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Portrayals of Appalachia in America's Major
Metropolitan Newspapers

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of Communication
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Professional Communication

by
Honey L. Comer
May 2006

Dr. John M. King, Chair

Dr. Jack Mooney

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Keywords: Appalachia, Media, Stereotyping, Cultivation Theory

ABSTRACT

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by

Honey L. Comer

According to Gerbner's cultivation theory, misrepresentations in the media create false realities in the minds of society. To date, much research has been done on the impact of this phenomenon on women, minority races, and the homosexual community. Little consideration has been given, however, to geographic minorities such as Appalachians. This study attempts to identify the frequency and manner of representations of Appalachia in major metropolitan newspapers across the U.S. By conducting a framing analysis on a sample of 823 individual mentions of "Appalachia" in 2005, the author is able to illustrate interesting relationships between geographic proximity and the type of portrayal. Among these, mentions originating in Appalachia were much more likely to frame the region positively than those mentions published outside the region. Similarly, Appalachia and surrounding areas were most likely to report on Appalachia, with more than 75% of all mentions originating within 250 miles of the region.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Discussion of Stereotypes in Appalachia

Throughout the history of communication inquiry, multiple studies have strived to uncover the truth about the misrepresentation of various groups in media. Guided by Gerbner's cultivation theory, scholars of this persuasion remain convinced that such misrepresentations create false realities about various groups in the collective consciousness of society (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Often times, they have found, that these false perceptions result in negative stereotyping and social oppression of the groups involved. Although such studies have allowed us to develop a better understanding of the ways that various minorities become stereotyped via media portrayals, there are several groups yet to be examined thoroughly.

One largely overlooked area involves the application of stereotyping by region. Appalachia remains one of the most stigmatized areas in America today. Its mention alone typically conjures images of hillbillies, outhouses, moon-shining, and other disagreeable behaviors. These associations, while seemingly harmless, can actually be quite damaging to the region and its people. Negative stigma may hinder tourism, deter industry, or cause emotional distress to residents.

Importance of Inquiry

Through a thorough examination of Appalachia's presence in U.S. media, we may be able to better understand the ways that the region and its inhabitants have become stereotyped over time. Such an inquiry might also reveal any discrepancies between the

reality of Appalachian life and the myths cultivated by media. Exposing existing inaccuracies in media portrayals is highly important, as it assists in spreading awareness and debunking stereotypes, thereby decreasing the negative impact of these ideals on Appalachia and the Appalachian people.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Appalachia

According to the Appalachian Regional Commission, the region known as “Appalachia” consists of 406 counties in portions of 12 states and all of West Virginia. Its expansive terrain includes everything from cotton plantations in Alabama to wine country in New York State (Calhoun, 2004). More than 20 million people reside in Appalachia, and its size is comparable to that of the United Kingdom (The Appalachian Regional Commission, 2006). The region is also deeply saturated with a unique history and diverse cultures from which distinctive forms of art, literature, and music have emerged (Straw & Blethen, 2004).

Tourism is an increasingly valuable industry in modern Appalachia. Visitors are attracted to the variety of outdoor activities, festivals, and sites throughout the region. Other sources of commerce have provided a reasonably sound economic climate for Appalachia. In fact, 1990 census data placed the region’s poverty rate just below the national average of 13.1. In the same year, more Appalachians age 18-24 had completed at least 12 years of schooling (77%) than had those in the nation as a whole (76%) (The Appalachian Regional Commission, 2006).

Despite this richness of heritage, industry, and education, Appalachia and its inhabitants have remained victims of negative typifications by journalists and society at large for over a century (Paxton, 2003). It is only through careful investigation that the origins of these regional stereotypes can be uncovered and solutions for eliminating them may come to light.

The Creation of Hillbillies

Scholars believe that the image of Appalachians as dumb, dangerous, and lethargic began as early as the 1850s. In particular, some postulate that it was the notorious feud between the Hatfield and McCoy families that allowed such notions about the region to become solidified on a national scale (Paxton, 2003). Sensational media attention and folklore about the families who allegedly battled for decades over a stolen pig pervaded the thoughts of many outsiders and shaped their views of Appalachia and its people.

The negative stereotyping only progressed with the influx of coal companies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As developers connived to cheat residents out of their land, the social order in Appalachia began to crumble. In an effort to maintain their images, companies would quickly shift the blame to the backward culture and violent tendencies of the regional people (Calhoun, 2004). It was during this time period (1899) that the term “hillbilly” was actually coined (Harkins, 2004).

