



Tapped Out: Second round of reporting leads to deeper coverage, stories otherwise untold

Introduction

In December 2020, a collaboration of eight INN members was formed to publish the [Tapped Out](#) series. The eight INN newsroom participants documented serious concerns including contamination, excessive groundwater pumping and environmental inequity — which led to [\\$3 million in federal money](#) to help bring water to Gallup, New Mexico and surrounding communities, significant global republication and deep reader engagement and gratitude.

The impact and storytelling opportunities were so great that the partners largely decided to follow up on the story — the first follow up collaboration in INN’s collaboration history.

In late November 2021, seven of the partners returned to the series, alongside Colorado Public Radio, to cover contaminated water, drought, overuse of groundwater and land ownership.

[Eight stories](#) were published between November 22 and December 15, 2021.

The series generated a range of impacts, including:

- Multiple outlets reported that lawmakers, policy advocates and environmental changemakers saw and appreciated these stories, reaching out with feedback and enthusiasm.

“We received an email from Zach Frankel, executive director of the Utah Rivers Council, who was quoted in the story. He said: ‘You wrote both a seminal and overarching summary of the problems Utah is posing and the byzantine nature of much of the paradigm in Utah. I also learned a few things I was not aware of, which is fantastic and a testament to how hard you worked on that piece. I was impressed.’”

- Reporting on a Native American tribes’ invitation to policy making negotiations regarding the Colorado River, which was republished by NPR, generated a considerable amount of **republication and attention**. As a result of the reporting, Colorado Public Radio reported they were able to bring much-needed context and history to the conversation.

“The biggest success was giving a voice to tribal members and native nations that have been excluded from the Colorado River agreement — as well as much of the decades of reporting on it.”

- Newsrooms reported **deep reader engagement and gratitude** poured in, with multiple outlets reporting a dramatic increase in reader emails, social media outreach, comments and even donations due to this reporting.
- The series was **widely shared on social media**, with links to the stories posted and retweeted by Twitter accounts with more than 967,000 million total followers and posted on Facebook pages with more than 1.5 million total followers.

This project was made possible by a grant from The Water Desk, with support from INN’s Amplify News Project. Amplify — which provided support for project management and organization, as well as cash stipends for reporting and editing — is funded with support from the Joyce Foundation in the Midwest and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation in Chicago.

Nine INN newsrooms — California Health Report, Center for Collaborative Investigative Journalism/SJV Water, Circle of Blue, Colorado Public Radio, Columbia Insight, The Counter, High Country News and New Mexico In Depth — spent several months reporting on water issues in the Western U.S. to create the series.

Content reach

In addition to publishing stories on their websites and in print, collaboration partners shared links to the series on social media, in newsletters and beyond.

Newsrooms reported that these stories engaged readers and audiences often otherwise underrepresented. For Columbia Insight, the story was seen by “readers and commenters from areas we normally don’t draw readers from” and overall helped build its reputation for excellent reporting, as seen in donations specifically thanking the outlet for this story. A full metrics breakdown is available in the [appendix](#).

We found that at least 27 outlets republished at least one story from Tapped Out, notably NPR Morning Edition and Science Friday, while Environmental Health News linked to two stories in their widely-viewed daily newsletter. Meltwater estimates the potential reach of these outlets combined is more than 52 million unique visitors, excluding the Environmental Health News newsletter and SMS-based El Tímpano.

Some recirculation highlights from the series:

- The California Health Report story was translated into Spanish by [South Kern Sol](#), which reached out directly to California Health Report to ask if it could translate the story for

their audience.

- Susan Hess (Executive Director/Publisher) of Columbia Insight was interviewed by [KPOV Community Radio](#) in Oregon about their reporting.

Social media distribution

The series caught the attention of a number of influential accounts on social media, with the reporting posted on pages with more than 1.5 million followers on Facebook and posted and retweeted by Twitter accounts with more than 967,000 total followers.

- Links directly to collaboration partners' stories appeared on 40 Facebook pages with a total of almost 1.4 million followers, including 10 groups.
- The stories were shared on Facebook 51 times and received more than 1,900 interactions (comments and reactions).
- In addition, the stories republished by Science Friday and Now This News were shared on Facebook pages with a total of more than 62.4 million followers.
- Stories appeared on Reddit subreddits with a total of 1.8 million members, including [r/environment](#) (760,000 members), [r/OregonReddit](#) (142,000 members) and [r/IndianCountry](#) (46,100 members).

Significant social sharing included posts by public officials and political organizations; advocacy groups; and journalists from outlets including the Los Angeles Times, CNN Opinion and ProPublica Southwest. More information on social sharing is available in the [appendix](#).

Collaboration feedback

When the collaboration concluded we asked the partners to provide feedback on their experience through a survey. Several important themes emerged:

- **INN funding makes better journalism possible.** Participants said their reporting would not have been possible without the project funding. "As a small non-profit with a limited budget, travel grants are a significant source of funding to get (our) reporters into the field. Without the INN grant, we would not have reported this story."
- **Statewide impact is possible, but not apparent — yet.** Multiple outlets reported that it was too soon to see results, but one organization reported that state legislators had seen or responded to the work and another reported the reporting "brought concerns

that smaller water districts have to the forefront” of conversations. Representative Leslie Herod of Colorado shared the story on her Facebook page.

