

The Impact of Media Representation on Government Investment in Appalachia

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Life is old there, older than the trees

Younger than the mountains, growin' like a breeze

- John Denver, Take Me Home, Country Roads (1971)

The Appalachian Region of the United States (Appalachia) spans from New York to Mississippi across thirteen states (About the Appalachian Region, n.d.). While the isolation of Appalachia has evolved, following the American Civil War, the isolation of the region economically and socially became evident, at least as perceived by outsiders (Wilhelm & Brown, 1977). Due to this natural seclusion, much of the rest of the United States' (and to a greater extent, the world's) perception of Appalachia and Appalachians has been shaped by the media's portrayal of the region and the people who call it home. These portrayals have introduced stereotypes of Appalachia, transforming Appalachians into one homogenous group rather than recognizing the distinct different communities that make up the region. As demographic patterns shifted toward increased urbanization across the United States, the economic and social landscape of Appalachia faced distinct challenges, leading President Lyndon B. Johnson to introduce the "War on Poverty" in 1964, targeting Appalachia (Wilkerson, 2020). Despite the War on Poverty initiative, the region has struggled to receive economic investment, driving Appalachia further into isolation and poverty. Multiple disciplines have studied how the media representation of Appalachia has impacted society's view on the region. Appalachian Studies has found that outsider interpretations of Appalachia have caused the perpetuation of inaccurate stereotypes, including portraying the region as "folksy" or full of "hillbillies" (Wilhelm & Brown, 1977, p. 86). Media studies researchers have found that the media tends to focus on sensationalism and placing blame on individuals rather than the government or other entities

(Iyengar, 1996, p. 59). Finally, political scientists have found that the media continues to paint Appalachia as a traditional way of life, reinforcing nostalgia rather than promoting new, modern opportunities for the region (Kurlinkus & Kurlinkus, 2018, p. 88). The lackluster media representation of Appalachia begs the question: How has the media's portrayal of Appalachia impacted government investment in Appalachia since 1960?

While Appalachian studies is itself an interdisciplinary field, it draws on many different disciplines to address the complex problems the region faces. The problem of examining how the media's portrayal of Appalachia has impacted government investment in the region since 1960 is one of these complex issues, as it necessitates the insights of multiple disciplines. Its complexity stems from the fact that no singular discipline can construct the necessary historical context, conduct contextual analysis on media resources, and understand how these things have come together to impact the present-day economic and political standing of Appalachia. Studying the impacts of the public perception of Appalachia is important because it demonstrates how the media can be used to shape the narrative of a place. Developing an understanding of the role the media plays in influencing government investment in Appalachia can be further applied in developing the idea of the media as the fourth branch of the government. Results can also be used to drive research in other under-invested regions of the United States. The timing of this research is also important, as Vice President JD Vance, who has written about his relationship with Appalachia, and modern-day politics as a whole, have sought to influence the public's perception of Appalachia further (Moorwood, 2024). This renewed interest in Appalachia presents the opportunity to identify how the media has impacted government actions in the region.

In investigating Appalachian media coverage in the relevant disciplines, Appalachian studies, media studies, and political science, a wide variety of theories are utilized. Appalachian studies tends to focus more on the historical context of the development of the region, and uses Gerbner's cultivation theory to suggest that the media has chosen to portray Appalachia as rural and backwards to shape viewer's ideas of the region (Comer, 2006). Similarly, media studies relied heavily on framing theory, especially episodic and thematic framing, in explaining how the media chooses to portray issues as individual issues versus overarching themes of the region (Iyengar, 1996). In contrast, political science focused, of course, on the relationship between politicians and Appalachia, where politicians have continuously maintained the idea that Appalachia is an impoverished region in need of government support (Kurlinkus & Kurlinkus, 2018). While this is accurate, the exact nature of government support has often fallen short of the dedicated change in economic activity needed in the region, and the goals stated by the Appalachian Region Commission for 2022-2026 remain similar to those from the past 65 years (*Appalachia Envisioned: ARC's 2022-2026 Strategic Plan*, n.d.).

President John F. Kennedy (and to a lesser extent his brother, then-Senator Robert F. Kennedy), campaigned on addressing the abject poverty in Appalachia in 1960. During his presidency, Kennedy focused on developing community-lead programs within Appalachia to help provide locally-grown support and economic stimulus (Schmitt, 2009, p. 378). In 1964, the War on Poverty, a series of social programs initiated by President Lyndon B. Johnson to help address poverty in the United States. That same year, CBS presented a documentary, entitled "Christmas in Appalachia," highlighting the impoverished living conditions in Appalachia (*CBS News Special "Christmas in Appalachia,"* 1964). The program discusses how economic status has changed over the years in the region, as well as the government subsidies given to residents,

in the way of hot school lunches and food scraps from other regions of the country. The documentary paints a grim picture of Appalachia, highlighting the impacts of automation and unemployment on the region.

