Bridging the Digital Divide in Rural Appalachia: Internet Usage in the Mountains

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Abstract

This project looks at Internet usage within the Melungeon community of Appalachia. Although much has been written on the coal mining communities of Appalachia and on ethnicity within the region, there has been little written on electronic media usage *by* Appalachian communities, most notably the Melungeons.

The Melungeons are a group who settled in the Appalachian Mountains as early as 1492, of apparent Mediterranean descent. Considered by some to be tri-racial isolates, to a certain extent, Melungeons have been culturally constructed, and largely self-identified. According to the founder of a popular Melungeon Web site, the Internet has proven an effective tool in uncovering some of the mysteries and folklore surrounding the Melungeon community. This Web site receives more than 21,000 hits a month from Melungeons or others interested in the group. The Melungeon community, triggered by recent books, films, and video documentaries, has begun to use the Internet to trace their genealogy.

Through the use of oral history interviews, this study examines how Melungeons in Appalachia use the Internet to connect to others within their community and to the world at large.

Keywords: Internet, media, digital divide, Appalachia, rural, oral history, ethnography, sociology, community

Introduction

In Rod Carveth and Susan Kretchmer's paper "The Digital Divide in Western Europe," (presented at the 2002 International Summer Conference on Communication and Technology) the authors examined how age, income and gender were predictors of the digital divide in Western Europe. In addition, they pointed out how geography played a crucial role given that countries in Southern Europe have less computer and Internet penetration than their Northern European counterparts. In my paper, I examine the digital divide in the United States, particularly while looking at Internet usage in rural Appalachia.

Given that the growth of the American "Sunbelt South" has become somewhat of a symbol of U.S. economic progress, I will examine Internet usage in Appalachia, an area of the U.S. that is often overlooked. As Eller (1999, ix) writes, "Always part of the mythical South, Appalachia continues to languish backstage in the American drama, still dressed, in the popular mind at least, in the garments of backwardness, violence, poverty and hopelessness once associated with the South as a whole. No other region of the United States today plays the role of the 'other America' quite so persistently as Appalachia."

By using oral histories, my intention is to give an outlet to residents of rural Appalachia. Using their own words, I hope to discover who they think they are and how their use of electronic media has informed their identity and included or excluded

them. As participants recalled their histories, I attempted to record their lived/reconstructed/and or perceived past.

Riesman (1950) illustrated the effects of electronic media on our sense of community in his "lonely crowd" theory. His analogy of the individual living in a modern technological society yet existing in seclusion seems to echo the beliefs that electronic media are isolating catalysts on society. This theory is even more poignant given the strong sense of community and family within the Appalachian region. The analysis of this concept—whether the arrival of electronic communication technology into the region disrupted rather than enhanced the sense of community—defines this study.

Significance of the Study

As stated above, although much has been written on the coal mining communities of Appalachia (see Fisher, 1993; Yarrow, 1990; and Eller, 1982) and on ethnicity within the region (see Billings, 1999; Turner, 1985; Klotter, 1980; Cunningham, 1980; and Snyder, 1982), there is a dearth of literature on electronic media usage within the Appalachian community. An important distinction should be made in that there is a body of work that examines print media's effect on Appalachia (see Stephens, 1972 and Maggard, 1985). In addition, Newcomb (1979) examines how Appalachian stereotypes are perpetuated on TV, Williamson (1994 and 1995) points out how the Appalachian is portrayed in motion pictures, and some alternative media sources, such as Appalshop Film and Video in Whitesburg, Kentucky, produce works on Appalachian culture and history (see *Mountain Vision: Homegrown Television in Appalachia, and Strangers and Kin*).[1] None, however, address *electronic* media usage *by* Appalachians. Therefore, I hope the oral histories collected in this study will contribute to the understanding of the impact the Internet had on the residents of rural Appalachia, especially from a social historical context.

I see a great value in a human diary that documents how electronic media affected the lives of rural Appalachians and hope the oral histories used to trace the early adoption of the Internet contribute to a better understanding of how Appalachians, particularly within the Melungeon community, were able to establish communities — both virtually and in real life — regardless of their geographical isolation.

