Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy

July 2017

Environmental Justice?
Unjust Coverage of the Flint Water Crisis

By Derrick Z. Jackson
Joan Shorenstein Fellow, Fall 2016
Boston Globe Essayist and Climate and Energy Writer for the Union of Concerned Scientists

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Before Flint: A History of Environmental Injustice

The Flint Water Crisis that began in 2014 represents a failure of government and the national media, a tragic intersection of race and environmental hazard.

The terms “environmental justice” and “environmental racism” originated three and a half decades ago over a proposed landfill in Warren County, North Carolina. The facility was meant to hold PCBs in waste oil that was otherwise being dumped by the Ward Transformer Company in violation of federal toxic substance laws along 240 miles of road in 14 counties. The company was located in the thriving Research Triangle of Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill, but the site for the landfill was to the rural northeast, in an area with the highest percentage of African Americans in the state and some of the worst poverty.

The Environmental Protection Agency approved the site in 1979, granting waivers from certain groundwater and liner protections. Angry residents hired a soil expert who said the groundwater would indeed be contaminated by the waste oil. That began a legal resistance that led to a temporary halt to construction and a 1982 federal lawsuit filed by a county chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The NAACP alleged that the site was picked because of its racial makeup.[1]

The suit failed, but the opening of the landfill was met with weeks of peaceful protests where residents laid down on the road to stop dump trucks from entering. More than 500 people were arrested. *The New York Times* covered the beginning of the protests, quoting the Rev. Donald Jarboe as saying, “This is a life and death issue.”[2]

The landfill would eventually produce contaminated water, which required millions of dollars to clean it up. But an editorial in *The Washington Post*, titled, “Dumping on the Poor,” still celebrated “the marriage of civil rights activism with environmental concerns,” and the “broadening of the traditionally white, upper middle-class environmental movement.” The editorial said, “blacks and whites in depressed Warren County are right not to let the bureaucrats and technicians invoke studies as some kind of cloak of immunity.”[3]

That editorial signaled that there might be a marriage between the national press and environmental assaults on African Americans and poor people. In theory, there was plenty to cover. Just five years after the Warren County protests, the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice published a landmark report that found that people of color were far more likely than white Americans to reside near hazardous waste sites.[4]

But environmental justice was of little concern to the conservative Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations in the 1980s and early 90s. President Clinton tried to formally elevate its federal stature in 1994 by signing an executive order

telling federal agencies to make environmental justice part of its mission "by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations." A *New York Times* editorial praised the order hoping that "today's good intentions become tomorrow's standard practice."[5]

The good intentions evaporated amid George W. Bush's denigration of science, famously symbolized by White House deletions of critical environmental data from EPA reports. Then came the Obama administration, which bucked opposition from anti-regulation Republicans and fossil-fuel Democrats to reassert American environmental leadership. He pushed for the 2015 Paris climate change accords and directed the EPA to issue a host of landmark rules to cut industrial pollutants and greenhouse gases, including a 54.5 miles per gallon standard for automobiles and light trucks by 2025.

President Obama also increased funding for environmental justice grants, and in October 2016, the EPA rolled out a 66-page, "Environmental Justice Strategic Plan" for 2020. The cover photograph featured two African American girls at the head of one of the landmark Warren County PCB marches. The EPA plan pledged to tailor its rulemaking, permitting and enforcement powers to reduce disparities in communities already "overburdened" with lead exposure, poor drinking water and air quality and hazardous waste. EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy said in the executive summary that environmental justice was now "at the core of the EPA's mission."[6]

The mission is daunting. A 2014 report by the Environmental Justice and Health Alliance for Chemical Policy Reform found that more than 134 million Americans live dangerously close to a toxic facility. The people who live in "fence-line zones" closest to such facilities are disproportionately African American and Latino and are also more likely to be of low income.[7]

A 2016 report by the Center for Effective Government determined that children of color made up nearly two-thirds of the 5.7 million children who live within a mile of a toxic facility. Twenty-eight states received a "D" or an "F" for their fence-line communities and racial disparities.[8]

It did not matter whether a state otherwise had a proud or poor environmental reputation as the 28 states included progressive states such as Massachusetts, California, Minnesota and Washington alongside less regulated manufacturing states such as Texas and others in the South. The report said its findings "reinforce results from numerous other studies that demonstrate that the health and safety of communities of color and people in poverty are severely and unequally impacted."

