

Accountability and Transparency Diluted in the Flint Water Crisis: A Case of Institutional Implosion

Debilitamiento de la transparencia y la rendición de cuentas en La crisis del agua Flint: un caso de implosión institucional

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ABSTRACT

This article examines two major institutions widely touted in the United States as servants to communities and the general public: the government and the news media. The Flint water crisis is a textbook case in which these two institutions failed to live up to their responsibilities of accountability and transparency. The authors examine the major events during the water crisis, looking at it through the lens of government actions and how the press covered them, conducting qualitative context analysis during the first five months of the crisis. The analysis includes the actions of federal, state, and local agencies and the reporting of national, state, and local newspapers. Their findings show that the institutions completely imploded, with an impact on thousands of residents, many of whom happened to be minorities.

Key words: Flint, water crisis, accountability, transparency, news media, watchdog function, public health, lead contamination

RESUMEN

Este trabajo analiza la labor de dos grandes instituciones que prestan servicio a las comunidades y a la sociedad en general en Estados Unidos: el gobierno y los medios de comunicación. La crisis del agua Flint es un caso de libro de texto que muestra cómo estas dos instituciones incumplieron sus responsabilidades de transparencia y rendición de cuentas. Los autores examinan los principales sucesos ocurridos durante la crisis del agua, observándolos a través de la lente de las acciones gubernamentales y la cobertura que les dio la prensa, realizando un análisis cualitativo de contexto de los primeros cinco meses de la crisis. Tal estudio incluye las acciones de las agencias federales, estatales y locales, y cómo fue tratado en la prensa a nivel nacional, estatal y local. Los hallazgos muestran que hubo una absoluta implosión institucional que impactó a miles de residentes –muchos de los cuales resultaron pertenecer a minorías–.

Palabras clave: rendición de cuentas, transparencia, gobierno prensa, crisis agua.

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INTRODUCTION

The city of Flint is a typical example of the de-industrialization and economic decline experienced by several U.S. cities after decades of prosperity in the last part of the twentieth century (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982; High and Lewis, 2007). Flint was an icon of the U.S. automobile industry as the place where General Motors (GM) Corporation was originally founded. The city expanded from the mid-1940s until the late 1970s, as GM generated thousands of auto manufacturing jobs for unskilled workers. However, from the 1980s through most of the 1990s, Flint began its steep decline due to closures and the relocation of thousands of General Motors manufacturing jobs (Highsmith, 2014). As a result, Flint has lost population and experienced high unemployment rates and low income levels, compared not only to the rest of Michigan but to the rest of the country.

Flint's socio-demographic indicators show the social and economic impacts. First of all, total population declined from 1960 to 2010 by almost half (48 percent). However, the percentage of black population increased from 17.5 percent in 1960 to more than half (56.6 percent) in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Secondly, Flint unemployment rates increased in just ten years by 7 percent, from 16.1 percent in 1990 to 23.2 percent in 2010, which was higher than the state as a whole and the metropolitan area (MSA) (Doige et al., 2015: 8).

And thirdly, the average annual household income from 2010 to 2014 in Flint was US\$24,679, which is much lower than the state level of US\$49,087, and less than half that of the national level of US\$53,482 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Closely linked to this figure is the percentage of the population living below the poverty level, which has increased from 16.9 percent in 1980 to 31.1 percent in 2010; this is more than double the rate for Michigan (15.5 percent) and the country as a whole (15.1).

As result of these conditions, tax revenues declined while local services continued to cost the city money, causing significant fiscal stress to the Flint local government (Scorsone and Bateson, 2011: 1; Doige et al., 2015: 13). The city was so financially weak that Governor Rick Snyder appointed an emergency manager (EM) on November 8, 2011,¹ with enough power to determine the city's financial functioning. This displaced democratically-elected public officials by appointing a non-elected official to manage the city.² The functions and operations of the EM as conceived

¹ According to a congressional act (MHR 436 of 2012), an emergency manager (EM) was designated in order to face a deficit of US\$14 621 546 (Snyder, 2011).

² "The EM shall have broad powers in receivership to rectify the financial emergency and to assure the fiscal accountability of the local government and the local government's capacity to provide or cause to be provided necessary governmental services essential to the public health, safety, and welfare" (Sec. 9.2 of Act 436 of 2012[1]).

generate tensions in the traditional democratic principles of checks and balances (Kasdan, 2014).

Flint's financial situation is part of the deepest roots of the Flint water crisis. To save money, the EM made key decisions that seem to have contributed to the crisis, "from the use of the Flint River to delays in reconnecting to the Detroit Water System (DWS) once water quality problems were encountered" (FWATF, 2016: 1).

Our research shows that negative conditions coincided at a time when residents were unaware of the quality of their water supply. Government institutions and the news media both failed to respond and inform residents in an accountable and transparent way of the harmful water conditions, although the former were responsible for providing safe public services to all citizens and the latter, for watching over the public function and informing the public of any irregularities.

THE UNDERLYING CONDITIONS OF THE FLINT WATER CRISIS

The Flint water crisis evolved as a trickle, not as a single crisis event. Residents reported problems soon after the city switched to its own water source on April 25, 2014. They complained about the odor, taste, and color of the water coming directly into their homes; and they began to report health complaints, such as skin rashes (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2015). Throughout this time city and state officials assured residents that the water was safe to drink (Gordy, 2016; Veolia North America, 2015).

The problems with Flint's new water source did not begin with high levels of lead, but rather the city's efforts to disinfect it. Contaminants entered the water supply in August 2014 and boil-water advisories followed. City officials blamed the first on an "abnormal test," but after two additional advisories in September, they cited probable weaknesses in the infrastructure that were allowing bacteria to enter the system (Adams, 2014). They added more chlorine, a highly corrosive substance, to remove the contaminants (Al-Jasser, 2007; Fonger, 2014). In the early stages of the crisis, the *Flint Journal (MLive)* described water treatment efforts as "a crash course in learning how to treat river water" (Fonger, 2014).