During the 1930s comic strips like “Li'l Abner” and “Barney Google” caricatured the hillbilly, portraying them as somewhat lovable and dopey. Such depictions helped foster the notion of Appalachians as noble savages, a label not unlike the one endured by Native Americans throughout U.S. history. Movies and television would later perpetuate this myth with characters like “The Andy Griffith Show’s,” Barney Fife and “The Dukes of Hazzard’s” Luke Duke (Harkins).

Several decades later, Appalachia was dealt one of the most damaging blows to its image nationally. The 1960s “War on Poverty” was a campaign initiated by the federal government to eradicate poor conditions in America. In an effort primarily directed at

gaining financial support for this initiative, a series of news pictorials featuring impoverished Appalachians was published across the United States (Calhoun, 2004). These images painted a picture for America that supported the previously constructed stereotypes. Appalachia, in the minds of outsiders, became something of a third world. Its inhabitants were impoverished, un-educated, malnourished, unsanitary, and generally primitive people.

As previously mentioned, many media forms have contributed to the cementing these typifications in American thinking. Television programs like *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Petticoat Junction*, and *Hee-Haw* capitalized on the loveable caricature of mountain folk, bringing them alive on screen (Calhoun, 2004). A variety of motion pictures, such as 1972's *Deliverance*, made further contributions to the pervasive images of poverty and primitive violence in the region (Hanna, 2000).

The existence of fervent religious beliefs and Primitive Baptist sects also serves as a modern testament to outsiders about the “backward” ways of Appalachia (Sovine, 1983). Images of snake handling churches and overzealous ministers are just a few examples of the abnormal practices offered by many media outlets as descriptors of the Appalachian religion. These, like most of the stereotypes imposed upon the region, are accurate in part. It is the remarkably disproportionate representation of these anomalies, however, that creates an unfair image of Appalachia and its inhabitants.

The Invisible Minority

Harkins describes how Appalachia and “hillbillies,” in particular, represent the “white other” to mainstream America (2004). They are often regarded as a poorer, less

modern version of the traditional Anglo-Saxon, protestant, American. African Americans and Hispanics are generally exempt from the hillbilly stereotype, although in reality they represent nearly two million of Appalachia's inhabitants. Mason suggests that this construct in the minds of Americans could actually serve as a defense mechanism for much of the nation, even acting partially as an agent for the maintenance of patriotism (2005). Citing the cases of Appalachian soldiers Jessica Lynch and Lynndie England, researchers were able to illustrate the ways that the "hillbilly" icon helped diffuse the blame for American mishaps during the War in Iraq. Lynch, a West Virginia native, was held prisoner for a period of time by Iraqi insurgents. England was involved in the abuse of a group of Iraqi prisoners in the custody of the United States. Some have reasoned that these women served as scapegoats for the rest of the nation. For example, the torture of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. troops need not be attributed to the uncivilized nature of America but instead to the uncivilized actions of an Appalachian soldier (Mason).

As unfortunate as these negative portrayals of Appalachia are, the absence of the region in media can be equally detrimental. Communication scholars have repeatedly found that the under representation or omission of ethnic groups, regions, and minorities in mainstream media has, over time, evolved into negative stereotyping (Mahtani, 2001). To clarify, stereotypes are labels or misconceptions developed by individuals, often unconsciously in an effort to make sense of their world (Paul, 1998). Stereotypes also need not be blatantly malicious to cause problems for the target group. The loveable hillbilly is an example of this concept as applied to Appalachia and the Appalachian people.

Gerbner's cultivation theory provides the primary foundation for understanding the relationship between the construction of stereotypical generalizations and media. The basic concept of cultivation is that media cultivate a mainstream worldview. Furthermore, it asserts that this way of thinking on the part of society is somehow beneficial to those in power and assists in maintaining the status quo (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Such an idea has obviously significant implications in the examination of stereotype development. In part, it suggests that society tends to think in ways more akin to what they are shown in media rather than those that are derived from their own personal research or experience. Previous studies have demonstrated this by looking at the proportional representation of various events and groups to the reality in society. More often than not, individual ideals more closely mirrored those they viewed on television or in other media than they did the reality (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

Another theory pertinent to the formation of stereotypes via media coverage is Goffman's framing theory (Goffman, 1986). A frame is the overarching theme of a message or news story that directs the recipient to look at the message in a particular way. Frames act as filters, often used by journalists to sensationalize or provide an "angle" to a story (Goffman). Previous studies have shown that when media consistently frame an issue in a particular way, it becomes predominantly viewed that way by society (Paxton, 2003).

Although many studies have examined the effects of cultivation and framing on the stereotyping of highly visible minorities, there are other groups so marginalized that they have often been ignored even by the academic community. Appalachia, as one such group, remains largely un-researched with respect to systematic quantitative study on

stereotype perpetuation in national media. It seems a logical and necessary progression in communication research, then, to attempt to uncover any biases about this region that might be pervading media today.

