

News Coverage and Access to Contextual Policy Information in the Case of Recreational Water Rights in Colorado

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Local news media help shape the agendas from which new policies emerge. Furthermore, local media help determine public understanding of complex issues. Media should inform citizens and policymakers on important policy issues. This study uses a content analysis of 11 newspapers to understand the manner in which reporters covered a specific environmental policy issue in Colorado. Findings indicate that news coverage did not provide local readers with contextual information important in forming policy opinions. These findings support mass communication and policy scholarship on the limitations of local media in adequately informing citizens and policymakers.

News media play a crucial role in determining whether democratic principles are upheld. In a democracy, it is argued that policy decisions should be made with transparency and accountability. For the average citizen, however, the primary mechanism to understand many complex policy issues is through mediated communication. One key component of policy understanding is whether citizens and policymakers understand the complexities, context, and implications of policy decisions. With this in mind, when scholars analyze media coverage as it relates to policy outcomes, it is vital to examine how news media cover complex policy

issues in terms of placing them in an appropriate context and providing adequate information for policy knowledge.

Much research on environmental policy decisions is conducted at the state and federal levels. This pattern is also true of research on media coverage of politics and policy. In general, scholars focus on the prestige press, federal policymaking, and the interactions at a national, regional, or state level (e.g., see Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004; Kingdon, 1995). Although these studies have contributed significantly to the understanding of the interactions between media and public policy, focusing on local policy processes and media coverage can provide a depth of understanding and case context that macro-level studies usually do not (e.g., see Crow, 2010a; Layzer, 2002; Nicodemus, 2004). In addition, research often finds that online news, large circulation newspapers, and

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television are the primary source of information for citizens—and increasingly so, according to national surveys (National Science Board, 2010; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2002). In small communities, however, local newspapers are often the only means by which citizens come to understand local policy issues. For these reasons, this study (a) uses the case of a local policy decision to analyze how local news media covered a complex topic and (b) argues that the implications of such coverage could be important for policy outcomes.

LOCAL MEDIA COVERAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF INFORMED POLICYMAKING

At a minimum, the press in a democracy is expected to provide citizens with information upon which they can base their political decisions. News media serve a primary role as the purveyors of complex science and policy information (Horning, 1990; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2002). Although most research focuses on the significance of national media, and increasingly online media, on the dissemination of complex policy information, in small communities across the United States, local newspapers maintain their role as the primary source of local policy information. In many of these communities, there may not be online sources of information related to local policy topics, even as scholars assume that online media are present in nearly all communities and in nearly all subject areas. The information that citizens access through local media is necessary for accurate civic decision-making and participation.

An important element of providing this policy and political information from which citizens and policymakers can draw conclusions and form opinions is whether these in-

dividuals have access to the breadth of knowledge to accurately understand the context and implications of policy decisions. A foundational assumption about news coverage is that geographic proximity to the story leads to greater coverage of that story, rather than objective newsworthiness (Bendix & Liebler, 1999; Molotch & Lester, 1975). It should therefore be expected that any news outlet will cover local stories to a far greater extent than stories that happen outside of the local community. However, there is less understanding of how stories that are directly related to local political issues are covered when those take place outside of the local community.

The media frequently frame coverage around individual experiences and stories. These individualized packages of news help communicate the human side of issues but often leave the broader issue context as a footnote and instead rely on drama and emotion to tell the story. This framing of news is referred to as *episodic framing*, which, in comparison with *thematic framing*, is more emotional (Gross, 2008). Episodic framing can lead to a misunderstanding of the broader societal implications of policy and political issues because of its reliance on single-case narratives (Iyengar, 1990). Research on war reporting in Iraq indicates that coverage using *episodic framing*—telling stories through the eyes of individual soldiers or military units—presented a much different depiction of the war than did *thematic framing*, which provided a broader picture of the war and its effects (Lindner, 2009).