During this time, water treatment staff members were already struggling with disinfection. In May and August, sampling revealed excessive levels of a chemical byproduct called trihalomethane, or THM, which is created when chlorine reacts to organic matter (FWATF, 2016; Sivaganesan and Clark, 1998; THM Notice, 2015). Levels were so high that they violated the federal standard for the Safe Water Drinking Act. In January 2016, the city was forced to notify residents that the sample, which is averaged over six months, showed a violation. The notice stated the water was not a

health risk for “most people,” and that they had already implemented measures to improve water quality after the May and August testing (TTHM Notice, 2015).

The notices served as a catalyst for activism throughout Flint, which attracted the attention of a well-known environmentalist (Fonger, 2015a). She offered to perform a free evaluation of the city’s water supply, but city officials declined and contracted Veolia North America (FWATF, 2016; Veolia North America, 2015). Veolia’s report concurred with the city: the water was safe coming out of the plant, and any discoloration was the result of cast-iron erosion from pipes. The consultant’s action plan recommended improved treatment methods, staff training, and a new carbon filtration system (Fonger, 2015b; Veolia North America, 2015). The report failed to mention possible erosion in homes and service lines (FWATF, 2016; Veolia North America, 2015).

Complaints about the color, odor, and taste continued until a group of outsiders brought national attention to what government officials and the media failed to address: residents were ingesting contaminated water as a result of corrosion (Roy, 2015a; 2015b). First, Roy (2015a) released a study by Virginia Tech researchers on August 31, 2015, which indicated that almost half the samples they collected from 48 homes in Flint contained dangerous levels of lead. E-mails later revealed that some governmental officials, including representatives from the Department of Health and Human Services and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, knew of the increased lead levels, but failed to act, marginalized the situation, and attempted to conceal evidence (FWATF, 2016: 16; Roy, 2015; Roy and Edwards, 2016; Michigan Government, 2016).

The second major catalyst brought worldwide attention to the city of Flint and its water problems. A report by Michigan State University researchers Mona Hanna-Attisha, Jenny LaChance, Richard Casey Sadler, and Allison Champney Schnepf (2015) released in late September 2015 found that the incidence of lead in children’s blood in the city of Flint had increased from 2.4 percent to 4.9 percent after the water source changed. The city would also later report an increase in deaths from Legionnaires’ disease after the switch (Burke, 2016; FWATF, 2016; Hanna-Attisha and Kuehn, 2016). The people of Flint were poisoned by the city’s water supply, carrying unknown long-term effects such as behavioral and learning problems and reductions in I.Q. (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2015; U.S. EPA, 2017).

On December 14, 2015, the city declared a state of emergency. The state of Michigan followed suit three weeks later (FWATF, 2016). The water’s damage potential, which General Motors recognized to be so corrosive to auto parts that it had disconnected from the city’s water supply more than a year previously, was blamed for eating away at the service lines and household plumbing of the city’s 100 000 water

customers (Fonger, 2014d; FWTF, 2016), potentially exposing them to metals including lead and copper (U.S. EPA, 2016; Kammer, 2015; City of Flint, 2015).

The water crisis continues to attract attention. Criticisms are directed at the federal, state, and local governments, the media, the consulting firm, and even the local hospitals for not doing enough to protect the citizens of Flint (Halcom, 2016; Hearing Wrap-Up, 2016; Robbins, 2016). Both state and federal officials called on Michigan's governor to resign. Government officials face criminal and misdemeanor charges of tampering with test results and making false statements about water testing (Clark, 2016; Michigan Government, 2016; Bitley, n. d.).

The Flint water crisis is a unique case in which the public mobilized to draw attention to an ongoing public health threat that continued for more than a year with little resolution. Questions remain as to what happened throughout the period leading up to the discovery of lead in the water and what actions and players are responsible for the state of affairs remaining hidden for so long.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last few years, scholars and practitioners have increasingly focused on –or have returned their attention to– open government (Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes, 2010; Luna-Reyes, Bertot, and Mellouli, 2014). However, its study is not new and the concept has been used in different contexts (Parks, 1957; Nam, 2012). Bernd Wirtz and Steven Birkmeyer formulate a comprehensive concept that includes the essence of the peer-review literature from 2008 to 2013 that they examined. For them,

Open government is a multilateral, political, and social process, which includes in particular transparent, collaborative, and participatory action by government and administration. To meet these conditions, citizens and social groups should be integrated into political processes with the support of modern information and communication technologies, which together should improve the effectiveness and efficiency of governmental and administrative action. (2015: 382-384)

Wirtz and Birkmeyer (2015) underline the importance of transparency as one of the most essential bases for open government. Transparency has been a part of U.S. American ideology since the beginning of its democracy (Harder and Jordan, 2013). In this sense, the right to access government information is seen as a way to facilitate democratic participation, prevent corruption, and establish trust in government, providing information to citizens, particularly journalists. The U.S. Congress passed

the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in 1966 to provide a more specific legal support for transparency.

Transparency shares a special relationship with accountability because, simply, “a democracy requires accountability and accountability requires transparency” (White House, 2016). Public accountability is a cornerstone of good governance and, again, a basic principle of democracy (for example, see Bovens, Schillemans and Hart, 2008; Mulgan, 2000; Aucoin and Heintzman, 2000; Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin, 1999).