CHAPTER 3

HYPOTHESES

1. Appalachia will be mentioned significantly more often in newspapers published in or near it, than it will in newspapers published further away.
100. Stories about Appalachia will be significantly more likely to be framed in a negative way in newspapers published farther from the region than in newspapers published in or near the region.

Exploratory Question

Is there a relationship between the issue discussed in the story and the frame used? If so, which issues are typically framed in a negative way? Which issues are framed in a positive way?

CHAPTER 4

METHOD

Sample

A content analysis was conducted on a purposive sample of 86 major metropolitan newspapers available through the LexisNexis database. Some stories were published directly by the Associated Press. Half of all retrieved mentions of “Appalachia,” appearing from January 1, 2005, through December 31, 2005, were coded. These were chosen by selecting 50% of all stories retrieved in each of four U.S. regions used by LexisNexis to create a stratified sample. The regions were the Northeast, Midwest, Southeast, and West. A randomizing program was used to select which of the stories would be examined in each region (Urbaniak & Plous, 2006).

Procedure

The specific newspaper was recorded as well as the paper’s distance from Appalachia. This distance was calculated by measuring from the city of origin of the newspaper to the nearest border of Appalachia. Mentions appearing in stories issued by the Associated Press were assigned to the city listed as the dateline in the article. Papers were grouped in 250-mile increments, with papers printed 1-250 miles away receiving a value of 1, those 251-500 miles away receiving a 2 and so on. Mentions also received a regional category designation, depending upon their origin of publication. These regions followed the guidelines used by the United States Census Bureau, aside from the inclusion of Appalachia as an independent category. The regions were as follows: New England [Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and

Vermont], Middle Atlantic [New Jersey, New York (non-Appalachia), and Pennsylvania (non-Appalachia)], East North Central [Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio (non-Appalachia), and Wisconsin], West North Central [Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota], South Atlantic [Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia (non-Appalachia), Maryland (non-Appalachia), North Carolina (non-Appalachia), South Carolina (non-Appalachia), and Virginia (non-Appalachia), East South Central [Alabama (non-Appalachia), Kentucky (non-Appalachia), Mississippi (non-Appalachia), and Tennessee (non-Appalachia)], West South Central [Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas], Mountain [Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, Montana, Utah, Nevada, and Wyoming], Pacific [Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington], and Appalachia (United States Census Bureau, 2005). Appalachia, as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission, consists of portions of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi as well as the entire state of West Virginia (The Appalachian Regional Commission, 2006).

Each article was then examined to determine whether the overarching frame presented Appalachia in a positive, negative, or neutral way. The criteria for determining this were derived from the framing standards set forth in Paxton's 2003 study of Appalachia (Paxton, 2003). Those articles that associated Appalachia with poverty, lack of education, poor economy, or crime and violence were deemed "negative." Those portraying Appalachia as wealthy, rich in arts and culture, flourishing economically, or as a relaxing/aesthetically pleasing region were coded as "positive." Any mentions that did

not employ any of the aforementioned frames or that had equal positive and negative elements were entered as “neutral.”

The final variable, “issue,” pertained to the topic of the article. Those mentions discussing economic issues (e.g. poverty, the coal industry, big business) were coded as “1.” A code of “2” meant that the article referenced Appalachian culture. This included art, music, theatre, heritage, and dialect. Those articles depicting the Appalachian “way of life,” were also included in this category when no other category applied. Education was category “3.” Mentions were given this designation when they discussed the scholastic aptitude of Appalachia and its people (whether positive or negative). Finally, those stories that did not reference economics, culture, or education were assigned “4” for “other.”

Inter-coder Reliability

Coder 1, the author, analyzed more than 70% of the data. A second coder completed just over 28% of the research. Before beginning, an inter-coder reliability test was conducted to ensure congruency between coders. After two rounds of coding, 100% reliability was achieved on the “newspaper,” “region,” and “distance” variables. The reliability was also acceptable for the “frame” (90%) and for the “issue” (96%) variables.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

The following series of tables provides simple illustration of the data retrieved from this study. All but one chi-square test returned a p value of less than .001, indicating a significant relationship between variables.

Frequencies

Table 1 illustrates the variation among mentions of Appalachia by region. Clearly, Appalachia is more often represented in newspapers printed in (33.5%) or near it (South Atlantic at 24.9% and East North Central at 12.3%) than it is in those papers printed in regions not affiliated with Appalachia. These results support the first hypothesis, that proximity and frequency are positively related.

