# The effect of community structure on newspapers' coverage of issues involving conflict vs. consensus in the community

**By**

**Dr. Marshel D. Rossow**
**Professor of Mass Media**
**Minnesota State University, Mankato**

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## Background

In the usually serene setting of lakes and forests and granite outcroppings of northern Wisconsin in the mid 1980s, two issues erupted. Both involved use (or as many perceived it, *abuse*) of the environment. Both involved what many residents saw as external threats to their power to control events affecting their community -- indeed, as threats to the northern Wisconsin outdoors way of life. In one case, the point of contention made the residents of the region pull together victoriously in a shared cause; in the other, the topic caused deep divisions among residents in many of those same communities.

One issue involved a plan by the federal government to examine two areas of northern Wisconsin as a potential site for a high-level nuclear-waste repository in the granite bedrock underlying the region. In the spring of 1979, the U.S. Department of Energy issued a report describing generic waste-disposal-site characteristics and impacts. When officials of Wisconsin's Geological and Natural History Survey noted that the generic characteristics described conditions at two northern Wisconsin locations, "The public response was immediate and forceful" (RWRB 1986). The resistance intensified when it was learned later in 1979 that the Department of Energy planned to begin repository-site studies in the state. After years of rumor, uncertainty and unrest, the DOE in January 1986 issued a report identifying rock bodies in Wisconsin and six other states as potential secondary repository sites. The public uproar was deafening. After listening to several months of noisy outcry by enraged citizens, the DOE announced in late May 1986 that work on secondary repository siting would be postponed indefinitely (RWRB 1986). Although Wisconsin was not completely off the waste-siting hook -- its geologic characteristics mean it remains a potential future target -- the postponement relieved public fears and marked a rapid decline in intense media coverage of the siting issue.

The other issue in this study involved the usufructuary rights[1] of Chippewa Indians, specifically the treaty right to engage in off-reservation spearing of game fish during the spring spawn. Although treaty disputes spanned more than a century and a half in Wisconsin, the dispute that publicly developed in the mid-1980s began in 1969 when members of the Red Cliff and Bad River bands of Chippewa were charged with illegally fishing in Lake Superior. The Wisconsin Supreme Court in 1972 decided in favor of the Chippewa, saying they had retained treaty rights to fish in Superior. Two years later, two members of the Lac Courte Oreilles band were arrested for fishing in a smaller lake off their reservation. The case made its way through state and federal courts. In early 1983, the Seventh Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals found in favor of the Chippewa, and in late 1983 the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear Wisconsin's appeal of the ruling. But although the right to fish was upheld, a dispute emerged over the extent of exercising those rights. An agreement on spearing was not reached in time to be implemented in spring 1984. Thus, the first practice of the newly reiterated off-reservation spearing rights occurred in spring 1985, drawing immense protest from both the pro- and anti-Chippewa forces. Media coverage became intense as the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and other law-enforcement agencies tried to keep peace between supporters and opponents of spearing. Media coverage quickly eased at the end of the spring spearing (although it was to reemerge again and again in the springs that followed).

As the discussion above shows, on the nuclear-waste proposal there seemed to be little discord among northern Wisconsin residents -- under no circumstances would they accept a repository. On spearing, no such consensus developed. While some residents recognized and supported the Chippewa treaty rights to harvest fish, others were opposed -- sometimes violently so -- to the Chippewa exercising those rights.

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[1] "Usufructuary rights" may be a phrase with which some readers are unfamiliar. The phrase comes from the word "usufruct," the right to use another's property without damaging or altering it. In the Wisconsin spearing situation, "usufructuary rights" are those rights that, in signing treaties with the U.S. government, the Chippewa tribes retained to hunt, fish, gather and harvest in ceded territories.

In both cases, the issues were thrust upon small communities by decisions made at the federal level. Newspapers in the affected areas and beyond recognized the news value in the two stories. Most area newspapers closely followed the whirl of activities spinning around both topics, some running dozens of stories about the issues. The research being presented here examines and compares the coverage in an effort to determine whether the nature of the two disputes became intertwined with the sociocultural characteristics of the communities to affect information presented to readers.

Specifically, the research examines two basic questions:

(1) Does the level of community structure or *pluralism*[2] influence the local newspaper's presentation or suppression of information that might contribute to intracommunity conflict?

