CASE STUDY
HOLLOW

Project description: *Hollow* is an interactive documentary and community participatory project that examines the future of rural America through the eyes and voices of those living in McDowell County, West Virginia. *Hollow* combines video portraits, data visualizations, photography, soundscapes, community-generated content and grassroots mapping to bring these stories to life through an online experience.URL: hollowdocumentary.com

Launch date: June 20, 2013

Funders: Kickstarter, TFI New Media Fund, West Virginia Humanities Council, Private/individual donations

Production team:
- Elaine McMillion, Project Director
- Jeff Soyk, Art Director/Designer and Architect
- Tricia Fulks, Associate Producer and Researcher
- Robert Hall, Technical Director and Senior Developer
- Russell Goldenberg, Interactive Developer
- Sarah Ginsburg, Editor
- Kerrin Sheldon, Editor
- Billy Wirasnik, Sound designer
- Lee Strauss, Composer
- Michelle Miller, Participatory workshop leader
- Eric Lovell, Participatory mapping
- Jason Headley, Writing
- Nathaniel Hansen: Project Manager

Festivals and awards

Festivals:
- 2015 True False Film Festival
- 2015 Big Sky Documentary Film Festival
- 2014 Eastern Oregon Film Festival
- 2014 SXSW Interactive Awards
- 2014 Visions Du Reel i_docs workshop (Switzerland)
- 2014 Festival du Nouveau Cinema (Montreal)
- 2014 Margaret Meade Festival at the American Museum of Natural History
- 2014 The Fife: 31st International Environmental Film Festival
- 2013 Filmmaker Magazine Film Series: 25 Faces of Independent Film
- 2013 Camden International Film Festival, Points North Doc Forum
- 2013 New York Film Festival: Convergence 2013
- West Virginia International Film Festival 2013
- Doc Lab at International Documentary Festival of Amsterdam

Awards:
- 2014 Emmy Nominee in New Approaches for Documentary
- 2014 ONA Excellence & Innovation in Visual Digital Storytelling award
- 2014 Webby Awards: "Web Community" honoree
- 2014 Innovation Award at the Festival du Nouveau Cinéma in Montreal
- 2014 FITC Awards Finalist in "Narrative" and "Best Visual Design"
- 2014 SXSW Finalist in "Activism" and "People's Choice" Awards
- 2014 World Press Photo 3rd Prize Award for Interactive Doc
- 2013 Peabody Award
- 2013 FWA Site of the Day (Aug. 28, 2013)

- 2013 FWA Adobe Cutting Edge Project of the Week (Nov. 11, 2013)
- 2013 Finalist for the DocLab Storytelling Award at IDFA
- 2013 CSS Winner of the Day (Sept. 27, 2013)
- 2013 National Coal Heritage Foundation: Research and Documentation Award

Conferences:
- 2013 Tribeca Film Institute's Interactive Day
- 2014 i-Docs Conference (Bristol, UK)
- 2014 Appalachian Studies Conference
- 2014 DC Webfest
- 2014 Magnum Photography Foundation: PhotoEx Symposium
- 2014 Woodstock Digital Media Festival
- 2013 Making Media Now: Filmmakers Collaborative
- 2013 The University Film and Video Association Conference
- 2013 A Bright Economic Future for the Mountain State Conference
- 2013 IFP Conference
- 2013 Future of Storytelling: Story Arcade Exhibit
- 2013 Create West Virginia Conference
- 2013 DocYard: Boston

TARGETS

Engagement goals:
- To build an interactive world online for people globally to understand the issue of population loss in rural America while also providing an understanding of the options available to keep small-town America alive.
- To offer a multi-dimensional portrayal of the diverse people in McDowell County, their ideas of "home," and the future of Southern West Virginia.
- To empower the people of Southern West Virginia by giving residents a chance to tell their own stories through community workshops and forms of grassroots mapping.
- To communicate the historical, cultural, social and economic significance of Southern West Virginia through user-generated content,

interactive data, and interviews with longtime residents.

Target location: United States, including cities where most brain-drainers from rural areas go to: NYC, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, etc.

Target audience: The primary target audience was 18–35 year olds who have left a small town in the United States for a larger city. The website has been viewed over 200,000 times in 178 countries.
- 64 percent of users are from U.S. (West Virginia, New York, Virginia, California, Massachusetts are the top 5 states).
- 178 Countries (U.S., U.K., France, Spain, Canada are the top 5 countries)

Events that opened up the project to new user groups: *Hollow* was a finalist at IDFA's Doc Lab and that opened up a new international audience. Furthermore, the team gave presentations in Switzerland, Japan, the UK, and other European countries, opening up those audiences.

USER ENGAGEMENT

Platforms: Online

Users: 200,000+

Social media:
- Facebook: facebook.com/hollowtheproject (3332 likes)
- Twitter: twitter.com/hollowthefilm (1330 followers)
- Instagram: instagram.com/explore/tags/hollowdocumentary

Efforts to reach particular demographic groups: The team screened the project nearly 80 times in three years. Many of those screenings included traveling to small, rural colleges across the U.S., as well as public libraries in Appalachia. Many of these places have less access to high speed broadband and the students are the first in their families to attend college. The team felt they

were an important group to have a one-on-one experience with *Hollow.*

CHANGES IN AWARENESS/BEHAVIOR

Goals: The creators wanted to show a more nuanced version of the region to help audiences understand the extreme challenges that post-industrial towns face, while also showing people working hard every day to change their situation. The hope was to combat the stereotype of lazy, welfare-dependent, and uneducated Appalachia.