Table 1
Frequency of Mentions of Appalachia in each of the 11 U.S. Regions

	Frequency	Percent
Appalachia	276	33.5%
South Atlantic (non-Appalachia)	205	24.9%
East North Central (non-Appalachia)	101	12.3%
Middle Atlantic (non-Appalachia)	52	6.3%
Pacific	47	5.7%
New England	41	5.0%
West South Central	34	4.1%
Mountain	32	3.9%
East South Central (non-Appalachia)	24	2.9%
West North Central	11	1.3%
Total	823	100.0%

Note. N = 823

In Table 2, a more precise version of these results is presented. Here, the distance/frequency relationship becomes even more apparent. Of those stories coded, more than 75% appeared in newspapers originating either in Appalachia itself, or within 250 miles of the region.

Table 2
Frequency of Mentions of Appalachia in U.S. Newspapers, by Distance from Appalachia (in miles)

Distance	Frequency	Percent
0 (Appalachia)	276	33.5%
1-250	344	41.8%
251-500	102	12.4%
501-750	20	2.4%
751-1000	3	0.4%
1251-1500	22	2.7%
1501-1750	10	1.2%
1751-2000	30	3.6%
2001-2250	14	1.7%
3751-4000	2	0.2%
Total	823	100.0%

Note. N = 823

Frame frequency appears in Table 3. Interestingly, the negative frame appeared most frequently, representing 41.8% of all mentions. Neutral mentions were second most frequent, with 312 occurrences (37.9%). Only about 20% of all mentions coded represented Appalachia in a “positive” light.

Table 3
Frequency of Positive, Negative, and Neutral Frames in U.S. Newspaper Mentions of Appalachia

	Frequency	Percent
Positive	167	20.3%
Negative	344	41.8%
Neutral	312	37.9%
Total	823	100.0%

Note. N = 823

Table 4 begins to address the exploratory question of this study by describing the frequency of issues discussed in stories about Appalachia. Of those issues coded, economics was the one most frequently mentioned in relationship to Appalachia. This issue accounted for 35.1% of all mentions. More than half of all stories coded pertained to either economics or culture, which appeared in 23.3% of mentions. Education was only addressed 35 times, comprising 4.3% of the data. The remaining mentions, 37.3%, addressed issues other than economics, culture, or education.

Table 4
Frequency of Issue Addressed in Mentions of Appalachia

Issue	Frequency	Percent
Economics	289	35.1%
Culture	192	23.3%
Education	35	4.3%
Other	307	37.3%

Note: N=823

Table 5 supports the second hypothesis, clearly illustrating a high frequency of negative mentions as related to distance from Appalachia. A p value of less than 0.001 suggests an extremely significant relationship. Because of a large number of low-count cells (12), however, the data were later collapsed to eliminate these holes.

Relationship of Distance

Table 5
Relationship between Distance from Appalachia and Frame

Distance from Appalachia (in miles)		Frame		
		Positive	Negative	Neutral
0	Count	85	84	107
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	30.8%	30.4%	38.8%
1-250	Count	58	175	111
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	16.8%	50.9%	32.3%
251-500	Count	14	43	45
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	13.7%	42.2%	44.1%
501-750	Count	1	9	10
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	5%	45%	50%
751-1000	Count	0	1	2
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	.0%	33.3%	66.7%
1251-1500	Count	6	3	13
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	27.3%	13.6%	59.1%
1501-1750	Count	0	6	4
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	0%	60%	40%
1751-2000	Count	2	15	13
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	6.7%	50%	43.3%
2001-2250	Count	1	8	5
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	7.1%	57.1%	35.8%
3751-4000	Count	0	0	2
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	.0%	.0%	100.0%
Total		167	344	312

Note. N = 823, Chi Square = 61.7, df = 18, p < .001

Table 6 reveals that newspapers published within Appalachia were the most likely to frame the region positively, although there were nearly the same amount of negative mentions. Intriguingly, the newspapers originating just beyond Appalachia (published from 1-250 miles from the nearest border) were the most negative. Those papers published farther from the region had few positive mentions, but were more often neutral than negative. Again, a p value of less than 0.001 indicates high significance.

Table 6
Relationship between Distance and Frame, Collapsed

		Frame			Total
Distance from Appalachia (in miles)		Positive	Negative	Neutral	
0 (Appalachia)	Count	85	84	107	276
	% within distance collapsed	30.8%	30.4%	38.8%	100.0%
1-250	Count	58	175	111	344
	% within distance collapsed	16.8%	50.9%	32.3%	100.0%
251-500	Count	14	43	45	102
	% within distance collapsed	13.7%	42.2%	44.1%	100.0%
501-750	Count	1	9	10	20
	% within distance collapsed	5%	45%	50%	100.0%
751+	Count	9	33	39	81
	% within distance collapsed	11.1%	40.7%	48.2%	100%
Total	Count	167	344	312	823
	% within distance collapsed	20.3%	41.8%	37.9%	100.0%

Note. N = 823, Chi Square = 47.2, df = 8, p < .001

To further investigate the exploratory question of the study, a cross-tab was generated to look for any relationship between distance and issue discussed. Table 7 illustrates that “other” issues were discussed most often, with 307 mentions. Of those issues specifically coded, however, economics appeared most often in most of the areas. Here the p value was less than 0.05, illustrating a significant relationship between the two variables. Once again, low-count (20) cells created the need for a collapsed table.