Despite the lofty rhetoric of the Obama administration, the EPA was criticized for failing to utilize its enforcement powers. The Center for Public Integrity published a damning report saying that the EPA's civil rights division dismissed 90 percent of

community pollution complaints. The report said, “Time and again…communities of color living in the shadows of sewage plants, incinerators, steel mills, landfills and other industrial facilities across the country—from Baton Rouge to Syracuse, Phoenix to Chapel Hill—have found their claims denied by the EPA’s civil-rights office. In its 22-year history of processing environmental discrimination complaints, the office has never once made a formal finding of a Title VI violation.”[9]

That report was seconded by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in a September 2016 report that said, “EPA does not take action when faced with environmental justice concerns until when forced to do so. When they do act, they make easy choices and outsource any environmental justice responsibilities onto others.”[10]

In an individual statement in the report, commission Chairman Martin Castro wrote:

> I’m not certain if the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is incompetent or indifferent when it comes to requiring environmental justice from polluters of minority communities, but whatever the case, the result is the same. The EPA has failed miserably in its mandate to protect communities of color from environmental hazards. In my estimation, the EPA loses the forest for the trees. By that I mean that the EPA is more focused on process, than on outcomes; more focused on rhetoric than results. By any measure, its outcomes are pathetic when it comes to environmental justice.

In a joint statement, commissioners Michael Yaki, Roberta Achtenberg and David Kladney said, “This report, in the wake of the mass poisoning of residents in Flint, Michigan, is especially timely…EPA’s Office of Civil Rights has historically acted as a black box for complaints about discriminatory effects of toxic source locations.”

The report was timely because it was in Flint that the EPA’s behavior backfired into the worst environmental justice disaster of the Obama era.

National Media and Flint: Late to the Story

In order to cut costs in a city ruled under emergency manager powers, the state of Michigan in April of 2014 switched the city of Flint from its prior water supply of Lake Huron, provided by Detroit, to the highly corrosive Flint River. The water instantly ate at the aged pipe infrastructure, unleashing lead into the drinking and bathing water of residents. The EPA knew early on about the disaster that was unfolding, but failed to step in with the federal emergency powers at its disposal.

It its own way, the national media also failed to step in, cementing in the eyes of many environmental justice leaders its reputation for paying only scattered attention to environmental justice in predominately African American or Latino cities, towns and rural areas. Despite the laudatory editorials of earlier years,

environmental beat writers are found only at the largest newspapers and the "environmental justice beat writer" is virtually non-existent.

The situation has not gone unnoticed by one longtime leader in the environmental justice movement, Beverly Wright of Dillard University and the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice in New Orleans. She asked in a telephone interview:

"When have you seen the big movie about environmental disasters in a black community or in a Latino community? You have a movie on the BP Horizon. You had Erin Brockovich. You had Woburn. In spite of all the suffering and numerous stories available about what is happening in black communities, we don't see anything that reaches that level of attention."[11] Wright could have added for comparison the nationally-covered toxic or nuclear disasters of the 1970s and 80s in predominately white communities such as Love Canal or Three Mile Island.

It will always remain an indictment as to why Flint, a city that happens to be 57 percent black, did not get such attention. By their behavior, the national media clearly did not "credential" residents for their on-the-ground observations as to what was coming out of their taps. Their activism, from protests to bottled-water drives, was essentially ignored for a year and a half. Flint did not receive sustained coverage until lead-contaminated blood in children was confirmed by "credentialed" doctors and scientists.

Flint is a prime example of how the media still struggle to tell the story of disadvantaged Americans nearly a half century after the Kerner Commission Report on American riots in many inner cities in the 1960s. A whole chapter of the 426-page report was devoted to the media and the need to integrate African Americans "into all aspects of coverage and content, including newspaper articles and television programming. The news media must publish newspapers and produce programs that recognize the existence and activities of Negroes as a group within the community and as a part of the larger community."[12]

One problem is that people of color are underrepresented in the media. Barely more than 10 percent of newspaper staffs are black or brown in a nation that is 30 percent African American and Hispanic/Latino. The news coverage, too, is distorted. Studies show that print and television news reinforce negative stereotypes of African Americans and Latinos by over-portraying them as criminals and disproportionately publishing or airing positive stereotypes of white Americans in roles of authority and as good-hearted, innocent citizens.[13]

Negative stereotypes can have a dehumanizing effect, lulling the media to sleep. Flint was a perfect storm for that to happen, often depicted as a broke and broken city as a result of the staggering loss of manufacturing jobs in the last half of the 20th century.

