fall of 2013) and gave it to me. It represented a rare published glimpse into the life of a man so poor his family could not afford a grave marker when he died, and it presented a deeper message that, to Bill, still resonated thirty years after Pap’s death.

Profiles of people from Pap’s social class were largely absent from the four newspapers I studied for this dissertation. So were more analytic views of the extent to which poverty and related issues impacted the community as a whole, as well as the voices of those who dealt with the repercussions of those issues firsthand. This study found that local newspapers in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek, three communities dealing with high levels of poverty and unemployment, rarely referred to poverty on the front pages of their issues. When they did write about poverty, my qualitative analysis found, they most often discussed community responses to need, an approach that largely excluded the views and experiences of the poor. In interviews conducted for this study, 11 current and former journalists expressed several reasons for
the absence of news about poverty: Professional habits and restrictions such as an emphasis on “spot news,” sources who were reluctant to voice views on the issue that were outside of the mainstream, and work demands that made it difficult for editors and reporters to reach out to new voices; philosophical approaches such as the idea that the poor should be protected from ridicule or that poverty coverage would be unnecessarily negative; and social isolation from the poor that resulted in an inability to fully understand the problematic nature of local poverty. The 40 local residents I interviewed interpreted the absence of poverty news, and the scraps of information that were present, as evidence that poverty was a normal part of everyday life, something they had the power neither to fix nor even discuss publicly.

Those factors culminate to reinforce a longstanding, dominant view of Appalachian poverty as a cultural deficiency. Rural sociologist Cynthia Duncan described the “culture of poverty” understanding as the impression that

individuals are trapped in poverty because poor families pass on bad values and norms of behavior that prevent successful participation in mainstream social institutions. Poor places are condemned to stagnation or deterioration because they do not have the human or natural resources to sustain economic activity, and social institutions are backward (1996, p. 103).

The approach Duncan discussed, which is the dominant way it is understood by U.S. policymakers and, in many cases, local residents, can be an accurate way to describe the conditions associated with poverty. However, it often leads to victim blaming and social stratification that further separates the poor from opportunities to engage their communities economically or socially. Again, Duncan explains:

What they [the long term poor in chronically depressed rural areas] have learned in their families, schools, and social networks about who they are and how to behave—the identity, habits, and skills that make up their “cultural tool kits”—does not prepare them for participation in the mainstream economy and society.
But they also stay poor because the social institutions, civic norms, and politics that make up the social context in their communities deny them opportunities to learn and get good jobs. (Duncan, 1996, p. 116).

This study makes the theoretically grounded argument that the absence of voices is interpreted in ways that reinforce the culture of poverty perspective. Absence is decoded into local news coverage in part because of the routines and believes of journalists and sources and, in some cases, because of the business constraints under which they work. Journalists told me they believed their approaches to poverty were beneficial for their communities in that they gave people the information they needed but did not embarrass low-income residents or depress the community as a whole. Many residents, however, decoded local media approaches to poverty quite differently, seeing it as a suggestion that poverty is a normalized way of life, and that the public conversation of poverty included only certain kinds of voices.

Newspapers and local news websites are and will continue to be important vehicles for the construction and maintenance of attitudes and opportunities in rural communities such as Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek. What I have attempted to show in this dissertation are the structural aspects of social life and journalistic practice that limit the poor’s ability and/or willingness to engage in local discussions about poverty through those media and the ways their absence contributes to feelings of powerlessness and stratification. People have knowledge, and sometimes a willingness, to add to the public discussion and understanding about what it means to deal with poverty in a rural community, but they feel limited in their ability to express that knowledge because of barriers that restrict (or seem to restrict) their ability to interact with their local news outlets. When we view those structural constraints through the structurational
theoretical lens suggested by British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984), we can realize that the barriers exist only because journalists, sources, and readers act them into being. Those barriers are not, I argue, intentionally set by journalists. They are rather, as Giddens would say, “unintentional doings” (1984, p. 11). The attitudes, philosophies, and routines they encounter daily establish a social habitus for journalists, but a habitus can be changed (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Benson, 2006). The limitations they encounter are, to a degree, within their control if they engage in a discussion about what is appropriate, and what people are willing to do. As the previous chapter suggests, those individuals can alter those limitations if they choose to engage the production and dissemination of news in different ways.