Table 7
Relationship between Distance from Appalachia and Issue Addressed

Distance from Appalachia (in miles)		Issue			
		Economics	Culture	Education	Other
0	Count	97	75	9	95
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	35.1%	27.2%	3.3%	34.4%
1-250	Count	140	71	16	117
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	40.7%	20.6%	4.7%	34.0%
251-500	Count	30	16	6	50
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	29.4%	15.7%	5.9%	49%
501-750	Count	7	6	0	7
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	35%	30%	0%	35%
751-1000	Count	0	1	0	2
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	0%	33.3%	0%	66.7%
1251-1500	Count	6	9	0	7
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	27.2%	40.9%	0%	31.9%
1501-1750	Count	0	1	2	7
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	0%	10%	20%	70%
1751-2000	Count	6	8	1	15
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	20%	26.7%	3.3%	50%
2001-2250	Count	3	4	1	6
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	21.4%	28.6%	7.1%	42.9%
3751-4000	Count	0	1	0	1
	% within Distance from Appalachia (in miles)	0%	50%	0%	50%
Total	Count	289	192	35	307

Note. N = 823, Chi Square = 43.02, df = 27, p < .05

As Table 8 clearly shows, Appalachian newspapers talk about the area most often in reference to poverty or other economic issues. Locales farther away, by contrast, are more interested in cultural phenomenon and “other” issues. After collapsing the data, the

p value was reduced to less than 0.01, strengthening the relationship between variables further.

Table 8
Relationship between Distance and Issue, Collapsed

		Issue			
		Economics	Culture	Education	Other
0	Count	97	75	9	95
	% within distance collapsed	35.1%	27.2%	3.3%	34.4%
1-250	Count	140	71	16	117
	% within distance collapsed	40.7%	20.6%	4.7%	34.0%
251-500	Count	30	16	6	50
	% within distance collapsed	29.4%	15.7%	5.9%	49%
501-750	Count	7	6	0	7
	% within distance collapsed	35%	30%	0%	35%
751+	Count	15	24	4	38
	% within distance collapsed	18.5%	29.6%	4.9%	47%
Count		289	192	35	307

Note. N = 823, Chi Square = 27.2, df =12, p < .01

Table 9 represents the relationship between frame and issue. Regardless of location, newspapers typically framed stories about the Appalachian economy in a negative way (nearly 70% of the time). All newspapers were slightly more likely to portray education issues negatively as well. Elements of Appalachian culture, by

contrast, were most often represented in a positive way (54.2% of the time). Among the examined issues (economics, culture, and education), all tended to be framed in a positive or negative way, rather than a neutral way. Most neutral stories addressed “other” issues.

Cross-Tabulation of Issue and Frame

Table 9
Relationship between Frame and Issue Discussed in Reference to Appalachia

		Frame			Total
		Positive	Negative	Neutral	
Issue Addressed	Economics	35	202	52	289
		12.1%	69.9%	18%	100%
	Culture	104	34	54	192
		54.2%	17.7%	28.1%	100%
	Education	11	17	7	35
		31.4%	48.6%	20%	100%
	Other	17	91	199	307
		5.6%	29.6%	64.8%	100%
Total		167	344	312	823

Note: N=823, Chi Square=342.4, p<.001

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

Study Summary

Gerbner's cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) and Goffman's framing theory (Goffman, 1986) suggest that media take an active role in structuring the thinking of individuals. Sometimes this power can be executed for the good of society. It can help to raise awareness for an important issue or foster large-scale movements toward positive social change. Unfortunately, there are also instances when this influence negatively impacts society or social groups. The promotion of negative stereotypes is one such instance.

Largely overlooked in the past, Appalachia exists as one of America's most stigmatized regions. This research sought to unearth the underlying media messages about Appalachia and its people today. Specifically, does geographic proximity of a newspaper to Appalachia have an impact on the frequency and/or type of mentions of the region in that paper?

The study was also interested in uncovering any relationships between the type of issue discussed and the other variables, particularly distance and frame. Economics, culture, and education were chosen as important issues for evaluation.