Accountability must be seen as a process. In fact, many scholars have highlighted three analytical steps or phases (for example, Schillemans, Van Twist, and Vanhommerig, 2013; Mulgan, 2003). The first is the information phase, which presupposes that an accountable entity or public official provides retrospective information about her/his/its choices, conduct, or performance. The second is the debate phase, when the accountability forum evaluates the information received and starts a debate with the accountable entity or public official. And third is the sanctions phase, where accountability permits some kind of judgment on the activity of the political official or entity and leads to punishment or reward for his/her/its actions. The most significant kind of accountability is produced by agencies that can reveal existing data, investigate, and produce information about institutional behavior (Fox, 2007: 668-669). This raises the question of what happens when public officials fail to fulfill their mandate.

As the fourth estate, the press has seen itself as a form of accountability, because the “ideal goal of traditional journalism has been to make power accountable: to keep ordinary citizens apprised of what government is doing, and how it affects them both individually and with respect to the groups and values that they care about” (Entman, 2005: 48). From the moment that the media pay attention to governmental failures or political abuses and promotes social debate about them, the press is perceived as a way to strengthen accountability (see, for example, Ettema, 2007; Chavez, 2006). The news media provide a way for citizens to see how public officials respond to their problems (Maia, 2009). This, in turn, raises two questions: what happens when the media do not report deeper public affairs and simply reproduce official messages? And, where is the watchdog function that is supposed to be vigilant at all times?

One important function of the press is to monitor government actions and the impacts they have on the community. This is called the media watchdog function. It is critical since the press is touted as serving the public and the communities they cover. The function of the media watchdog is well established within normative theory. Laswell (1948) considered the watchdog function to be one of surveillance, monitoring the environment, collecting evidence, and reporting relevant facts to the public they inform. Scholars have expanded on this premise to suggest the media remain

not exclusively objective, but operate with a critical eye, evaluating sources and making value judgments in order to give voice to citizens and act as an advocate if needed (Ettema and Glasser, 1998; Glasser, 1989). This function holds journalists accountable to expose corruption in the government or in the private sector and to hold leaders accountable with regard to their responsibilities. (Ettema and Glasser, 1998; Laswell, 1948; Nielsen, 2015). The media receive criticism when they fail to serve this purpose, and are sometimes referred to as being a subservient “lapdog” to the government or special interests, or perhaps playing an insignificant role in society (Christians, McQuail, and Glasser et al., 2009; Dennis, Gilmor, and Glasser, 1989; Johnson, 2014; Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien, 1995).

The public rates watchdog reports focusing on subjects such as corruption and accountability among the top five most important investigative areas. However, recent economic and educational factors are blamed for slashing investigative budgets in both professional and academic settings (Clark, 2013; Houston, 2010; Wasserman, 2008). Newsrooms cut staff by approximately 25 percent between 2000 and 2009 (Starkman, 2014). Therefore, editors must efficiently maximize content with minimal staff often resulting in less priority being placed on “working stories” and those requiring follow-up (Jones, 2013). It makes sense that the media are most successful at uncovering lack of transparency and corruption in times of immediate crisis, or big stories, when more resources are dedicated to in-depth, continuing coverage of an event, rather than a slow-to-develop crisis, as was the case in Flint.

Communities expect local journalists to hold government officials and sources accountable, to be solution-driven and connected to the communities they serve. Journalists often fall short, opting for the quick, “official” government, elite, or business source (O’Neill and O’Connor, 2008; Starkman, 2014). They often fail to develop a story with multiple viewpoints and angles from across the socio-economic spectrum. As a result, citizens and activists are much less frequently cited than government officials or businesses (O’Neill and O’Connor, 2008; Nielsen, 2015). In terms of the Flint water crisis, which in its early stages was best characterized by citizen activism without government response, previous literature regarding news frames involving citizen movements may offer further insight. Historically, U.S. newspaper coverage favors the *status quo* and provides less voice to the disenfranchised; this holds true even in non-violent situations (Boyle, McLeod, and Armstrong, 2012; McLeod and Armstrong, 2012; Armstrong, Boyle, and McLeod, 2012). Activism and citizen-focused stories are less frequent than those with a governmental focus, especially in local news (Nielsen, 2015; O’Neill and O’Connor, 2008).

Recent case studies find that the media watchdog can receive both praise and criticism for its crusade against a non-transparent government. In cases in which of-

ficial sources lag behind or fail to respond adequately, the media turn to independently exploring answers. This was the case of Hurricane Katrina, when the government was slow to react (Garnett and Kouzmin, 2007), and the Elk River chemical spill in Charleston, West Virginia, when confusing information and a lack of accountability by government officials led the media to use technology to pursue their own answers (Bray, 2015). Both, in turn, resulted in errors in content.

The case of the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, may demonstrate failures in the both the media watchdog function and governmental institutions over the period leading up to the exposure of lead leaching into the homes of the city's water. From the moment when the city switched its water source to the Flint River until researchers brought the lead crisis to light, citizens complained of health effects, tested positive for poisoning from metals, and brought their contaminated water to city officials (Fonger, 2015c; Gordy, 2016; Hanna-Attisha et. al, 2015). At the same time, e-mail evidence and other testimony reveals officials at various levels of the government manipulated and attempted to conceal safety testing results (Hearing Wrap-Up, 2016; Roy, 2015a; Roy and Edwards, 2016).

DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

The vast majority of the literature on accountability emanates from political science and public administration and pays scant attention to the role of the news media. Obviously, this point of view is completely different in media studies, which presents the watchdog function as essential; however, studies on accountability from this field of knowledge are by no means abundant (Djerf-Perre, Ekström and Johansson, 2013). That is why we focused on the nature of the how institutions informed and delivered actions to the Flint community. To examine these issues, we used qualitative interdisciplinary approaches that provided a framework linking accountability and transparency across institutions. The research design sought to answer the following questions:

- RQ1: Was there a major institutional failure during the Flint water crisis?
- RQ2: What was the thematic coverage of the news media during the Flint water crisis?
- RQ3: What was the role of the media in the initial stages of the Flint water crisis?