In a column entitled “Why I Love My Hometown Newspaper” published in his hometown newspaper, the San Pedro Valley (Arizona) News-Sun, poet Baxter Black wrote that he thought of local newspapers “as the last refuge of unfiltered America. A running documentary of the warts and triumph of real people unfettered by the spin, the bias and the opaque polish of today’s homogenized journalism” (Lauterer, 2006, p. 25; Bunch, 2008). The local news outlets in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek often seemed to struggle to live up to Black’s ideal. I did not write this dissertation to criticize the newspapers I studied, or to put down the hard-working, intelligent, dedicated individuals who produce them on a daily or weekly basis. They find themselves in a difficult quandary. The editors and reporters in those three towns want to foster unity and community pride. However, poverty—a highly divisive issue—sits in their communities like an elephant in the room. Some journalists seemed to view its coverage as an either/or proposition: Do they ignore poverty or downplay it, and in the process further distance
the poor from the rich and middle class? Or do they discuss it aggressively, and risk creating internal conflict, alienating themselves from another segment of their readership? It is my hope that this dissertation will encourage journalists to recast that dichotomy or eliminate it altogether and consider how they can recast discussions about social issues.

What can newspaper editors and publishers do about local poverty? For starters, they can provide a platform for the expression of poverty as a lived experience in their communities. This may start not with the disadvantaged themselves, but rather those who speak for them. For example, when the PPE featured Sally in its business spotlight, she made statements that challenged dominant perspectives on poverty exhibited in that newspaper, and in the region more generally. As a transplant from another state and someone who has been vocal in her opposition to the local status quo, Sally held somewhat of an outsider’s position in the community, but the newspaper suffered no ill effects from providing a platform for her. In fact, as Sally pointed out in Chapter 6, her profile served to legitimize her among some individuals in Priorsville. Sally gained stature in the community, and uses that position to advocate for the needy by encouraging others in the community to consider their own obligations to their neighbors. By incorporating community allies such as Sally into news coverage on a routine basis, and by introducing others who may not already possess a level of stature in their community (as was the case with Dan when he was profiled by the Greenburg Star), editors and publishers show readers that their news outlets can be a forum for anyone in the community, not just advertisers or the well-connected. Such exhibits open the door for broader participation by individuals who feel forgotten and disenfranchised in their
communities. In the process, newspapers can help low-income residents develop self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001) and develop “cultural tool kits” (Duncan, 1996, p. 116) that will help them adapt to problems and reach for solutions.

Giddens’ structuration approach to agency has particular utility in this discussion because of the access individuals in a community often have to those who produce their local news. If individuals in a community such as Priorsville or Deer Creek want to try to influence the newspaper’s editorial voice, they do not need to seek out a CEO in a faraway city, a board of directors, or shareholders. Rather, they need to convince one or two people who work for community newspaper and actually live in those communities. Media scholar and former journalist Don Heider suggested that, for meaningful changes in the way class is covered to occur, reporters, editors, and owners must be on board (2004). I believe that to be the case in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek. As the Deer Creek case shows, however, new media can emerge to create an alternative discussion when existing community news outlets seem unwilling or unable to address community needs.

As they address the way their own communities discuss poverty, I argue, local news organizations also have the opportunity to address the way it is discussed in the region, and to contribute to a strong external narrative about Appalachia that may serve as a counter to the often demeaning (and, as this study shows, consequential) dominant narrative of Appalachia as a land of Others, separated economically and culturally from

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90 Gaining access to most of the publishers, editors, and reporters I interviewed for this study seemed to be fairly easy in most cases, if you could visit their offices during working hours. Nick, the editor of the PPE, Sandra, the editor of the Star, and Gregory, the editor of the Deer Creek Chronicle, worked in offices right off of their newspapers’ lobbies. During my later visits, I would enter the Chronicle building (a house converted into an office) and go straight to Gregory’s office without even “checking in” at the front desk. Occasionally, Gregory would answer the phone when I called the Chronicle’s main line. Because the editor and publisher of the Priorsville Record both work part-time, I found it more difficult to catch them in the office.
civilized America. Almost all of the individuals who participated in this study told me they saw representations of the region as damaging. Some were upset by those images, and others were not, in large part because they did not feel those negative images reflected them personally. They said they had the power to ignore those images and, as a result, saw no need to challenge them. I argue that viewing stereotyping as an individual experience rather than a communal one is problematic in the same way that understanding poverty as an individual rather than a social issue is. In Chapter 9, I make recommendations aimed at developing a grassroots counternarrative to the dominant media image of Appalachia as poor and backward. Getting the attention of the local newspaper editor may be relatively easy in small towns such as the three I studied here. Changing the minds of national media executives, filmmakers, and television producers is a task that seems unapproachable for the vast majority of Appalachian residents. However, technology makes it increasingly easier for the region’s people to tell their own story in their own words, to create a different picture of the region, its problems, and its successes. Horace Newcomb’s analysis of commercial television’s treatment of “hillbillies” in the 1970s made the point that the negative aspects of the broad images do reinforce negative attitudes and contribute to the model of “cultural imperialism.” But the positive images serve in part to counter that model. It is a slow process of cultural and social change. The faster process is one in which we contribute our own images to the mixtures. (1995, p. 328)

