



Independence, Pragmatism, and the Flow of Money: Findings from Ethnography in Central Appalachia

By the Topos Partnership

for Resource Media, with support from the blue moon fund

June 2015

INTRODUCTION

Project Objectives

The objective of the research is to provide insights that will help advocates in Appalachia's economic transition away from coal and towards a more diversified and sustainable economy.

Specific research questions include:

- *How do Appalachian people see their role in a region where coal loses its central place?*
- *How do they understand diversification and the transition from a coal-centered economy?*
- *What roles do pride, tradition and Appalachian stereotyping play?*
- *How does the rhetoric about "the war on coal," and a coal identity affect Appalachians' openness to alternatives to coal?*
- *To what extent are people willing or eager to play an active role; to what extent do they feel they are passive or powerless?*
- *What can be done from the inside of the region; what has to come from outside? What role can advocates play?*

In this research, Topos has worked to map aspects of the cultural and cognitive terrain in Appalachia in order to identify opportunities for compelling engagement and to give insights into potential pitfalls and missteps that advocates need to avoid.

Research Approach

Developed over a decade of close collaboration between its three principals – a cognitive linguist, a public opinion strategist, and a cultural anthropologist – Topos’s approach is designed to give communicators a deeper picture of the issue dynamics they are confronting, and of the fundamentally different alternatives available to them, as well as to deliver communications tools with a proven capacity to shift perspectives in more constructive directions.

For this project, research was based on ethnography conducted by two anthropologists in nine central Appalachian counties of Kentucky and West Virginia.

Ethnography

The defining strength of the anthropological approach is to provide a deeper view into people's *lived experience* of the world. The primary tool of anthropology is ethnography – based on engaging with people where they live, work and play, and on their own terms rather than on terms imposed by the researcher. One of the key goals of these semi-structured conversations is to encourage subjects to think aloud about the issue, rather than reproducing opinions they have stated or heard before.

In practice, in the counties visited, this entailed a certain amount of observation, but mostly engaging people in impromptu conversations. To be considered useful, interactions took at least 5 but no more than 40 minutes, depending on how much time and willingness a given subject had to delve into the topics. The conversations were often one on one, but also included three or four way exchanges.

One of the keys to the ethnographic method is to allow patterns to emerge from natural interactions as much as possible. In the brand of ethnographic research that Topos undertakes, we decide ahead of time what kinds of topics we would like to cover – what terrain we want to be on, so to speak. We design questions and comments that are structured enough to put us into that terrain, but loose enough to elicit unexpected responses and rejoinders. Researchers are professional anthropologists trained and experienced in the techniques needed to maintain and direct these kinds of semi-structured conversations.

Between February and April 2015, ethnography was undertaken in 5 counties in eastern Kentucky (Knox, Clay, Leslie, Pike, and Letcher) and 4 counties in southern West Virginia (Logan, Mingo, Raleigh, McDowell). About 200 significant conversations were recorded, 60 of which were videotaped for later close analysis.

Findings

When people in Appalachia think about the kinds of initiatives and programs that leaders, advocates and others put forth, they process that information through three related and complementary frameworks:

- The core, motivating value of Independence Through Work
- A rich, explanatory model of economics focused on sources and circulation of money – The Money Flow model
- A cultural orientation of Pragmatism, balancing open-mindedness with hard-nosed skepticism

Whether or not a given policy or idea will appeal or make sense to people depends on how it sits with this cognitive and cultural landscape.

Independence Through Work is a guiding value

Traditions of independence and self-reliance run deep in central Appalachia. And as people process information about transition and think about their expectations for themselves and for others, they evaluate it with reference to this core value.

It's all about hard work . . . I think anything worth having in life takes a lot of hard work. (Pike county man, 40s)

I was real young, and I went to Florida and worked down there for a while. They said, where are you from, and I told them where we was from, [and I was] hired right there on the spot because people in eastern Kentucky, they work harder, it seems like. They know what hard work is. (Mingo county man, 40s)

Independence in the Little Picture view

Independence, personal virtue and individual success are deeply interwoven with ideas of work and providing for family. Independence is first and foremost founded on the idea of economic independence – in particular economic independence that comes about from hard work.

We were poor but we were very proud - we believed in education, hard work, and nothing free. We got nothing free when we were growing up - nobody starved, nobody was homeless - everybody was poor but we all helped each other. (Knox county woman, 70s)

Providing for family

Independence does not mean individual liberation or freedom from attachments. Instead it means having the means to establish oneself as a full-standing adult who is economically and socially secure, and able to establish a family, to set up children (if one has them) for a better life, to help out in family networks, to be a constructive and contributing member of the community, and so on.

Most important is the ability to be a *breadwinner* and the capacity for young people to make a life for themselves and establish families of their own.

Around here, the people will work. They will take care of the family. (Mingo county man, 40s)

I remember my dad, he would work on Christmas Eve, he would work till 6, 7 o'clock on Christmas Eve just so we could have just a little bit more . . . He hauled wood chips for a living . . . and no matter what, he would do what it takes to provide for his family, and that's, I guess, what I see for myself. (Knox county man, 20s)

I want to be able to provide for my family, and not just provide but thrive, survive, move beyond that - have a life, vacations, and be able to give my kids things that they want, not just what they need. (Knox county woman, 30s)

Coal jobs once meant independence

The primary reason for people's affection for coal jobs is that they have represented a clear, well-trodden path to economic security and independence – not just for coal miners, but for others in the community as well.

Traditionally in Appalachia, there has never been a guarantee that hard work will result in anything but continuing poverty. Coal jobs, at least in their later versions, have meant that hard work was rewarded with the economic independence that people desire. It is rare to hear people complain about the deal they received from the coal companies. They are more likely to feel that a fair deal was struck, exchanging dangerous and even destructive work for the good wage that was provided.

