

## Digital Literacy in Rural Women's Lives

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This qualitative study looks at how rural women in the American South have obtained access to digital technologies for reading and writing. Using the “life history” approach (Brandt; Hawisher and Selfe), we interviewed five women. We look at the challenges caused by the Digital Divide, at economies of access, including the financial factors that shape individuals’ uses of digital technologies for reading and writing, at the strategies that the women used for gaining access to needed technologies, and at the nature of sponsorship in digital, rural contexts.

Keywords: literacy; rural; women; digital divide; technology; access; sponsorship; qualitative

### Introduction

In 2014, the World Wide Web marked its 25th birthday.<sup>1</sup> The Pew Research Center observed the occasion with a report showing how drastically the Web has changed the lives of individual Americans. In 1983, several years before the World Wide Web was born, only 10% of adults had a home computer. Today, 81% of adult Americans regularly use computers, 87% use the web, and 68% use “smart” mobile devices (e.g., phones or tablets with Internet access) (Fox and Rainie). Although access to the Internet has increased for many Americans, rural households are less likely to have access than their urban counterparts. This gap in Internet access has increasingly become a focus of the federal government. The Clinton administration coined the term “digital divide” to describe the gap between those who have access to emerging technologies and those who do not, and initiated the “Falling Through the Net” project (1995-2002) to track computer ownership and network access across broad demographic categories. By contrast, the Bush administration suggested that the digital divide was no longer a significant problem (Grabill; Ruecker). The Obama administration, however, believes that the problem persists, and therefore has focused on connectivity in schools. The ConnectEd initiative seeks to provide access to 99% of America’s students by upgrading Internet connections, training teachers, and encouraging private sector innovation (“ConnectEd”). Due in part to these federal initiatives, as well as to changes in consumer habits, more Americans use digital technologies for literacy today than ever before.

While rates for computer and Internet usage are climbing, reliable access to the Internet continues to be problematic, in part because the gap is narrowing in unequal ways (Besser; Grabill). For this reason, scholars such as Todd Ruecker suggest that the “digital divide” must be understood not as a simple binary (whether individuals have access to digital technology) but rather as a multifaceted concept that includes consideration of “not only type of access but the way individuals have developed technological literacy through self-sponsorship or sponsorship by another figure, such as a teacher, in a way that enables them to more effectively contribute to societal discourses” (Ruecker 241). As Jeffrey Grabill puts it, “what we miss when we focus [solely] on the statistics is that access is deeper than simple infrastructure ... access is a moving target” (462). Moreover, as Howard Besser argues:

though the gap in technological access has narrowed, other critical gaps still remain ... between those who have the skills and competencies to effectively evaluate the appropriateness of a given piece of information, and those who do not. A major divide still remains between those able to apply critical thinking and evaluation to an information source and those who cannot.

At the national level, then, scholars and policy makers increasingly recognize that digital literacy is important to the lives of American people, and that access to digital technologies is an especially important issue for Americans in isolated communities.

These broad changes in technology, access, and federal policy create the backdrop for this study, which looks at how women in the American South have obtained access to digital technologies for reading and writing. Using the “life history” or “literacy narrative” approach (Brandt; Hawisher and Selfe; Ruecker), we interviewed five rural women, asking, in part, how has technology shaped your reading and writing practices? How have you gained access to technologies for literacy, and how have you learned to use them? We were interested in how issues of access affect rural people—though we tried, in approaching our topic, not to presume that participants and their communities would be deficient in their access to or use of technologies. The lives of the women we interviewed, whose ages range from their early 30s to mid-40s, have been shaped by the technological revolution of the 1980s, 1990s, and the new millennium. They have seen the emergence of new technologies that include the home computer, the Internet, Web 2.0, and, more currently, smartphones and wireless devices, which are changing the ways people access and produce texts. Though we would not attempt to draw general conclusions based on our small sample, we do offer a look at the particular, local dynamics of these five cases, whose experiences are unique to them, yet part of broad social and technological trends that are still unfolding as we write this.

## Background and Methodology

The question, “What is rural?” confounds nearly everyone who works with rural populations of the United States. According to the US Housing Assistance Council,

rural areas share the characteristics of having comparatively few people living in an area, but they differ in their proximity to urban areas, community size, total population, population density, and other social and economic factors (Housing 8). Policy makers often view the concept of rural through an “urban-centric perspective; thus, many definitions focus on urban and metropolitan areas, and other territory is classified as rural by default” (Bucholtz 30).

In fact, determinations about what counts as “rural” are often rhetorical, made for particular purposes and contexts. Federal agencies—such as The United States Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the United States Census Bureau, and the United States Department of Agriculture—classify areas as rural (or not) in order to make determinations about funding and about the regulation of industry and land management. Official determinations vary by agency and by purpose for classification. Due to the variable nature of official classifications, the rural population of the US can be considered as low as 17% or as high as 49%. This variation “reflects the reality that rural and urban are multi-dimensional concepts, making clear-cut distinctions between the two difficult” (Bucholtz 29). In other words, although rural areas have a rich culture and history in the United States, the concept of *rural* is shifting and unstable.

In their book, *Rural Literacies*, Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell point out that much of the previous research in community literacy has been “skewed toward urban sites and subjects. Many of our theories and research paradigms presume an urban or semi-urban setting and do not account for the experiences and realities of rural places and peoples” (12). The authors call for scholarship that addresses this gap and counterbalances the “deficit model of rural life that is commonly perpetuated in academic scholarship and popular press and media representations. All too often, life in rural America is seen as ‘lacking:’ lacking education, lacking economic opportunities, lacking cultural opportunities.” At the same time that the authors caution us to avoid stigmatizing rural communities and individuals, they also seek to avoid painting romantic, sentimental views of rural communities (14). In thinking about how we have framed our study of rural women, we might add that rurality, while of course a central aspect of this project, is nonetheless only one aspect of our participants’ lives, and a complex one at that; moreover, the distinctions of “rural” versus “urban” are not always clear cut. For instance, two of our participants, while strongly identifying themselves as rural people, have spent significant portions of their lives in urban areas, for their jobs and for their education.