Oral History

Conducting oral history interviews is fraught with challenges, particularly when the interviewer is seen as an outsider by the interviewees. Some participants, uncomfortable with an interviewer entering into a region where many are burdened with poor educations, were reluctant to be recorded. Given the way the media often depict Appalachians in movies (*Deliverance*), television ("The Beverly Hillbillies"), and comic strips (*Snuffy Smith*), their reluctance is not surprising. In "The Appalachian Inheritance," Cattell-Gordon (1990, 41) describes the Appalachian region as a "culturally transmitted traumatic stress syndrome." However, in their viewing of the Appalachian community, Banks, Billings, and Tice (1996, 82) suggest that

> [T]his account of the effects of history as social trauma bred in the bones of the people of the region is flawed because it constitutes Appalachians solely as "victims" and obscures the potentiality of diverse subjects' making history...thereby minimizing the possibilities for agency and empowerment. Such an account leaves unquestioned paradigmatic views of Appalachia that have the effect of either marginalizing and excluding Appalachians as fully human beings or else treating them as a monolithic category.

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[1] Created in 1969 as a War on Poverty program to train young people in media production, Appalshop is a media arts center located in central Appalachia where it continues to produce and present works on social, economic, and political issues concerning Appalachian culture.

It is incumbent upon social historians to rethink oppositional terms such as "insider/outsider" and "scholars/activists." The idea of "apprehend[ing] and inscrib[ing] others in such a way as not to deny or diffuse their claims to subjecthood" should be the goal of all social scientists (Mascia-Lees 1989, 12). It is therefore the intention of this study to allow the participants who were interviewed to express themselves through the use of their own words.

Throughout the interview process, I tried not to rely too heavily on my prepared questions and allowed the interviewee to follow any unexpected path he or she chose to take. Of course, my initial questions did shape the direction in which I felt I could derive the most raw material (memories), and I tried my best to guide participants in the direction which best served my scholarly aim. As the author of this work, I also recognize that I chose the quotes that are included herein.

In *A Shared Authority,* Frisch (1990) addresses the notion that the interviewer may feel more responsible for the creation of a work; however, the interviewee is the greater partner. It is in the interviewee's stories that the greatest value of an oral history resides. Furthermore, the interviewee also participates in the interpretation of the stories since he or she constantly analyzes their own motives while recalling them (see Ritchie, 1995).

The Melungeon Community of Appalachia

While conducting previous research in Appalachia, I recognized that it was the inception of radio in the 1920s, and for some, television several decades later that brought a genesis of belonging to a national community into this region of the country. During my earlier research, I interviewed respondents who were old enough to recall the inception of both radio and television. The majority of those who participated were either of Scotch-Irish or German descent. However, few were Internet users. In searching for an indigenous group from within the Appalachian region who had actively embraced the Internet, I became aware of the Melungeon Heritage Association. This group began holding national conferences celebrating their tri-racial heritage in 1997. During that year, the first Melungeon Heritage Association meeting, planned as a picnic for fifty participants, attracted over 600 people. Called First Union, many attribute the overwhelming attendance to the group's Web site and the Internet's wide reach. Second Union followed in 1998 with a substantially greater attendance. According to Darlene Wilson, founder of one of the earliest Melungeon Web sites, the Internet has proven an effective tool in uncovering some of the mysteries and folklore surrounding the Melungeon community2. Ms Wilson claims that the Melungeon heritage Web site receives more than 21,000 hits a month from Melungeons or others interested in the group.3 For an unadvertised Web site, this is a remarkable number of hits.4

Some speculate that the Melungeons first settled in the Appalachian Mountains as early as the fifteenth century, of apparent Mediterranean descent. Its members are considered by some to be tri-racial isolates. According to Kennedy (1994), the Melungeon community descends from Turks, Berbers, Moors, Jews, Portuguese, Spaniards and others who arrived on the southeastern seaboard of North America during the period between 1492 and the founding of Jamestown in 1607. Webster (1962, 1122) described the Melungeon as "a member of a dark-skinned people of mixed Caucasian, Negro, and Indian stock, inhabiting the Tennessee mountains."[5] Davis (1963, 16) identified the Melungeons as "dark-skinned, reddish-

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[2] Interview with Darlene Wilson, 19 June 1999.