Evaluation of Hypotheses

The data in this study supported the hypothesis that Appalachia would be mentioned less frequently in newspapers published farther away. Table 2 clearly illustrates this, placing more than 75% of all mentions either in Appalachia or within 250

miles of the region. Such results provide possible insight into why there is a lack of understanding of the region among outsiders to Appalachia.

The second hypothesis, by contrast, yielded more varied results. As expected, papers published in Appalachia framed the region positively more than in any other part of the country. Even in the region though, positive mentions only represented 30.8% of all mentions coded. Those papers published in regions outside Appalachia, as anticipated, seemed to reference the region in a negative manner most often. These outside regions also had relatively high instances of neutral framing.

Interestingly, papers published farther away were slightly more likely to report Appalachia in a neutral way, than those just outside the region (1-250 miles). In fact, slightly more than half of all mentions within 250 miles of the Appalachian border were negative. A possible explanation for this phenomenon might be that those regions proximally nearer Appalachia feel a greater need to disassociate with it in order to avoid assuming the stigma. These areas might be striving to clarify their anonymity from Appalachia, to “prove” that they are actually players in the modern world. Further study would need to be conducted in order to corroborate these assumptions.

The data collected to evaluate the exploratory question of the study also illuminated some interesting trends. Among all mentions coded, 289 (35.1%) referenced economic issues. Of these, 202 mentions were framed negatively. Such figures demonstrate the strong tendency of papers to discuss Appalachia in terms of poverty and meager living conditions. This discovery suggests a bothersome trend that could easily be misleading to the public. Although poverty does exist in Appalachia, as it does in the rest of America, it seems that it is reported in levels strongly disproportionate to the

reality of the region. While recent census data place the Appalachian poverty level just below the national average of 13.1%, more than 70% of the newspaper mentions on economy cast a negative light on the financial stability of the region and its people. (The Appalachian Regional Commission, 2006) Such a gross generalization creates an image of Appalachia in the minds of mainstream Americans that counters the facts. It is only to be expected, then, that visitors from outside the region are astonished to find people wearing shoes and using indoor plumbing. To reverse these perceptions, media must equalize their portrayals to be more reflective of the reality.

Another interesting finding regarded the “culture” issue. It was referenced in 23.3% of all mentions. Unlike economic issues, culture was most often framed positively. More than half of the stories discussing Appalachian culture (54.2%) described the unique art, cuisine, history, or other positive attributes of the region. Data also suggest that culture was a more prominent issue than economics or education in those areas farther from Appalachia (750 miles or more). Many of the west-coast mentions also appeared to apply to Appalachia’s musical influence throughout time. Future studies might strive to corroborate this inference.

Another striking finding was the lack of reference to education in Appalachia among the entire sample. Table 4 places the frequency of mentions of this issue at only 35, or 4.3%. While the cross-tab in Table 9 showed that education was most likely to be framed negatively (at nearly 50% of the time), it is the absence of mentions that seems most disturbing. Lack of news coverage on this issue could contribute to the belief that education is rare in Appalachia. In essence, the media depict this as a “non-issue,” and

may thereby reinforce stereotypes about Appalachia and Appalachian people. This might also be an area that would benefit from a more focused investigation.

“Other” issues represented the largest percentage of the sample, with 37.3% of the mentions. In future studies, additional issues might be included to reduce this ambiguity. Some of those noted in this study were crime, environment, and religion.

Limitations

Limitations of this particular study included the use of a database and limited variables. While useful, LexisNexis may not give the most encompassing sample of newspapers. Because those retrieved were primarily major metropolitan news sources, some media relevant to rural Appalachia and other smaller areas may have been bypassed. Including these in future research might provide a more accurate picture of how American media talks about Appalachia. Also, the search results were not limited to a specific type of story. News stories, editorials, sports statistics, and obituaries were all coded. While it can be argued that every mention contributes to the overall construction of Appalachian stereotypes by media, a more accurate assessment might break these into categories and code them as such.

The “positive,” “negative,” and “neutral” distinctions were fairly broad, as well. Although this was offset somewhat by the inclusion of the “issue” variable, a large portion of mentions were still coded as “other.” Assessing for other major issues (notably crime and environmental concern) would probably foster a more thorough understanding of this phenomenon.

Implications

Perhaps the most disturbing finding of this study was the overwhelming propensity of the newspapers to affiliate Appalachia with negative stereotypes. This result sheds light on the prevalence of a hidden prejudice permeating American society today. Such bias would most likely be unheard of in modern America were any other group the target. Through the presentation of these and similar statistics however, journalists may become more conscious of their own biases in reporting. Consumers of media must also consider the presence of these misrepresentations. Teaching citizens to become critical analysts of media can help prevent stigma from taking hold. By heightening awareness and providing broader education about the reality of the Appalachian region, perhaps we may gradually neutralize the stereotypes associated with it. Such techniques might be applicable to other groups impacted by media portrayals as well.