Even that process of contributing our own images is fraught with cultural peril, Newcomb noted: Documentaries, journalism, long-form nonfiction, and even academic studies such as this one still need to “sell” in one sense or another and, as such, run the risk of doing so using stereotypes by focusing on “the unusual or the almost forgotten” (1995, p. 328).
A nonprofit Appalachian media cooperative would seem to be the forum that would be least susceptible to those types of pressures. Local advertisers would already have “paid” for much of the content as it appeared in newspapers, and it would be disseminated not with the goal of accumulating more economic capital, but rather of building bridging social capital for the region and countering prevalent negative stereotypes.

What Comes Next?

Using the qualitative research methods of textual analysis and interviews, this dissertation makes some fairly specific observations about the six news organizations that operate in three communities. I make no claims that these observations will “generalize” to other communities in the traditional social scientific sense that generalization is understood. However, I think journalists in other communities, large and small, rich and poor, both in and outside of Appalachia, can learn from the case studies of Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek.

News organizations, both in print and online, are important institutions in small communities, but they are only one part of a larger social structure that that dictates how individuals in a bounded place see and understand one another. Healthcare groups, education networks, law enforcement systems, and other bodies that help constitute what we might broadly refer to as “social life” in a community have important roles to play in public discourse about social issues. This study explores the fringes of some of those relationships, but it does not fully explain the relationships among them that may contribute to stratification and stigmatization regardless of what the local media do or do not do. I chose to study the news because news is what I know, and because I strongly believe newspapers and electronic media can foster important public dialogue. It is
doubtful, however, that a newspaper could cause wholesale change in a community on its own. *Priorsville Post-Examiner* editor Nick, who pushes his sources’ and readers’ boundaries more than any other journalist in this study, put it well when he said:

> At the end of the day, it comes back to [the fact that] the community has got to get involved. If the community’s not willing to get involved, the newspaper can’t [pause], the newspaper’s only, in that role of being able to make a difference, the newspaper can only do what the community’s willing to do. So after you’ve been the voice, you’ve been the mouthpiece and you’ve facilitated the discussion, at that point, if people aren’t willing to get involved, and maybe that’s because you as a newspaper haven’t done your job well enough to convince people to get involved, but if they’re not willing to get involved it’s hard to make a difference.

This study represents snapshots of three communities at a single moment in time. It focuses on perceptions, which are important but also very fluid. Long-term community issues such as the unemployment trend in Priorsville can influence those perceptions, as can more immediate and concrete matters such as the closure of a local hospital or a natural disaster. Longitudinal studies of communities like Greenburg, Priorsville, or Deer Creek could offer a more robust explanation of how attitudes toward poverty and the poor evolve over time, and what types of public discussions (either in media or independent of them) contribute to those perceptions.

I wrote this dissertation because I wanted to encourage stakeholders to think about the ways they could discuss the problems and potential in their communities, and because I wanted to encourage journalists to consider how they view the poor and how those views influenced the way the poor are viewed publicly. The men and women who work in local media in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek—even those I criticized the most—expressed the desire to help the people around them live more fulfilled lives. Many other reporters, editors, publishers, and online news providers approach their work
with the same desire as concerned friends. It is my hope that this study will help journalists reevaluate the ways they have acted on those desires.

Newspapers have the ability to foster more inclusive discussions of social matters that are (or should be) of grave local concern, and the people who live in the communities they serve deserve those discussions. Much existing coverage does little to help communities see solutions to their problems, and it does little to integrate the poor into local discussions. People like Jenn and Brandy in Greenburg and Stacy in Deer Creek, largely invisible except to those who would look down upon them, deserve more than that. People like Trish in Deer Creek who struggle to get by through no fault of their own, yet sometimes get lumped into the heap of “those people” who need assistance, deserve more than that. People like Stacy and Micah in Priorsville and Floyd in Greenburg who have ideas about changing things but find themselves yelling into the wind when they try to voice them, deserve more than that. People like the late Pap Miller who, because of their social standing, never get a public voice until after they are dead, deserve more than that.