We chose to focus on rural *women* for several reasons; first, due to a desire to uncover the voices of those who are mostly likely to be silenced or left out of official accounts of literacy practices. Beyond this impulse, however, we note that women most often perform the role of initial literacy sponsor (for their children, for instance) and make many decisions regarding the purchase and use of technology within the home. The women we interviewed were instrumental in selecting and purchasing the computers and other devices that their families use for reading and writing. Their influence spread as they and their family members ventured into the community.

Moreover, by virtue of their role as librarians and teachers, several of the women play a special role in sponsoring the literacy of other members of their communities. By talking to them about the many contexts in which they read and write, we attempt to show the multifaceted nature of women's writing rather than limiting the focus to the domestic or the family sphere.

We were interested not only in our participants' contexts for digital literacy, but in the *kinds* of literacy they exhibit. In his book, *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, Stuart Selber outlines three categories of computer literacy that are essential for adequate participation in the digital age: *functional*, *critical*, and *rhetorical*. *Functional computer literacy* positions the computer as a tool and the student as a user whose objective is effective employment of the tool (25). *Critical computer literacy*, in Selber's framework, places the student as questioner of technology with the objective of performing an informed critique of the computer as a cultural artifact (25). In this category the user is critically engaged in recognizing and questioning "the politics of computers" (75). Selber argues that critical literacy allows technology users to "work against the grain of conventional preoccupations and narratives, implicating design cultures, use contexts, institutional forces, and popular representations within the shape and direction of computer-based artifacts and activities" (95). In other words, with critical computer literacy, users are engaged critics, not passive consumers. Finally, *rhetorical computer literacy* is a category that involves the creation of twenty-first century digital texts. Being rhetorically literate in the digital age involves more than just creating content, but involves consideration of interface, web design, the connectivity and usability of hypertexts, and so on.

Our study uses the "life history" interview approach, which we have adapted from Deborah Brandt, as well as from Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher. Our purpose was to learn more about the "cultural ecology" of literacy—the range of social, cultural, economic, and personal factors that shape individual reading and writing practices. In her groundbreaking book, *Literacy in American Lives*, Deborah Brandt notes that this research method, in the tradition of oral history, emerges out of an interdisciplinary framework that includes "historical, sociological, psychological, and phenomenological inquiry...What these diverse traditions have in common is an interest in people's descriptions of their own life experience" (10). Inspired by Brandt's project, Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher embarked on a study using the life history approach to explore Americans' life histories as they related to literacy and technology. Emerging in the early 2000s, their work captured the experiences of the first generation of Americans who experienced technological revolution of the 1980s and 90s. In their article in *College Composition and Communication*, the authors summarize the key findings of that study (also detailed in their book, *Literate Lives in the Information Age*). We quote them at length here, as they provide key insights into the nature of digital literacy: 1) "Literacies have life spans." 2) "People can exert their own powerful agency in, around, and through digital literacies." 3) "Schools are not the sole—and often, not even the primary—gateways through which people gain access to and practice digital literacies." 4) "The specific conditions of access have a substantial effect on people's acquisition and

development of digital literacy.” 5) “Families transmit literacy families and practices in multiple directions” (644). As we reflect on our interviews, we consider how our interviewees exert agency through digital literacy, how they acquired literacy inside and outside of school, how access affected their literacy development, and how their family literacy practices worked in multi-directional ways.

After obtaining permission for the project from our institutional research board, we located our participants, with Amy reaching out to her former writing students, and Allen and Jennie contacting members of their communities. The study included two initial steps—a background questionnaire that asked for demographic information and general information about the participants’ reading, writing, and technological habits, and a structured interview in which we asked participants how they learned to read and write, how they learned to use computers, how they get access to the technology they need in their daily lives, and how they use digital literacy for specific contexts—academic, professional, public (as in, for church or community groups), and personal.<sup>2</sup>

After we gathered and transcribed the interviews, we developed a set of analytical categories to analyze the transcripts. Some of the categories—such as “rurality,” or “sponsorship,” were part of the study from the outset, but others, such as “anxiety about technology” or “resourcefulness,” emerged as we coded the interviews. We used a two-step process in which each interview was read and coded twice. In keeping with the life history approach that Brandt, Selfe and Hawisher pioneered; we sought to create research partnerships with our interviewees, who are participants, rather than “subjects,” in this project. All of our participants have chosen to use their real names and have had the opportunity to read, respond, and reflect on our draft. In this way, they can be part of the process of analyzing and making sense of the data we gathered. As we explain in the next section, this project comes out of our commitment to rural people and places and to democratic, participatory research methods.

## The Researchers’ Stance

Jennie: My interest in this project stems from the intersection of my personal and professional lives. As a feminist scholar of writing, rhetoric, and literacy, I focus on work done by ordinary women in their everyday lives. I hope to broaden the scope of the field by (re)valuing the work and influence of women, often overlooked by the academy and the historical record. Acknowledging the value of women’s literate practices in the home and community can help to reframe the ways we think about and teach literacy, writing, and rhetoric.

Personally, I identify as a woman from a rural community. I currently live in the same small town as my two interview participants. They are women I know and admire. We have worked together over the years as community and school volunteers. I have been connected to or living in this community for over 25 years. I can relate to our participants’ struggles to gain, maintain, and afford reliable Internet access. I am, in many ways, the population this study seeks to examine.

Allen: In my graduate-school coursework, I focused on issues affecting rural

populations, as I had recently moved back to my childhood home after living 16 years in Birmingham, Alabama, my state's largest city. I immediately understood that the access I had taken for granted while living in "the city" was the stuff of dreams in "the country." I became interested in issues of access as a larger problem in all rural areas after reading a *New York Times* article that focused on the town and the public school at which my grandmother taught for 39 years and from which most members of my family graduated (Severson). The article focuses on the struggles rural students and community members face without fast and reliable Internet access. Since the article's publication, the county board of education closed the school, and the town is dying. I believe that Internet connectivity and access to the information, goods, and services found online are important not only to a community's longevity but also to the fate of all rural people. And as an instructor at my local community college, I witness the challenges that a lack of access to technology creates for my students. Therefore, I believe that in order for future generations of rural Americans to remain in these areas or to survive in the world outside of them, rural people must have reliable broadband Internet access or they will be left behind.