The Flint water crisis is a fluid process that is expected to linger for years to come. This study focuses on the early stages of the crisis until President Obama declared

the State of Emergency; it uses a proxy of the newspapers that represent the coverage at the national, state and, local levels. To identify the relevant dates during the Flint water crisis, the researchers used the *Flint Water Advisory Task Force Final Report* (FWATF, 2016) to pinpoint how the media reported on important events.

To analyze the function of the national and state media we collected *New York Times* articles from the Factiva database and used ProQuest to search the *Detroit Free Press*. In terms of *The Flint Journal (MLive)*, we selected the online version because the print version is not a daily newspaper. For this source, researchers ran a day-by-day Google News search utilizing the search terms, “Flint” and “Water.” The search was rerun utilizing the names of *The Flint Journal (MLive)* staff writers to locate additional articles. Also, the media stories and timelines of events were cross-referenced to identify the level of government response, actions, and approaches during the crisis. A discretionary sample of this kind of cross-referencing is displayed in Appendix A.

The initial period of examination began September 2, 2015, the date of the first detailed news coverage about a Virginia Tech report of lead leaching into the city’s water supply, and ended on January 16, 2016, when President Barack Obama declared a State of Emergency in Flint (White House, 2016). The *New York Times* did not reveal significant samples for analysis, so the sample was expanded to include articles from January 1, 2015 through January 17, 2016.

The parameters required source-specific content pertaining only to the issues relating to and resulting from Flint’s water contamination. Wired and press bureaus such as the Associated Press articles and editorials written by an external source were excluded (Table 1). The total sample resulted in 253 articles ($n=253$).

Newspapers	Articles	Percent
New York Times	10	4.0
Detroit Free Press	76	30.0
Flint Journal (MLive)	167	66.0
Total	253	100

The qualitative content analysis consisted of coding key data into themes through an inductive process, which is more conducive to categorization when unpredictable themes might be expected to emerge (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). We analyzed

articles through a four-step process to develop key themes in the articles published by the national, state, and local media. First, we read the articles for overall content and summarized them. Our analysis then considered tone of headlines, quotes, and the overall article. The third step involved generating descriptive codes utilized within each article. Graneheim and Lundman (2004) suggest this type of extensive categorization makes an analysis of underlying meanings within texts more reliable. The main themes for each source were ranked in descending order (Table 2).

Media Source	Themes Presented
New York Times	Government actions* Apathetic government Social injustice Accountability* Transparency* Emergency response*
Detroit Free Press	Government actions* Accountability* Transparency* Apathetic government Social injustice Emergency response* Health risks
Flint Journal/MLive	Government actions* Official sources Transparency* Accountability* Emergency response* Health risks
* Consistent across all media	

Definitions of themes:

- Government Actions – Focus on actions or statements by political figures
- Accountability – Degree by which regulatory mandates on government agencies, officials, and elected officials were executed; emphasis on party or parties

responsible for the crisis and/or current actions perceived as deceptive, dismissive, or delaying response

- Transparency – Call for more open government or investigation into the crisis (Secondary analysis of transparency included analysis of sources, attribution, media investigation, FOIA, and themes within content)
- Emergency response – Focus on physical relief efforts for residents within the city of Flint and Genesee County
- Apathetic government – Presentation of governmental officials as having ignored or been indifferent to the concerns of residents despite evidence of water contamination
- Health risks – The emphasis on dangers associated with drinking lead-contaminated water or long-term health effects of lead
- Official sources – Reliance primarily on governmental, organizational, business, or religious sources as opposed to residents
- Social injustice – Depiction of the water crisis as an issue of social injustice for disadvantaged and disenfranchised citizens impacted by governmental officials who ignored their complaints

FINDINGS

“The Flint water crisis is a story of government failure, intransigence, unpreparedness, delay, inaction, and environmental injustice.” (FWATF, 2016: 1)

Institutional Failure

This research sought to answer RQ1 and the role of institutions and the news media in the early stages of the Flint water crisis (FWC). While the local media were not vigilant of the public actions taken during the FWC, the national media missed an opportunity to call attention to a major health crisis. Data show that government institutions—at all levels—did not properly solve the FWC and completely failed to be accountable to Flint residents.

For instance, when Virginia Tech made its initial water report public (August 31, 2015), state of Michigan officials tried to dismiss it by issuing a counter report containing dubious information (FWATF, 2016:16). Repeatedly, after continuing reports of contaminated water came to light and multiplied, the state government sought ways to discredit or invalidate those findings. During these events, the local news media

did not investigate more deeply into the reports or commission independent water testing and continued to rely on government sources.

The 15-month lapse between the switch to the Flint River water source and the discovery of lead, testing errors and governmental cover-ups underscore the U.S. media's primary assumption that their role is not that of a watchdog, but of detached reporting and investigating (Hanitzsch, 2013; Nielsen, 2015). Media researchers argue this may be a result of direct control of the media, since economic considerations' influence in newsrooms has journalists "tethered to the news cycle," rather than developing stories that require investigation (Starkman, 2014: 246). Starkman (2014) describes this process in terms of the 2007-2008 U.S. financial crisis in which markets unexpectedly crashed despite what he claims were mounting clues journalists should have foreseen.

The function of a media watchdog is to expose and hold leaders accountable (Ettema and Glasser, 1998, Laswell, 1948; Neilsen, 2014). According to Christians, McQuail, and Glasser, it requires, "the identification of some problem and an active search for evidence, rather than simply collecting and disseminating what is readily available" (2009: 142). This responsibility requires a journalist to personally commit to stories, make reasonable judgments, and advocate for them, if necessary (Ettema and Glasser, 1998). Our research showed, through use of FOIA requests and independent analysis, that the media elevated themselves to an independent watchdog role, which they had failed to achieve prior to outside research discoveries and scientific investigation.