By focusing on community culture, community personalities, and drama, some local newspapers have managed to maintain high rates of circulation, despite the overall industry trends in recent years (Smith, 2007). As with episodic framing, however, this trend that has meant relative economic success for local newspapers can also lead to a lack of broad contextual information provided to local readers. Although some studies have shown that local media are more likely to cover issues frequently but negatively with regard to important

social and political issues such as immigration (Branton & Dunaway, 2009), others have indicated that local media cover local stories in a more accurate and sensitive manner than do outside media. A notorious example of such reporting was seen in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana, where national media were accused of racial profiling and inaccuracies, while the local media won awards for the quality of their coverage (Cooper, 2007).

The example of Hurricane Katrina also points to the potential importance of specialist reporters in telling complex local stories. Specifically with regard to science and environment reporting, news outlets tend to treat these topics as beat subjects, which leads to uneven reporting among newspapers, television, and wire services depending on the number of specialized beat reporters (Friedman, 1986). Research has found that newspapers have more specialist reporters than do television stations (Sachsman, Simon, & Valenti, 2006). Regardless of the presence of specialist reporters, when surveyed, scientists point to the many inaccuracies and distortions in science and environmental reporting (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2009). This trend is not likely to improve as newspapers and television stations lay off specialized reporters in order to address budget shortfalls—with CNN serving as a leading example of this trend, having eliminated its entire science and technology news division in 2008 (Brainard, 2008).

The importance of media coverage in a local community can mean that citizens and policymakers lack information related to the broader context within which policy decisions are made and about which policies are enacted. On the basis of the literature outlined here, this study attempted to answer the question, “How do local news media cover complex local environmental policy issues?” In particular, “Do local news media provide the contextual information necessary for individuals to understand the implications of important policy decisions?”

RESEARCH METHODS: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY

To answer these research questions, this study focused on a single environmental policy issue that was debated within multiple communities. The case of recreational in-channel water rights in Colorado is a useful case for this research for several reasons. First, water rights are a technical policy issue where citizens and policymakers need access to accurate and clear information in order to develop informed opinions upon which to base decisions because these individuals are not typically engaged in water policy discussions. Second, this case, as subsequently outlined, played out across Colorado communities from 1998 to 2007 and allows a comparison of different media and policy cases on the basis of a common policy topic. Last, this case generated significant political controversy in communities and across the State of Colorado and therefore would be expected to generate some degree of local media coverage.

Case Study: The Recreational In-Channel Diversion Water Right

In Western United States, where water resources are variable and less plentiful, water rights systems are controlled primarily under the system of prior appropriation (Getches, 1997) wherein junior water rights holders are not allowed to take any of their water until the senior water rights holders on the river have fully satisfied their rights. Colorado's previous appropriation system first allowed only for irrigation water rights (Hobbs, 1997) but over time has evolved to incorporate many other uses of water, including domestic, industrial, mining, snowmaking for ski resorts, environmental protection, and other uses (Colorado Foundation for Water Education, 2004). This evolution of uses has most recently included the development of in-channel recreational use of water for maintaining river flows for kayaking and

whitewater boating. This new water right—the recreational in-channel diversion (RICD)—is the focus of the analysis presented here.

In 1998, Golden, Colorado, applied for the first such water right in water court, following previous legal precedent. As recreation and tourism have become important economic drivers across Colorado and in many communities, local governments sought solutions to help establish or protect recreational resources, such as whitewater boating. Golden was followed by Vail, Breckenridge, and nine other communities between 1998 and 2006. As a result of intense political opposition to these water rights, the state legislature debated legislation on three separate occasions to codify and restrict the water right, passing two pieces of legislation (Senate Bills 216 [2001]; 62 [2005]; 37 [2006]). The Colorado Supreme Court also heard the cases involving four of these communities before the water rights were granted.