Almost immediately after the April 2014 switch to the Flint River, people complained about the smell and color of the water. Residents would not be aware of

lead levels for several months, but they were clear that something was afoul and said so when asked by the local media. Yet it was not until March 2015—nearly a year after complaints were being voiced—that national media, such as *The New York Times*, began to pay attention.

Even then, there was no sustained newspaper attention until late 2015 and early 2016, when Flint, Genesee County, the State of Michigan and President Obama declared an emergency over high levels of lead in the water and in the blood of thousands of children. Lead is a potent neurotoxin of particular danger to young children, putting them at risk of lifelong cognitive damage and behavioral problems. By the time the state called its emergency, it was about 20 months after the switch to the Flint River water.

Since then, there have been many national and international reports of local, state and federal negligence, lying and cover up. Editors and environmental reporters at nationally influential outlets have issued many “mea culpas” for being late to the story.

But the Flint Water Crisis should stand as a case study, posing the agonizing question of what power could have been brought to bear on politicians and environmental and public health officials if the media took the credentials of residents seriously in the first place. What level of lead poisoning and other illnesses could have been prevented?

Residents and Local Media Sound the Alarm

The voice of the people was there for national media to hear, if it wanted to. From the outset, residents were angry and graphic on the public record in local newspapers, radio and television reports. The city’s utilities administrator, Daugherty Johnson boasted, “Average residents won't notice any difference,” to the switch to the Flint River. “The system, as it's designed, has very complex treatment standards and systems built into it. As we've talked before, the plant went through an extensive upgrade in the early 2000s.”[14]

But on May 23, a month after the April 25, 2014 switch, amid claims by the state that the water met all safety standards, including those for turbidity, residual chlorine and bacteria, resident Bethany Hazard told reporter Ron Fonger of the *Flint Journal* (who would come to write the most stories by far on the crisis) that her water was murky and foamy. She said the water was so “weird,” it required her to use “tons more dish soap” to make bubbles.[15]

On June 2, the local NBC television outlet WEYI interviewed residents on their complaints. Senegal Williams said the Flint River water was the worst he had ever tasted. “I don’t know how it can be clean if it smells and tastes bad,” he said. “It’s not proper for people to drink this, if I can smell it?” A woman named Angie added, “When I'm showering and bathing my skin feels different so the smell from the

water and the showering kind of convinced me that the water is just not the same."[16]

On June 12, not yet two months after the switch, the *Flint Journal's* Fonger wrote a story on how the Flint water treatment plant had to increase its volume of lime to reduce the hardness of the water. Again there were several assurances that the water was safe. A district supervisor for the state Department of Environmental Quality said the water met all standards for nitrates, metals, residual disinfectant and arsenic. State-appointed emergency manager Darnell Earley said that until the DEQ told him the water was unsafe, "it will be the water source." Flint Mayor Dayne Walling boasted, "It's a quality, safe product. I think people are wasting their precious money buying bottled water."[17]

This flew against the comments in that same story of the Rev. Barbara Bettis, a resident who said the water "stinks. It's nasty, and we shouldn't even be drinking it."

Two days later, Michigan Public Radio reported on its website that, "Flint's water department is getting plenty of complaints about the smell and taste of the city's tap water." Again, reassurances abounded, with the city's utilities manager saying it was merely due to "hardness issues."[18] Yet, by the end of July, the city announced it was flushing fire hydrants in some neighborhoods to deal with discoloration complaints by residents.

By late summer 2014, several protests were staged in Flint over a host of issues, including residents being stuck with the highest home water bills in the country. At a mid-July rally where the *Flint Journal* estimated that about 100 people protested the rates, Councilman Wantwaz Davis said, "We're going to keep going until we get national attention. Governor [Rick] Snyder needs to be accountable for what this city is suffering through.[19] The right to clean water was voiced at the same time about 70 miles away in Detroit where protests were being staged over the cutoff of water services to low-income residents (protests covered by the national press, including *The New York Times*).[20]