(2) Regardless of the level of community pluralism, will the extent and completeness of *enabling information* be greater in stories about topics of consensus than about topics of contention?

**Relevant literature: The value of local news**

For local news, the community newspaper traditionally has been a key information source for community members. Particularly for non-metropolitan weeklies and small dailies, local coverage has long been the "bread and butter" of the newsroom (Yamamoto 2011; Gladney 1990; Sim 1969; Janowitz 1967; Greenberg 1964). The importance of newspapers providing useful information has been well-documented. In his classic examination of small-town power structures, Mills (1956) observed: "Very little of what we think we know of the social realities of the world have we found out firsthand." Even when people have witnessed events firsthand, he

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[2] The term *pluralism* is fraught with peril because of its myriad meanings in different research disciplines. Despite the danger, the term was used in this project because of its widespread use in earlier research on which much of the present study was based. At the outset of examining pluralism as used in media research, it should be noted that pluralism is a matter of degree and definition. If it were conceded, as some have contended, that the entire United States is "a society with plural features, but not a plural society" (Furnivall 1956), then no individual Wisconsin community would truly be much different from any other, and research on "pluralism" would have no basis. In mass media research, however, differences in pluralism do exist among communities such as those examined here.

noted, they may not believe the evidence of their own eyes until that evidence has been confirmed in the mass media.

Schramm and Roberts (1972) concurred. They observed that, "Only the media can provide us with much of the information necessary to enable public participation in government. Only the media can insure that this information is complete. Theirs is the responsibility of making sure that the public receives all available information about various issues before those issues are resolved."

Forty years later, Wishart (2012) noted a continuing truth: "The one constant in small-town newspapers is that they strive to provide people with local news about their schools, government, clubs, and activities.... Editors of small-town newspapers know that if they chronicle people's lives and the events around them, people will read their papers. Shirky (2012), too, concurs: "It's hard to overstate how vital community coverage is for small-town papers, which have typically been as much village well as town crier." Markus (2011) similarly points out the role of small newspapers in providing vital information to their communities, and Yamamoto (2011) found that access to such local news provided citizens with a sense of social cohesion.

Atwater, Salwen and Anderson (1985) offered evidence of the important media role in providing news specifically related to the environment. When these researchers asked respondents where they obtained most of their information about environmental issues, 83 percent named one or more media sources exclusively. In examining media coverage of one environmental issue (a waste-incinerator siting process), Johnson-Cartee, Graham and Foster (1993) observed that, "In today's environment, public policy must deal with these types of hazardous situations.... For the public to make informed choices, the news media must present balanced and informed coverage.... They provide raw materials from which citizens form political realities." Beane (1973) likewise supported the value of newspapers providing environmental information, saying, "The complexity and technical nature of ... environmental problems make them extremely difficult issues for the general public to comprehend.... If citizens are to become more involved ... they will need objective sources of information."

Mazur and Conant (1978) and Sapolsky (1968) found that the level of intensity of media coverage of environmental issues affected people's attitudes toward the issues. Earlier research has shown that the information the media provide in that coverage has disparate levels of usefulness (Rossow 1994; Griffin and Dunwoody 1993; Dunwoody and Rossow 1989; Gallepp 1982).

**Relevant literature: Key concepts**

Three major concepts were central to this study -- "pluralism," "conflict" and "enabling information."

**Pluralism,** as noted earlier, has different meanings to researchers within and among disciplines. Discussion of the topic frequently is marked by a lack of consensus about what the term really represents. As Ley, Peach and Clarke (1984) observed, "Pluralism as a concept presents one of the more intractable problems to interdisciplinary dialogue in the social sciences." Despite this lack of consensus, the concept as used in mass media research often has been used interchangeably with such terms as "heterogeneity," "community structure," "social structure" and "social pluralism" (Coleman, Bacaltchuk and Lathrop 1993; Griffin and Dunwoody 1993; Hindman, Olien, Donohue and Tichenor 1992; Schweitzer and Smith 1991; McLeod 1991, Griswold 1991). When viewed in connection with media performance, pluralism typically has been examined as a reflection of the power structure of a community. Griffin and Dunwoody (1993) observed that, "Talking about community structure, or pluralism, is a way of talking about the distribution of power in a community."