The people of Appalachia, who in many cases live in communities that have been exploited for the economic benefit of the rest of a country and Othered for their social benefit, deserve more than that.
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APPENDIX A: CASE STUDY PROTOCOL

Purpose

This dissertation will examine discourse on poverty as it appears in and is facilitated by local newspapers in the Appalachian region of the United States. The region, which was populated by more than 25 million people in 2010, follows the Appalachian Mountain chain from northern Mississippi to southern New York, spanning 205,000 square miles across 13 states (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.). Appalachia has endured generations of poverty and economic struggle (Caudill, 1962, Eller, 2008). After a number of federal efforts, social movements, and more than 50 years of development programs, parts of Appalachia remain shackled by a legacy of “land abuse, political corruption, economic shortsightedness, and the loss of community and culture” tied to a lack of resources in the region (Eller, 2008, p. 3).

While media have long played a role in the creation and maintenance of a national “Appalachian identity” (Eller, 2008; Biggers, 2006; Lewis, 1999), little scholarly attention has been paid to the specific ways media approach poverty in the region. It has been suggested that individuals’ attitudes toward poverty and specific aspects of poverty are shaped by the discourse on poverty encountered by those individuals on a daily basis (Gowan, 2011).

In this dissertation, I will explore the production and interpretation of contemporary media messages about Appalachian poverty and regional identity in local media in Appalachia. The study is theoretically informed by Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model, which provides insight on the way social issues and events are
transformed into media messages, and the ways those media messages are understood and incorporated into the lives of media audiences (Hall, 1980).

Key Features of the Case Study Method

Each of the three case studies executed in this dissertation will involve three separate research methods:

*Qualitative textual analysis:* The textual analysis employed in this study will use cultural context to understand mediated communication, relying heavily on Fairclough’s approach to considering “equivalences and differences” (2003, p. 100-101) that build identity. McKee (2003) argued that textual analysis serves as an important vehicle to understand individual sense-making processes. Sense-making is important to the maintenance of one’s own sense of value, and the way we make sense of other people’s lives is an important factor in how we treat them (McKee, 2003).

*Qualitative interviews:* Interviews conducted for this study will attempt to adhere to Bourdieu’s model of the interview as a “spiritual exercise” of “intellectual love” (1999, p. 614). Bourdieu encouraged an open dialog in which interviewees would feel empowered enough to dominate the discussion. The creation of such an environment reduces the objectification of participants in the research project, instead offering them what can be viewed as a therapeutic opportunity to take their private sphere experiences into the public realm. Such an approach requires the interviewer to engage in *true conversation* with the interviewee and, in the course of that conversation, to give of oneself. Bourdieu likens the interviewer to a midwife who helps the interviewee “deliver up their truth or, rather, to be delivered of it” (1999, p. 621).
Focus groups: Unlike interviews with individuals in a one-on-one setting, focus groups including eight to 12 people are able to “exploit the ‘group effect,’” taking advantage of “the fact that, in both ordinary conversations and guided discussions, people draw upon a shared fund of experiences” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 183). The resulting interaction draws out details and dynamics that often will not present themselves in one-on-one interviews.

Organization of this Protocol

Section I of the protocol lays out the procedures that will be used in the execution of the three case studies that will make up this project. It includes an explanation of and rationale for the research methods that will be utilized. It also includes estimated timetables for the execution of certain aspects of each case study. The textual analysis component of the research project will be a continuous process; each media outlet under study will be examined routinely over the course of the entire project. This protocol assumes that the other aspects of each case study will be executed concurrently, with each case study taking approximately four to six weeks to execute.

Section II of the protocol describes the four specific research questions the study will attempt to address. Within each research question, relevant topics and subtopics are noted, as are some sample questions that may be addressed during the inquiry. It is expected that these topics, subtopics, and sample questions will evolve (perhaps significantly) as the research progresses and the theoretical grounding is refined.

Section III of the protocol describes the presentation of case study results. It offers a tentative outline for the discussion of findings, and how individual case studies will be subjected to cross-case analysis.
I. Field Procedures

A. Selection of Case Study Sites

To allow for a robust cross-case analysis that can give case study research more potency (Yin, 1994, p. 31), three separate cases will be studied for this dissertation. Each case will focus on a community in a different state within the Appalachian Region: one in Ohio, one in West Virginia, and one in Tennessee. The communities will be similar in that they are all part of Appalachia as it is defined by the federal government, each will experience high levels of economic distress as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission, and each will be in a rural setting (outside government-defined MSAs). The local differences are important in that they will bear fruit for the cross-case analysis.