At the same time in Flint, a series of boil alerts were issued, stirring up yet more uncertainty among residents. Despite living outside the advisory areas, resident Diane Fletcher told the *Journal* in a September 12 piece, "I'm not very confident about it at all. We haven't used the water to cook with, and I don't want to bathe in it, but I can't get around it."[21] One protest in September drew "hundreds" of people outside a private fundraiser attended by Governor Snyder, according to the *Flint Journal*.[22]

For two consecutive days in early October, the website of the local CBS TV affiliate featured complaints from residents leading off one story by saying, "It's an odor residents say will make you gag and they are fed up with paying for water they can't even drink."[23]

And the water came in different colors. Terry Griffus said, “About a week ago I filled up my dog’s bowl with water. The next day I got up and looked in it and it was brown…Go back to buying Detroit water.” Resident David Bussing said, “Their water around here is yellow, and it’s just really nasty. They should’ve done something a long time ago.”

In those CBS affiliate pieces, Flint resident Roseanna Thompson said every time she turned on the faucet, she recoiled from the stench. “I can't get it close enough to get a drink because I can't hack the smell of it,” Thompson said. “I've lived all my life on the east side so I've been around the Flint River and that's just what it smells like, it smells like the river.”

Flint resident Joe Schafer added: “Everybody's uncertain about it, you know. I wouldn’t drink it, and we’re paying a lot of money for it too.”

Meanwhile, the city’s head of water operations, Howard Croft, continued to claim the water was in “great condition…clear and drinkable.”

Then came news that should have shocked the conscience of the nation. On October 13, the *Flint Journal* reported that General Motors was disconnecting from the Flint water supply just five and half months after the switch, saying that high chlorine levels in the water corroded engine crankshafts.

The company quietly cut a deal with suburban Flint Township to resume getting water from Lake Huron. The *Journal*’s quote from GM spokesman Tom Wickham intimated that the rusting was relatively instantaneous. “Because of all the metal…you don't want the higher chloride water [to result in] corrosion,” Wickham said. “We noticed it some time ago [and] the discussions have been going on for some time.”[24]

Some time ago? The next question could not be more obvious: If Flint’s water so rapidly rusted the metal of automotive parts, what business did human beings have drinking it?

To the credit of residents in the region, they asked that out loud in October and November in letters to the editor of the *Journal*. Gayle Fish of Flushing, Michigan, a town outside of Flint, said, “There’s General Motors going back to Detroit water because of their fear Flint water is going to cause corrosion. To metal. Think it out folks. If it’s not good enough to wash off metal, exactly what is it doing to your bodies, your food, your clothes, your pipes?”

Joyce Tomlinson of Flint wrote:

> Whoever thought Flint River water would be great had to be idiots. I certainly have had problems and I’m sure most people have. Water pressure varies during the day at various times so you never know when it will be low, therefore here are my personal problems:

> Washing one load of clothes takes twice as long. It takes forever for the washer to fill.The icemaker on the refrigerator/freezer is malfunctioning.
>
> The problems happened after the Flint water supply went into effect. Taking a shower or bath is extremely frustrating when the pressure is low.
>
> I don't drink the water, but my daughter buys bottled water for all coffee making. Guests from out of town mentioned a lousy taste early on so now nothing used but bottled water.
>
> So now I'm paying almost three times my fees four years ago (between $90-$100 per month) and everything stinks: the water, the service, the charge, the taste, you name it!
>
> Now I see General Motors isn't using it due to corrosion problems. And Flint officials want new businesses to come to town. I think what they're really saying is, "Get out of town."

D'Andre Jackson of Flint wrote:

> Apparently the city of Flint's water quality is not good enough to be used in an industrial process but good enough to used and consumed by humans…That the water can be corrosive to metal has me questioning whether or not the water is truly safe for me and my family and this community. It's hard to imagine that this would be allowed to happen anywhere else but within a city like Flint that most politicians would like to write off and forget about.[25]

A councilwoman, Monica Galloway, went so far as to tell the *Flint Journal*, "This is just another thing that says to me [that] we are like guinea pigs. It's like a research project…that we would normally do on rats." [26]

It's hard to imagine that there was still no national attention to the crisis. Then, on January 2, 2015, the city mailed out notices to residents saying that the water had been in violation of the Safe Drinking Water Act for containing an excess of trihalomethanes (TTHM), a chemical compound that is a byproduct of water disinfectants. Prolonged exposure to TTHM is tied to liver and kidney disease and neurological damage and cancer.[27]

The city claimed that the current water supply was still safe, but coming on top of the boil alert and the rusting of engine parts at GM, residents began to literally boil over. The day after the notices went out, sixteen residents wrote a joint letter to city hall saying, "The persistent problems with our drinking water have undermined our confidence in those responsible for overseeing it. Further, the city had not been

sufficiently transparent with the public about the nature and causes of these problems."