Despite the overarching theme of extreme poverty in Appalachia, a socio-economic review conducted by Andrew Isserman suggests that the main problem lies in how the region is presented. While Appalachia is typically regarded as an overwhelmingly rural region of the United States, in 1969 59 percent of Appalachians lived within metropolitan areas, however, even in 1994 these metro areas were still smaller than other non-Appalachian metro areas (Isserman, 1996, p. 4). Isserman claims that only central Appalachia matches the stereotypes presented in the media, while the larger metro areas have almost reached income parity (93 percent, standardized by urbanization) with the rest of the country (p. 6). Appalachia's reputation as an impoverished, rural area is reinforced by political scientists, including Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus, who found that the media's portrayal of Appalachian's focus on portraying them as "backward" to "dismiss that group's concerns and/or sell them something new" (p. 88). Likewise, media analysts found that news articles written outside of Appalachia were significantly more likely to negatively depict the region than local newspapers, suggesting a biased representation of the region (Comer, 2006, p. 15).

At first glance, it may appear that each of the primary disciplines involved in researching this problem: Appalachian studies, media studies, and political science, all naturally come to the conclusion that the media has chosen to continue to depict Appalachia as an impoverished, stuck-in-the-past region, despite increased economic growth in the region. Once individual sources from these disciplines are thoroughly reviewed, however, small but significant conflicts in their research styles appear, which must be addressed and taken into account in investigating

this issue. The primary conflict that emerged while reviewing literature on the media's representation of Appalachia and its impact on government investment in the region is between voices within Appalachia and those from outside the region. Researchers who are not innately familiar with Appalachia tend to focus more on outside narratives and neglect the differences that exist between different areas in the region (Wilhelm & Brown, 1977, p. 86). Both researchers from within and outside of Appalachia recognize that there is a difference between how the media represents the area, but they seem to disagree on the scope of the disparity. Both of these viewpoints are accurate, there is simply more nuance presented in research done by those more familiar with Appalachia. In addition, some studies chose to analyze certain media formats, such as focusing solely on television news or newspaper articles from "major" newspapers (Comer, 2006; So, 2014). These restrict the overall impact of the results of their research, as they neglect to consider the different impacts and reach of different media formats. To reconcile these differences, it is important to frame the results in the context of inadvertent biases, which in the end resulted in a fuller understanding of the representation of Appalachia in the media and how different media sources present information differently. Once you take into account the different perspectives on Appalachia by those familiar and unfamiliar with the region, and account for those differences in analyzing research, the overall theme is clear. Across all three disciplines, the overwhelming conclusion is that the media has continued to perpetuate stereotypes about the Appalachian region over the past 65 years, causing government opinion to remain focused on remedying the same issues without successfully helping the region grow independently of government subsidies.

Despite the increasing income parity and declining poverty rates occurring in much of Appalachia, the media continues to perpetuate the region as seen in NPR's "A View from

Appalachia,” which used phrases like “deeply religious and conservative” and “economically deprived” to describe the region (Carey et al., 2016, p. 292). This reluctance by the media to acknowledge the growth in Appalachia has led to problems for the region, as seen last year (2024) in the Hurricane Helene response, which was largely focused on perpetuating stereotypes of the region instead of focusing on recovery efforts (Knoepp, 2024). This misrepresentation of the region has resulted in manipulating the public - and in turn, government - opinion of Appalachia, causing it to be stuck on the negative past of the region rather than its growth today.

After developing common ground between Appalachian studies, media studies, and political science, a clear integration of the disciplines appears where a cyclical relationship between media representation and government investment in Appalachia perpetuates. From media studies, framing theory explains how the media’s episodic coverage of poverty in Appalachia has reinforced stereotypes about the region by focusing on sensationalist narratives (Iyengar, 1996, p. 59; *CBS News Special “Christmas in Appalachia,”* 1964). From Appalachian studies, cultivation theory supports the idea that these media portrayals have shaped public perceptions of Appalachia over time by continually reinforcing stereotypes. Finally, political science research demonstrates how the impacts of cultivation theory and framing techniques have influenced policy decisions. This cycle, whereby the media’s portrayal of Appalachia shapes public perception, which in turn influences political priorities, has resulted in government programs addressing the symptoms of poverty in Appalachia rather than the root issues.

Further testing of the ideas presented above would involve collecting information from members of the media and politicians, either directly through surveys or indirectly through content analysis of previous writings and statements. This information would include their own relationship with Appalachia and how they receive information about the region. By determining

how the media and politicians have developed their understanding of Appalachia, further research can determine whether the cyclical relationship of media representation and government policy exists, or if there are other factors present that were neglected in this research.

In conclusion, it is clear that government opinion of Appalachia has been distorted by media representation over the past 65 years. From an Appalachian studies perspective, the media has chosen to cultivate specific sensationalist stories, which draw attention to the issues plaguing the region and reinforces stereotypes, but does nothing to bring awareness to the causes of these issues. Additionally, from a media studies perspective, the episodic framing of these issues as being inflicted on individuals by themselves rather than as a product of their circumstances further distorts the role that the government plays in addressing these issues. Finally, political scientists confirm that these media portrayals have influenced public opinion, thereby shaping government policy and preventing it from advancing to help the region move forward, leaving Appalachia stuck in the past.

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