Accountability and Transparency: Political Figures and Voices Speak More Frequently and Louder

To answer RQ2, "What was the thematic coverage of the news media during the initial stages of the Flint water crisis?" this section identifies the themes considered most relevant as government and media functions (Table 2). The analysis presented several common themes across national, state, and local coverage.

All media presented the water crisis first and foremost as a governance issue involving accountability, transparency, and calls for Michigan's government to respond more rapidly as part of its *emergency response* duties. As seen in the discretionary sample of events in Appendix A, state and national coverage lagged behind local media in all themes identified; however, accountability remained a constant theme across all media.

Much of the focus centered on criticism by state and federal lawmakers that Governor Rick Snyder failed to act on residents' early concerns and continued to delay aid after the discovery of lead:

“It is beyond frustrating that the city I love had to declare it[self] destroyed before the state would act with any urgency.” – Sen. Jim Ananich, D-Flint (Egan, 2016)

“The people of Flint deserve to know the truth about how this happened and what Governor Snyder and other leaders knew about it. And they deserve a solution, fast.” – Hillary Clinton (Fonger, 2016a)

Media and Governmental Oversight: The Watchdog Awakens

All media used political sources to convey accountability and demand transparency; however, the *New York Times* and the *Detroit Free Press* developed a more aggressive, critical tone regarding social injustice. Themes emerged through editorial content, descriptions of Flint’s demographics, and reporting of a finance-centric versus citizen-centered government (Board, 2016; Egan 2015). The *New York Times* took the most critical stance, referring to Flint in terms such as “disadvantaged” and “destitute,” a city where residents’ continued complaints were ignored, “largely dismissed,” or fell victim to “a blind eye” by officials (Atkinson, Haimerl, and Pérez-Peña, 2016; Board, 2016; Davey, 2015; Smith, 2016b). The *Detroit Free Press* developed a similar position primarily through critical columns:

“If there’s such a thing as benign neglect, this was malignant indifference, on an institutional level.” (Kaffer, 2016a)

“Governor Snyder: When are you going to turn your relentless, positive action toward assuaging the misery your administration has heaped upon the people of Flint?” (Kaffer, 2016b)

The analysis also expressed the theme of social injustice through quotes by residents:

“I trusted the city, and I helped the city poison my kid.” Walters (Davey, 2015)

“If he [Snyder] was in jail and we served him nothing but this water, he’d be looking into it a lot quicker.” (Egan, 2016b)

The *Detroit Free Press* and the *Flint Journal (MLive)* incorporated the Freedom of Information Act, independent investigation, and collaboration with researchers as critical elements of coverage. Through such independent research, The *Flint Journal (MLive)* found Flint officials filed false reports with the state on water testing, while the *Detroit Free Press* confirmed research on children's lead levels provided by Dr. Hanna-Attisha were accurate, despite the state's insistence that the data was flawed (Fonger, 2015d; Tanner, 2015). While this independent research assisted in holding officials accountable, it also underlined the media's prior non-fulfillment of their own watchdog role to inform residents adequately and constantly about the crisis.

Analysis of content versus merely topic revealed an underlying lack of transparency among government officials, especially in state and local media sources, where a larger number of articles were available. Our analysis revealed that the governor continued to communicate about the crisis primarily through spokespeople and news releases despite overt assurances of transparency.

Response and Health Risks of Contaminated Water

Actual emergency response efforts and health risks were overshadowed in the governmental aspects of the water crisis. Local media coverage most often focused on water donations and distribution as part of response efforts, while national coverage highlighted distribution in articles with a broader focus, often including both residents and the latest political updates (Acosta, 2016; Smith, 2016a; Smith 2016b). The *Flint Journal (MLive)* placed most emphasis on the health risks from lead, including recommendations to use bottled or filtered water.

The analysis revealed that Flint residents were confused about the risks even after weeks of coverage:

"I don't think people know what's going on at all." – Resident (Davey, 2015)

"For the most part, I just deal with it. Sometimes when your skin swells up, you just kind of deal with it." – Resident (Acosta, 2016)

"Kids love bath time and to not even be able to give that to them out of fear..." – Resident (Emery, 2016)

Local Media: The “Official” Sources and the Missing Voices

Local media preferred direct quotes from official sources such as public statements, press releases, segments from televised interviews, and e-mails. Researchers, businesses, and activists also cited official sources. Residents were rarely the focus of content or headlines. Residents were more likely featured in stories about relief efforts or protests, but overall, official sources dominated coverage. While the tone of the quotes was often critical of the government, government officials, or delays, the overall tone of writing by *Flint Journal (MLive)* journalists remained objective, and negative quotes were balanced with responses:

“I think Governor Snyder needs to do something about the water.... He needs to be fired.”
– Resident (Emery, 2016b)

“It’s disappointing that some groups would use such rhetoric and aren’t instead focused on joining the collaborative efforts to make sure all Flint residents have access to safe, clean water.” – Dave Murray, Governor’s spokesman (Emery, 2016b)

Government Actions/Media Reactions: The Role of the Media as Watchdog

To answer RQ3, “What is the role of the media in the initial stages of the Flint Water Crisis?”, the authors created a discretionary table highlighting key government actions and corresponding media coverage from the date of the switch to the Flint River water source through President Obama’s emergency declaration (Appendix A). Our analysis of the task force report demonstrated that all media sources reported concerns regarding the quality of the water prior to finding lead content. State and national media actions lagged behind and were mostly non-existent until late 2015, when the *Detroit Free Press* increased coverage following the findings of Hanna-Attisha’s (2015) research on children’s blood levels in late September 2015. Although the *New York Times* first covered the story in March 2015, it relied primarily on Associated Press content in subsequent coverage until Michigan Governor Snyder called on FEMA and the Michigan National Guard for assistance on January 12, 2016.