ETHNOGRAPHIC SIDEBAR

5 of us are gathered around the counter of a store in rural Leslie county – the owner, her father and three customers. We're talking about the ups and downs of coal. I've noticed in these kinds of conversations that whenever people really get talking about the times that coal boomed, they never speak of the things they bought or the financial security. Instead, they'd relate how in those days you could quit at one mine and by the next morning you'd be hired at some other. It's the independence to work where you wanted that marked the best times.

The pay's great - a coal miner minimum would make about \$21 an hour and maximum would run as high as \$30-35. That's good money anywhere for a working man. Of course the dangers - you've got to take care of yourself, there are dangers in anything. I worked 34 years and I still have all my fingers and toes - it's all in how you take care of yourself. (Letcher county man, 60s)

The value of Independence does much to explain something that outsiders typically have a hard time understanding: Coal jobs are often dangerous and dirty and unpleasant, and yet people are glad to take them. They understand the downsides quite clearly and choose them *because it gives them economic Independence.*

Guys working in the mines were making \$18-25/hour - they had really good medical insurance, they could afford to have a nice home, a nice car, and then when all the mines were shut down, there was nothing - there's nothing here. Fast food restaurants, or unless you work at the hospital or a doctor's office, grocery store, there's nothing else here. There were mines here everywhere, and that was the biggest thing here. Without it there's nothing. (Letcher county woman, 50s)

I went from making near \$3,000 a week to Stop and Shop pay - so what does that tell you? (Laurel county man, 30s)

Coal jobs clearly have a masculine bias. In some ways they are like joining the army - dangerous but affirming, and freely chosen.

Entrepreneurship

Economic enterprise such as entrepreneurship fit well within the tradition of independence, and many Appalachians - women as well as men - speak of businesses they have undertaken or would like to undertake, and speak admiringly about others who have striven in these directions.

At the moment, it is lack of capital, and even more a sense that there is little money in the pockets of customers, that seems to give people pause, rather than any cultural obstacle to the idea of entrepreneurship.

[Could a person start up a business here or anything like that?] The economy is so bad, it's hard to get one started right now, I think . . . I've got friends right now that owns businesses, and they're going under. There's no customers, and I've had several of them that had to shut down over this . . . I've got a friend right now that's trying to put in a solar system business. He's had it going for six months, or a little longer. He sold two solar systems . . . So, you know, he's in the red. (Mingo county man, 40s)

My original idea was to be an orthodontist, and then once I sat down and thought about it . . . People around here can't afford braces . . . So let's say I

did open up an orthodontist business - who's going to come? Who can afford that? (Knox county woman, 20s)

I worked at [the gas station] for 13 years. As soon as there was layoffs you could see it from the business. It's not just a coal miner gets laid off. It's a whole family. (Leslie county woman, 30s)

Any change that seems destined to help people secure the kind of work that can set them and their family members up for a life of economic self-sufficiency is popular among Appalachians.

Independence in the Big Picture, a regional view

The core value of Independence seamlessly scales up to a regional perspective. Appalachians spent a good deal of time in our conversations thinking about whether the region has the money and the jobs to enable individuals and families to achieve the economic independence discussed above.

This provides another example of cultural miscommunication. It's easy for outsiders to see Appalachia as *dependent* on industries like coal. For many Appalachians, however, this gets the picture exactly backwards: Coal has traditionally been a source of regional as well as individual economic *independence*.

ETHNOGRAPHIC SIDEBAR

The fire chief is holding informal court with a few other men at the general store in Panther. In between bouts of local gossip we talk about the role that coal has played here in McDowell county. It was the mines that brought families to these hills, and when the mines closed most of those families went elsewhere, "chasing the dollar." A lot who departed were good people and a lot who stayed can't really make a go of it. Drugs and hopelessness and crime take their toll – which segues back to the local gossip . . .

The challenge for Appalachia is discovering what combination of solutions can help provide a pathway back to more of that independence.

Enabling people to stay

Coal jobs enabled families to stay and build lives in the region, and even if that is no longer the case for most, it remains the source of affection that people have for those well-paying jobs. Unless something changes, the loss of those jobs means that people across the region will leave.

As soon as I'm done with school I plan on leaving, just because I don't think there's much to offer around here, unless you go into coal mining, but obviously I'm not going to do that. (Pike county woman, 20s)

I wish they hadn't of closed those coal mines. All of my children, they're off in other states. My two sons got their papers to work underground, but there weren't any work. (Letcher county woman, 60s)

There is no guarantee for Appalachians that their region is going to give them the means to establish the economic independence they want. On the contrary, economic failure and departure is a familiar aspect of Appalachian life.

Everybody compares this to the way it was back in the '50's, that most people left here and went to Indiana and Michigan to get jobs at the steel factories to support the family and then when they retired they moved back home. And now the kids are faced with that same option - they're moving to Lexington, Knoxville, Kingsport - you have to leave the area because even a husband and wife just getting married, they both have to work, and if they're working at minimum wage jobs they still can't afford much because the economy's gone down but the prices have gone up, so they're just working harder to survive. (Letcher county woman, 50s)

Years ago when the coal got slow everybody went to Detroit to get work, and now so many people go South to try to find something, but things are getting tough everywhere else too. (Logan county man, 50s)

Any plan of economic development that might mean families can remain – without leaving and scattering – is going to be popular with Appalachians, if they see it as relevant to their particular family – and especially if it helps improve prospects in the region generally.

Eventually young kids will have to leave if there isn't anything here for them to work on . . . With no jobs, they can't stay. There's a saw mill or two around, but that doesn't employ that many people . . . They've got plenty of room back on T. road - they could have manufacturing jobs back there if they wanted to bring them in . . . Right now there is no life the way things are going down. (Mingo county man, 70s)

Education and self-improvement help the individual, but not necessarily the region

When people think about the jobs that they see today that are giving people economic independence, they think of being a teacher, working in the medical field, or even working for the state or county.

Although these are good for the individuals who manage to secure them – and thus they are welcome in a little picture sense, they seem irrelevant to the regional picture. People don't think of them as any kind of economic driver or as something that could be expanded or built upon.