[3] Ibid.

[4] By comparison, survivor.com, the site for Survivor Software, a small software company that produces personal finance software, receives an average of 2,400 hits a month. At the opposite extreme, during the month of August 2000, their site received 631,998 hits from Internet users seeking the official CBS "Survivor" television program Web site (Survivor Software).

[5] Interestingly, there are no listings for "Melungeon" in *The American Heritage Dictionary (3rd ed.), Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary (10th ed.), Oxford English Dictionary (2nd ed.), Britannica Online,* or *The Columbia Encyclopedia.*

brown complexioned people [who were] supposed to be of Moorish descent, neither Indian nor Negro, but [who] had fine European features, and claimed to be Portuguese."

Today, the largest Melungeon communities are primarily in eastern Tennessee, western North Carolina and southwestern Virginia (Kennedy). However, members are found throughout the Appalachian region and beyond. Perhaps some migrated in search of a place where their tri-racial heritage was not suspect. Others may have been seeking employment in the city. As Melungeons begin to reach out to embrace their heritage, many are using the Internet to trace their genealogy. Ms Wilson claimed that a large percentage of the people who visit her Web site are expatriates, comprised of those who left the community.[6] As Melungeons faced discrimination (often because of their mixed ancestry), many kept to themselves, settled in isolated communities, or migrated to regions where their heritage was not suspect (see Price 1951). Their "mixed blood" led to discrimination that kept many from claiming or celebrating their heritage. Throughout the years, the term Melungeon had taken on a negative connotation. Recently however, there has been resurgence in the Melungeon community as many have begun to reach out to embrace their diversity. Within the realm of community studies, it is interesting that the Melungeon community is perhaps defined less as a geographic community than as an electronic community.

Participants

In 1999, the Melungeon Heritage Association held a genealogical workshop at Berea College in Kentucky. It was there that I began interviewing participants. Prior to the gathering, I placed a notice on the Melungeon Web site announcing that while at the conference, I would be seeking to interview individuals to discuss their Internet usage. I also relied on a snowball effect resulting from recommendations of friends and neighbors of those initially interviewed. This required trips to Sneedville, Tennessee and Wise, Virginia (areas with a large intact community of Melungeons) for further interviews.

In May 2000, I attended Third Union in Wise, Virginia, and continued to collect oral histories.

In all, eighty-two respondents were interviewed ranging from the age of eighteen to 103.

It's for the Younger Generation

As stated previously, while conducting earlier oral history interviews on electronic media usage in rural Appalachia, I found that few of the elderly respondents who recalled the inception of radio and television were Internet users. In fact, for some, the mere mention of the Internet brought suspicious looks. Several felt they were too old to learn about something they viewed as "not very personal" or "too technical." "You hear so much bad about it," Margaret Tabler said of the Internet, "I don't want one. Kids are abusing it."[7]

Even respondents in their early fifties were resistant. Virginia Miller argued:

> It's for the younger generation. For our generation, I think this newfound stuff is just too far beyond us. I think we're really scared of it, just like the older generation was scared when telephones come out. They were scared to use the telephone right at first, because I know my dad would very seldom touch the telephone if it would ring. You know, he'd have one of us answer it.[8]

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[6] Wilson interviw.

[7] Interview with Margaret Tabler, 11 May 1998.

[8] Interview with Virginia Miller, 19 June 1998.