Efforts will be made to analyze communities with somewhat diverse media environments. For example, frequency of local newspaper publication (daily versus weekly), media ownership (local versus corporate) and competition within local media markets (i.e. a single publication, multiple publications, publications and hyperlocal online media, etc.) will be factored into site selection.

B. Initial Scheduling of Field Visits

Initial telephone contact will be made with newspaper editors and publishers in communities chosen for study. Newspaper managers are the natural points of entry into individual cases for several reasons. The participation of newspaper personnel is an important component of each individual case study. If editors, publishers, and reporters are not “on board” with the project and willing to participate in interviews, then the communities in which they work may not be the best subjects for
examination. Once newspaper personnel have agreed to participate, they may become excellent agents for the identification of other research participants (this process will be discussed in more detail in the next section).

The researcher will schedule a preliminary meeting with newspaper sources to discuss the project, answer questions, address concerns, and obtain informed consent. These meetings will also present opportunities to get information “on background”—that is, to gain a better understanding of community history and issues that may help orient the inquiry.

C. Determination of People to Be Interviewed and Other Sources of Information

Community newspaper personnel—editors, reporters, publishers, and possibly other employees—are key participants in this dissertation, as are individuals who operate online news outlets that are not affiliated with print publications (for example, residents who operate blogs that cover local news issues).

A snowball sampling method will be utilized to gain access to additional research participants. Media workers will be asked to suggest others in the community (such as activists or nonprofit managers) who might be interested in participating. Those participants will in turn be asked to suggest others in the community who might participate, and so on. I will also seek out research participants through my own personal connections in the communities and through local civic leaders (i.e. church pastors, heads of nonprofit organizations, etc.).

Print media for the qualitative textual analysis will be secured through subscriptions and/or public libraries. Primary analyses will focus on the major commercial media outlets in the community (“the newspaper of record,” as well as its
commercial competition). Other print media, such as shoppers, will be the focus of a secondary analysis. Hyperlocal online media (primarily blogs) and social media content will be accessed through dedicated accounts and RSS feeds. Online content (hyperlocal websites and social media) will be the focus of a secondary analysis. Hyperlocal sites will be identified through the use of search engines and also through word of mouth in the communities under study. Sites that are updated regularly (once a week or more over the duration of the study) will be considered in the analysis. Publicly-available social media sites will also be analyzed. In part because of the dynamic nature of social media and its relatively shallow roots in communication research, the author has been unable to locate established sampling procedures for social media research. In the absence of established standards, interviewees and focus group participants will be asked what public social media sites the frequently visit (for example, a chamber of commerce Facebook page). Accounts that are mentioned by more than two individuals will be considered in the study.

Historical data about the communities under study also will be vital – understanding the unique collective biography of a community will be an important part of understanding the public dialog within that community. Collection of historical data will begin prior to qualitative interviews and focus groups. Much of that data will come from public libraries and/or historical societies. It will be collected at the beginning of each case study period.

D. Execution of Qualitative Textual Analysis

Qualitative textual analyses of media content will be the first component of each case study, and it will continue through the duration of the project. Four months’
worth of daily print media (November 2013-February 2014) and six months’ worth of weekly print media (October 2013-March 2014) from each community will be analyzed.

Online content (including social media posts) will be examined on a daily or semi-daily basis and curated for research purposes on a weekly basis. The delayed curation will allow for social media dialogs to develop more fully. Content will be curated through the creation of PDF files, which will be analyzed at a later date.

Media content will be subjected to three separate readings. The first reading will include all editorial and advertising content, regardless of its relevance to the study. During the initial reading, content that pertains to poverty, even tenuously, will be identified. That content will be subjected to a second reading, in which common themes will be identified. A third and final reading will apply the theoretical perspective to those themes.

Although the textual analysis is qualitative in nature, some frequencies will be recorded and reported (for example, the percentage of front-page stories, editorials, and letters to the editor that specifically address poverty).

The researcher will attempt to complete the formal textual analysis for each case prior to conducting focus groups or interviews. Textual analyses will be conducted in the first and second weeks of the five-week case studies.