ETHNOGRAPHIC SIDEBAR

In laeger's abandoned heart a line of cars is waiting to pick up school children. The bus can no longer navigate the storm-damaged road up one of the hollers. A genial old coal miner in a pickup truck is telling me how proud he is of his 14 year old grandbaby, who's smart and studious and going to be a nurse. But her future will have nothing whatever to do with McDowell county and its ghost towns.

In fact, if there are too few good jobs to sustain young people, then getting an education, instilling values like independence, responsibility and ambition result in them leaving Appalachia to seek success elsewhere.

Needless to say, the general idea of education creates ambivalence in the minds of many Appalachians, since they view it as a key to individual success, yet it also seems to lead to the exodus of the best and brightest.

People get education, but there are no jobs. (Letcher county woman, 60s)

You've got to get them educated to do something more. They say go into anything computer, technology, but then we don't have businesses or companies here that would hire. He has a son and a nephew who are computer whizzes, and they can't get jobs doing that. (Pike county woman, 50s)

Them with drive, leave. (Raleigh county man, 70s)

Other quality of life issues are secondary.

Although people do value things like restaurants, skate parks, movie theaters and so on, as well as having strong attachments to the mountains and natural world – these things don't matter if there are not well-paying jobs to keep young people and families in the area.

I wouldn't give this place for any place I've ever lived. Where you're raised you love it and you don't want to leave it. But if you've got a family to raise, you've got to go. (Mingo county man, 70s)

I love it here and have my family here, but for what I want to do, I don't think I'll be able to stay here. (Pike county woman, 20s)

Environmental concerns are secondary.

Most Appalachian people are attuned to the importance of environmental protection, and like most Americans they value the natural world around them. However, the environmental concerns do not trump economic concerns, and people generally see a necessary trade-off between environmental damage and economic activity – especially if the alternative seems to be departure or impoverishment for Appalachian families.

Everybody here loves [coal mining], but away from here people don't have such good views on it. And I see both views . . . It does hurt our mountains and it causes effects . . . but we kind of need it, too, so . . . unless they find a different way to get electricity, then I'm all for it. (Pike county woman, 20s)

You've stripped beautiful mountains, and I understand that - a lot of my family is coal miners - but at the same time, there's so many other different options that we can take instead of . . . just devastating [the] landscape. (Knox county man, 20s)

Nobody complained, nobody had any problems when they stripped a mountain in West Virginia, in Charleston, to make an airport. Nobody had any problem with that. Why is there a problem that they strip it to get coal out and then give that to something else, whether it's a golf course . . . [or] to put a big hotel . . . [or] an industry up there? (Mingo county woman, 40s)

When people think about developments in their particular town, county or the region as a whole, they have a laser-like focus on this question of whether the local economy is going to enable the economic independence that could induce people to stay – or whether the place is destined to empty out and become a “ghost town.”

In other words, the value of Independence has an existential dimension. It's not just about doing the right thing, but about whether Appalachia will continue to exist.

Independence Through Work is a value system under threat

It is important to keep in mind that the Independence value is not just about having the material necessities of life. A work ethic is a crucial ingredient to creating and sustaining that independence. At the moment, Appalachians see a two-pronged crisis. On the one hand is the economic decline and demographic exodus that accompanies the retreat of coal as an economic keystone. On the other hand is the cultural crisis of people losing the habit and the will to work – and a danger that the work ethic itself is in decline.

When you're not participating in your community, when you're not actively involved in making it a better place or you're not actively working to provide for your family, I think you lose hope. I've seen it in my family and in my friends, and it's a downward spiral. (Pike county man, 40s)

If you buy those shoes and you work for them it's better than having a dozen pair that you just go and somebody hands them to you. (Knox county woman, 70s)

Dependency on government aid especially violates this value.

Forms of help and aid that promote dependency among able-bodied people are seen as intensely destructive to individuals, families and the region. One of the

ETHNOGRAPHIC SIDEBAR

In rural Clay county, talking with 4 working guys on their lunch break at a roadside diner. R. was the ranter, S. the young, bearded conservative, M. the older voice of reason. After R. and S. went on an extended rant about the unfairness of their working themselves to an early grave to pay for handouts to the majority of layabouts, M. said seriously to R., “You are blessed. You may struggle – but would you want to be one of them people!?”

main threats to the work ethic is “the draw.” Welfare, disability, subsidized housing and health care all reward people who don’t work and exclude people who do.

I think you learn habits from your parents, so when your parents stay at home, they don’t work hard, and they draw from the government - which if you need it that’s fine, but I think here it’s used as a crutch which ironically they seem to hate - then they learn that, and they think I can do this the rest of my life, and the ones who do want to work hard, they have no support at home. (Knox county woman, 20s)

Dependence on government checks is tightly bound in people’s thinking with multi-generational, dysfunctional patterns of poverty, ignorance, lack of ambition and hillbilly stereotypes. The War on Poverty, FDR’s social programs, and contemporary SSDI are all held up as failed projects that have done more harm than good, because they promote dependency rather than independence through work.

It started when people started getting checks handed to them for nothing, that didn’t deserve it. Now you’ve got generations of families that are not educated, won’t work because they have never had to. (Pike county man, 40s)

[Welfare] served it’s purpose when FDR adopted this legislation in the Depression - it was meant for a stopgap that helped you until you got on your feet again, but somewhere we got confused as to its purpose . . . People just can’t live on welfare their whole lives. If you can work you need to work. (Raleigh county man, 50s)

The analogy and connection between economic dependency and dependency on drugs is particularly vivid in people's thinking. Being dependent on government handouts is a violation of a core value, which has a moral dimension, and in this sense, it has parallels with drug dependency. The fact that the two often go hand in hand makes perfect sense to people.