This power distribution is basic to Tichenor, Donohue and Olein's (1980) definition of pluralism as "the extent to which one community is characterized by a greater diversity of potential sources of social power than another community." A pluralism theory emerged from more than four decades of work by Tichenor, Donohue and Olein and more recently by other researchers (including but not limited to Smith, 1987, Griswold 1988; Dunwoody and Rossow 1989; Demers 1990; Rossow and Dunwoody 1991; McLeod 1991; Griffin and Dunwoody 1993; Coleman, Bacaltchuk and Lathrop 1993; Coleman 1994). The theory suggests, in essence, that

the way a newspaper covers community issues and events will be determined at the societal level by the characteristics of the community in which that paper is embedded. Research has shown that community power structure is related to the performance of mass media in the community and thus to the form and quantity of information available to citizens (Olien, Donohue and Tichenor 1978; DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 1989). Media in lower-pluralism settings tend to serve as consensus builders, community boosters and reinforcers of mainstream values; they may not see reporting of intracommunity dissension as part of their job if such reports can be given a positive spin. When such media report conflict, they often do so as a way of organizing a unified response to some external agency seen as posing a threat to the community (Olien, Donohue and Tichenor 1968; Tichenor, Donohue and Olien 1980).

On the other hand, media in higher-pluralism communities are likely to serve as the public forum through which power bases communicate (Griffin and Dunwoody 1993). Indeed, rather than avoiding the reporting of local conflicts, media in more-pluralistic communities often perform a "feedback" role by drawing attention to such problems -- that is, bringing an issue out into the open where it can be constructively confronted (Tichenor, Donohue and Olien 1980). As an example of this press performance, Dunwoody and Rossow (1989) found newspapers in more-pluralistic communities covering a local controversy more extensively than their counterparts in less-pluralistic settings; the higher-pluralism papers were more likely to report conflicting views of participants in the dispute and to dig out material that the lower-pluralism papers were likely to have left untouched.

Research involving pluralism often is lacking working definitions that would explain why some communities are rated higher in pluralism than others; operationalizations follow no clear-cut path. Gamson (1966), in a study of community conflict, examined what he called "shared background" based on nationality, education, religion and length of residence as factors influencing conflict. Griswold (1988) flatly declared rural areas less pluralistic than urban areas. Other researchers in describing pluralism have considered such myriad factors as political groups, community poverty, women in the work force, industrial activity, economic

diversification, educational levels, religious affiliations, percentage of minority citizens, university enrollment, per capita income, distance to a metropolitan area, number of community schools, number of voluntary organizations -- the list is marvelously varied. (See, for example, Olien, Tichenor and Donohue 1986; Dunwoody and Rossow 1989; Olien, Tichenor, Donohue, Sandstrom and McLeod 1990; McLeod 1991; Griffin, Dunwoody and Gehrmann 1992; Hindman, Olien, Donohue and Tichenor 1992; Coleman, Bacaltchuk and Lathrop 1993). But among all the determinants of pluralism, the common thread seems to be community population size. In truth, a community's pluralism level seems in large measure to be a function of population size (Hindman, Olien, Donohue and Tichenor 1992; Griffin and Dunwoody 1993). However, population size alone should not be used as an absolute indicator of pluralism. Tichenor, Donohue and Olien (1980) observed: "It is possible to have a large concentration of population with relatively little diversity." Thus, multiple indicators will be used in this study, as will be explained in the definitions section to follow.

**Conflict** traditionally has been a major element of news stories. As Lippman (1915) noted almost a century ago, news overwhelmingly is based on trouble and conflict. In more recent times, conflict remains relevant in an examination involving newspapers and pluralism. One repeated finding is that newspapers are more likely to avoid reporting internal conflict in the small, more traditional community in the interest of maintaining an outward image of tranquility as well as tranquility in fact (Tichenor, Donohue and Olien 1980). Rapoport (1974) explained that "conflict directed outward promotes cohesion and cooperation inward.... In short, exogenous conflicts, by dramatizing the boundary between Us and Them, that is, by calling attention to what is outside of the system, also call attention to what is inside. The immediate results are attenuations of endogenous conflicts." Thus, even when an issue causes sharp disunity in a community, the small-town press may portray the community as unified against an outside force. This protective mechanism is necessary because smaller communities often lack more formalized ways to accommodate conflict that are available in larger, more-pluralistic communities (Tichenor, Donohue and Olien 1980).