The table also references multiple events in which significant governmental actions involving health concerns about the water were undisclosed, and the media learned of those actions months later through the FOIA, taskforce reports, or information obtained and/or published by researchers. The delay reflects a lack of account-

ability in terms of the media's watchdog function. It should be noted that a much more comprehensive listing of events is available in the Flint Water Advisory Task Force's *Final Report* (FWATF, 2016).

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

Further, frames within national, state, and local reporting remained consistent with previous scholarly findings regarding accountability and the media's watchdog role. Bennett (2007) finds that national news often provides broader perspectives of contentious political issues. In terms of how political and other official sources drove local media content, the findings support research indicating that local coverage may favor political and organized groups with established influence within the community (Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien, 1995; Davis, 2009; Tichenor et al., 1980). Bennett (1990) and Hallin (1994) find that reliance on political sources and their public relations officials makes coverage less critical. In this sense, Balkin (1999) states that mass media can help simulate political transparency, not by hiding facts, but by altering the context in which citizens view them. This is close to what the local newspaper did in Flint water crisis.

We must point out the limitations of our research findings. First, the Flint water crisis resulted in criminal and civil lawsuits, which are still pending and increasing. Plaintiffs include residents, the State of Michigan, and the NAACP. Defendants include members of the state and local governments, hospitals, the media, and engineering firms. This makes it difficult to carry out qualitative research involving interviews or focus groups with key participants. Access to reporters and news organizations in Flint has proven challenging due to legal concerns. As result, litigation hindered our efforts to interview actors involved or affected by the crisis.

Evaluation of the media offers a one-sided representation of a crisis event; therefore, future research should incorporate residents, as did Driedger, Mazur, and Mistry (2014), who documented the "evolution of blame" in the years following a water crisis in Walkerton, Ontario. Their work with focus groups found skepticism and distrust of government persisted, insofar as residents remained reluctant to drink what they admitted was probably safe water. So, in the future, similar focus groups and interviews should be conducted not only with residents, but also with government officials and other institutional actors.

Given the city of Flint's demographics, future research should also include specific emphasis on how the media served its minority community and worked to include minority voices in its coverage. Previous research by Heider et al. (2005) finds

minority communities want coverage on solutions versus continual emphasis on problems. Such research may be conducive to a longitudinal study of the Flint water crisis.

Despite the information about the quality of water during the crisis, the government repeatedly refused to respond or was unwilling to acknowledge errors in water testing. Transparency and open government functioning also failed to provide citizens with information about the hazardous conditions of their water.

The media also failed to search for other sources or doubt the veracity of government statements. This is a clear case of lack of accountability. The more informed a citizen is, the better he/she will be prepared and able to respond when facing a crisis.

The Flint case demonstrates not only a failure to communicate health risks, but also the results of an unaccountable government that offered “callous and dismissive responses to citizens who expressed concerns” (FWATF, 2016: 2). Some of the harshest criticism centered on Michigan Department of Environmental Quality spokesman Brad Wurfel, who first referred to Dr. Hannah-Attisha’s comments as “near hysteria” and “unfortunate” (FWATF, 2016: 8). Wurfel resigned in December 2015 (Smith, 2015), and he now works with a Michigan law firm, where he is said to be advising clients on how to maximize their communication strategies (Egan, 2016c). To date, Wurfel has escaped formal charges.

“Let me start here – anyone who is concerned about lead in the drinking water in Flint can relax.” – Brad Wurfel, spokesman for Michigan’s Department of Environmental Quality in an interview with *Michigan Radio*. July 13, 2015. (Smith, 2015)

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Appendix A DISCRETIONARY SAMPLE OF EVENTS, ACTIONS, AND MEDIA RESPONSE					
Date	Event	State Government Action or Inaction	Media Action or Inaction		
			Local	Regional	National
4/25/14	Flint begins using water from the Flint River, despite internal communication from MDEQ staff expressing doubts about water quality.	4/25/14 - City officials attend event in which water source switch is flipped to the Flint River source. They toast with water. 4/28/14 - Flint Mayor Walling requests comments regarding water quality in a Tweet.	City officials celebrate switch at the Flint water plant. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2014/04/watch_mayor_dayne_walling_em_d.html 4/28/14 - Mayor communicates with residents via Twitter regarding water quality. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2014/04/switch_to_flint_river_for_city.html		
8/15/14	City of Flint issues first boil-water advisory due to E. coli bacteria. A second advisory follows on 9/5/15.	Flint increases water main flushing and adds additional disinfectant. 10/1/14 - MDEQ reports to the governor, stating advisories are a result of aging infrastructure and population decline. MDEQ requests operational evaluation for trihalomethanes. (THM5).	Coverage of city statements regarding boil water advisories. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2014/08/flint_issues_boil_water_notice.html 8/18/14 – Follow-up report http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2014/08/flint_officials_say_abnormal_t.html		

Appendix A (continuación)				
October 2014	Genesee County notes increase in Legionellosis incidents.	cCHD expresses concern to the Flint Utilities Department about increased incidence of Legionellosis and its possible connection to the water supply.		
10/13/14	General Motors ceases use of Flint water due to corrosion.	General Motors disconnects from city water supply. The article includes quotes from CMI, MDEQ, county commission and township. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2014/10/general_motors_wont_use_flint.html		
12/31/14	The first 6-month round of LCR testing shows 90th percentile lead level equals 6 parts per billion with 2 samples of 100 above action levels			