Over a decade, this issue rose in importance throughout communities in Colorado. Similar policy debates were held in local communities regarding whether to pursue a water right and build the required boating course structures to qualify for such a water right. This was not only a politically controversial issue, but also an expensive undertaking for the communities that chose to pursue an RICD. Communities spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees associated with the water right ($M = \$276,714^1$ in costs), and many also spent hundreds of thousands of dollars building the boating course structures ($M = \$378,200^2$ in costs). Considering that many of these communities have small tax bases ($M = 21,385^3$ people), this is a significant investment and an important and complex policy decision.

¹Figures for each community obtained through interviews with the water attorney in each case.

²Figures for each community obtained through interviews with local policymakers in each case.

³Figure based on U.S. Census data for 2000 because this policy decision took place within local communities between 1998 and 2006.

In local communities, in the Colorado water court system, and in the state legislature, the issue of RICD water rights became a great source of debate and litigation. Traditional water users—irrigators, large municipalities, the State of Colorado, and some water suppliers—in general, opposed these water rights, whereas mountain towns that relied on recreation, environmental groups, and recreation advocates supported the water rights.

Research Design

A comparative case study research design was used for this study. All 12 communities that applied for a RICD water right were studied: Golden, Vail, Breckenridge, Longmont, Pueblo, Gunnison, Steamboat Springs, Chaffee County, Silverthorne, Avon, Durango, and Carbondale. A content analysis of all local media coverage of the RICD issue within each case study community was conducted. In the 12 communities, 11 newspapers were included in the sample. This group of newspapers includes every local newspaper within the case study communities, which also includes the two statewide dailies in Colorado—*The Denver Post* and *Rocky Mountain News* (*Rocky Mountain News* closed in 2009). Two of the newspapers sampled are weekly publications—the *Carbondale Valley Journal* and the *Gunnison Country Times*. A complete database of all published articles pertaining to RICD water rights was constructed by the lead researcher through multiple search methods including academic search databases, local newspaper online archives, newspaper hardcopy archives, and community library archives. Each back issue of the local newspaper during the decade from 1998 to 2007 was searched for articles, when possible. These articles include editorials as well as news about the local RICD water right, the legislative debates statewide, the RICD boating courses, and general statewide political issues related to the water rights. There was no national or regional media coverage on this issue.

Newspapers were solely included in this study because they were the only source of local water policy news in each community, with one exception. Pueblo is covered by local television news, but other communities rely on television news from the Denver and Colorado Springs/Pueblo markets (and, in one case, the Albuquerque market), which are generally distant and rarely cover topics related to local community policymaking and water rights outside of their metro areas.⁴ In addition, there were no blogs or online news sources covering this story within local communities, apart from those Web sites associated with newspapers. It is important to note that the absence of local television and online news sources does not indicate that the data used in this study are somehow out of date. Rather, consider that in small and rural communities across the country, where important local environmental decisions are frequently made, newspapers often remain the primary source of policy and political news. A total of 325 articles were included in the database constructed for this content analysis.

Two coders then independently coded each article for stakeholder groups as news sources, the subject focus of the article (legislation, local policy, local recreation, broad statewide issues, issues facing other RICD communities), and geographic focus of the article (local, other communities, or statewide). Using Scott's pi, intercoder reliability coefficients show 100% agreement between coders for *type of article* (1.0) and *subject of article* (1.0). These are the two subsequently analyzed variables.

The purpose of coding these variables was to understand how local newspapers chose to cover this complex policy issue as it relates to the local and broader statewide policy debates that were ongoing at the time. In particular, the second research question—"Do local news media provide the contextual

information necessary for individuals to understand the implications of important policy decisions?"—will be answered on the basis of the presence of media coverage related to the experiences of Colorado communities that had previously pursued a RICD water right, statewide legislation and court decisions, and similar information that would provide local communities with relevant information upon which to make policy decisions. In interviews with community policymakers, the importance of understanding what other communities had experienced, what the legal requirements were, and what the likely costs and political obstacles would be emerged as the most important information that local communities could learn from others. These, therefore, were chosen as indicators of contextual policy information in local media reporting.