The extraordinarily close relationship between economic issues and negative frame is also extremely unsettling. Not only does this sort of gross generalization make Appalachia look bad politically, but it can deeply impact the lives of individuals living in the region. Appalachian people may feel inadequate, condescended to, or pitied when traveling to other parts of the country. Outside visitors may be disrespectful, patronizing, or ogling when traveling within the region. All the while, U.S. newspapers appear to be reinforcing these behaviors, suggesting that Appalachians are a sub-culture operating below the normal standards of America.

What, then, are the implications for a recent graduate attempting to relocate outside the region for college or work? Several colleges offer minority scholarships to

Appalachian students. While this is probably helpful for the student in many respects, it also seems to inherently support the notion that the Appalachian people are helpless victims of their environmental condition. Those beginning work or schooling in outside areas may be subjected to condescending inquiry or ridicule by their peers based purely upon their regional affiliation. Though such behavior would not be tolerated if aimed at minority groups, it seems all-in-fun when a “hillbilly” is the target. The discrepancies unearthed in this study might also be evidence of a need for more comprehensive diversity education in the workplace. Employees must understand that all harassment and stereotyping are unacceptable, even if intended in a playful manner.

While this study illuminates a largely un-investigated problem in American media portrayals of Appalachia, it hardly covers the gamut. In order to truly transform the level of awareness among journalists and citizens, further exploration should take place. By looking at portrayals in television news, movies, and magazines the researcher might be able to corroborate further the results of this study. It is through thorough investigation of existing conditions that detrimental stereotyping may be eradicated, and various minority groups can become free of undeserved stigmas.

Future Directions

As previously mentioned, future research in this area should certainly address more specifically the types of issues discussed in reports involving Appalachia. Crime, religion, and environmental issues would likely be helpful inclusions. Individuals interested in this topic might also address the various aspects of culture alone. The

musical influence of Appalachia was noted many times throughout this study and seems worthy of further inquiry.

Broader understanding of this topic can only be achieved when a variety of media are examined. Future researchers should apply these questions to television news, magazines, the Internet, or other media outlets that have been neglected thus far. Analysis of popular movies, such as the 2005 film, *Walk the Line*, might also illuminate some interesting trends in portrayals of Appalachia.

A comparative analysis would also be beneficial in illustrating any discrepancies between Appalachian portrayals and those of other U.S. regions. Future researchers should look at media depictions of more mainstream areas and compare the reflective accuracy levels with those of the Appalachian portrayals. Such an inquiry would clearly distinguish whether the misrepresentations of Appalachia are an anomaly or if such is a pervasive phenomenon among depictions of all regions.

Final Thoughts

Regardless of intent, media misrepresentations of minority groups lead to the stereotyping of those groups and, ultimately, stigmatization. Clearly, Appalachia and the Appalachian people have been targets of such misrepresentation, and have, no doubt, suffered the consequences. Throughout time, the hillbilly image has perplexed mainstream Americans, provided them with entertainment, and been their scapegoat in times when white society was criticized internationally. This study sought to uncover these trends and increase awareness, thereby minimizing the impact of such stigma. One study, however, cannot single-handedly change what decades of misinformation have

done. It is only through further investigation and more specific inquiry that these issues may truly begin to be understood and resolved.

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APPENDIX

Newspaper Frequency

Frequency of Mentions of Appalachia in Individual Newspapers in 2005

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Albuquerque Journal	7	.9	.9	.9
	Anchorage Daily News	2	.2	.2	1.1
	AP Charleston, W.Va	27	3.3	3.3	4.4
	Austin American-Statesman	1	.1	.1	4.5
	Bakersfield Californian	1	.1	.1	4.6
	Copley News (San Diego)	2	.2	.2	4.9
	Cox News Service (Waco, TX)	4	.5	.5	5.3
	Dallas Observer	5	.6	.6	6.0
	Denver Post	8	1.0	1.0	6.9
	Desert Morning News (Salt Lake City)	7	.9	.9	7.8
	East Bay Express (CA)	1	.1	.1	7.9
	Fort worth Star Telegram	4	.5	.5	8.4
	Fresno Bee	1	.1	.1	8.5
	Houston Chronicle	7	.9	.9	9.4
	Inland Valley Daily Bulletin (Onterio, CA)	1	.1	.1	9.5
	L.A. Weekly	5	.6	.6	10.1
	Los Angeles Times	4	.5	.5	10.6
	Rocky Mountain News (Denver)	5	.6	.6	11.2
	Sacramento Bee	1	.1	.1	11.3
	Salt Lake Tribune	3	.4	.4	11.7
	San Antonio Express	3	.4	.4	12.0
	San Diego Union-Tribune	5	.6	.6	12.6
	San Francisco Chronicle	6	.7	.7	13.4
	Santa Fe New Mexican	2	.2	.2	13.6
	Seattle Post Intelligencer	3	.4	.4	14.0
	Seattle Times	9	1.1	1.1	15.1
	The Columbian (Vancouver, WA)	1	.1	.1	15.2
	Tulsa World	4	.5	.5	15.7
	Ventura County Star	4	.5	.5	16.2
	AP Lookout, W.Va	4	.5	.5	16.6
	AP Pikeville, KY	24	2.9	2.9	19.6
	Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock)	3	.4	.4	19.9
	Atlanta Journal-Constitution	26	3.2	3.2	23.1
	Augusta Chronicle	1	.1	.1	23.2