The "rules of the game" in small-town reporting, then, require that conflict be channeled into the least-disruptive paths. When forced to report on topics of conflict (e.g., because of coverage by competing media), the small-town press likely will report the dispute in a way that minimizes local differences. Janowitz (1967) found that less than 5 percent of space in the community newspapers he studied was devoted to controversial topics. Tichenor, Donohue, Olien and Hindman (1993-1994) reported that "all but 1 or 2 percent" of local coverage of news about government and public agencies is non-controversial. Dunwoody and Rossow (1989) observed that newspapers in more heterogeneous communities framed fewer stories in conflictive terms. Smith (1987), in a study of a single community, noted that reporting of conflict on almost all topics increased as pluralism developed over 40 years.

Edelstein and Schulz found that small-town editors endorsed a good-news philosophy shared with town leaders, tending to print controversy only when it reached a point of concern among citizens and preferring instead to publish material that stressed their community's good points. Breed (1964) earlier had found a similar "chamber of commerce attitude" in the community press. But editors and community leaders are not alone in their boosterism. Janowitz (1967) found extensive evidence that ordinary small-town readers saw the newspaper as an agent of community welfare. His analysis suggested that the community press may give varying degrees of coverage to different controversies, depending on how the community perceives an issue. He found that controversies likely to receive prominent treatment in the local press were ones in which the community was pitted against outside forces, with little internal dissent -- a situation consistent with Rapoport's analysis of conflict cited earlier and much like the waste-siting controversy but quite different from the spearing dispute being considered here. In another finding suggesting an expectation of cooperation in small-town society, Coser (1956) found that when threats from external forces arise, small, homogeneous groups demand great internal cohesion and high involvement from all elements of the group in mobilizing energies against the outside enemy.

If, as suggested by the literature cited above, pluralism predisposes newspapers to cover conflict in certain ways, might it also be linked with the types of information provided in specific stories? It is known that the usefulness of information newspapers provide can vary considerably, and readers are likely to act on certain types of information when it is made available (Sears and Freedman, 1972; Murch, 1971). Information that specifically empowers readers to react to situations and events in their communities has been labeled **"enabling information."** That label is akin to other tags researchers have used to describe reader-usable information, including "functional information" (Dailey 1993) and, most notably, "mobilizing information" (Lemert et al. 1984, 1983, 1982, 1979, 1977).

In basest terms, enabling information, or EI, involves "news you can use" for civic participation, as Lemert (1991) called it. A term first used by Dunwoody and Rossow (1989), enabling information is similar to the "mobilizing information" concept developed earlier by Lemert and his colleagues (Hungerford and Lemert 1973; Lemert and Larkin 1979; Lemert and Cook 1982; Lemert and Ashma 1983; Lemert 1984). In a study of why editors use or delete mobilizing information, Lemert (1984) found editors more likely to delete such information in controversial contexts. Likewise, Lemert and his colleagues found that mobilizing information was most likely to be present in positive-context news -- issues that enjoy community consensus (Lemert and Ashma 1983; Lemert and Cook 1982). McQuail (2010) lists "mobilization" -- providing material in the media to promote objectives of the society in which the media exist -- as a key task of media. Such information may promote community involvement by readers on issues they consider important (Moscowitz, 2002).

Most mobilizing-information studies have examined information across a range of topics in selected publications, without regard to the exact topics. Studies of enabling information have gone beyond mobilizing information in that they have focused on specific news topics and have assessed the comprehensiveness (coded as completely useful, partially useful or non-useful) beyond the simple presence/absence of reader-usable information (Dunwoody and Rossow 1989; Rossow and Dunwoody 1991; Rossow, 2011).

**Definitions**

The key concepts cited in the literature review above were defined for this study as follows:

**Pluralism** was defined as characteristics of a community that, when taken together, are deemed to reflect the nature of the social, political and economic structure of the community. U.S. Census Bureau data relevant to the time frame of the controversies examined was used to create a "pluralism scale" for the communities studied. A community's level of pluralism was gauged as a measure of the community's ranking on an 11-item scale consisting of these variables: (1) community population; (2) population change between 1980 and 1990; (3) proportion of non-Caucasian residents; (4) proportion of residents born in Wisconsin; (5) percent of foreign-born residents; (6) percent of residents living in a different house in 1985 than in 1980; (7) percent of residents who owned versus rented their homes; (8) percent change in per capita income between 1979 and 1987; (9) proportion of residents over age 65 compared with those under age 5; (10) proportion of students attending private schools; and (11) number of religious denominations in the community.