When asked if anyone felt "scared" of other emerging electronic media such as radio or television, Marian Dees replied: "No, because I was young. I was ready for anything."[9] Henry Shaffer reflected:

> Well with radio...then we was kids, and we didn't think of anything ahead. Now this Internet is sort of scary because there is so much that's going on you just wonder — everybody knows your business. And you transmit, well, all over the world, and well, it's sort of scary. It's something that we don't know anything about and afraid to find out, I guess.[10]

Genealogy on the Web

It is important to note that many of the respondents I interviewed became involved in the Internet because of their interest in genealogy. As they examined their possible Melungeon roots, many went to the Internet for further research. Today the Internet is used by tens of thousands of people doing genealogical research. Major genealogy Web sites, like cyndislist.com, claim over 8,800 subscribers to its listserv, more than 70,000 visitors to the Web site each day, and more than 2,000,000 visitors each month (see also rootsweb.com, ancestry.com, Lamb 2000, and Crowe 2000).

Tracking genealogical information on her grandmother, Nancy Sparks Morrison spoke of getting on the Internet.

> I got a computer [in 1997] and started putting my genealogy into it. And I got on the Internet, and I put a note on one of the [genealogy] message boards saying I'm looking for this Indian grandmother, her name is Mary Collins. And I got a reply from a girl who lived in California and she said your Collins is in the area of the Melungeons, in the area where the Melungeons were. And I wrote her back and said, "Who the heck are Melungeons?" So she gave me a little brief thing, I went to the library and I found Brent [Kennedy]'s book and I sat down and read the book and it just clicked. I knew immediately that this was where this family belonged, was in this character. So, I began doing more research. I have about seven lines that I think are Melungeon connected....I don't think I would have found it without the Internet.[11]

Barbara Langdon tells a similar story of finding an identity on the Net:

> Well, when I first started doing research, the first thing I did was get on the Internet. There are several genealogy sites [where] you can post your names you are looking for and dates and regions and all that sort of thing, and I had posted information on my grandfather's family and within just a couple weeks I had contacts from distant cousins....A cousin I've never met told me this family story about how we were Melungeon, and the way he told his story, and the way that his family reacted to being Melungeon was very, very similar to my own experience with being told that we were Indian and the sort of barrier there about, you know.[12]

Many respondents with Melungeon links spoke of their *families'* acceptance of Native American ancestry while avoiding any mention of African or Melungeon heritage. However, most respondents at the Melungeon Heritage Association gatherings appeared ready to embrace this new identity.

Having never before heard the word Melungeon prior to getting on the Internet, Nancy[13] admits,

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[9] Interview with Marian Dees, 30 June 1998.

[10] Interview with Henry Shaffer, 17 June 1998.

[11] Interview with Nancy Sparks Morrison, 26 June 1999.

[12] Interview with Barbara Langdon, 26 June 1999.

[13] Given that I was on a first name basis with most of the people I interviewed, after using a respondent's full name the first time I refer to them, I will use only their given name on subsequent reference or citation.

> It's interesting because I never really felt that I belonged. I've always been kind of a private person....I never felt really comfortable in this group or that group or the other group. It was just not — and when I found the Melungeons and the first time I went to Wise, Virginia, [where First Union was held] I felt like I was coming home. It amazed me, the emotional feeling that I got.[14]

Common, Community, and Communication

In *Imagined Communities,* Anderson (1983) examined how a community could be imagined around shared cultural practices. In addition, Deutsch and Foltz (1966) contested the notion of nation as a geographically-based construction. To a certain extent, the Melungeons have been both culturally constructed and self-defined. Their use of the Internet has allowed the community to reach out beyond its geographical borders to form an electronic virtual community.

However, some question the motives of those claiming identity with the group. Speaking of participants on the Melungeon listserv, Madonna Cook warns, "And some of them, are wannabes. They wish they could find something and they don't, but they're still so enthralled by the 'What if? I could be!' they religiously follow the e-mails looking for a specific new surname that might connect them to the Melungeons."[15] Today, it seems chic to be the "other" in the United States. Groups that were historically marginalized and persecuted, as was apparently the case within the Melungeon community, now proudly announce their identity.