I don’t like so much dependence on welfare, lack of work ethic, and there’s not much drive to do anything more than just have a child - that’s considered a pretty good life if you just are in some kind of government housing and you’re getting food stamps . . . And I hate the drug problem - that’s probably the biggest thing here - so much with meth labs now, and heroin - rampant drug use. (Knox county woman, 40s)

Pride of work versus rejection of work are key ways Appalachians judge one another

The Independence through work value is not an optional value. It is one that Appalachians insist on as appropriate to being a proper adult member of society.

It is one of the most prominent ways that they distinguish between the people they approve of and the people they disapprove of.

I was raised to work, so I think it has a lot to do with the ethics of your family, too. I was raised to help people as much as you can, but you also help yourself . . . it's just personal responsibility, really. It's just a good moral background and being taught personal responsibility. (Logan county woman, 30s)

- It's better to go to work . . . Self-worth, self-esteem, not to mention you work, you build the work ethic - you can build up and move up - go to a different company or move up within the company.

- And you are actually being a productive member of society. To be a drag is like having a boat anchor or having somebody rowing the boat. Either you help row the boat or you're just dead weight. (Pike county couple, 50s)

A key figure in these conversations is the child or youth who explicitly rejects the need for an education – and ultimately rejects work and economic independence – because they intend to rely on public assistance. This young person shows up as a standard character in many variations, but is always incorporated into a lament about dysfunctional family traditions and generations on the draw.

If they didn't have the background in their family that encouraged them to be a part of their community and to contribute to the family. We've all seen it time and time again, and I know teachers who said there are students who told them the only thing I need to know is how to sign my name. You know, what do you say to that? (Pike county woman, 40s)

ETHNOGRAPHIC SIDEBAR

*Talking with a woman in Barbourville:
"My sister's a teacher, and she used to teach smaller kids, and it just blew her mind whenever she was like, 'So what do you want to do when you grow up?' 'I want to be an astronaut, I want to be a policeman,' and one little kid, I would say he was maybe seven, eight - he said, 'I want to draw.' And she was like, 'You want to draw, you want to be an artist?' He said, 'No, I want to draw a check' . . . She's actually had kids who, she'll say, 'You can retake that test - you can do better,' and he'll say, 'No, I'm not allowed,' because he'll be coached to not do well so that he continues to get some kind of learning disability benefit . . . so he's encouraged not to do well.*

People who are unemployed and themselves on public assistance are just as likely to voice the opinion that the real problem is people even further down the socio-economic ladder or those who see no value in work and bettering themselves.

Because I work myself to death, they only give me something like \$124 a month food stamps. That don't cut it . . . A girl that lives upstairs, just because she's got two kids and she's divorced, I think she gets something like \$900 a month, and that's ridiculous . . . it just doesn't seem like the people who really try really get enough. (Logan county man, 40s)

When people reject the value of work – either because of this kind of family tradition or because they’ve become discouraged in the weak economy – the prospects for the region seem bleak. The flip side is that Appalachians are keen to embrace the role that the work ethic and striving play in bettering oneself and the region.

I’m the first person in my family to go to college, so I feel like I’m already starting something with my family, because my family aren’t bad people, but they see that I’m becoming successful in college and I haven’t dealt with drugs or alcohol, so I’m not all high and mighty, but I’m a pretty positive example. (Pike county woman, 20s)

I’ve come from a family who does have issues with drugs and because I am a first generation college student I am showing my little brother you can break the cycle, you can be better, you need to be better, and you have to work hard to get where you need to be. (Pike county woman, 20s)

It’s a major problem when work doesn’t pay and doesn’t lead to independence

It is a source of intense frustration to Appalachians that the current economy seems set up to discourage people from working. As the good paying jobs associated with coal mining have gone away, more people find themselves commuting to low-wage jobs in retail and the service sector. The fact that much of the available work (such as clerking at Walmart or “flipping burgers”) often pays too little to establish independence is seen as demoralizing and damaging to those who want to work, but do not find an economic reward.

If you’re willing to work there’s plenty of work. ‘Course they won’t pay you nothing. (Floyd county man, 50s)

There need to be opportunities that they can see, like if all of a sudden if you could look out the door and see some job that you were interested in and that paid a lot of money, that would be better than your welfare, so you’d go do that job. (Knox county woman, 40s)

The idea that hard work doesn’t lead to independence, but instead to continued poverty, and that in dollar terms it makes more sense to resort to public assistance – is a source of anger and despair for Appalachians.

I put my own self through RN school, I paid every dime. I worked night shift - and I went to school – and I worked every day or went to school every day for two years. Every day . . . And now, here I am a single mom, I have to work two jobs . . . I don’t get government assistance to live in a trailer, so basically they’re really probably better off than me. They probably have money on the weekends that I don’t have . . . They get WIC and things like that to pay for formula, and

I'm going to work full-time but I have to breastfeed, not because I'm any type of granola bonding this is beautiful thing, but because that's what I can afford to do. (Logan county woman, 30s)

They've got WIC, medical care, food stamps, and whatever else. But if she goes to work then they cut that off. They penalize you for working, and that's crazy to me. (Knox county woman, 70s)

The end of coal, the loss of economic prosperity and opportunities for well-paid work, the increasing problems of drug use and government dependency have left people deeply worried about the prospects of their region. Anxieties about the loss of Independence and this threat to the work ethic are widespread and intense.

Appalachians understand and evaluate economic ideas through a well-defined economic model: The Money Flow.

To most Americans, “the economy” is a vague force of nature, much like the weather. It is unpredictable, unfathomable, and you adapt to it as best you can. At best they have a sense that there are distant people making decisions that impact whether the economy is getting better or worse, but regular people don't really have a very developed sense of economic mechanisms – of how the economy actually "works."

The Money Flow model is basically accurate from an economics perspective.

The people of Appalachia, in contrast to most Americans, have a quite accurate and sophisticated grasp of their regional economy.

Like any economic model this one highlights certain things and leaves other things to the side, but it is an essentially accurate portrayal of an economy – especially one that has been relatively isolated geographically and geared toward resource extraction and export.