**Enabling information** was defined as story content that would help a reader pursue a chosen course of action related to the topic of the story in which the information appears. For most news stories, multiple instances of enabling information were expected to be found. Following Dunwoody and Rossow (1989), each instance of enabling information (EI) was coded as complete, partial or non-useful, as will be explained in the methodology section below.

**Conflict** was defined following several earlier definitions of news-story conflict (Dunwoody and Rossow 1989; Simon, Fico and Lacy 1989; Smith 1987; Olien, Donohue and Tichenor 1968). Specifically, conflict was considered the presence of explicit statements or actions by two or more opposing parties over the topic of the story.

**Methodology**

The study used content analysis to examine coverage of the waste-siting and spearing issues. Relevant articles in a final tally of 17 weekly and daily newspapers with circulations from 791 to 25,832 were coded for the quantity and level of usefulness of enabling information offered in the

articles. Those findings were then analyzed in relation to community structure, or pluralism, to determine whether differences in coverage existed between communities with a relatively homogenous structure compared with communities that were more heterogeneous.

A preliminary examination of the communities involved in the waste-siting and spearing controversies determined that some communities potentially affected were within the boundaries of the proposed waste sites but beyond the geographic scope of the spearing dispute. The first step, then, was to map out communities that, on the basis of geographic location, might have been expected to carry stories about both the waste-siting and spearing issues. A map of Wisconsin was prepared on which were overlaid the boundaries of (1) the 1837 and 1842 treaties that are central to the spearing dispute, and (2) the areas being considered by the federal government as potential nuclear-waste repository sites. Communities lying within both a radius of approximately 25 miles of the treaty area and one of the two potential waste-repository areas were then examined for the presence of local daily or weekly newspapers. The result was a list of 24 newspapers -- five dailies and 19 weeklies[3] -- that could be expected to examine both issues as topics of local concern and with potential for direct local impact. Community sizes ranged from 540 to 37,060. The newspapers were ranked on a pluralism scale based on the 11-indicator ranking system noted earlier. An examination of the ratings revealed a rather smooth continuum of scores.[4] Ideally there would have been extreme highs and lows so that natural "high" and "low" pluralism groups could have been examined. But such was not the case. Thus, following the example of Dunwoody and Rossow (1989; Rossow and Dunwoody 1991), communities from the upper and lower levels of the ranking scheme were purposively selected to maximize differences in pluralism. Communities in the middle of the list dropped out. The final list of

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[3] Originally, 25 communities were ranked on the pluralism scale. After the ranking was completed, it was discovered that one of the communities, Tigerton, was no longer served by a distinct community newspaper at the time of the spearing and waste-siting controversies, even though the Tigerton Chronicle was listed in some publications directories; the Chronicle had been absorbed by the Marion Advertiser before the two disputes arose. Therefore, Tigerton, by necessity, was dropped from the list of newspapers to be considered for examination.

[4] Ley, Peach and Clarke (1984) noted that many theorists interpret pluralism as a continuous rather than discrete variable -- reflecting the kind of continuum found in the examination of Wisconsin communities.

communities whose papers were to be examined consisted of seven cities from the top of the ranking and 10 from the bottom.

   With the list of 17 community newspapers in hand, the search for relevant news and opinion pieces about the waste and spearing issues began. The chronology of the spearing controversy suggested that newspapers from January through May 1985 should be examined because preparations for the spring spearing season began early in the year and culminated with the actual spearing in May. A similar chronology applied in the waste-siting controversy: The government announcement of potential waste sites in January 1986 kicked off press coverage of the issue, and the announcement in mid-May that the secondary-site search had been suspended brought a rapid decline in media attention.

   More than 800 newspaper editions were examined for relevant information on the two topics. Every page of each edition was searched for news articles, editorials, opinion columns, photographs and other miscellaneous items about the topics. Photos and other artwork were included in the coding only if the information was not already presented in an accompanying story. Letters to the editor were not included because it was decided they would not accurately reflect information the newspaper itself had chosen to provide readers. However, opinion pieces and other material written by non-journalists but that received more than letter-to-the-editor treatment were included for coding – e.g., an invited piece by a state legislator or a tribal leader.