As respondents found that they might be of Melungeon heritage, many began to use the Internet to further research their identity. As Barbara Langdon said: "I think right now my question that I am trying to answer is, how do we define Melungeon? And, in some ways it's, you know, it is a self-identifying, uh, let's see, how do I want to say that? Uh, in a lot of ways, people that are Melungeon are self-identified."[16] Fitzgerald (1991, 202) tells us: "By defining itself, ethnically or otherwise, a group escapes classification by others."

Some respondents, like Madonna, were already aware of their Melungeon identity and used the Web sites and Melungeon listserv to research their legacy. "I already knew of the Melungeon connection for my family when I went on-line so I started looking for other people who were researching these same lines to see if they had something that I didn't have. [I use] the Melungeon list, which has automatic e-mails coming to you, where they have a lot of discussion about the Melungeons. I was getting like 300 e-mails a day off that one list."[17]

Being unmonitored, members of the Melungeon listserv, as Madonna stated, could receive up to 300 postings per day. To those tracing their lineage, the number of postings could be overwhelming. Barbara spoke of trying to keep up.

> Just to keep up with what's happening with the Melungeon research, you know, at first, I was using the Internet, oh gosh, I was on there hours, you know, listening to everybody tell their stories. There are a lot of stories on that listserv. People telling their stories about, you know, why they think they are Melungeon or why they got interested in the Melungeons because of, you know, some story in the family, or they always knew, or they have a history of Black Dutch.[18]

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[14] Morrison interview.

[15] Interview with Madonna Cook, 28 June 1999.

[16] Langdon interview.

[17] Cook interview.

[18] Langdon interview. Black Dutch was sometimes used euphemistically in place of Melungeon.

Often, the same individual would post ten to twenty messages within a twenty-four hour period and the content seemed to become less important than the ritual of posting messages. As Barbara saw it:

> I don't get on the listserv as much anymore because [it is] simply a matter of not everything that is posted counts. Everything that is posted to the listserv comes to you. Nobody reads it, and selects certain [themes] you know, everything comes and sometimes it is more than I can handle. For a while I made a policy that if it was in, if it was something I wanted to read, I read it, otherwise I threw everything away.[19]

At times, the information conveyed via the listserv was merely chitchat amongst the participants. As a result, it did not necessarily appear to "describe the world but portray[ed] an arena of dramatic forces and action" (Carey, 1989, 21). To a certain extent, the multiple postings of messages on the listserv appeared to be a ritualistic form of communication.

Carey's notion of communication as ritual may also be applied to the use of electronic media in Appalachia, especially when viewing Internet usage within the Melungeon community. Given that some Melungeons migrated to regions where their heritage was not suspect or simply went in search of job opportunities in larger cities, there has been a resurgence in the Melungeon community as many have begun to reach out to embrace their diversity, largely via the Internet. As they began to reach out to one another in hopes of forming community via electronic communications technology, the concept of communication as ritual comes to light. Carey (1989) described a ritual view of communication as being directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs....The archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality....Under a ritual view, then, news is not information but drama (18-21).

Cleland Thorpe spoke of making a connection with others (from as far away as California) he had met on the listserv. "I talked to people in California and I then talked to people, by e-mail, in Arkansas and Tennessee, up in Ohio and it was just, you know, it's really weird how we all have so much in common, and it really had to come from our heritage. I mean, it passed on, it had to be."[20] It is important to note that even though many respondents spoke of skimming the Melungeon listserv, most pursued contact with others in the group by e-mail rather than communicating via the listserv.

In joining the Melungeon listserv, I was surprised to receive over 100 messages a day, most of which were more entertaining than informative. Often, the same individual would post ten to twenty messages. This could be viewed as the ritual of connecting to others within the group. Here, the tie between the words common, community, and communication, as Dewey (1916) saw them, is revealed within the ritual view of communication. Much of the information conveyed via the listserv did not describe the world but portrayed an arena of dramatic forces and action (see Carey, 1989).

In *The Roots of Modern Media Analysis,* Carey (1997) addresses electricity's arrival in the United States as classless, if not socialist. Similarly, he described the birth of the telegraph as promising the distribution of information everywhere, "simultaneously reducing the economic advantage of the city and bringing the more varied urban culture out to the countryside" (45).[21] Today, the egalitarian dreams of the Internet hold similar promise.