Amy: Since coming to work at a large public university in the Deep South, much of my teaching has made use of oral history as a primary research method. In spring 2012, I taught a graduate-level course on research methodology, in which Jennie and Allen were enrolled. This project emerged out of our conversations and interests in rurality and digital literacy, women's literacy practices, and the potential for the life history approach to help us gain insights into these issues. As a faculty member at a large institution that has increasingly moved to attract out-of-state students, I feel a personal commitment to better understand a group of students who are less visible on our campus—nontraditional, local, and especially, rural students.

## Participants

We chose to focus on adult women, and on literacy success stories rather than on focusing on the deficiencies of rural people or rural communities. Indeed, all of the women we interviewed are highly literate: skilled at reading and writing in a variety of contexts. Patricia and Rhonda are librarians at small public libraries. Connie co-owns a home-photography business, volunteers in the community, and recently began homeschooling her son. Kody and Kristy are returning college students who have recently finished their degrees, and Kody is a homeschooling mom. As librarians, Rhonda and Patricia are community literacy sponsors in their libraries—a technological gateway. As president of the local library board, Connie is connected to community literacy, too. As mothers, all five women serve as literacy sponsors (digital and otherwise) within their families as well. Aside from being digitally literate, these women lead lives rich with reading and writing experiences.

## Case Studies

Connie Ford is a white, married mother of two. At age 43, she lives with her family in Ragland, AL, a small town of about 2,000 residents. This is also Connie's husband's hometown, and her in-laws and large extended family live here, too. She is active in the local community, serving as president of the board of the local public library and as an officer of the local school's parent-teacher organization. While Connie has worked out of the home over the years, she currently runs a photography business from home with a partner as she homeschools her thirteen year-old son. Her sixteen year-old daughter attends the state school of math and science and now lives at the school (four hours from the family's home). The family uses technology extensively for school, work, communicating, and entertainment. Each family member has an Apple iPhone, which serves as the primary device for much of their digital literacy practices including: texting, Internet surfing, gaming, posting on social media, and reading. Also, the family owns two desktop computers used primarily for school.

Connie describes herself as "a pretty voracious reader" and says she has been since she was young. In fact, she remembers surprising her grandparents by reading to them at age four: "They thought that I had just memorized the book, but I was actually reading." As a young reader, Connie found her family to be a supportive and attentive audience. She notes, "Reading as a whole was just a really profound thing for me as a kid. My parents were divorced when I was a year old ... My mom worked, she was a single mom for a long time, and I think reading was just an escape for me." Connie also connects her early experiences with reading to her love of libraries saying, "The library was such a cool thing for me as a child. I loved to go there, and books were just special. I just always had a sense [that] books were something to be revered." At the same time, Connie associates books with adventure and taboo, saying, "Because I was a curious and interested and bright child, I really just read everything I could get my hands on. I probably read things I shouldn't have at that age." Today, both paper and digital texts play an important role in her life. She spends about twenty-one hours a week engaged in some sort of reading activity including reading novels, magazines, newspapers, emails and texts, social networking messages, the Bible, and her son's homeschool assignments. Admittedly, Connie spends less of her time engaged in writing activities, but she spends anywhere from four to seven hours a week writing emails, texts, notes for her son's homeschool lessons, to-do lists, and social networking messages.

Like most of our participants, Connie has lived both with and without digital technology. She did not use computers in high school or college and laughs about her college paper-writing experiences, "I guess I just handwrote [papers]. What an archaic thing to do!" Her first experience with a computer was at her first job as a teenager in the late-1980s, "I remember inputting data. And I can remember it was so slow that I kept a book with me and I would just read until it processed ... it was ridiculous!" After that, more than a decade passed before she purchased a home computer. By then she was married with a young daughter. Connie laughingly remembers her initial skepticism about digital technology, "I can remember, you know, people talking about the Internet, and being like, 'What is that? That just sounds too much to bother with.'"

Today, digital technology is an integral part of Connie's life. She spends at least forty-eight hours a week using some sort of digital device like her desktop, smartphone, or smart television. Functionally speaking, she conducts much of the work for her photography business on the computer, both online and offline. She edits photos, orders prints, communicates with clients, and advertises her services digitally. Her son's homeschooling curriculum is computer-based, and she uses Internet sources to supplement his learning. Connie engages with these sources critically, noting, "You do want to verify and make sure that what you just read is accurate. If you can get three places that say the same thing then you're fairly certain." She continues, "Well, I think you definitely err on the side of caution ... just because you found it on the Internet absolutely doesn't mean that it's true." As for her rhetorical digital literacy practices, Connie has used a DIY hosting service to create a website for her company, and she frequently posts both personal and professional content on Facebook. Though she uses her desktop computer for paying bills, editing photos, homeschooling, and sending emails, Connie relies most heavily on her smartphone because "It's just so much easier." With her daughter living hours away at school, Connie feels that mobile devices keep her family connected.

Looking back, Connie admits that her family's first technology purchases were based more on advertising, noting that they bought a Gateway desktop because "Gateway was just a highly advertised brand ... a little bit more well-known to us." However, over the years she and her husband have become more savvy and resourceful technology consumers learning to shop for specifications and capabilities over name brands. She says, "I think that as you use [computers] more and you get more comfortable with the technology ... enough to know that it's all the same components ... You can find out exactly what it is that you're getting, it doesn't matter what brand it is."

This same resourcefulness is again evident when Connie explains her family's experiences in gaining, maintaining, and financing Internet access. She describes her options for Internet access as "very limited" and often expensive. Currently, the family has DSL service through the local, privately-owned telephone company. Connie notes that she has tried other services, but

that was an epic fail! Because apparently we use a boatload of data and you get a certain amount of data per month ... at normal speed and after that [the providers] slow you down. And it is [via] satellite, so if there's bad weather you lose the service.

The family is continually evaluating its access needs and weighing concerns about data usage, weather conditions, and signal strength against the costs of available service options. Despite these struggles with access, Connie has some interesting thoughts about digital technology and rural populations.