What happened: Elaine McMillion Sheldon designed and executed the outreach strategy. The team coordinated nearly 80 screenings—internationally and nationally—taking the project to rural towns, schools, and colleges across America and in Appalachia.

- One year after the film came out, the team secured a major screening with Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV) at the U.S Capitol in Washington, DC. Fifteen residents from *Hollow* stood on stage with the Senator and expressed their concerns for their community.
- The interactive documentary has over 200,000 unique users and has generated hundreds of volunteers to the area and donations to individuals.
- The community members, through the online networks and tools the *Hollow* team built for them, continue to meet and organize for change. They were able to bring support and awareness to a community garden and local food movement campaigns on GoFundMe, which ultimately raised $10,000.
- After watching *Hollow* and learning about hunger in West Virginia, one user called Feeding America non-stop for months until the group agreed to become a partner and donate food weekly to the food bank. Donations and volunteers have come into the county, especially to non-profit partners on the ground and the local food bank.

- *Hollow* was purchased and archived by West Virginia University Libraries and is used in high schools and colleges to demonstrate the economic and social impact of population shifts in post-industrial and rural places. The raw materials are being archived for use in research by professors and students.

Evaluation strategy: The team conducted surveys among residents after participatory workshops during production. Residents rated their experience of working with *Hollow*. An overwhelming majority said the workshops made them feel more empowered to change their community. Many stated that they had learned new digital literacy and communication skills.

Locals' responses to *Hollow:*

> Erica Lucas (young person running for city council): "I wanted to let you know that *Hollow* had inspired me to be that change and I am running for Welch City Council! I hope to bring new ideas and help out our community."

> Elaine LaCaria (local businesswoman trying to expose police brutality): "You have no idea how you guys motivated us to quit taking their status quo and the impact your team has made here politically. We are going to take our county back and our political offices and our police and emergency medical personnel and hold them accountable."

> Renee Bolden (local historian): "I'm not sure I can explain the hope and sense of community that *Hollow* has inspired. *Hollow* has given McDowell County the voice that we have never had before, and an opportunity to be seen as a people who overcome great obstacles and keep going."

> Tammy Stevenson-Agee: "I just wanted to say thank you for making this documentary. I grew up in McDowell and moved to Tazewell for work and school but watching this has made me

change my mind!! After I finish school in May 2015 I will be moving back and helping rebuild. I didn't realize how much I missed it until now but the people on there was right — you don't know what you took for granted until it's gone."

The team also collaborated with Cowbird to collect stories at screenings around the theme of small towns: blog.cowbird.com/post/79165570128/small-town-america-is-vanishing-a-hundred-years

Press examples:
- Journalist.de: "Die 12 Besten Multimediareportagen 2013" www.journalist.de/ratgeber/handwerk-beruf/tipps-fuer-den-berufsalltag/onlinejournalismus-die-12-besten-multimediareportagen-2013.html
- Los Angeles Times: "Framework: Best of the Web" framework.latimes.com/2013/08/29/best-of-the-web-129
- POV: "Interactive Docs for the Nonbelievers" povmagazine.com/articles/view/interactive-docs-for-the-nonbelievers

Notable social media conversations: The team used social media to rally supporters and get a screening at the U.S. Capitol with Senator Manchin (D-WV). Read about it here: www.peabodyawards.com/stories/story/senator-manchin-invites-hollow-to-the-capitol

Reactions on Twitter:
- @tomburket: "I can say with confidence (*Hollow*) wins the Internet for 2013"
- @MikeyTacos: "The next frontier. Makes me feel determined to help out."
- @kylestudstill: "Exploring the greater tensions of modern America."
- @gabestein: "Everyone—historians, students, designers, developers—drop everything you're doing and watch this interactive doc."
- @crystalkinser: "Beautifully arresting. Stereotype-busting. An interactive documentary about people and a community."

Events:

Community screenings and exhibits:
- Photography Exhibit "Beautiful McDowell County" in Charleston, WV, October 2012
- Welch, West Virginia, June 2013
- Caretta, West Virginia, June 2013
- Kanawha County Public Library Screening Series (3 screenings), September 2013
- Princeton, West Virginia, October 2013
- River View High School, October 2013
- Mount View High School, October 2013
- Bisbee, Arizona, December 2013
- Washington, D.C. in United States Capitol Congressional Theatre, July 2014
- Sarasota, Florida, February 2015

University screenings:
- Virginia Tech University, October 2013
- Radford University, October 2013
- West Virginia University, November 2013
- Emerson College, November 2013
- Colgate University, November 2013
- Ohio State University, January 2014
- Davis & Elkins College, March 2014
- Alice Lloyd College, April 2014
- Shepherd University, April 2014
- Wheeling Jesuit University, April 2014
- Vermont College of Fine Arts, April 2014
- Duke University Center for Documentary Studies, November 2015
- University of Tennessee Knoxville, March 2016
- Appalachian State University, March 2016

Event goals: Events were designed to engage audiences with these stories through screenings and discussions. At five events, local residents attended and spoke directly with the audience. The team also collected stories (for its partnership with Cowbird) at these screenings, asking people why they left, why they stayed, or why they returned to their small town. Each screening venue paid $250–$700 to host a screening; that money went directly to paying server fees of $750 a month.