Habermas (1989) views democracy as representing a social space wherein members of the society can rationally debate issues. The Habermasian view of the public sphere was inspired by the literary move-

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Interview with Cleland Thorpe, 26 June 1999.

[21] One should note, however, that telegraph routes in the United States usually followed railroad lines. Referring back to Smythe (1973), decisions for rail routes where largely based on economic rather than egalitarian forces.

ment and revealed itself in salons and coffeehouses where the average citizen could discuss socio-political issues. Although the bourgeois public sphere was marked by gender and class exclusion, Habermas's ideal public sphere was egalitarian in principle. In looking at Internet usage in Appalachia within the concept of the public sphere, one might look at the Melungeon listserv where issues of gender, age, and race need not necessarily impact the topic being discussed (if the writer chooses not to reveal his or her physical identity). Although most chat rooms offer little more than questions of where the other person is from and how old he or she is, newsgroups and listservs offer any subscriber a chance to express his or her ideas without prejudice from anything other than what is written. However, a person with a lower educational level might be betrayed by improper use of spelling and grammar. As a result, this person might be taken less seriously in virtual groups. Again, technology, such as automatic grammar and spell checking software, can level the playing field, leading to a more egalitarian and accessible electronic public sphere.

Coming Together

As some interviewees spoke of meeting others in cyberspace, many mentioned how nice it was to make human contact with people with whom they had created an electronic community. "It was more interesting Saturday up at Berea [at the genealogical workshop] when I could look people in the eye and hear them talk," recalled Claude Collins. "I was standing there Saturday in one of these meetings and this lady come runnin' up and she threw her arms around my neck and she said 'Oh, I'm so glad to see what you look like,' 'cause she had e-mailed me dozens and dozens and dozens of times."[22]

The bonds made in cyberspace seemed to create a familiar bond similar to that of a real family which was reinforced when respondents met at the Unions. As Nancy put it, "It amazed me, the emotional feeling that I got. It was just like we were coming to a family reunion."[23] Barbara concurred:

> It was sort of strange coming to Wise the first time and not having met these people, but having created a community, an electronic community, I'd had experiences before with having a community and bringing that community together through electronic media, through the Internet. And so I was sort of nervous about what was going to happen since all of us had met on the Internet and had not met each other yet, because people that I didn't even know were paying attention to what I was saying, you know. "Oh Barb, I've been listening, you know I've been reading what you've been saying on the Internet and I'm so happy to meet you and what do you think about...." You know, it was strange in a very pleasant sort of way, but, it, I didn't know what to expect, I was a little apprehensive and I wondered if I was nuts and what am I doing going to meet all of these people from the Internet. Yeah.[24]

The phrase, "What am I doing going to meet all of these people from the Internet," suggests that the Internet is an actual place in space rather than an electronic medium. Addressing the metaphor of a digital world, Sproull and Faraj (1996, 143) tell us, "When e-mail is used for group conversations, the network takes on the characteristics of place — like the office coffee pot or the local watering hole." The bonds made in cyberspace by most respondents I spoke to appeared to last. When speaking of people she has met on the Internet, Barbara admits, "I keep checking the [Melungeon] Web pages to see what's going on and I keep in contact with, there's key people, there's some people that I have long-lasting relationships with now through the Internet that I stay in touch with."[25] Turkle (1996, 3) states that "virtual

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[22] Interview with Claude Collins, 28 June 1999.

[23] Morrison interview.

[24] Langdon interview.

[25] Ibid.

experience may be so compelling that we believe that within it we've achieved more than we have." However, a large number of respondents took the cyber-friendship experience to the next level by actually meeting one another at the Unions.