RESEARCH FINDINGS: POLICY CONTEXT AND LOCAL MEDIA COVERAGE

Because the policy issue in question played out across an entire state, by focusing on a single community without regard for any discussion of statewide issues or the experiences of other communities, news coverage that focused on single RICD communities can be compared to episodic framing—that which is divorced of its broader context. In the RICD case, the communities of Golden, Vail, Breckenridge, and Gunnison fought their water rights cases to the Colorado Supreme Court and simultaneously battled the legislature in its attempts to undermine the water right. These communities spent significant sums of money on the legal process and paved the way for later cases, legally and politically (Crow, 2011). This is a case where effective policy learning could readily take place among the case study communities and provide for better policy decisions in later

⁴Golden is a suburban community in the Denver television market, but as with most local community policy decisions, this water debate did not garner any television coverage within the large Denver market.

Table 1
Quantity of local news coverage of recreational in-channel diversion issue

Community	Total coverage	News articles	Editorials	Non-editorial opinion articles
Golden	42	27	3	11
Vail/Avon	22	10	0	12
Breckenridge/Silverthorne	27	24	0	3
Longmont	13	13	0	0
Pueblo	95	69	22	4
Gunnison	20	19	1	0
Steamboat Springs	36	26	1	9
Chaffee County	14	14	0	2
Durango	51	38	0	13
Carbondale	5	4	0	1
TOTAL	325	244	27	55

Note. The values listed are raw numbers of articles where recreational in-channel diversion issues were the primary subject of the article.

case study communities. This is also a case where comparisons with other communities and discussions of past cases are necessary components to complete understanding of the policy issue in question.

Overall, in RICD communities in Colorado, when media coverage is broken down by community, Pueblo⁵ is the only community where media coverage of RICD issues was a notable news topic. This is surprising given the large expenditures that local elected officials devoted to building boating courses and gaining water rights. Table 1 indicates the amount of media coverage in RICD communities during the decade of analysis.

The data in Table 2 break down news content according to the primary subject of the article. Overall statewide content analysis numbers are also provided.

For effective policy learning and improved policy outcomes, news coverage should include some degree of focus on the experiences of other RICD communities. This was not evident in the case study communities analyzed here. To indicate a focus on contextual policy information from other cases,

media coverage would have discussed the experiences, costs, or issues involved in other RICD cases. Overall, this was the least frequent topic of coverage for local news media. Out of 325 articles coded for this study, only 10 articles focused on other communities' experiences. This is somewhat surprising because the communities that laid much of the legal groundwork (i.e., Golden, Vail, Breckenridge, and Gunnison) were considered notorious cases and well known within policy circles. Although it is to be expected that local issues will take precedence in news coverage, according to traditional journalistic values, the coverage of RICD stories shows a journalistic blindness to the experiences of other RICD communities and the relevance of these cases to the local community's experience.

Figure 1 removes the topic of statewide legislation and collapses the categories related to broader statewide context to illustrate a simple dichotomy of local and nonlocal news focus, ordered chronologically. The communities that proceeded through the RICD legal process first are those where there was actually more coverage of other communities' experiences. In later cases in which policy learning is especially important and useful for producing better policy decisions, there was little coverage beyond the local RICD cases. While it may seem curious that Golden, the first RICD case, received more coverage than most later cases, it is important

⁵Pueblo is the only community among the case study communities, and possibly in Colorado, where a dedicated water reporter is on the newspaper staff. This clearly may be one reason for the abundance of coverage. The presence of a water reporter indicates that this issue is vital to the local community—and to the newspaper's publisher.