Baltimore Sun	7	.9	.9	24.1
Birmingham News	2	.2	.2	24.3
Charleston Daily Mail (W.Va)	34	4.1	4.1	28.4
Charleston Gazette (W. Va)	54	6.6	6.6	35.0
Chattanooga Times Free Press	19	2.3	2.3	37.3
Daily Record (Baltimore)	3	.4	.4	37.7
Florida Times-Union (Jacksonville)	3	.4	.4	38.0
Fulton County Daily Report (GA)	1	.1	.1	38.2
Knoxville News Sentinel	73	8.9	8.9	47.0
Lexington Herald Leader	15	1.8	1.8	48.8
Maryland Gazette News and Observer (Raleigh)	5	.6	.6	49.5
	4	.5	.5	49.9
Richmond Times Dispatch	47	5.7	5.7	55.8
Roanoke Times	32	3.9	3.9	59.7
Sarasota Herald Tribune	2	.2	.2	59.9
St. Petersburg Times	3	.4	.4	60.3
Tampa Tribune	6	.7	.7	61.0
The Advocate (Baton Rouge)	2	.2	.2	61.2
The Capital (Annapolis, MD)	6	.7	.7	62.0
The Commercial Appeal (Memphis)	5	.6	.6	62.6
The Herald (Rock Hill, SC)	8	1.0	1.0	63.5
The Herald-Sun (Durham, NC)	6	.7	.7	64.3
The Ledger (Lakeland, FL)	3	.4	.4	64.6
The Virginian Pilot (Norfolk)	8	1.0	1.0	65.6
Washington Post	23	2.8	2.8	68.4
Winston Salem Journal	12	1.5	1.5	69.9
AP Morgantown, W.Va	2	.2	.2	70.1
Capital Times (Madison, WS)	3	.4	.4	70.5
Chicago Daily Herald	46	5.6	5.6	76.1
Columbus Dispatch	6	.7	.7	76.8
Dayton Daily News	6	.7	.7	77.5
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	10	1.2	1.2	78.7
South Bend Tribune	9	1.1	1.1	79.8
St. Louis Post Dispatch	8	1.0	1.0	80.8
The Pantagraph (Bloomington, Ill.)	1	.1	.1	80.9
The State Journal-Register (Springfield, Ill.)	3	.4	.4	81.3

Boston Globe	14	1.7	1.7	83.0
Brattleboro Reformer (VT)	5	.6	.6	83.6
Buffalo News	4	.5	.5	84.1
Hartford Courant	7	.9	.9	84.9
Lancaster new Era	4	.5	.5	85.4
New York Times	25	3.0	3.0	88.5
Pittsburgh Post Gazette	10	1.2	1.2	89.7
Pittsburgh Tribune Review	7	.9	.9	90.5
Sunday News (Lancaster, PA)	2	.2	.2	90.8
The Patriot Ledger (Quincy, MA)	14	1.7	1.7	92.5
The Post Standard (Syracuse)	2	.2	.2	92.7
The Record (Bergen County, NJ)	12	1.5	1.5	94.2
The Times-Union (Albany)	4	.5	.5	94.7
Tribune Review (Greensburg, PA)	5	.6	.6	95.3
Times Picayune (New Orleans)	2	.2	.2	95.5
AP – Hazard Co., KY	12	1.5	1.5	97.0
AP – Louisville, KY	3	.4	.4	97.3
Palm Beach Post (FL)	1	.1	.1	97.4
The Post & Courier (Charleston, SC)	2	.2	.2	97.6
Plain Dealer (Cleveland)	13	1.6	1.6	99.1
Lincoln Journal Star (NE)	4	.5	.5	99.6
Chicago Sun-Times	1	.1	.1	99.8
Omaha World Herald	2	.2	.2	100.0
Total	823	100.0	100.0	

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