In addition to e-mail and the Melungeon listserv, Melungeon Web sites also proved important in getting people interested in the Internet and bringing them together. As Connie Mullins Clark recalled:

> About six months after I got my computer [in 1997], this article in the paper was explaining about a picnic about Melungeon heritage. People could send in, over the Internet, they could fill out the form, send it in, and you could be part of the picnic. So, I did that. I went directly to the Web, you know, hooked on the Web site, went in there, filled out my application, printed it off and sent it. So, I have been, since that time, I have worked directly with the Internet, helping with Web pages and working on research with Melungeons....There's different Web sites now that you can go to and find the Melungeon information, but that's how I first got started was with Melungeon. I had it [a computer], but to really get involved in the Internet itself was with the Melungeon connection. [26]

Respondents often spoke of going to these sites when researching their Melungeon heritage. "I don't think I would have found out as much information so quickly," recalls Barbara. "I probably would have given up because when I went to your traditional means of research which was the library, I did a search on the various different databases that are available in your university library and searched the word Melungeon and came up with nothing except, the card catalog in that particular library had Brent Kennedy's book." [27]

It appeared that for some respondents, interest in Melungeon culture was an initial catalyst in early Internet usage. In addition, it brought information about the Melungeon community to those not likely to find it elsewhere. As Tammy Mullins saw it, "I feel like the Internet has really opened up the world to everyone. And also, it's really opened up the world for Melungeon people because, basically, without the Internet and there are very few books that are written, I mean, where would you be? You wouldn't know where to start so actually, the Internet really opened up a big space for me to be able to do research." [28]

The Internet as Electronic Front Porch

Writing about technology's ability to bring strangers together, Johnson (1997) compared the computer to the cotton gin, which caused millions of workers at the end of the eighteenth century to crowd together in factory towns. Of course, Luddites were quick to react to the drudgery and deskilling brought about by this new labor-saving textile machinery by smashing the gins. Neo-Luddites might have similar feelings towards the computer and the Internet. Even if most people are not so threatened by the computer as to feel a need to toss it out the window, for some there is still an enigmatic quality to the computer. On a recent trip on U.S. Airways, both outgoing and incoming flights were delayed by over an hour because of improper luggage distribution in the cargo bay. Each time this happened, the pilot readily blamed the computer for causing the improper distribution, as if it were the computer and not the luggage handlers that overloaded the cargo bay. "Please bear with us," pleaded the pilot, "as we try to get the bugs out of our new computer system." It appeared that the pilot was demonizing the computer.

Similarly, as expressed by some elderly respondents above, the rapid expansion of the Internet appeared to produce an undercurrent of frustration. This may be in response to people's discomfort with new tech-

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[26] Interview with Connie Mullins Clark, 26 June 1999.

[27] Langdon interview.

[28] Interview with Tammy Mullins, 26 June 1999.

nology versus personal human interaction. However, as with radio and television's arrival into rural Appalachia, the Internet appeared to create interaction within the community. In addition to the Melungeon cyber-communities, (which resulted in face-to-face re-Unions), some respondents spoke of how using the Net, even at home alone, allowed one to interact with others in chat rooms. Some compared their experiences on the Net with "the good ol' days," when one sat on the front porch and made small talk with the occasional passerby. This is what might be called, "the Internet as electronic front porch." Bob Cole explains his point of view:

I think that between TV and air conditioning, people retreat to their homes and tend to isolate themselves inside of the house whereas radio brought you to the porch in the summertime, and the neighbors walked along the street and then the neighbors would stop and listen to the radio and then they'd discuss the news or listen to the programs. So there was a lot of interaction of people and everybody knew everything that was going on in the neighborhood. The Internet, I think, is a technological innovation that tends maybe to counteract the seclusion that was caused by the air conditioning. Well, you start talking to people again. Start communicating with people. You're able to meet people. It's kind of like sittin' on the porch and the neighbors walking up and down the street. You know, they come in, they get in contact. Well, you sit in your house but you get out on the Internet and it's like a stream of people walking by. You can reach out and interrelate with them like you used to when you sat on the front porch and the neighbors walked up and down the street.[29]

A Digital Divide

One might hope that the Internet as electronic front porch could lead to a more egalitarian and accessible electronic public sphere. However, the issue of the "digital divide" remains especially noticeable within rural Appalachia (along with other rural areas of the country). Nonetheless, as with other obstacles, respondents without local Internet access found ways of connecting, though, often at a premium. "I have the Internet now," says Bennie Lawson. "In the beginning, the only way I could get the Internet was to pay $20 for unlimited access to a [larger city] phone line and then I had to pay $25 for an Internet provider service, so it was $45 a month to get Internet access."[30] Madonna told an Internet access story that recalled telephone party lines[31] of the 1930s, '40s and '50s.