During her interview she asks, "Don't you think kind of that technology is like the great equalizer between rural people and city people?" She continues, "It's probably not for everybody but certainly, people in a rural setting have access now to what they

never would have unless they made a trip to a particular place.” To follow-up, when asked if she thought people in her community were employing the access available in this way she replies, “I doubt it ... But as long as you have access to a computer and to the Internet, then you have access to everything that anybody, no matter where they live, has access to. That’s kind of a cool thing.”

Patricia Poe is a 44 year-old, white, married mother of two. Ragland, AL, is her hometown, and she has lived there all of her life. This is also her husband’s hometown, so the family is deeply rooted in this community. Describing the town Patricia says, “It has always been rural. I don’t think anything’s going to change that, it’s going to stay the same. And that’s what I define rural as ... It’s not going to change.” Though this may seem like a negative assessment, Patricia notes she and her family choose to live in a rural setting. She is employed both as director of the town’s small, public library and head librarian of the county library in a nearby town.

Not surprisingly, reading is an important part of Patricia’s life. She spends twenty to thirty hours per week reading, mostly for entertainment. She says, “Reading, to me, is the best outlet. When I cannot express my feelings, I like to get in a book and read.” Patricia remembers her parents and grandmother reading at home as she grew up. Yet, for Patricia, writing was more enjoyable at first than reading. She recalls writing for her elementary school teachers and keeping her own diaries as well. She says, “I really didn’t get hooked on reading until I was I guess about twelve or thirteen ... I found Silhouette Special Edition for Teenagers ... I could still read those books today!” Interestingly, as Patricia’s interest in reading sparked as a young teen, her interest in writing waned. She attributes this to an increase in the amount of writing assigned in her junior high years saying, “[W]e had seven classes, and tons of homework ... I just didn’t like it anymore.”

Despite her teenage loss of interest in writing, Patricia revealed in our discussion that writing is an important part of her everyday literacy practices. She spends ten to twenty hours each week engaged in writing activities mostly associated with her job. She composes reports for both the town council and the county library system on a regular basis. She also regularly posts on the library’s Facebook page and keeps track of her to-do lists via OneNote. Recently, her husband began online college courses and she has helped edit and transcribe his papers. Of assisting with her husband’s coursework Patricia says, “We were learning together. I had forgotten how to use a semicolon and [other] stuff, so I had to relearn ... this past year I have written a lot, more than I wanted to.”

Growing up during the early stages of the technological revolution, Patricia’s initial experiences with technology were in a high school vocational education class, though she admits she received no formal instruction then. She remembers, “At the time when we were in eleventh grade there were seniors there, and they already knew how to use [a computer]. So, they would just show us what to do ... we just taught ourselves basically.” After high school Patricia did not use a computer again until she and her husband bought their first home computer in the late-1990s. Of that first computer she says, “It sat in our living room ... And [her oldest son] would play games, and I started

off playing games, too ... It was 1998 when we finally got the Internet ... And that was fun, being on the Internet and finding out things.” Patricia says that while she used the computer occasionally over the years for news and entertainment, it was not until she was hired as town librarian in 2003 that she came to use technology on a daily basis.

Today Patricia uses technology extensively. However, when she was hired she did not know how to use most of the technology associated with her job. Her oldest son, now twenty-seven, played a unique role as his mother’s technological literacy sponsor. Patricia remembers, “He taught me how to use [the library’s technology] because he had been going to the library and he knew the previous librarian. My director did not get to come for a couple weeks to teach me. So he taught me.” Since then, she has mastered the technology necessary for her job. She regularly uses social media and the Internet to research titles, promote library events, and support literacy (digital and otherwise) within the community. In addition to these functional and rhetorical digital literacy practices, Patricia has purposefully developed her own critical digital literacy skills over the years saying, “It has taken me years to figure out [what to believe] and a lot of the emails that are going around, they just go to spam or trash.”

In her role as librarian and community literacy sponsor, Patricia is in a position to observe and participate in the literacy practices of the library’s patrons. She is familiar with the reading preferences of her regular patrons, and she frequently recommends books and Internet sources to fit patrons’ needs and interests. And yet, while she feels confident in her role as literacy sponsor, she expresses some concern about the boundaries of the *digital* literacy sponsor, noting, “Some of my patrons, I want to say to them, ‘Look, don’t believe that email.’ But I also don’t want to tell them what to do.” Patricia negotiates this boundary issue by only offering instruction or advice when a patron asks directly.

As a librarian, Patricia also possesses a unique perspective on access and the digital divide within her community. When asked if she thought a large percentage of her patrons used the library to obtain digital access she replies, “No, actually it’s just the opposite. My [largest] percentages are the ones that read.” She also reports that computer usage in the library is seasonal, saying that usage increases in the spring with students working on research papers. One exception to this pattern, Patricia notes, came three years ago after a devastating tornado hit the town. The library building and much of its contents was destroyed and the library was relocated to a temporary location while a new library was constructed. During this time Patricia noticed that the library played a larger role in providing digital connectivity and access to the community saying,

We had more people that could not afford to have [access]. They may have had a computer at home, but they could not afford a printer, or they could not afford the Internet. So they would come to the library. Then there was the group of people taking classes online and many could not afford computers at all.

Patricia and her family definitely live a connected existence as they use digital devices around 50 hours per week. Though she acknowledges that technology is “an everyday thing; you have to have it nowadays,” Patricia prefers printed material over digital for reading, saying, “I will always love a book in my hands ... with the written word in my hands I can escape better than I can with an E-reader.” Still, her attitude about technology is positive as she concludes, “You have to have it. It’s not gonna go away, so you might as well embrace it and learn how to use it.”