E. **Execution of Focus Groups**

Focus groups will be conducted in each of the three communities under study. Local libraries, churches and/or civic organizations will be approached and asked to provide space for focus group meetings. Meetings will last between 60 and 90
minutes and will include five to seven participants. Attempts will be made to draw participants from similar professional/socioeconomic backgrounds across each community. For example, focus groups might include one public school teacher, one barber/hairdresser, one volunteer firefighter, one social services case worker, etc. The recruitment of individuals in this manner is not meant to create a categorization system for individual members; rather, it will provide focus groups that are likely to be similar in a socioeconomic sense.

Focus group meetings will be recorded using digital audio recording equipment. The recordings will be coded for common themes and auditory moments that provide telling details about ideas and understandings. To protect the anonymity of participants, reports on the meetings will not include the names of individual speakers. Focus groups will be conducted in the third or fourth week of the case study period.

F. Execution of In-Depth Interviews

Interviews conducted with reporters, publishers, and editors will focus on their attitudes about poverty in the communities they cover, the ways they approach poverty and associated issues in news coverage, and the roles they see their media outlets playing in the communities they cover. An attempt will be made to interview most, if not all, news workers and publishers in the communities under study. Interviews will be conducted one-on-one, either in the newspaper office or at the home of the newspaper worker (interview subjects will select the location of all interviews). Professional journalists will not be remunerated for their participation in
the study. However, to encourage participation, the researcher may offer newspapers an “executive summary” of focus group comments.

Interviews conducted with community members will focus on the representations of poverty they experience through local media, their experiences with local media, and the roles they believe local media play with regard to creating community dialog about social issues. Interviews will be conducted in the homes of residents whenever possible. Interviewees will not be remunerated for their participation in the study. The number of interview subjects may vary from community to community, but it is expected that between 12 and 20 individuals will be interviewed in each community (not including newspaper professionals).

Initial interviews with newspaper employees will be conducted in the second week of the five-week case study period, prior to focus group meetings. Interviews with community members will be conducted in the third, fourth and fifth weeks. Participants may be asked to take part in multiple interviews. It is likely that newspaper workers will be interviewed at least twice (once before focus groups and community interviews, and a second time after). All interviews will be recorded using digital recording equipment. The audio recordings will be coded for common themes and auditory moments that provide telling details about ideas and understandings. Anonymity will be extended to all interviewees (journalists and community members) to encourage honesty and candor.

II. Case Study Protocol and Questions

The four sections included in this portion of the protocol represent the four research questions that will be posed in this dissertation.
A. What frames exist in community media coverage of rural poverty?

   a. Topics
      
      • Representation of poverty and its various aspects
      
      • Historical sources of poverty in the region

   b. Summary of Questions for Section A
      
      i. What images of poverty are most commonly used in media coverage?
      
      ii. How do media suggest individuals “look” at poverty in their communities?
      
      iii. What sources are primarily called upon to discuss poverty?
      
      iv. Are “outsider” perceptions of poverty important? How are those perceptions acknowledged/addressed/challenged?
      
      v. What is the economic history of the community (i.e. mill town, mining community, diversified economy, etc.)?

   c. Sources to address Questions in Section A
      
      i. Questions i-vi can be addressed largely through textual analysis, with findings supplemented by interview and focus group subjects.
      
      ii. Question vii may be addressed through textual analysis, but it is more likely to be addressed through interviews with media workers and community members.
      
      iii. Question viii can be answered through historical research, which may be supplemented by interview data.

B. What motives and routines create and maintain those frames?

   a. Topics
• Portrayals of poverty in local media
• Perceived role of local media in discussion of social issues
• Message encoding
• Rationalization and reflexivity

b. Summary of Questions for Section B

i. What determines how poverty is portrayed in local media? What “maps of meaning” (Hall, 1980, p. 134) are created to classify culture through those portrayals?

ii. What are the acknowledged consequences of those portrayals? The unacknowledged consequences?

iii. How do media workers “see” poverty in their communities?

iv. What are the “discursive aspects” of the production process (Hall, 1980, p. 129) that shape media workers’ understandings of poverty?

v. What role do media workers see themselves as playing in the discussion of social issues/problems? Does this align with their opinions of what they “should” be doing in that regard?

vi. How are power relations embedded in actions and routines that may be taken for granted among newspaper employees and community members with regard to production/consumption of media?

c. Sources to Address Questions in Section B

i. Questions i-vi will be addressed through interviews with media workers, and supplemented with interviews/focus group data from
other community members (particularly individuals who have regular dealings with the media).