> It's a toll call and I knew better than to get on the Internet and there'd be a $6 an hour charge — the way we wanted to research, it takes a long time sometimes to find just what you're looking for. There was access to — there was a lady who had set it up as a non-profit thing where you could share an Internet access line but ten or twelve people had to share. I checked into that but I really didn't want to do that because I figured if we got on there and researched we'd probably take up too much time.[32]

In addition, the up-front cost of getting on-line (hardware, software and access expenses) was prohibitive for some with fixed or lower incomes. As Marian put it, "It may be cheaper to send an e-mail but the initial cost wasn't cheap. Sooner or later you're gonna spend your money on something."[33]

Just as access to electricity seemed to have determined how people listened to early radio, limited local Internet access in rural Appalachia inhibited some respondents' ability to get on the Net. However, as

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[29] Interview with Bob Cole, 11 May 1998.

[30] Interview with Bennie Lawson, 20 May 1998.

[31] Interestingly, the telephone party-line provided a social outlet similar to some Internet chat lines (see Curtis 1996).

[32] Cook interview.

[33] Marian Dees interview.

with other electronic media, many respondents I spoke with were eager to embrace the World Wide Web.

The rapid expansion of the Internet seems to suggest that a new era of global communications has been realized. Clyde Pinney, however, seemed to put things in perspective as he compared radio's inception to that of the Internet's arrival.

> The world of radio opened up a lot more for me than the Internet. I would assume it may not later on as I get into it more. Well, radio was the forerunner of all worldwide communications, and this is just a continuation of what was started even back in the '30s. I see this just as an advancement of radio. I got the computer because it was the right thing to do. I guess it's something that should be done, so we went that way. [34]

When Clyde reminisced about the arrival of electronic media technology in rural Appalachia, his comment, "The world of radio opened up a lot more for me than the Internet," is quite telling. Respondents each had the benefit of decades of hindsight as they told their stories of how radio and television's arrival affected their lives. However, Clyde continued his comment on the Internet with, "I would assume it may not later on as I get into it more." With the Internet being a relatively new technology, which seems to be evolving almost on a daily basis, it appears to be far more difficult to accurately gauge its immediate impact on society.

Conclusion

In looking back to KDKA's[35] first radio broadcast on November 9, 1920, we must recognize that it has been more than eighty years since that first historic broadcast. Given today's rapid growth of electronic media technology, it will be interesting to see how the Internet has evolved when broadcast radio celebrates its centennial.

The Internet has allowed respondents to connect to one another and to the world at large. It has also allowed the Melungeon population to establish themselves as being larger than they had originally seen themselves and perhaps defined less as a geographic community than as an electronic community. In addition, the Internet appeared to precipitate interaction within the community both in cyberspace and at annual re-Unions.

Moreover, the Internet can be used as a powerful tool to unify even the most isolated groups. Its potential as a public forum is especially powerful within a region where getting to a town meeting could require traversing mountainous terrain or traveling great distances, as is the case in much of Appalachia.

Lastly, it is important to note that in looking back at the arrival of other electronic media into this rural area, (such as radio and television) respondents have the benefit of decades of hindsight. However, with the Internet being a relatively new technology, which seems to be evolving almost on a daily basis, it appears to be far more difficult to accurately gauge its immediate impact on society. It is in this direction that I see the need for future research. With the passing of time, respondents may be able to better reflect on how the Internet has affected their lives.

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[34] Interview with Clyde Pinney, 25 June 1998.

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Biography

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