Rhonda Lang is a 40 year-old, African-American, married, mother of two boys. Rhonda and her family live in the rural southwest Alabama town of Jackson, a community of roughly 5,000 residents. Rhonda has always lived in Jackson, and while she loves her hometown and believes it to be “a great place,” she says that “it’s a really good place for retirement ... ‘Cause they’ve taken away a lot of the activities for the kids, and [kids] have to travel outside, like to Mobile or farther to have entertainment because nothing is here. So it’s really kind of quiet.” When asked about her early literacy experiences, she replied, “I really don’t remember any of my childhood as far as, like, school reading. Well, I used to read at home. When my mama used to do hair, I used to get little books and read while she would do hair. ‘Cause I didn’t have nothing else to do.” Rhonda related that her mother firmly believed in engaging in literacy-based activities, saying, “She was strict on all us with that. ‘Cause she always told us she wanted us to do something in life besides just, you know, just not know nothing. So people wouldn’t take advantage of you.” Growing up, Rhonda has no memory of going to a computer lab in school, mainly because the school did not have computers available to for students to use, saying, “We didn’t have that ... I don’t remember having that. I really don’t. But now, [the school’s] got it, and [the students] know more than me. [Students] show me stuff and I be like—‘Wow! I didn’t know this.’ But [the schools are] really moving on up.” Rhonda credits enhanced access and the proliferation of computers for enabling today’s students to be more digitally literate than she is even today, yet her abilities grow every day. She uses computers and mobile technologies for reading and writing, which continue to play profound roles in her life.

Rhonda’s extracurricular literate practices are grounded in her faith, as she writes poetry and produces documents for church: “I love writing ... I write poems now ... I got, like, fifty something poems written already, [and] I do a lot of quick stuff in church. You know, if somebody need a reading or something really quick, I can write a poem within five minutes...they can be next on a program and I can just write them a quick poem and they read it.” In her free time, she reads two to three hours per day from the Bible online and commentaries related to specific Bible verses or stories. A self-described “jack of all trades,” Rhonda works as the technology coordinator at the public library in her town. She attended college for a short time to be a nurse, and says she had few meaningful experiences with technology and no training before accepting her current position out of necessity: “[The library] had a position open. And at that point I didn’t have a job, and so I asked were they hiring and they said, ‘Yeah, do you know anything about computers?’ And I said, ‘Yeah, a little.’ ... I didn’t know as much as I know now. When I first got this job I didn’t know a whole lot, but

as time progressed I learned more and more.” She has developed her technological literacy on her own, through sponsoring library patrons in digital literacy, in the adult computer classes she teaches, and through networking with her co-workers. In her adult computer classes, she teaches 30 people per year, on average, to use computers for various tasks, including how to use e-mail and Microsoft Word and how to conduct research online.

As the technology coordinator for the library, Rhonda sponsors patrons regularly to become functional users of technology, and though she thinks critically about the information she finds online, she often faces ethical dilemmas when helping patrons find information: “Sometimes [patrons] come in and want to look up stuff that isn’t ... well, there’s this man who come in and wants payday loans ... loans here, loans there. He always lookin’ for loans and I look it up ‘cause it’s my job, and I wanna say, ‘Hey, you don’t need to be gettin’ these loans,’ but I don’t say nothing.” Rhonda also worries about paying bills online and about hackers getting access to her email account and other personal information, saying, “People can go in and steal your identity and hack your pages and your phone numbers and they’ll send you links to your phone and if you click on it they got access to everything about your phone and your computer. So basically ain’t none of it’s safe from hackers.” Rhonda employs a skeptical approach to all of her Internet activities in order to balance her fears, and she teaches her adult computer students how to use technology as safely as they can by instructing them not to give out personal information and to also be wary of potential online risks. In her position at the library, she is a community literacy advocate and sponsor. Rhonda continues to learn new software and technologies, and she hopes to one day be a master of PowerPoint so that she may better serve the library’s school-aged patrons.

Rhonda’s family circumvents having Internet service at home through their use of mobile technology: “I just use my phone. We use the hotspot. We used to have Internet, you know, we used to pay for it. But it was like, ‘Why?’ when we got it right here on the phone. That’s just extra money.” When asked if she felt limited by the amount of data on her phone plan, she replied that she and her husband share data and have separate phone accounts, saying, “I use my phone one minute, you know, and then [my husband] use his phone ... So we kinda share it that way. So you won’t use all my data. You know, you use yours some.” Rhonda also explained that while her family owns a computer for her sons to do homework, mainly, she uses her mobile devices when she is not at work: “If I need anything I use my phone ... Cause I mean, it pulls up just about everything I need. I don’t have no problem.” In this way, cellular connectivity is working not only to bring faster and more reliable access to rural people but also to provide a more affordable way to access the Internet.

Kristy Randle, 43, is a white, married mother of one, and a returning college student who obtained her degree in English and journalism in spring 2014. Kristy was born in Charleston, South Carolina, but has lived all over the United States, and overseas, as the child of a military parent. Despite her mobility, however, she identifies strongly as a rural person and has strong roots in Springville, Alabama, a community near Birmingham. As Kristy puts it, “I identify [the town] ... closely with home. The smell

is home, the feeling, the people.” Kristy defines “rural” in both negative and positive ways. On one hand, it represents a gap or absence of certain things: “few if any chain restaurants or stores. [On] the outskirts of the towns they lack modern conveniences like cable T.V. or city utilities.” On the other hand, *rurality* represents things that Kristy values, such as a sense of connection and lifelong friendships, both for her and for her teenage son. During her adult lifetime, Kristy has had many roles, including beauty pageant contestant, salesperson, photographer, bakery and restaurant manager, stay-at-home mom, and full-time student. After graduating from high school, Kristy began taking classes at community college, but left school in order to get married and start her family. Years later, divorced, remarried, and back in the workforce, Kristy went back to college here at the University of Alabama, where she and her husband both decided to finish their degrees. For a time they commuted to school from their home in Springville, but the drive of almost two hours each way became unmanageable. In order to save money, they decided to buy a boat and live at a marina near their university. They return to their home in Springville for weekends and breaks.

Both literacy and digital literacy have been important aspects of Kristy’s life. As a returning college student, she spends 20-25 hours a week reading or writing. But she notes that writing was important to her even before she went back to school: “I journaled like nobody’s business!” She kept notebooks during her pregnancy and tried her hand at writing a romance novel, saying, “I still have the laptop that has [the work] on it. One day I might go back, but I’m kind of scared at the same time. My writing back then.. it’s not at the same level as it is now. My writing is neater now, there’s a purpose.” Kristy explains that when she returned to college she was scared about the expectations for writing in her advanced English classes, and she describes her first attempt to write a long paper as an “epic fail” (though she didn’t literally fail). With dedication on Kristy’s part, and the help of a few professors who worked with her outside of class, she gradually began to produce longer and more successful academic papers.