- **Distribution drives impact.** Participants valued the partnerships that brought their stories to a wider audience. “Our story was translated into Spanish and published nationally, reaching a broad audience and helping to shift the conversation around this issue.”
- **Management matters.** The leadership provided by INN was regularly cited as a positive element for the participants. “This project helped us do ‘slow journalism,’ and to get a clearer understanding of the level of communication needed to build the kind of trust needed for folks to take risks, stretch beyond themselves and their customary ways of working, and do high-quality and innovative work.”

Participants were asked to rank different aspects of the project management from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). The responses were overwhelmingly positive, with rankings of 4.1 and above. The full breakdown is available in the [appendix](#).

Challenges & Observations for the Future

Unsurprisingly, reporting amid the COVID-19 pandemic was cited as a key challenge for participants, who had to adapt their plans in order to do field reporting.

As with any follow up story, the more in-depth you go, the more challenging it is to distinguish the nuance of the story, especially to an audience who may not be experienced in these topics. “It’s a complicated, nuanced and legally messy story.”

A commitment to the same specific, single-topic interest and high standards of reporting encouraged partners to go further with these stories. “All news outlets strive to do the best job possible and present the most thorough and professional work possible. When you’re working as part of a group effort like Tapped Out, when you’re meeting with so many excellent journalists every couple weeks and seeing the really great work they’re doing, it does kind of give you an extra spark to bring your work up to those high standards.”

A deep respect and appreciation was built in the first round of this project and extended into the second series, which was evident in the feedback of the partners surveyed. “We expect to work with many of these folks on future projects. It’s been great to build those relationships.”

This was INN’s first follow up series to a previously published collaboration. While there may be less immediate feedback and impact to report, the series delved into high-level environmental policy and issues, which could be more impactful state-to-state.

Appendix

Story performance by outlet:

Outlet	# of unique page views on original site	Average active/engaged time on the story page	Cumulative Facebook shares	Cumulative Facebook comments	Twitter impressions
California Health Report	606	Unknown	1	0	Unknown
Center for Collaborative Investigative Journalism (CCIJ)	204	6:27	20	1	264
Circle of Blue	1,287	4:36	28	12	4,079
Colorado Public Radio	10,645	2:45	174	49	Unknown
Columbia Insight	1,062	04:29	99	51	Unknown
High Country News	3,626	6:02	95	10	15,789
New Mexico In Depth	703	0:46	44	36	90
SJV Water	991	8:41	21	5	11
The Counter	Roughly 5,000	4:30 on desktop, 7:30 on mobile	73	18	Unknown

Outlets that republished stories:

[12 News](#)

[Biz News Post](#)

[Calexico Chronicle](#)

[California Health Report](#)
[California Patch.com](#)
[Democratic Underground](#)
[Gallup Sun](#)
[Governing](#)
[GV Wire](#)
[High Country News](#)
[Honest Columnist](#)
[Indian Country Today](#)
[KUSA-TV](#)
[NowThis News](#)
[Player FM](#)
[Science Friday](#)
[Sentinel Colorado](#)
[Standard-Examiner](#)
[The Bakersfield Californian](#)
[The Counter](#)
[Vail Daily](#)
[NPR](#)
[South Kern Sol](#) (republished in Spanish)
[Environmental Health News](#)
[WFAE](#)
[YES! Magazine](#)
El Tímpano (SMS-based)

Social sharing highlights:

Public officials and political groups

- [Colorado Water Conservation Board](#)
- [Conservation Voters NM](#)
- [People's Party of Oregon](#)
- [Representative Leslie Herod](#)

Advocacy organizations

- [350 Eugene](#)
- [California Pan-Ethnic Health Network](#)
- [Center for Environmental Law & Policy](#)
- [Center for Western Priorities](#)
- [Citizens Water Advocacy Group](#)
- [Clean Water Action](#)
- [Climate Nexus](#)
- [Climate Reality](#)

- [Community Water Center](#)
- [Great Outdoors Colorado](#)
- [Population Balance](#)
- [Restore the Delta](#)
- [Roots of Change](#)
- [Save The Colorado](#)
- [Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance](#)
- [The Denver Foundation](#)