<p>1/2/15</p>	<p>City notifies residents of violation of SDWA due to high THMS.</p>	<p>1/2/15 - City issues a press release to the media and mails a notice to water customers, maintaining that despite the violation, the water is safe for most residents. The violation remains in place until 9/2/15.</p>	<p>Coverage of the notice by city warns of SDWA violation with quotes from officials. Article refers to the violation as "the latest in a series of issues." http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/01/flint_water_has_high_disinfect.html 1/5/15 - Follow-up coverage http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/01/flint_water_customers_will_get.html 1/6/15 - Follow-up coverage. Flint's Mayor Walling reassures residents that the water is safe and his own family drinks it daily. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/01/flint_officials_say_city_on_r.html</p>		
<p>2/9/15</p>	<p>University of Michigan-Flint's independent testing shows elevated lead levels on campus.</p>		<p>Coverage of UM- Flint's independent water testing results and response. Old fixtures cited as cause of lead in the water. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/02/water_testing_at_um-flint_show.html</p>		

Appendix A (continuación)				
3/12/15	<p>Veolia North America issues "Water Quality Report" to City of Flint and emergency manager (EM). Report states Flint's water meets state and federal standards for THM control, but does not address lead.</p>	<p>City issues report and news release.</p>	<p>Article quotes the report, mayor, and city council president, and lists recommendations for improving THM. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/03/flint_water_contaminant_final_r.html</p>	
3/23/15	<p>Non-binding council vote to return to Detroit water.</p>	<p>Flint City Council votes 7-1 to return to Detroit water service; the vote is non-binding since Flint is under EM control.</p>	<p>Coverage of non-binding decision, and quotes the councilman who brought the measure to a vote. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/03/flint_council_votes_to_do_all.html</p>	<p>Article cites Flint Journal story. http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/03/24/flint-council-votes-reconnect-detroit-water/70365106/</p>
				<p>3/24/15 - Article quotes residents, the EM, and mayor. EM Ambrose states complaints are mostly cost-related. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/25/us/a-water-dilemma-in-michigan-cheaper-or-clearer.html?_r=1</p>

5/29/15	MDHHS produces a report concluding Legionellosis outbreak in Genesee County in 2014-15 is over; 42 percent of the cases had health-care contact, while 47 percent had contact with city water.				
7/27/15	MDEQ receives LCR report documenting lead levels measured in sampling from 1/1/15 to 6/30/15. The report is later revised omitting two high lead results.	8/20/15 Revised report issued to ACLU-MI in response to FOIA request.			
8/31/2015	VT researchers report elevated lead levels in Flint water resulting from the corrosiveness causing lead to leach from pipes. Full report is released on 9/8/15.	9/2/15 Wurfel/MDEQ issues a press release disputing results of testing. The mayor and department of public works issue a joint statement.	9/2/15 Coverage includes quotes from the report and lead researcher, Marc Edwards. A Flint councilman and coalition leader are quoted criticizing the handling of the situation. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/09/new_testing_shows_flint_water.html		

Appendix A (continuación)				
9/24/15	<p>Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha presents Hurley Medical Center's findings of elevated blood levels in Flint children, followed by remarks by the GCHD Director Mark Valacak.</p>	<p>MDEQ's Wurfel calls Hurley findings "unfortunate" and says water controversy is becoming "near-hysteria"; "Flint's drinking water is safe in that it's meeting federal and state standards." <small>MDRHS</small> issues a statement claiming the state's data is more accurate. State Senate Minority Leader Jim Ananich, D-Flint, issues a statement calling the findings of the lead study "alarming." <small>HMC</small> and <small>GPHC</small> members call a press conference to advise the community of a health emergency and risks to infants.</p>	<p>Coverage includes a Hanna-Attisha's findings and statement from a state rep. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/09/study_shows_twice_as_many_flint.html Coverage of response from <small>MDRHS</small> refuting research. The city administrator and governor's spokesman (via email) cite continued efforts to improve water quality. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/09/state_says_its_data_shows_no_c.html</p>	<p>The article includes quotes from Hanna-Attisha and the results of her research. http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/09/24/water-lead-in-flint/72747696/9/26/15 - Editorial critical of government's response, including quotes and independent research by the Detroit Free Press. http://www.freep.com/story/opinion/columnists/nancy-kaffer/2015/09/26/shortfalls-em-law-writes-large-flint-water-crisis/72811990/</p>

<p>9/25/15</p>	<p>City of Flint issues a health advisory.</p>	<p>City issues a press release.</p>	<p>9/25/15 - Coverage of the lead advisory includes precautionary measures for residents to flush pipes and install filters; emphasis on risk being most serious to infants. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/09/flint_makes_lead_advisory_offi.html</p>	<p></p>	<p></p>
<p>10/2/15</p>	<p>State announces Governor's 10-point Action Plan to address water system.</p>	<p>Governor's Office, EPA Region 5, City of Flint, MDEQ and MDHHS hold a press conference. Governor attends via conference call.</p>	<p>Article lists state's plan, which includes filters and testing. Governor quoted via conference call. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/10/governors_plan_for_flint_water.html</p>	<p></p>	<p>Associated Press content omitted.</p>
<p>10/16/15</p>	<p>City of Flint is reconnected to DWSD system Lawmakers issue a statement. Flint lawmaker, and Democratic house leader issue a statement calling for governor's accountability.</p>	<p>City of Flint is reconnected to DWSD system Lawmakers issue a statement. Flint lawmaker, and Democratic house leader issue a statement calling for governor's accountability.</p>	<p>Article focuses on reconnection and US EPA's announcement that it will advise the city and state on water issues. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/10/flint_epa_task_force_will_advise.html Coverage of press conference announcing reconnection to Detroit water. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/10/flint_reconnecting_to_detroit.html</p>	<p>Coverage of reconnection and statement from lawmakers calling for accountability. http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/10/16/flint-reconnecting-detroit-water-5pm-friday/74074740/</p>	<p></p>