Born in the early 70s, Kristy has witnessed the rise of the personal computer, the advent of the Internet, the digital revolution, and the emergence of Web 2.0. Though many of her daily activities are mediated through technology, she has clear memories of a time when that was not the case. Kristy remembers the advent of the electronic typewriter and the transition to word processing. She remembers having a Commodore 64 computer at home, and later on, learning to use computers on Macintosh machines in high school. Part of her education included a class where she learned to write basic computer code. Describing this class, Kristy says

Our assignment was, we had to write this program to calculate grades. So one of us would do it, and each of us would get the disk passed down and we would do through and copy it and make a few changes just to get it done. [This was 1987] and we had this attitude, “what the hell are we going to use this for?”

However, Kristy's real introduction to computers came in her professional life when she got a job at a department store that sold computers in its electronic department. Then, as she puts it, the birth of the Internet and the arrival of e-mail allowed her to connect with family members and friends, and she gradually became more wired as the technology evolved: "I was e-mailing my mom ... e-mailing different friends who had moved off ... e-mailing those folks that were states away ... I didn't use the computer every single day, like I do now. I mean it's a night and day transition to what I am now. It just kind of evolved."

By her own description, Kristy is a highly connected user of technology. She estimates spending 4 hours a day using her laptop or computer for schoolwork, 5 hours a day using a tablet device, and keeping her smartphone at hand in addition to these other devices, for about 8-10 hours of the day. She uses these devices for word processing, social media, e-mail, gaming, voice/texting, photo editing, and web browsing, among other things. Digital technologies and digital literacies serve various purposes for her. They have been essential to her academic work and her training as a student journalist. In her interview, Kristy describes how she uses social media to report on local politics: "If I need to do a follow up question with [a state representative], well, we've become friends on Facebook. I did an interview with him the other day. And with somebody like that, I didn't want to misquote him, especially when doing a controversial topic. So I Facebooked him and I said, 'Look, I know you're in session, I'm writing up your article now, and I couldn't understand it on the tape, and I really want to make sure I have this quote.'" Similarly, she uses Twitter to send questions to state politicians. As she puts it, "You can pose a question to them, 'Now what was this bill for?' You gotta be informed, like on say [Alabama] House Bill 56 and criminal expungement ... 'Have there been any changes in senate judiciary on House Bill 56 since it's being re-debated?' You can ask them that question as a journalist [and] get a quote on Twitter." Digital technologies also serve very practical purposes for Kristy because sometimes her WIFI service on the boat is more reliable than her wireless phone service. She notes that her family members use Facebook to send urgent messages because it's more reliable than calling or texting.

In terms of her access to digital technologies and the digital divide, however, Kristy notes that "in rural areas, it's more constricted. We have one phone carrier for the entire town. We did not have dial-up until about four years ago. And I didn't realize how slow it was until we got high speed. So that's your limitation. If you're in the town of Springville, you have a little bit more choice because the cable company carries Internet. Where I live, I'm on the outskirts, so I don't get cable." For Kristy, technology, has been essential in helping her bridge the distance between her rural community and her temporary home on the boat.

**Kody Thomas** is a 31 year-old, white, college graduate, part-time tutor, aspiring writer, and homeschooling mother of three. Originally from Eutaw, Alabama, she grew up in a small town in Mississippi, and now lives in Reform, AL. When asked to describe her small town, Kody says, "We have a whopping TWO red lights ... which is kind of a big deal for Pickens county. This is one of those communities where everybody knows

your business, your family, your history, etc. Which of course has its downsides, but can also be a good thing.” While she has worked and attended college in an urban area, she prefers “to commute rather than live in the city. [She] simply does not like being stuck in a crush of that many people all of the time; it feels too unnatural to [her].” Kody is an avid reader and writer who was always a good student. She went to a well-respected public boarding school for high school and then attended college for three semesters before leaving school to get married and start her family. During the years that she was out of school, she did procurement work for a trucking company and became proficient in creating spreadsheets and using Excel. Seven years later, she went back to school to finish her degree.

Kody is both highly literate and very connected to the digital world. She estimates that she spends close to forty hours a week reading and twelve to fourteen hours a week writing. She reads and writes in diverse ways, from the mundane activities of using social networks or writing lists, to reading literary and popular fiction, and writing prose. Her mom, who was an avid reader, shaped her literacy practices in significant ways. Kody has vivid memories of going on road trips with her mom when she was a kid. They would drive from their small town to a larger city where her mom could buy books: “she would buy a new book at the bookstore every month and would read it while driving home. The book on the steering wheel, I am not lying ... And she was a hobbyist writer ... seven years ago she passed away, and I’m still finding manuscripts that she had written on an old school typewriter.” During her school years, Kody frequently read material far above her grade level. As a reader, she enjoys both literary and popular fiction; She is proud of a college paper she wrote comparing the *Twilight* series to *Paradise Lost* (it earned an A-). Although she is a successful, and prolific writer, Kody is also very self-critical. She has kept diaries through the years, but destroyed most of them. As she puts it, “I hate my own writing. I will write something, and, a year later, I’ll go back through and read it. If it’s worth saving, I’ll leave it be, but if I think it’s crap, I’ll just delete.”

Kody was in the eighth grade when she first got access to computers at school. She learned basic word processing skills, such as using Clip Art and making tables, but because the technology was new to the teachers as well, they were learning it along with the students. Access was limited at that time, because the school had only twelve computers to serve all four hundred students. In high school, Kody first got access to the Internet. The use of the technology was not immediately apparent; students used it to send email to one another, but since they were at boarding school, Kody says, e-mail was “nothing we couldn’t have done by walking down the hallway and knocking on a door.” Later, Kody used the school library for Internet research, and began to type instead of handwrite her school papers.