   The examination yielded 683 relevant items to be coded. Once the  items had been located, attention was turned to coding for enabling information and conflict. Two coders worked on coding, and Scott's pi (Scott 1955) was used to test for intercoder reliability. Adjustments to coding were made when a need was indicated.

   As in earlier EI research, enabling information was coded as complete, partial or non-useful, allowing an examination of not only the existence but also the comprehensiveness of enabling information. Complete EI was material a reader could use to complete an action without further

information, such as the exact time and place of a hearing. Partial EI was material that might call for further information to make action possible, such as a meeting day and community but not specific time and location. Non-useful EI was material that hinted at possible action but was insufficient to permit that action by a reader, such as a vague reference to "a future hearing" or "a tribal source."

Each story was coded as either containing or not containing conflict, based on the simple presence or absence of statements or actions by protagonists in an issue. While the protagonists did not have to be identified by name, the information had to make clear what general social, cultural or political group was represented. Thus, a reference that said "some people oppose the plan" was not considered sufficient identification. Following Dunwoody and Rossow (1989), once a story was determined to represent conflict, specific instances of conflict within the story were not summed or otherwise measured.

**Findings**

The first research question asked whether lower community pluralism would equate to newspapers presenting less information that might be used to advance intracommunity conflict. That is, would coverage of spearing (the more controversial topic) be proportionally lower than coverage of waste siting (less internally controversial)? The data show that coverage of waste siting was higher than spearing coverage in both high- and low-pluralism communities. In high-pluralism communities, 556 stories dealt with the two topics. Of those stories, 404 (73 percent) focused on waste siting and 152 (27 percent) focused on spearing. In the low-pluralism communities, 109 (86 percent) of the stories were about waste siting and 18 (14 percent) were about spearing.

**TABLE 1. Number and proportion of nuclear-waste and spearing items by pluralism level of community**

|  | Higher pluralism | Lower pluralism |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Nuclear waste | 404 (73%) | 109 (86%) |
| Spearing | 152 (27%) | 18 (14%) |

**Total items in content analysis: 683**
**Total items by pluralism level: 556 (81%) higher, 127 (19%) lower**
**Total items by topic: 513 (75%) nuclear waste, 170 (25%) spearing**

As the table above shows, although the number of stories among papers in both higher- and lower-pluralism communities was fewer for spearing than for waste siting, the difference was more pronounced in the lower-pluralism papers. Thus, the data lend support to the suggestion that a lower level of community pluralism may have contributed to lighter coverage of the more volatile spearing topic.

The second research question asked whether the quantity and detail of enabling information would be greater in stories about a topic of general consensus (waste siting) than in stories about a topic of serious contention (spearing), regardless of the level of pluralism in the community. "Quantity" referred to the sum of *partial plus complete* enabling-information opportunities; "detail" referred to the sum of only the *complete* opportunities. The finding that the total number of stories about nuclear waste (513) was much greater than the number of stories about spearing (170) preordained that greater raw quantities of enabling information would be found on the waste-siting issue. Such was, indeed the case, as the table below shows.

**TABLE 2. Quantity (partial plus complete EI) of useful enabling-information instances in nuclear-waste and spearing stories in high- versus low-pluralism papers**

|  | Higher pluralism | Lower pluralism |
|---|---|---|
| Nuclear waste | 2618 (83%) | 444 (77%) |
| Spearing | 835 (70%) | 122 (74%) |

**Total: 4,019 usable (partial + complete) EI occurrences (79% of total EI opportunities in study)**

For newspapers in both higher- and lower-pluralism communities, the proportion of enabling-information opportunities that resulted from summing partially and completely useful instances was lower for the spearing story than for the waste-siting story. Among lower-pluralism papers, usable information (partial plus complete) made up 77 percent of the total EI

opportunities on waste siting and 74 percent on spearing, a relatively small difference between topics. Among higher-pluralism papers, the difference between usable waste-siting information and spearing information was stronger -- 83 percent usable EI on waste siting, 70 percent on spearing.