C. How do community media discourses on poverty shape local understandings of poverty?

a. Topics

- Contradictory outcomes (Giddens, 1984)
- Reification
- Message decoding

b. Summary of Questions for Section C

i. How do embedded power relations that influence the encoding of messages and their subsequent decoding?

ii. How does community media discourse on poverty shape local understanding? How does that understanding in turn shape future media coverage?

iii. What (if any) contradictory outcomes result from the reproduction of media messages on poverty in local communities? How are those contradictory outcomes experienced?

iv. What role do community members see media playing in the discussion of social issues/problems? Does this align with their opinions of what media “should” be doing in that regard?

c. Sources to Address Questions in Section C

i. Questions i-iv will be addressed through interviews with community members (both media users and non-users).
D. What strategies might challenge existing structural understandings of poverty and enable alternative structures?

a. Topics

- Consequences of the reproduction of current structures
- The “dialectic of control” (Giddens, 1984, p. 16)

b. Summary of Questions for Section D

i. What common identities are maintained through existing structures?

ii. Do existing structures reinforce social division? If so, how are they reinforced?

iii. What alternatives exist?

iv. How might those alternatives be implemented?

v. What would be the positive and negative consequences of alternative strategies?

vi. What must happen in order for “freedom of action” (Giddens, 1984, p. 175) to be realized?

vii. Do study participants feel they are capable of challenging existing structures? How is their confidence (or lack thereof) expressed? What resources do they have at their disposal to initiate shifts in agentic action?

c. Sources to Address Questions in Section D

i. While the questions in this section will be answered in part through interviews and focus groups, all of them will be heavily influenced by the researcher’s observations over the course of his field work.
III. Analysis Plan and Case Study Reports

A. Individual Case Studies

a. Descriptive Information

i. Demographic and historical information about the community under study

ii. Information about the “media ecosystem” (i.e. newspaper ownership, presence of hyperlocal online media, etc.)

iii. Media workers’ views of poverty and the media’s role in dialog on poverty

iv. Community members’ views on poverty and the media’s role in dialog on poverty

b. Explanatory Information

i. It is expected that individual case study reports will be largely descriptive in nature. Explanatory analysis will be conducted at the cross-case level. However, if individual cases break with patterns established by the literature and/or other cases under study, explanatory analysis will be conducted on those cases (or the facets that break with established patterns) in this section.

ii. Embedded unit analysis may be applied to individual case studies. The selection of embedded units for individual consideration will evolve as the case studies progress. The “summary of questions” entries in Section II of this protocol are examples of units that could be selected for embedded analysis. Embedded units will be analyzed in the context
of their individual cases, and the results of those analyses will not be applied across cases, except when they constitute facets of the case that are subjected to pattern matching (Yin, 1994, p. 120).

B. Cross-Case Analysis

a. Descriptive Information

i. Pattern matching will be used to compare patterns observed in the cases under study with those expected based on an understanding of literature and theory.

ii. Those patterns will be compared against widely-accepted explanations and understandings of rural poverty (i.e. poverty is the result of personal or cultural shortcomings).

b. Explanatory Information

i. Data across cases will be analyzed to build explanations (Yin, 1994, p. 110).

ii. Those explanations will be applied to research questions 1-4, with evidence from all three cases supporting the explanations. It is likely that each RQ will be discussed in a dedicated chapter.

1. In the event that a case breaks pattern, the break will be considered among other evidence.

iii. Rival explanations will be developed through literature and data gathered during the course of the dissertation.
APPENDIX B: QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW GUIDES

I used the following interview guides during my conversations with participants in Greenburg, Priorsville, and Deer Creek. While most participants were ultimately asked all of these questions, the interviews were largely unstructured, so the actual format of each conversation was different. I allowed research participants to direct conversations to a great degree. As a result, discussions often strayed from these guides as participants discussed many different aspects of social life and news coverage in their communities.

Interview Guide 1: Used During Interviews with Journalists

Basic Questions

Tell me about your career path – what got you interested in journalism?

To you, what does it mean to be from ________?

What does it mean to be from Appalachia?

What’s the relationship like between residents and the newspaper in ________?

What kinds of stories do people most like to read?

How would you describe the economic situation in ________?

What’s your sense of what causes those conditions?

What are the ways that poverty impacts the community?

Are there negative aspects of local/regional identity you have to deal with?

How do you deal with them?

How is ________ (and Appalachia more generally) portrayed in the media generally?

Do those portrayals matter to you as a local resident? As a journalist?

How are issues like poverty and homelessness covered in the newspaper?