In the late 90s, around the time that many Americans were becoming connected to the Internet and personal computer use was increasing throughout the nation, Kody, too, became a more regular computer user. She got her first home computer when her boyfriend at the time helped her to build one: “He had a bunch of spare parts, because he was [a] technophile. He had a box of spare parts. So we took a tower and found a

hard drive that worked and went digging through and we found power strips and some memory and a motherboard. We threw it all together and started wiggling wires and pushing things into place until it powered up and worked.” She used that computer to play games and for dial-up Internet access. Kody describes how she acquired her next computer after this one. This computer was reduced for clearance after another customer had purchased and returned it: “It didn’t work, and knowing it didn’t work, I bought it. I was able to send it off and get the warranty to fix it, which was why I bought it. And it was \$350, maybe \$400, somewhere in that range. But the same ones like it that were new were \$900-\$1200.”

Kody is an avid reader, writer, and user of technology. In fact, it seems difficult to sort out her “digital” reading and writing from her “traditional” literacy because she does so much of both. As previously mentioned, she estimates that she spends forty hours a week on reading and writing texts that include “literature, news, humor, brain candy, romance novels, and sometimes help wanted and circular ads.” The scope of her literary reading ranges from Harlequin romances to Shakespearean comedies. She does much of her reading on her phone, using sites that include Al.com, Yahoo News, and Google News. For books, however, she prefers to use the actual texts rather than e-readers. Before Kody purchased a tablet, she had some reservations about e-readers: “So many people are realizing that when you purchase [an electronic] book, you’re purchasing a right to look at the book. You don’t actually own it, and they can take it from you. If I want to purchase it, I want it [she claps twice] right there.”

The technologies she frequently uses include her iPhone, laptop, and Xbox. She uses Facebook to connect with other moms and Twitter to keep up with some of her interests (She notes that she likes to follow the Twitter feeds of literary figures such as Lord Voldemort and Jane Eyre). She often jots down notes for story ideas and hopes to use some of her life story as a basis for her work in the future. For Kody, digital literacy has been not only essential to her academic life but also important to her personal and domestic life, as it helps her to generate ideas and to pursue her interest in literature, to stay connected with other moms, and to homeschool her boys. Her children have used technology to do online lessons, to check out electronic library books to read on her tablet (purchased during the course of our study). They use an app that reads aloud to the children and highlights words and sentences, helping them begin to read independently.

## Synthesis and Conclusion

### Rurality

Because rurality is the central feature that shaped our participants’ access to technology, we were interested in their perceptions of their communities and of the term itself: what does it mean to be rural? In the introduction to this piece, we note that “rural” is not a fixed label but a determination made for rhetorical, economic, and political purposes. In a similar way, “rural” does not have a shared definition for our participants,

but rather, represents a range of factors. When asked to describe her community, Kody says that Reform, AL, is rural because only 1600 people live there and because the entire county (Pickens County) has fewer people in it than Northport, AL, the “sister city” of our university town. She suggests, only somewhat ironically, that her town must be rural because it only has two stoplights. Rhonda defines herself as “less rural” than many of her library patrons because she lives in town rather than in the country, and she has access to more conveniences (like better Internet service) than those who live farther out. As she puts it: “it’s hard. You ain’t gonna get Internet ‘cause that’s why most [library patrons] come here. That’s the reason I consider not being rural myself. I know we *are*, but they’re way out there, they have to come here ‘cause they don’t have any access.” And Kristy considers herself rural even though she has spent a good portion of her life in urban areas. Our interviews suggest that “rurality” can be considered a spectrum. Moreover, while our participants sometimes define rurality in terms of the things that are lacking—stores, or easy Internet access, for instance—they are quick to point out the positive aspects of rural life, including a sense of connectedness and belonging, a feeling of safety and friendliness, and a slower-paced style of life.

### Sponsorship and Digital Literacy

In her landmark article, “Sponsors of Literacy,” Deborah Brandt argues that we can better understand the development of literacy in its social, political, and economic contexts by tracing the relationships between learners and the individuals who have sponsored them. Literacy sponsors, writes Brandt, are:

... agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy-and gain advantage by it in some way. Just as the ages of radio and television accustom us to having programs brought to us by various commercial sponsors, it is useful to think about who or what underwrites occasions of literacy learning and use. (166)

As librarians, two of our participants serve as sponsors of digital literacy in their day-to-day, professional lives. For Rhonda, sponsoring others is an important source of pride:

When [I started] teaching computer class, I had a lot of people that saw me in town and they’d say, ‘If it wasn’t for you I would never have learned computers ... I didn’t even know how to turn it on, and now I know how to get on there, check my e-mail, navigate, see what I need.’ ... if you calculate fifteen people over seven/eight years, you’ve touched a lot of people lives, and they will remind you.

In exploring how our participants were sponsored by others, and in turn sponsored other learners, we began to think about how individuals become sponsors. What qualifies someone as a sponsor of digital literacy? For our participants, the role of digital literacy sponsor was not limited to those with a high level of computer proficiency. More so than technological “capital,” our interviews suggest, digital sponsorship is often a natural result of a willingness to learn. In this sense, it seems different from traditional sponsorship. In order to teach others to read, in other words, we would normally need to know at least a little bit more than they do. With technology, our participants often described themselves as learning *with* others, as well as through their own resourcefulness. Patricia, for instance, did not know how to use computers to check out books when she first got her job at the library, but her son, a regular patron who encouraged her to apply for the job, showed her how. When it comes to using technology in school, several of our participants mentioned that technologies such as word processing were so unfamiliar when they were first introduced, that teachers and students had to learn them together. “We just taught ourselves,” as Patricia put it, or, as Kody says, “the teacher was learning as she was teaching us, because she had been using a typewriter.”

In her interview with Allen, Rhonda describes how she became a technology coordinator before she had acquired the skills she would need in this position:

I had to teach the students so I had to teach myself first: to look up stuff on the Internet, to navigate and see what I could come up with, and to do programs. Microsoft Word—the fonts, the styles ... Powerpoint ... I didn't know nothing about any of that until I started here. And that's when I started and I learned it.