No important difference was found when coverage of either waste siting or spearing was computed between lower- and higher-pluralism papers. The 74 percent of usable spearing information in the lower-pluralism papers was (somewhat unexpectedly) higher than the 70 percent of usable information in higher-pluralism papers. The difference was slightly more pronounced on waste-siting coverage, with 83 percent of the EI being usable in the higher-pluralism papers compared with 77 percent usable in the lower-pluralism papers. However, when *detail* of enabling information (i.e., instances of *complete* EI) was considered, a stronger difference emerged, as the table below shows.

**TABLE 3. Instances of completely usable enabling information in nuclear-waste and spearing stories in higher- versus lower-pluralism newspapers**

|  | Higher pluralism | Lower pluralism |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Nuclear waste | 720 (23%) | 184 (32%) |
| Spearing | 100 (8 %) | 28 (17%) |

**Total: 1,032 complete EI occurrences (20% of total EI opportunities in study)**

For lower-pluralism papers, 32 percent of the EI opportunities in waste-siting stories were complete. Only 17 percent were complete in spearing stories; the 15-point difference is worth noting. That same 15-point difference between coverage of waste-siting vs. spearing was also found for the higher-pluralism papers, in which completely usable EI was found in 23 percent of the waste-siting EI opportunities but in only 8 percent of the spearing opportunities.

**Discussion**

Issues involving consensus and conflict are normal parts of every community's life, but when communities find issues being forced upon them by powers far beyond their boundaries, the

reaction may be swift and strong. The issues explored here offered a rare opportunity to examine coverage of two very different types of community issues in a short time frame and not only by the same newspapers but frequently by even the same reporters at the paper. Although the issues examined in this research occurred in the mid 1980s, the underlying question remains valid for today's communities: Does community structure (level of pluralism) coupled with the "consensus vs. conflict" nature of issues affect the information newspapers provide about those issues?

For the first research question, which asked whether lower community pluralism would equate to less presentation of information that might contribute to intracommunity conflict, the results showed that newspapers in lower-pluralism communities did give less attention to the spearing controversy than to the waste-siting topic than did their counterparts in higher-pluralism communities. It can be speculated that this downplaying of the more controversial topic was an attempt to avoid heightening community discord in the lower-pluralism communities. The fact that several of the lower-pluralism papers totally ignored the spearing story during its five-month run is philosophically unsettling if we are to believe that the newspaper's job is to provide information about topics of importance to the community. There may be a temptation to conclude that the weak coverage of spearing was affirmation of the small-town paper's desire to avoid conflict news. But that explanation may be only part of the reason that coverage (or lack of coverage) developed as it did. One plausible motive for low coverage is that editors simply did not initially see the "bigness" of the spearing issue and did not anticipate that the dispute would evolve into what it eventually became; that is, they did not see spearing as an issue that was vital to their base circulation areas.

In fairness to the collective editorial judgment of the newspapers in the study, it should be noted that in the case of nuclear-waste siting, just one government announcement that Wisconsin was "on the map" turned the topic into a mega-story. In the spearing dispute, the potential impact on communities was slower to emerge, beginning with dealings between disputants that some editors may have seen as routine government business and thus not worthy of heavy coverage. This explanation is supported in part by the fact that newspapers of all sizes gave less play to the

spearing story than to the waste dispute. Apparently, everyone involved in the spearing story (journalistically speaking) saw it as an issue that called for less coverage. But that does not explain why the downplaying or ignoring by the lower-pluralism papers continued as the dispute became heated. It could be posited that the actual spearing lakes were geographically far enough removed from some of the smaller newspapers that editors did not see the story as "local." But that would not explain other papers giving short shrift to the story even with spearing lakes almost at their doorsteps.

On nuclear-waste siting, newspapers in both the high- and low-pluralism groups seemed more eager to provide coverage. This coverage fits the mold established by Tichenor, Donohue, Olien and others who have found newspapers reflecting the community power structure. As community leaders rallied to fight the waste-siting threat, newspapers tended to parallel the power structure's efforts and joined the common cause of protecting the community from an unwanted intruder. So in the smallest to largest paper analyzed, stories about the waste issue appeared.