The economic folk model in Appalachia is fundamentally about the flow of money. Traditionally, coal companies sold coal to outsiders (where the money is), brought that money back to Appalachia and paid wages to coal miners and to others. Not only did those wages mean economic independence for the employees, but that money in turn flowed out into the local economy – as coal miners, mechanics, bookkeepers, truck

ETHNOGRAPHIC SIDEBAR

In Leslie county, Kentucky, two men are sitting in a battered pickup truck – a retired coal miner negotiating a carpenter's work for the day and staying warm in the heated cab. The coal miner said to me, “When the mines were open and that money spread around – everyone was working.” The carpenter agreed, “Now I work 16-18 hour days and I'm barely scraping by. People are leaving and those that stay won't have money to fix their houses. You take away our coal – you take away our lives.”

drivers and so on spent it – enabling other jobs and businesses to flourish from the flow of that coal money. Schools grew and thrived, hospitals were built and so on.

Coal miners spend money on our neighborhoods. These people with these other businesses, they spend money. So it all helps each other down the line. (Raleigh county man, 50s)

When coal was bringing in a great deal of money – either because the price was high or the amounts were large – money was flowing freely. When the flow of money slows to a trickle – as it has today – there is not enough money circulating to support businesses and good, wage-paying jobs.

I go underground, make the payday. I'm coming out here - I'm spending it here, yonder, you know, so actually, my payday is everybody's payday. You take my payday away and you took everybody's payday away, pretty much, and that's what happening. (McDowell county man, 40s)

It is easily articulated, motivating, and richly understood and illustrated.

The Appalachian model of Money Flow is not a dry, abstract academic economic model. Instead it is a rich and widely shared folk model of a dynamic economic world within which a person (or a family or a town or a county) has to act and plan and strive. People of all educational levels display great fluency with the model.

It offers a coherent explanation for the ground-level experience of the booms and busts that make up the history of the coal fields. It also offers a model that helps people think about the transition to a different kind of economy.

If you're Mr. John Q. Tourist, what am I going to offer you to keep you here a few days instead of coming to my town, staying in my motel, and having a couple meals in my restaurant and then going on? How do we keep you here a few days for you and your family to spend a few dollars with us? (Raleigh county man, 50s)

My wife used to run a restaurant by the four-wheeler trails. People'd come there from out east, and they loved it. They brought money into the area. (Clay county man, 70s)

The stakes in Appalachia are very high and evidence of failure to succeed is evident all around. Families scatter, people leave the region or sink into abject poverty - others decline into dependency on drugs and/or the draw.

ETHNOGRAPHIC SIDEBAR

I would ask people in other counties why Pikeville was booming when other places weren't. Some mentioned the college or the hospital, but most quoted a piece of common knowledge – that at one time Pike county had had per capita the highest number of millionaires in the country. Enough of that money still existed to be circulated and invested in Pikeville.

When we have coal, then we have money put into our communities, but when you don't have coal, your coal miners leave. They go places. For instance, my sister . . . was married to a coal miner . . . He now lives in Wyoming. He had to leave . . . in order to support their children. (Logan county woman, 30s)

Gaining access to the flow of money – individually and as a region – is of intense interest and importance to people.

The coffee shop opening up here, this was a really great thing because that allows more younger adults from the college to come over here . . . Imagine how much money that we can bring in while the college kids are here. Give them things to do . . . we could give that money back to the roads to be fixed – all those taxes could be spent back into the community. That's what we need, is something that will just keep us going instead of just keep descending, because if we keep descending, then there's no progress, and if there's no progress then there's basically no future, and that's what's really sad. (Knox county man, 20s)

[The] Hatfield-McCoy miniseries made people think a little different, because all of a sudden we had people in the streets of Pikeville with fanny packs and cameras . . . And I think people started to say, well hey, you know, maybe we do have something worth seeing, and we've got a new highway going in to make the Breaks Interstate Park more accessible . . . and the white water is really getting a lot of attention, Elkhorn City, so I think people are really starting to see that there are other aspects that we can tune into to bring money here. (Pike county woman, 40s)

Money Flow is an organizing idea that acts as a filter on everything else they think about.

An organizing idea is one that gives people a way of processing diverse information and helps them knit this information in a way that offers a means for evaluation and a plan of action.

The idea of money flow helps explain why businesses fail, why entrepreneurship is likely to succeed or fail – and whether any given plan to revive Appalachia is likely to succeed or fail.

For example, when people complain about politics, often they are talking about how elites interfere with the flow of money – either by preventing undertakings that don't benefit them personally, or by diverting funds (e.g. grants) to one place rather than another.

ETHNOGRAPHIC SIDEBAR

The furniture store sits along a back country road – the house, with a tidy enclosure for chickens and a pig – is down by the creekside. The owner tells me that a few years ago she did 100K of business and this year, just 11. We're talking about how they need to stop sending out logs from these hills and instead turn them into furniture. She says people in her business can sell that for a good amount – not in her store – not right now anyway – but there's people elsewhere who will pay. And she needs people around here to be working at something, because the coal's not coming back.

It all depends on the powers that be, what they're making money from. Right now, evidently . . . the big decision-makers [are] making money off gas, natural gas, because that's where all the focus is going to. (Pike county man, 40s)

Some people have the knack for getting the money – others don't. Senator Byrd could bring more money in a year than another could bring in ten. (Letcher county man, 70s)

When people think about proposals they hear about for developing the area, they look at them to see if they will bring any new money to the area.

I can't think of anything large-scale that would do it unless we were manufacturing a product or if tourism was big here. You've got to pull money in from someplace else if you're going to build wealth, because if it's just the money that's here circulating around, it pretty much stays the same. (Laurel county man, 40s)

When people think about the geography of the area, the roads and connections to other places, often they are not just thinking of these as conduits for people, but for money in and out of the region.