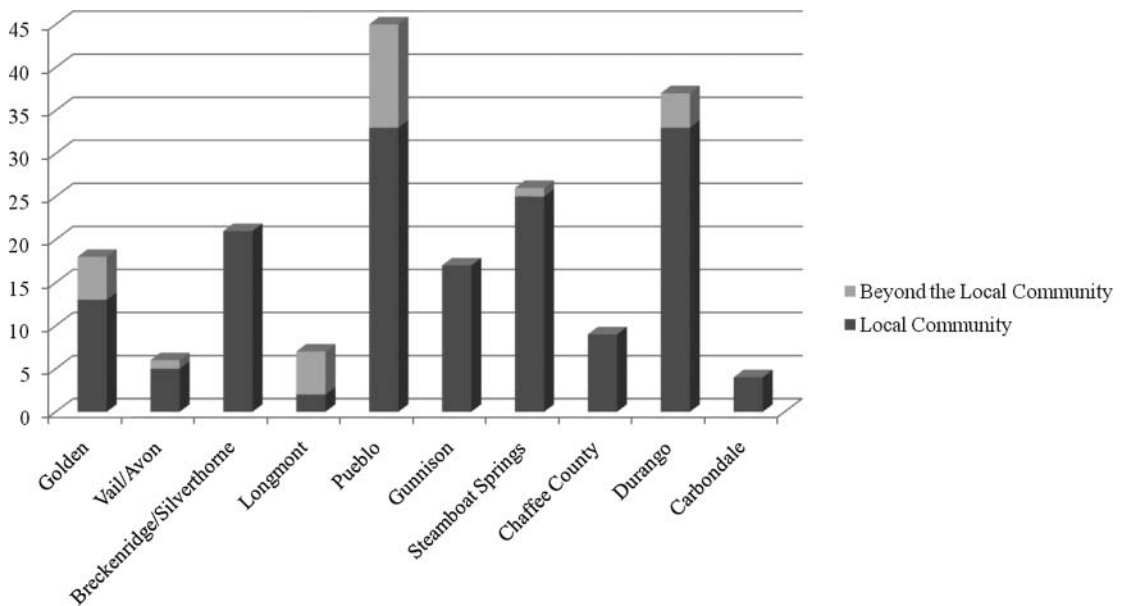


Fig. 1. Recreational in-channel diversion coverage, by geographic focus. The y axis represents the raw number of articles present in local newspaper coverage.

to remember that Golden is served by *The Denver Post*, which is more likely to cover other communities across Colorado. Golden, therefore, would be more likely to receive contextual policy information, even though it was all published after Golden’s legal case was settled.

Previous work indicates that the important policy learning that took place was based on expert dissemination of information rather than media coverage of policy lessons from other communities (Crow, 2011). Local citizens and elected officials would have benefitted by understanding the experiences of these previous cases, including how much these communities spent to obtain their water rights and what level of legal and political opposition they faced. In some of the later cases, access to this information through local news may have made a difference in the level of local support for pursuing the water right.

A final important question to ask is whether there are any important differences in coverage of RICD issues on the basis of newspaper circulation. Because large newspapers would presumably have more staff resources,

it is logical that they may cover complex issues such as water rights in greater depth than may small newspapers. These large newspapers may also have the ability and interest in covering the experiences of communities throughout the state. Between this and the presence of more specialized reporters at large newspapers, these papers may be more likely to cover the RICD story. However, it may also be likely that small community newspapers are more likely to cover the RICD issue because it is primarily of local concern and because large newspapers are more likely to simply have more news to cover and less space in which to publish it. Table 3 breaks down the communities by population, and it lists the total number of RICD articles printed in each newspaper.