Appendix A (continuación)				
11/4/15	EPA issues "Final Report: High Lead at Three Residences in Flint, Michigan."	The EPA releases a report.	Article cites the report and quotes Edwards. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/11/new_epa_report_warns_of_potential.html	Article cites Flint Journal story and quotes Edwards saying it is an admission that lead pipes are dangerous.. http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/11/05/epa-report-warns-more-potential-flint-water-problems/75203338/
11/13/15	Flint families file federal lawsuit accusing 14 state and local officials of intentional negligence.		Article names each of the 14 listed in the suit and quotes from the lawsuit and MIDEQ. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/11/class_action_lawsuit_claims_sn.html Brief story regarding lawsuit filed by families refers to the Detroit Free Press as source. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/11/report_families_file_lawsuit_1.html	Brief coverage of lawsuit, containing a quote from an activist. http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/11/13/after-flint-water-crisis-families-file-lawsuit/75744376/

<p>11/18/15</p>	<p>Elected officials and activists testify before U.S. EPA National Drinking Water Advisory Council regarding the Flint water crisis.</p>	<p>U.S. EPA holds a hearing that includes testimony from Flint residents, lawmakers, and researchers.</p>	<p>Article focuses on testimony in Washington. Quotes from an activist and lawmakers. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/11/story_of_flint_water_crisis_fa.html</p>	<p>Coverage of testimony in Washington with quotes from lawmakers and doctor Hannah Attisha. http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/11/18/flint-lead-problems-raised-national-water-hearing/75990848/</p>	<p>Associated Press content omitted.</p>
<p>12/14/15</p>	<p>State of emergency declared in Flint.</p>	<p>Flint Mayor Weaver declares a state of emergency and issues a statement.</p>	<p>Article focuses on declaration and contains quotes from the city council, which was split on the decision. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/12/mayor_karen_weaver_declares_st.html</p>	<p>Associated Press content omitted.</p>	<p>Associated Press content omitted.</p>
<p>12/29/15</p>	<p>Flint Water Advisory Task Force releases a report regarding initial findings of its investigation.</p>	<p>The Governor's FWATF issues a report. MDEQ's Wurfel and Wyant resign. State representative issues a statement. Governor issues an apology.</p>	<p>Coverage of MDEQ resignation. Statements by governor, Flint mayor, and lawmakers. MDEQ heavily blamed by task force. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/12/gov_rick_snyder_accepts_mdeq_h.html Article focuses exclusively on advisory findings. It quotes from the report. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/12/five_takeways_for_the_flint_wa.html</p>	<p>Coverage includes task force findings and resignations, including MDEQ failures, as well as a statement from the governor apologizing for the error. http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/12/29/deq-director-wyant-re-signs-over-flint-water-crisis</p>	<p>Associated Press content omitted.</p>

Appendix A (continuación)					
1/5/16	Governor declares state of emergency in Genesee County	Governor declares a state of emergency. Governor's office issues a news release. Mayor holds a press conference.	Coverage of governor's statement declaring state of emergency. Flint Mayor Weaver is quoted. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2016/01/governor_declares_state_of_eme.html	Article features multiple topics including emergency declaration and attorney general's investigation. http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2016/01/05/us-attorneys-office-investigating-lead-flint-water/78303960/	Associated Press content omitted.
1/12/16	Governor makes a request for FEMA's assistance with the crisis and use of the Michigan National Guard for distribution.	Governor requests FEMA's assistance. Michigan National Guard is activated to assist with water distribution. The governor issues a statement.	Focuses on the governor's request. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2016/01/governor_asks_for_fema_to_help.html	The article focuses on the call for FEMA with quotes from FEMA and MSP. http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2016/01/09/federal-disaster-agency-monitoring-flint-water-crisis/78553680/	Coverage of call for FEMA's help and background on the water crisis. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/13/us/troops-to-help-flint-address-water-crisis.html

<p>1/13/16</p>	<p>Governor and ^{MICHHS} announce a spike of Legionellosis cases in Flint between June 2014 and March 2015.</p>	<p>Governor and ^{MICHHS} hold a press conference in Detroit. Governor issues a news release.</p>	<p>Focus on announcement of Legionnaires outbreak, with a statement from the governor. http://www.mlive.com/news/detroit/index.ssf/2016/01/legionnaires_disease_spike_disc.html#incart_river_index Coverage of Edward's response. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2016/01/professor_says_flint_river_cou.html Coverage of residents' reaction to the Legionnaire's outbreak. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2016/01/flint_residents_scared_follow.html 1/16/16 - Investigative report shows officials knew of Legionnaire's outbreak long before warning the public. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2016/01/documents_show_agencies_knew_o.html</p>	<p>Focuses on announcement of the Legionnaires outbreak and Edwards suspicion that it is river-related. Quote the governor and a state representative. http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2016/01/13/snyder-flint-area-has-seen-spike-legionnaires/78750610/1/16/16 - Coverage of MLive investigation, and includes quotes from ^{MICHHS}, governor, and lawmakers. http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/flint-water-crisis/2016/01/16/legionnaires-cases-around-flint-raised-flags-2014/78905276/</p>	<p>Coverage of the announcement. It also states there may be a link to the river. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/14/us/officials-study-possible-tie-between-disease-and-flint-water.html</p>
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Appendix A (continuación)				
1/16/16	Emergency declaration signed by the president.	President Obama signs the emergency declaration for assistance from Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency. U.S. representative issues a statement. State senator issues a statement.	Brief article includes quotes from FEMA. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2016/01/president_obama_signs_emergenc.html Article focuses on Mayor Weaver's response to the declaration by the president. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2016/01/flint_mayor_karen_weaver_thank.html	Coverage of emergency declaration with reaction statements from lawmakers. http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2016/01/16/president-obama-declares-emergency-flint/78898604/
				Article focuses on emergency declaration with reaction from the governor and Michigan lawmakers. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/18/us/obama-flint-michigan-water-fema-emergency-disaster.html Associated Press content omitted