She notes that she still continues to learn in her current position: “I've learned a little about Excel. Just a little. I ain't quite got it yet, but I got the book.” When our participants learn to use new technologies from their children, on their own, or with their schoolteachers, they “flip the script” of traditional sponsorship, whereby the person with the most status is usually the one assumed to know best.

### Economies, Resourcefulness, Access

In thinking about our participants' experiences in relation to the economic and political issues surrounding the digital divide, an interesting paradox emerges. On one hand, all of our participants acknowledge that they have struggled at times to get reliable access to the Internet, and that their communities are less connected than the nearest urban centers. On the other hand, their responses do not dwell on that gap; rather, they tend to emphasize their sense of connectivity, and the strategies that they personally use to bridge the divide. Throughout our interviews, we were struck by our participants' resourcefulness—in gaining Internet access, in learning to use new devices in new contexts, and in acquiring technological devices that fit within their family budgets. Kody, for instance, describes many of the strategies she has used to acquire computers

at an affordable price—whether by having a computer built for her, or by using the warranty program that came with a computer returned by another customer. Likewise, Connie explains how after years of buying popular brands, she learned to compare machine specifications among brands to find an affordable computer that met her family’s needs. These examples illustrate Selfe and Hawisher’s point that individuals “exert their own powerful agency,” not only in using, but in acquiring technologies.

Moreover, economies of access played a large role in determining how and to what extent our participants were able to use technologies for reading and writing. Scholarship on digital literacy has tended to neglect such mundane details as the ways individuals get access, the options for access in particular locations, and the financial expense that access incurs (Selfe and Hawisher, Grabill). These details may seem to be matters of luck or personal choice, but in fact, we argue, when it comes to digital literacy, the mundane details are quite profound. Throughout our discussions we found that cost and service provider options were major factors in our participants’ levels and quality of access. Connie talks at length about her family’s ongoing struggle to gain affordable, reliable access. She notes that with only one local telephone company, her options for Internet service are “very limited.” Through the years the family has tried several providers, including the local phone company and a few satellite-based services. She explains that her family is continually evaluating their need for access and weighing concerns about data usage, weather conditions, and signal strength against the costs. Bad weather can make some providers unreliable, some providers’ signals do not reach throughout the entire house, and other providers’ connectivity speeds decrease dramatically once the data limit is reached—the family must consider these points regularly.

Like Connie, Rhonda has tried several strategies in order to gain reliable, affordable access. Though she lives in an area where wired access is available, she and her husband use their smartphones as wireless hotspots. They take turns using each other’s phones to avoid data overages. Rhonda says this option is less expensive, though they still struggle at times with slow connection speed. Connie speculated in her interview that technology might be a “great equalizer,” for rural people. It indeed may be, but only for those who can afford reliable, consistent access.

### Kinds of Literacy/Contexts for Literacy

Our participants use digital literacy in a variety of contexts—personal, spiritual, academic, domestic, and professional. They display a range of literacy abilities—functional, critical, and rhetorical—in these many contexts. All of our interviewees have a high level of functional literacy, as they use basic technologies on a daily basis. But we would argue that the definition of functional digital literacy might be better understood if we include in it the ability to find solutions for access. Our participants display this practical know-how when they create internet hotspots or share their phones with family members to avoid overage fees.

Likewise, critical literacy comes in different forms, including the ability to question information that participants encounter online (as Patricia, Connie, and Rhonda discuss in excerpts above), to use technology to become politically engaged (Kristy) and to make decisions about pedagogy for homeschooling mothers (Connie, Kody). For those who are in a position of literacy *sponsor*, a concern with critical literacy sometimes forces them to negotiate the boundaries of that sponsorship. The librarians, for instance, wrestle with the question of whether to warn patrons about the Internet scams they encounter when they access e-mail on library computers. Our participants also demonstrate a sense of critical literacy when they describe how they consult web sources in order to verify the accuracy of information they find online (Rhonda, Patricia, and Connie). As Connie put it, “If you can get three places that say the same thing then you’re fairly certain.” Critical literacy also means being aware of the economies of reading and writing online. Kody, in particular, expresses reservations about e-books because she is aware that when downloading books, individual consumers don’t really “own” those books in the same way that we can own a physical book that we purchase at a bookstore.

## Conclusion

With increasing interest in digital and online instruction at all levels of education, along with an increasing use of the Internet for e-commerce as well as to maintain personal/professional connections, digital literacy has never been so important. Yet for many Americans, owning a computer and having reliable access remain difficult hurdles to overcome. We, as researchers, acknowledge that technology evolves at a pace faster than qualitative research can match. Nonetheless, we hope that research like ours will bring human voices to the abundance of data on digital usage and access, an element often neglected in statistical measurements.

Digital literacy plays many different roles in the lives of our participants—from being a shared activity with family members (as in reading with children, playing video games together, or helping one another with school work), to being an important part of their professional and spiritual lives. Literacy is a legacy that family members pass down from one generation to the next, as with Kody and her memories of her mom driving home with a book on the steering wheel. Each participant marks the passing of time through technological advancements, as they are able to recall each “era” of their lives by the life spans of the technologies that emerged during these “eras.” Further, technology is so ubiquitous that we all forget how profoundly important it is and how much the technologies used for reading and writing have changed in the span of one generation.

One of the most profound changes is the increasing reliance on mobile devices—especially smartphones. Undoubtedly, the use of “smart” devices will have a dramatic effect on everyday literacy practices in the generations to come, and mobile technologies will play an important role in overcoming the gap created by the digital divide. We hope that our research clarifies that while mobile technology has become

more widely available, adequate digital access still depends on factors like location, cost, and infrastructure. We encourage future researchers to look more closely at how rural Americans are using their mobile devices to read and write, search for and evaluate information, produce texts, and narrow the gap caused by the digital divide.

## Endnotes

1. We thank our undergraduate research assistant, Taylor Sheeran, who assisted with interview transcription and with coding the data.

2. We modified Hawisher and Selfe's questionnaire by limiting it to questions that were most germane to our focus, and by dividing it into a background portion and an interview protocol. We realize that it is not possible to draw general conclusions about rural people, both because of our small sample size and the qualitative nature of the project, but also because "rural" is a complex term used to describe a variety of people with distance from urban areas as their common link.

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