They talk about eco-tourism, but . . . I mean it'll get people in here a little bit, but, hell, it took them forever just to connect that road up to get to where people would feel like driving through here . . . that took forever. And then by that time the money was leaving. More money left on that road than came in, let's put it that way. (Pike county man, 50s)

The organizing idea of Money Flow is an important way in which people think about economic implications relating to all sorts of different realms.

Pragmatism is a guiding orientation

In the 200 conversations we had with Appalachians from all walks of life, we were struck by people's openness to talking with outsiders about their region's problems and prospects, and in particular with their open-mindedness when it comes to looking for economic solutions.

Try something new - if it doesn't work, do something else, you know? Just try till you find what works. (Pike county woman, 50s)

Motivated to pursue the guiding value of independence through work, and reasoning about their economic environment in terms of the Flow of Money, Appalachians can be remarkably pragmatic about prospects to improve their economy and their opportunities.

Something that would pay people good money to keep them here, to keep from going to other states - and fortunately there could be other spinoff jobs coming from that that would pay good money too . . . I kind of circle that around to the industrial parks - if we could get some of those and get some industrial market in here - something different

that's not exactly related to coal mining, that could help in other ways as well. (Logan county man, 50s)

If they bring in factories, I'm happy to never look at another lump of coal. (Mingo county man, 40s)

At the same time, in our conversations they evaluated proposals and possibilities with a keen suspicion of what they see as "happy talk" – unrealistic fantasies about how money will flow back into the region.

Ideas tended to be evaluated through the demanding lenses of Money Flow and Independence. Will a policy or project enable young people to work and to make a good life here? Will this mean more money in circulation for Appalachians to make use of? Will this help to make hard work pay?

We found skepticism and pessimism, but we also found people who were willing to be persuaded – if only the arguments were sound and pragmatic in their turn.

Our best opportunity is with the reclaimed strip mines. When you reclaim a strip mine, look how much you can do with it. You can produce a Stonewall Jackson style golf course . . . They want to start talking about bringing in elk - those elk will thrive on a reclaimed strip mine just like the wildlife. With reclaiming you've got ponds and stuff that are used - that's some of the best fishing you'll ever see . . . We have the ability. (Logan county man, 20s)

Knott County has proven the wonderful concept over there of these trail rides that they're hosting, where thousands of people come out and do some trail rides over there, horseback riding, so I think there are some options there. [Though] I think we're going to have to reconsider in some degree what the wages are going to [be] . . . \$20, \$25-an-hour jobs and all the overtime you can handle – that may not be something that we're looking at in the future. (Pike county woman, 40s)

Until just a few years ago, you didn't really hear politicians say the word diversification. They would say new jobs, we've got new jobs coming, but you never really heard them use that word diversification, because it's like you're either for the coal industry or you're against it. Now . . . my father was a coal miner, it put food on my table, you know, my entire childhood . . . I think people are finally seeing that that doesn't mean you're against them, it just means that we have to take care of our people one way or another. (Pike county woman, 40s)

ETHNOGRAPHIC SIDEBAR

Leaning against flats of early tomato plants, I talked long with the nursery owner, an old man who did some work for him, and a businessman customer. None of them expected coal to be back, and in the course of half an hour we went over all the various kinds of solutions that had been and were being put forth. All three were pessimistic in their own way, but were reasoned and calm – with their doubts rooted in the area's history and economics – and the challenges of creating prosperity in a place as economically inhospitable as Appalachia.

Strategic Implications

The combination of these three frames – Independence Through Work, economics as Money Flow and an orientation toward Pragmatism – determine how Appalachians will react to information they hear about transition away from coal. This has implications for advocates building support for proposed solutions. As examples, we will stress several distinct areas.

Pragmatism trumps the War on Coal

Coal is an important aspect of traditional Appalachian identity (linked as it is to hard work and success). There is nostalgia for the days when coal jobs were plentiful and well-paying, primarily because of the way they created a path to independence through work. In other words, and contrary to what outsiders often assume, the enthusiasm for coal is based much more on practical economics than identity or loyalty.

It is certainly possible to trigger War on Coal polarization, but despite the coal industry's efforts to make loyalty to coal a cultural given, people's orientation toward Pragmatism interferes with that. While there is considerable resentment against outsiders (e.g. Obama, the EPA, environmentalists) who worked against coal, there is also widespread agreement that the time of coal has passed – that even if coal made a comeback it will never be what it was.

Appalachian Pragmatism means that plans and projects that will actually bring money into the region – or keep it there – are the litmus test for whether you are working for or against the people of the region. In our view, just about any proposal will get a fair hearing. Importantly, the flip side of this is that Appalachians expect to be engaged in equally pragmatic terms – with arguments about how a given path is really going to result in success. Vague aspirations and happy talk are unlikely to engage with this pragmatic orientation.

The importance of this "clear-eyed" view of proposals is hard to overstate. Economic proposals cannot simply be symbolic; they must pass the basic test of economic viability according to the Money Flow model.

Money will have to come from outside

One of the implications of the Money Flow model is that money will have to come from Outside. What Appalachia and Appalachians need is a *source* of money.

Coal mining and coal jobs have been the traditional source of money for the region. The way in which this money then spreads to others and serves as a basis for other jobs is a familiar part of local folk knowledge. Coal jobs enabled entrepreneurship and other businesses, because locals had money to spend.

Some economic responses to this transition will be “easy to think” – such as energy investment jobs or factories which are able to sell products to markets that have money. Efforts to attract tourists and other outsiders are also viewed through this lens as a way of bringing outside money in.

In contrast, proposals that don’t seem to include a source of money do not come across as serious or as relevant to the region as a whole. Retail and service jobs aren’t seen as sustainable without a source of money. Efforts that educate or train workers, or improve the quality of life in communities can be seen as futile, if the region cannot secure a base flow of money from somewhere.

In common with other Americans, Appalachians don’t tend to think about how wealth is actually created in the first place. But they can readily understand the importance of adding value – for example the difference between exporting logs to outside markets versus exporting finished wood products for a larger pay-off. Although this example is still embedded in the money-from-outside model, it does give more scope to the idea that there are things Appalachians can be doing to stimulate a better flow of money into the area by creating value through their labor.