When does poverty become “newsworthy?”
What are the venues where poverty and other social problems are discussed in the local community?

Motives and Routines

Who decides how poverty is portrayed in the newspaper, and how are those decisions made?

How do people react to coverage of poverty and other issues?

Can you remember specific stories that generated a lot of feedback, either positive or negative?

Who are the sources in the community who are best able to speak to the issue of poverty?

When it comes to issues such as poverty, what role should a local paper play in the public discussion?

What are the ways your newspaper best accomplishes these goals?

Are there areas where the newspaper could do a better job?

Interview Guide 2: Used During Interviews with Non-Journalists

Basic Questions

To you, what does it mean to be from __________? From Appalachia?

How would you describe the economic situation in __________?

What is your sense of what causes those conditions?

What are the ways that poverty impacts the community here?

Think about news coverage generally. What images are most commonly associated with coverage of __________? If you hear there’s a story about the county in the regional media (on television news, for example), what do you expect to see or read?
Same question for Appalachia generally.

Do those portrayals matter to you? Why or why not?

Does it matter to you what “outsiders” think of _________? About Appalachia?

Questions About Local Media

When you want to know what’s going on in your community, what news sources are you most likely to turn to?

Do you read the local newspaper/news website regularly? Why or why not?

How are issues such as poverty or need covered in the local newspaper/news website?

Can you remember specific stories?

This question is not about your local newspaper specifically, but about local newspapers more generally. Are there things you think a local newspaper should do to help address poverty in a community?

   Does the local newspaper here do those things?

   What might the newspaper do better?
APPENDIX C: STUDY PARTICIPANTS

**Greenburg**

*Media Workers*

Nancy, former editor at Henderson Media, which owns the *Greensburg Star*, late 30s

Sandra, editor, *Greensburg Star*, early 80s

Susan, reporter, *Greensburg Star*, late 20s

Theresa, editor and founder, www.GreensburgToday.com, late 30s

*Local Residents*

Brandy, unemployed but about to start work at a fast food restaurant, mid-20s

Clint, public school teacher, late 40s

Dan, custodian, late 50s

Dwight, unemployed, early 60s

Floyd, nonprofit volunteer and retired plant worker, late 50s

Grace, cook, mid-40s

Jenn, unemployed, late teens

Jerry, commuting to a regional university, early 20s

Kathy, retired secretary, mid-70s

Linda, part-time clerical worker, mid-30s

Matthew, manager at a social service agency, mid-40s

Mary, manager at a social service organization, late 50s

Robert, bank executive, early 40s

**Priorsville**

*Media Workers*
Ed, publisher/owner of the *Priorsville Record*, late 40s

Jim, editor of the *Priorsville Record*, early 60s

Bill, publisher/founder of the *Priorsville Post-Examiner*, mid-60s

Nick, editor of the *Priorsville Post-Examiner*, mid-30s

**Local Residents**

Amanda, social service worker, early 70s

Carson, mayor, early 50s

Eli, factory worker, mid-twenties

Kevin, pastor, mid-60s

Melody, works at a payday lender, early twenties

Micah, factory owner, early 60s

Molly, veterinarian, early 40s

Sally, owns a small nonprofit thrift shop, mid-50s

Scott, director of a healthcare service agency, late 60s

Sharon, chamber of commerce director, early 40s

Steven, manager of a small nonprofit organization, mid-40s

Tom, former politician and administrator at an area vocational school, early 60s

**Deer Creek**

**Media Workers**

Eric, general manager, *Deer Creek Chronicle*, mid-40s

Gregory, owner/publisher/senior editor, *Deer Creek Chronicle*, early 70s

Quinn, school secretary and former reporter at the *Deer Creek Chronicle*, early 40s

**Local Residents**
Andrea, clerk at a tobacco shop, late 40s
Blake, college librarian, early 30s
Chad, owner/manager of a small retail store, early 50s
Crystal, part-time secretary (through a government program that helps older people reenter the work force), early 60s
Frank, handyman (through a government work program that helps older people reenter the work force), mid-60s
Jennifer, manager at a local social service agency, mid-30s
Juanita, librarian, early 60s
Neal, pastor, early 60s
Rebecca, director of a local social service agency, late 60s
Rick, retiree, mid-70s
Rob, college student and co-owner (with wife Suzie) of a local restaurant, mid-30s
Stacy, retail store clerk, mid-30s
Suzie, co-owner (with husband Rob) of a local restaurant, mid-30s
Trish, secretary, mid-twenties