By grouping communities into two groups (>50,000 and <50,000—the same results would be found if a population of 20,000 was used as the dividing point), to test whether circulation and RICD coverage quantity are related, a two sample *t*-test (two-tailed) *t*-statistic was not significant at the .05 level, $t(9) = .633, p = .543$. There is no statistically

Table 2
RICD newspaper coverage broken down by subject

Community	Local RICD and boating course	Statewide legislation	Statewide RICD political and policy issues	Other RICD community cases
Golden	13	4	5	0
Vail/Avon	5	14	0	1
Breckenridge/Silverthorne	21	5	0	0
Longmont	2	5	4	1
Pueblo	33	15	4	8
Gunnison	17	2	0	0
Steamboat Springs	25	10	1	0
Chaffee County	9	4	0	0
Durango	33	10	4	0
Carbondale	4	1	0	0
Total	171	71	37	10

Note. RICD = recreational in-channel diversion.

The values listed are raw numbers of articles where RICD issues were the primary subject of the article. The data presented do not include those coded as "other," which includes articles about topics such as events held at the kayak course, brief mentions of the water right or kayak course in the context of other articles, and specific topics related to local water negotiations (that also indirectly include the RICD). If these were all added into the dataset, they would increase the total for the category "Local RICD and boating course" in each community.

significant difference between the two groups. It is important to note that the sample sizes are very small in this comparison, so the statistics must read with care.

These findings are important when considered in the context of previously presented research about the RICD policy process. In the RICD case, experts such as water attorneys and

water managers dominated policy discourse, these experts were given considerable trust by local elected officials when it came to advocating for policy solutions (namely, the RICD), and citizens were seldom interested or involved in the policy process or political debates held within communities (Crow, 2009, 2010b). In addition, this local media coverage did not begin in 10 of the 12 RICD communities until after policy decisions had been made (Crow, 2010a). This information, combined with the data presented here, indicates that reporting focused almost exclusively on the local policy process without regard for previous experiences of other communities. This finding indicates that citizens did not have access to information that was timely and placed their local community into a broader context of RICD cases statewide.

Table 3
Community size and total recreational in-channel diversion coverage

Community	Population	Total recreational in-channel diversion coverage
Golden	17,159	44
Vail	4,531	22
Breckenridge	2,408	27
Longmont	71,093	13
Pueblo	102,121	95
Gunnison	5,409	20
Steamboat Springs	9,815	36
Silverthorne	3,169	27
Chaffee County	16,242	14
Avon	5,561	22
Durango	13,922	51
Carbondale	5,196	5

Note. When newspapers cover more than one community, the total number of recreational in-channel diversion articles is entered for each community that the newspaper covers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The data presented here support previous scholarship on the limitations of local news

and episodic framing (Iyengar, 1990; Lindner, 2009; Smith, 2007) and demonstrate that Colorado community newspapers focused almost exclusively on their own community at the expense of reporting a broader context to local readers. This can have important policy implications because of the exclusion of information about costs, obstacles, objections, and processes that other case study communities faced. Local policymakers indicated in interviews that understanding issues in previous communities was important to their decisions. Only those policymakers who actively sought out information through personal and professional channels, however, accessed this information. Much of the information that would potentially be included in contextual coverage would be considered negative (high costs, significant political battles, and lengthy court cases) and may have provided information upon which citizens or policymakers may have formed contrary positions to those that were eventually enacted by local officials.

Especially when dealing with complex technical or scientific issues, it is vital that journalists provide citizens with the information they need to adequately and timely form opinions about decisions made on their behalf. It is often the task of reporters to translate science, policy, law, or data so that readers and viewers can understand the complexities of issues. Without good reporting, including the provision of accurate, contextual, and clearly communicated information, citizens and policymakers may often be left without adequate information upon which to base their personal political decisions.

This research concludes that local newspapers in Colorado did not provide adequate policy information in the case of recreational in-channel water rights decisions. However, there are some limitations to these findings that are important to future research in this area. The media coverage analyzed for this study span from 1998 to 2007. During this time, as local newspapers developed online outlets, they often did not provide information related to placement (page numbers and sections). A

short front-page story may be more important in relaying policy information than a longer story located in a less prominent position in the paper. Therefore, future research should incorporate story length and story placement when analyzing the contextual policy information provided through local media outlets.

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