The Money Flow model can enable productive conversations – that are often more Progressive than predicted by people's political orientation.

People are open to conversations about solutions, especially if they seem compatible with the Money Flow model and seem to lead to greater opportunity to secure economic independence. For example:

- **Diversification:** This seems like common sense to most. There is just no reason that coal should be the only source of the region’s economic viability. People are open to almost anything that can have a positive effect.

Being diverse does not mean that you’re against your primary industry. All you have to do is look at Detroit and see what can happen to any industry, not just coal. So it’s smart of any community to have diversity. (Pike county woman, 40s)

I don’t think [coal] is going to go away completely, but I don’t think it’s going to be any major source of money for the area - I wouldn’t put my eggs in that basket. (Knox county woman, 40s)

- **Localism:** It makes sense that we should keep money circulating in the community rather than allowing it to escape. The idea of supporting small businesses rather than chains fits within this thinking.

It would be really cool if they were spending all that tax money at the farmers' market . . . if there were - little diners are open all over town - if people were going there instead of McDonald's then that would put it back in the pockets of your neighbor, and that would be really cool. (Knox county woman, 30s)

- **Raising wages:** A higher minimum wage at companies like Burger King or Walmart means money stays in the community (in the form of wages), rather than departing as profits to stockholders. While many people initially resist this idea because it seems to violate one understanding of earning or deserving what you make, appealing to the Money Flow model regularly caused people to rethink their stance. Why should the profits flow to Bentonville, when the money could prime the regional pump? In our conversations people were open to considering a substantially higher minimum (up to \$15/hour).

These companies coming in like Walmart - I struggle with that. They pay minimum wage for 28 hours so they don't have to pay any benefits, and every dollar that they make is gone - it goes to Arkansas or wherever. How much does it come back? So you're taking millions of dollars out of eastern Kentucky or Appalachia and sending it to Arkansas - what comes back? Nothing comes back, so that's why I'm saying something has to come back in order for us to really boom and grow. (Pike county man, 60s)

- **Adding Value:** Finished products bring in more money than exporting raw materials.

Through the late '80's and up through the mid '90's there were Asian companies coming in and buying up the biggest of the logs for veneer logs, and they were leaving here in containers and getting loaded on ships and taken overseas . . . I don't know, it's not a product that gets a really high mark-up from raw material to the products that come out of it . . . so I don't think [manufacturing wood products] is a total answer for us right now, but it could be part of it. (Laurel county man, 40s)

- **Small-scale energy:** Whenever local people and businesses can keep the benefits from energy production, surrounding communities will benefit. In a more general sense, the idea that the flow of money will come not from a single massive source (Coal), but a variety of smaller sources, while unfamiliar, fits well within the Money Flow model.

I think they should get into other sources of energy, myself, because they're just so against coal . . . Everybody's worried about the environment and stuff, which is understandable . . . The way it looks to me, they're going more towards other sources. Even wind, you know - shoot, wind . . . you get up on these hills and you've got constant wind, you know? And that's power . . . That's what I would

*think, [but] I ain't heard nothing about it besides coming out of my mouth.
(Pike county man, 30s)*

*God gave us a gift of coal, natural gas, of course with the methane and stuff . .
. so we've got potential there. We've just got to be able to use it. (Logan county
man, 20s)*

- **Entrepreneurism:** The current reluctance is rational, but if people see opportunity for revenue many want to get on board.

People is trying, but what are they to do? A lot of people don't have the money to do it, and if they do got it, they want to hang on to it. Like I said, I've got several people that's just trying to create jobs for people, you know, that I know them real well. Sometimes they'll work four days a week, sometimes they won't, but they're trying. (Mingo county man, 40s)

I'd like to see those young people bring back companies with them - maybe go off and work for a while and bring companies back with them where we made some kind of product here that was sold internationally and money would come back to this area. (Laurel county man, 40s)

Advocates need to be clear-eyed, make sense and have their math in order. By understanding the orientations and knowledge that Appalachians bring to the table, advocates should be able to better understand what parts of the story they want to tell will be obvious, what will be new, and what will resonate with people's cultural motivations and understandings.

Collision of models: Appalachians are ambivalent about government as a source of money

Appalachians see twin crises in their region. On the one hand is the economic decline that has accompanied the retreat of coal as an economic keystone industry. On the other hand is the cultural crisis of a population losing its ability to work – with some families leaving in search of jobs and others sinking into dependency on drugs and government checks.

In principle, government monies are very consistent with the Money Flow model. People often note it as a significant source of money into the region, yet this particular flow is usually unwelcome tied as it is to the ideas of dependency discussed above.

- Help in the form of government checks and handouts create dependency. As discussed above this is associated with the destruction of work and the workforce; tied to drugs, lack of work ethic, and a disincentive to working.

The young people [leave] and the older folks who can't afford to leave, so they stay . . . We've lost a middle generation - a generation from 20-35 - where are they? Some of them are in the workforce, but a lot of them aren't - they're on

substances, they're on SSI - I'm concerned about the giveaway programs. You file for SSI benefits and you get \$1500 a month - why would you want to go work? So that part of our generation - we've lost that part. (Pike county man, 60s)

- Government monies are unreliable or capricious – and subject to the political winds. Grants (and grant-funded jobs) come to an end, whether the task is finished or not. For instance, the reduction of the Coal Severance payments harms local communities that have come to rely on them.

I worked at a nonprofit organization . . . [but] that was a government grant, and they don't last forever. So that ended, and that's why I came back to school. (Knox county woman, 30s)

- Appalachians are reluctant to dwell on the fact that many of the “good jobs” that still exist (such as teaching, medicine, corrections, even positions in local or state government) are directly based on government money flowing in. The jobs are welcome in that they do enable economic independence for some, and enable young people to stay, but to the extent that people think about the source of that money they are uncomfortable about it.