Media and notable figures

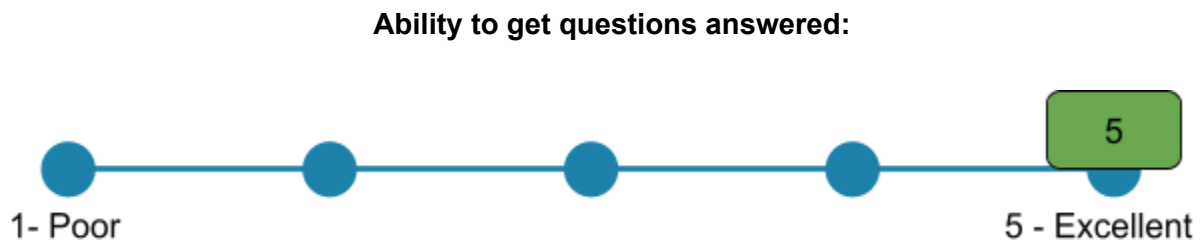
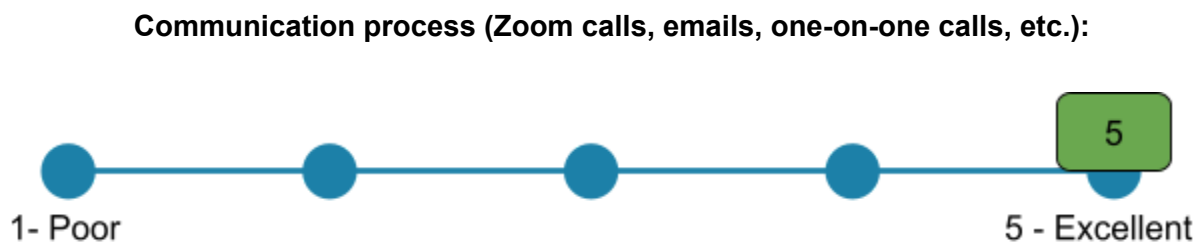
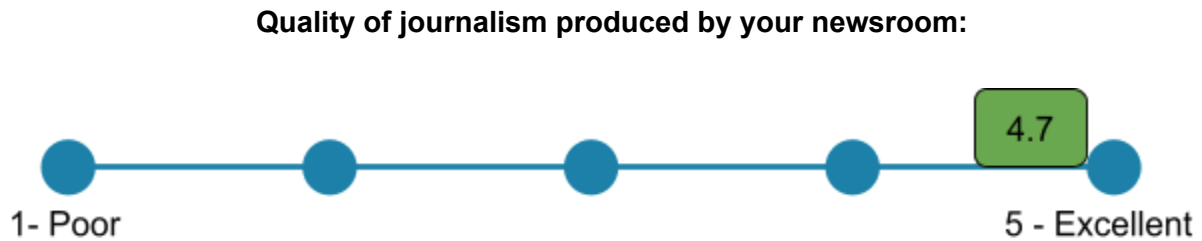
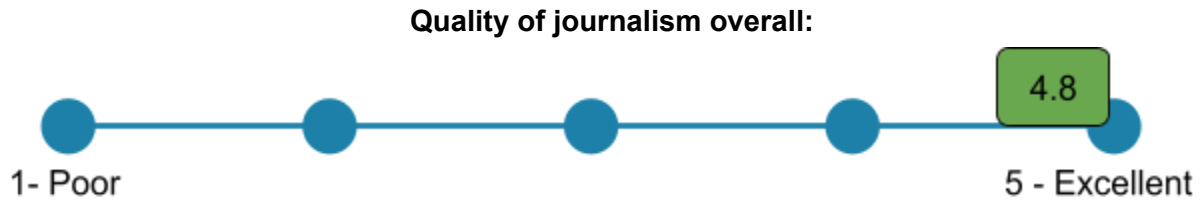
- [Alleen Brown](#), The Intercept
- [Caitlyn Kim](#), NPR Washington Desk, CPR News
- [Environmental Health News](#)
- [Food and Environment Reporting Network](#)
- [Jennifer Ludden](#), NPR Editor on climate and energy
- [Jeremy Wade Shockley](#), Southern Ute Drum
- [Kate Zerrenner](#), Climate Rising producer at Harvard Business School
- [Mark Olalde](#), environment for ProPublica Southwest
- [Michael E. Campana](#), professor at Oregon State University's College of Earth, Ocean, and Atmospheric Sciences
- [Nicole Lampe](#), Managing Director of The Water Hub
- [Ryan Christopher Jones](#), NYT contributor
- [Sammy Roth](#), Energy & environment reporter, Los Angeles Times
- [The Water Main](#)
- [Yaffa Fredrick](#), senior political editor, CNN Opinion

Communities impacted by the reporting

- [Box Elder County UT 411](#)
- [r/By Natives About Natives & The Americas.](#)
- [Cache Valley Public 411](#)
- [Colorado Springs Indigenous Community](#)
- [r/environment](#)
- [Klamath News](#)
- [Medford Food Co-op](#)
- [Monument Valley Bulletin](#)
- [Oregon Reddit](#)
- [r/Spokane](#)
- [r/Washington The Evergreen State](#)
- [r/Water: policy science](#)

Collaboration feedback

Below are the average responses from the nine INN newsrooms asked to rank their experiences on a 5-point scale:



Pickup by news organizations within the collaboration:



Likelihood that you will follow up on this series:



Likelihood of participating in another INN collaboration in the future:



How did we find this data?

We asked participants to provide engagement data from their sites and social accounts for web metrics and qualitative feedback via a survey.

For content distribution, we searched [Meltwater](#), a media monitoring service, for mentions of “Tapped Out: Power and water justice in the rural West” and variations of the series attribution. We also searched for the first sentence of each story.

For social distribution results, we searched Meltwater's social feature using the same search terms as well as the first sentence of each story. Additionally, we searched for social captures from each story through the CrowdTangle browser extension.