The second research question asked whether the quantity and detail of enabling information would be greater in stories about a topic of general consensus (waste siting) than in stories about a topic of serious contention (spearing), regardless of the level of pluralism in the community. The results lend limited support to the premise that lower-pluralism newspapers would be somewhat hesitant to "enable" readers to participate in an internally divisive issue (spearing). Among lower-pluralism papers, the proportional *quantity* of enabling information provided was only slightly less in spearing than in waste-siting stories. The proportional difference between spearing and waste-siting information was more noticeable in the higher-pluralism papers. When the *degree* of usefulness (i.e., complete EI) was examined, it was found that the higher- and lower-pluralism papers were equally more likely to give fully useful information in waste-siting stories than in spearing stories. While this result could be interpreted as a newspaper's efforts to help maintain community calm by not encouraging citizen participation in disruptive spearing-related activities, it also may be a factor of the nature of the two disputes: The waste-siting issue

generated more formal meetings and hearings, the kinds of stories likely to contain complete enabling information such as times and locations of events.

It should be noted here that although 17 communities were ranked on a low to high pluralism scale, by some definitions these communities could *all* be classified as low in pluralism. If that is the case, then the sometimes slight differences found between low- and high-pluralism newspapers may have been the result of all the papers in the study following the path dictated by a low-pluralism setting. This relatively narrow pluralism range, then, is a limitation of the study. While the design of the project demanded that a distinction be made on the basis of pluralism, the distinction between the highest and lowest communities on the scale may not have been great enough to reveal the finer nuances of pluralism at work. Many previous studies involving pluralism, including much of the University of Minnesota-based work of Tichenor, Donohue and Olien, would seem to have faced the same limitation; such is the nature of doing pluralism work in areas where the scarcity of true metropolitan areas limits the scope of studies requiring vast differences in social structure. Such a limitation should not be seen as negating the value of pluralism-related research as it is often conducted. However, future research does beg for a comparison of communities with greater gaps between highest and lowest pluralism to maximize the impact of community power structure on the performance of the local press.

Also limiting this project was the unexpected discovery that newspapers placed in the lower-pluralism group seemed disinclined to cover the spearing issue. A total of only 18 spearing stories in 10 lower-pluralism papers was discomfiting. Hindsight suggests that an approach might have been used in which newspapers that provided greater coverage of the issue could have been sought out for inclusion in the study before the pluralism rankings were made. But that would have entailed a project design that would have nullified the "local issue" approach desired here; recall that literally every community served by a newspaper that could consider the spearing and waste-siting issues "local" was considered in this study.

It should be kept in mind that because this project dealt with the universe of relevant stories in a census of newspapers, generalizations beyond these stories and papers must be done with

caution. While working with a census of material does allow easy observation of real differences within that material, it limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized. With these limitations in mind, what do the results of the study tell us about pluralism as a predictor of news coverage? Certainly, the findings suggest that pluralism was at work in the coverage of the two disputes. Foremost, despite possible explanations offered above, we should not discount the possibility that the minuscule coverage of spearing by several papers may have been an example of low pluralism at its finest-- keeping controversy off the front page and promoting peace that doesn't really exist. Indeed, the paucity of spearing coverage may have been a main pluralism-related discovery in this project.

Similarly, the profuse coverage of the waste-siting issue by most papers in the study may also be a strong indicator that pluralism was playing a role in media performance. In the waste dispute, conflict may not have been something to fear, because the conflict served as a unifying force within the communities, creating cohesiveness in the face of a serious threat from beyond the city limits.

In spite of the evidence of the influence of pluralism, we should be wary of drawing "conspiracy" conclusions in which small-town editors are seen sharing a mindset to hide conflict and useful information from readers for the sake of promoting pastoralism at the expense of knowledge. The effects of pluralism in this study can't explain the differences in coverage provided by newspapers in communities with very similar characteristics, pluralistically speaking. Why, for example, did Phillips, Wis., carry nine stories about the spearing dispute, while Clintonville, with a nearly identical pluralism ranking, carry zero? Assuming pluralism indicators used in this study were even marginally efficacious, some factor besides pluralism seems to have been at work in helping determine coverage. That other factor may have been the independence of the individual editor, an influence in news coverage that should not be underestimated. This is not to say an editor may escape the influence of the social structure in which he or she puts out newspaper. But perhaps we must acknowledge that while community structure may predispose *typical* newspapers in *typical* settings to act in *typical* ways, editors

with atypical ideas still may exercise their individual prerogative to ignore a story if they so choose. In the case of the spearing dispute, perhaps some did.

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