I would hate to think how many millions of dollars come in here monthly in Social Security benefits or SSI or disability insurance or whatever - millions and millions of dollars. (Pike county man, 60s)

A lot of the money that circulates around here now is federal dollars - even my salary [as a teacher] when it comes right down to it . . . I spend it here locally – it circulates around here, but it's still coming down from the Fed . . . So many of us depend on federal dollars coming in to keep things going, and I don't think people stop and think about that. (Knox county man, 40s)

- Since the government is seen as the main engine behind shutting the mines, they should have done something to soften the blow other than funding destructive social welfare programs.

I'm all for being environmentally conscious, but you can't just change things overnight - I think it has to be gradual, and I think you have to educate people on we're not going to do this anymore, so what do we do now? You can't just cut it off and say sorry . . . on paper it looks good to politicians, but to look at it in real life it's not so nice . . . They should be doing more maybe to help their workers find other jobs or give them other options. (Letcher county woman, 50s)

Or they should just stay out of it:

The less government involvement we have, the better off we're going to be . . . rather than the federal government stepping in and telling us how we need to do our jobs and how we need to live. (Logan county man, 20s)

Cynicism about government creates a challenge for advocates who work with government moneys or even for NGO's that work with government-like support programs. It is one area where Pragmatism can sometimes take a back seat.

I think this area needs those programs, and I don't want to get on the whole government thing, but those programs are needed, while some of these other people are just abusing programs that they don't need. I don't want to keep saying necessary evil, but it kind of is. (Knox county man, 20s)

There remain patterns of resistance and pessimism

Although the Topos research found Appalachians to be pragmatic and profoundly engaged with questions about the region's transition away from coal, it did not find high degrees of optimism. Their clear-headed and comprehensive understanding of numerous, interrelated problems faced by the region can challenge anyone's faith in a sustainable prosperity for central Appalachia.

Several patterns are at work:

- **Hard-nosed skepticism:** Among Appalachians it is seen as better to be skeptical than naïve. This is the hard edge of pragmatism. People require a persuasive argument, and are very sensitive to cheerleading and happy-talk.
- **Have heard it before:** Many of the problems are not new. And much has been promised that has not panned out as predicted. Solutions like industry, tourism, agriculture, etc. are familiar ideas that have all been touted in the past. The burden of proof is on the person proposing to make some improvement.
- **High Stakes for failure:** Poverty is abject and familiar and uprooted families are common. "Ghost towns" are the result of economic decline.
- **Contempt for Appalachians:** Appalachians readily toggle between two diametrically opposed stereotypes of themselves. On the one hand are the hard-working, self-reliant people of the mountains, whom factories and mines have always valued and hired. On the other hand are the lazy, poorly educated, un-ambitious and self-defeating hillbillies and drug addicts who rightly scare off any real potential employers and investors.

Conclusion

When people and central Appalachia think about the economy, they are naturally mostly focused on the day-to-day reality of earning money, paying the bills and finding or keeping decent-paying jobs for themselves and their family members.

But they are also very much engaged with the larger economic situation of their towns, counties and the region as a whole. They are paying attention and they are evaluating how and whether these places can sustain them and future generations.

As they process information on this and think about the various kinds of approaches, initiatives, programs, trends, promises and plans – they evaluate them in a very consistent manner:

- Key value of independence through work
- Money flow economic model
- Orientation of pragmatism

They are guided by a key value of Independence Through Work – in which virtue, community stature and self-worth are tied to a strong work ethic and a striving to provide for yourself and others. Any plan is a good one when it enables able-bodied Appalachians to secure material security and independence through work and it is a bad one when it interferes with work and/or the work ethic.

When it comes to the overall potential of the regional economy to support work, people use a particular conceptual model, the Money Flow model. This puts work into a context of availability and flow of money. Drawing on the experience of Appalachia's traditional export economy, they are sensitive to the ways that money flows into the region, circulates among the people, and dwindles. Plans that don't seem to increase – or at least account for – the flow of money, do not seem like practical efforts to solve the region's economic problems – which is fundamentally about a shortage of money, now that coal mining is in decline.

Motivated by the desire to see Appalachia retain and revive its traditions of work and independence, people take an extremely pragmatic (and hard-nosed) approach to thinking about potential solutions. We found them to be hungry for solutions and open to discussions about a great many potential approaches – even as they asked tough questions and voiced skepticism and doubts about the mismatch between the scope of the problems and the scale of the proposed solutions.

We could summarize our recommendations as the following:

- Take seriously and speak to their desires and anxieties about work and dependency
- Take seriously their diagnosis that the region's fundamental and fatal problem is a dwindling flow of money due to the decline of coal

- Engage their pragmatism with an honest and respectful dialog about potential efforts to manage the best possible transition to an economy that is going to be less coal-centered and more diverse.
- Avoid engaging in the avoidable trap of "war on coal" rhetoric.
- Avoid focusing on symbolic solutions - economic ideas that won't really change the situation.
- Take advantage of people's openness to having conversation about a very wide spectrum of policies.

There is a tremendous desire among Central Appalachians to find a way to re-vitalize their region. There is also tremendous anxiety, despair and pessimism that the end of coal means the end of an era when hard work was rewarded with prosperity and independence. The challenge is to overcome their entrenched and well-founded doubts and tap into the powerful motivations and practicality people bring to the table in order to make Appalachia a better more sustainable place.



Founded by veteran communications strategists Axel Aubrun and Joe Grady of Cultural Logic, and Meg Bostrom of Public Knowledge, Topos has as its mission to explore and ultimately *transform the landscape of public understanding* where public interest issues play out. Our approach is based on the premise that while it is *possible* to achieve short-term victories on issues through a variety of strategies, *real change* depends on a fundamental shift in public understanding. Topos was created to bring together the range of expertise needed to understand existing issue dynamics, explore possibilities for creating new issue understanding, develop a proven course of action, and arm advocates with new communications tools to win support. For more information: www.topospartnership.com.