Event attendees: From 250–300 people at the premiere in Welch and the U.S. Capitol screening,

to 25–50 at small university campuses. *Hollow* attracted both large and small crowds, which made for different types of experiences and discussion.

User participation in ongoing development: Users can visit hollowdocumentary.com to watch the 30 short films, contribute to the data visualizations, and add their photos of home through the #hollerhome campaign on Instagram.

Other evidence of behavior change: The decision to make *Hollow* an online, interactive documentary was fueled by the idea that non-linear and exploratory narratives may actually encourage participation among users locally and globally. It has been argued that the step from consumption to action is much smaller in a self-guided and user-generated experience than the consumption of a lean-back, linear film.

By inviting users to actively explore McDowell at their own pace, the team hopes to encourage and cultivate a more personal experience for a global audience. This has been seen through Linda McKinney—the owner of the food bank—who has received visitors, donations, and calls after people discover her story on the website. On the local side, the residents have a real-time sense of people who visit the site through their blogging tool. This could be seen as a motivator for many locally.

Despite the efforts of *Hollow*'s producers to assist residents in bettering their community, they have been unable to overcome deep-seeded issues regarding local infrastructure, motivations, and politics to sustain active participation. In McDowell there are limited organizations to support the continued growth of digital literacy skills. The problem becomes compounded when access to computer labs, mobile networks, and high speed Internet is limited. Additionally, the large, consolidated schools have not supported programming aimed at overcoming such obstacles. Such apathy and lack of initiative was not expected given high levels of involvement exhibited by youth participants during the summer of 2012. Other active storytellers have become

disheartened at the lack of tangible change to come about in the community, often blaming embedded systems of institutional and political bureaucracy as stalling their efforts.

The team has reflected on this drop-off of participation; the lack of incentive and collaboration is disheartening. Team members are dedicated to seeing residents follow through and has begun work to identify the issues surrounding this phenomenon. The team has pondered the cultural climate created amidst a community focused on survival. Perhaps digital literacy skills are not considered important when people are focused on putting food on the table. Regardless, this cycle of youth exodus and brain drain is not specific to McDowell. The challenge for the *Hollow* team is to work to create and maintain infrastructure that supports all residents in developing agency. Although it is too early to fully gauge successes and failure, the team continues to work on strategies to support the community.

POLITICAL IMPACT

- After participating in *Hollow* workshops, two locals ran for positions on city council.
- Residents got the opportunity to speak to Senator Manchin about their concerns during the Washington DC screening.

INNOVATION

Platform innovation: *Hollow* is one of the first custom-built, independent interactive documentaries that seeks to tell an American story. The innovation in *Hollow* lies in the fact that true stories lead the choice in technology. The team aimed to tell meaningful and impactful stories, not looking to jump on a tech trend. This allowed people to connect with individuals without being confounded by technology.

Replication: The team has been told, again and again, that *Hollow* is a project that inspires many while making their own interactive stories. Grant

Scott, a jury member for the World Press Photo Awards, shared why he chose *Hollow* for 3rd Prize in the Interactive Documentary category: "Some of the most impressive elements of Hollow are the depth of the content, the richness of the content. The characters that are portrayed are totally believable and I think it's these small stories told in a big way...it's not a large production piece but it has that feeling, it feels very much as if it was created by people who care about the subject that they are documenting." The *Huffington Post* wrote on *Hollow*'s launch day, "Anyone who saw promise for the future of web-based journalism after watching/reading *The New York Times*' highly innovative 'Snowfall' will positively be drawn to the work produced at Hollow. It is next level. It's maybe the most magnificently presented, web-aware journalism I've ever seen. But more important than the visual achievement is what it does—documenting the lives of people who live in a mostly ignored rural community, far from the traditional media bastions and bubbles."

BUILDING CAPACITY

Key strategic partners: Key strategic partners included Five Loaves and Two Fishes Food Bank, Big Creek People in Action, Mount View High School, River View High School, Council of the Southern Mountains, Documentary Educational Resources, West Virginia Humanities Council, West Virginia Filmmakers Guild, West Virginia University, Reed School of Media at West Virginia University.

New collaborations or organizations: The project has resulted in volunteers for partner organizations, donations to partner organizations and new collaborations between partner organizations. Through social media, *Hollow* helped Joel McKinney raise over $10,000 towards his local food movement (gofundme. com/fiveloaves). A new, informal citizens group has developed since the *Hollow* team left the community. The group meets once a month to work on initiatives and it is led by some of the individuals trained and featured in *Hollow*.