The *Flint Journal* quoted one of the signees, Melodee Mabbitt, as saying in an email, "Often, even very engaged and informed neighbors can feel we're being left in the dark, while being given either no information or only information that seems politically prudent. As we're paying more than the out-county for water that is of lower quality, people have started to back up and wonder if the decision to use river water was really a good decision."[28]

On January 5, some residents protested at city hall. Louise Gillespie, a 67-year-old diabetic, said, "We buy all our water or boil it. But I don't think it takes all the contaminants out." Her 67-year-old husband Melvin said, "There's sand in the bathtub after we run the water for a while." Zaricka Reeves, 19, said she started drinking bottled water after she noticed that Flint River tap water "tastes funny and it stains the tub." [29]

In a January 7 Michigan Radio report, Mayor Walling maintained, "The city water is safe to drink. My family and I drink it and use it every day."[30] But on January 13, the *Flint Journal* reported that "hundreds" of residents attended a "standing-room-only" meeting at a church to air complaints to Mayor Walling and city council members.

Qiana Dawson told the officials, "You all need to work with me on money," blaming the water for rashes on her 4-year-old and 2-year-old children, and the resulting high bills for doctor's visits. Tom Herman, 75, said, "When we were going to get Flint River water, the propaganda was that you wouldn't be able to tell the difference. The propaganda and the reality are not the same. I'm one of the old people they keep talking about, and I'd like to get a little older."

At that meeting, the *Journal* also interviewed a mother, LeeAnne Walters. She said her three-year-old child, who has a compromised immune system, was also breaking out in rashes. According to the *Journal*, the gathering broke out in applause when council member Eric Mays said, "We got bad water. If you buy a bad product, you return it for a refund. While researchers try to figure out the Flint water, we should turn the Detroit water back on."[31]

The Associated Press picked up the *Journal*'s story. By now, the residents had the ear of several city councilors, who began openly demanding consideration of reconnecting with Detroit's water. On January 20, the *Detroit Free Press* and *The Detroit News* reported an offer by the City of Detroit to reconnect Flint back to Lake Huron.[32] Then on January 21, the *Journal* covered a town hall of 150 residents. The piece led off:

> Flint and state officials said Wednesday the city is making strides in controlling total trihalomethanes in drinking water, but a skeptical crowd of residents at a town hall meeting seemed unconvinced. Flint water customers, some carrying bottles of discolored water, packed the

> meeting, designed to spell out the city's efforts to improve water quality, but Department of Public Works Director Howard Croft ended the session before answering all the questions submitted in writing, and many residents walked out or tried to shout their questions and comments.
>
> Claire McClinton, a General Motors retiree and a member of the Flint Democracy Defense League, a group that originally formed around Flint being placed under emergency management in 2011, said the town hall was "a total waste of time. To me, [the water is] like somebody dropped a bomb on this city. We don't need to test. We know [it's a problem]."[33]

The next day, the local CBS TV outlet WNEM went to the downtown farmers market and reported that it "had a hard time finding anyone from Flint who doesn't get their drinking water from a bottle." WNEM quoted these residents:

Rebecca Corbin: "It kind of smells weird and we don't use it to cook or anything. We buy our water from the grocery store."

Stephan Vanberg (speaking about letting his dog drink the water): "Sometimes I run out of bottled water to give him so I have to give him the tap water, but if they don't want us to give the water to people who have a compromised immune system or something like that, then I don't feel comfortable giving it to my dog."

The station also quoted Bethany Hazard, who had been interviewed in at least two *Flint Journal* articles. This time, she said her doctor recommended against her drinking the tap water. "I just drink bottled water and when I go up to Saginaw to visit my mom I fill up my jugs," Hazard said. She added that after she took a bath in the water she felt like she had been "in a pool that's over-chlorinated…Your eyes burn, your skin gets itchy." [34]

The *Detroit Free Press* also covered the January 21 town hall, representing the first major time that media outside the Flint region arrived to cover the crisis.[35] Despite the continuing assurances from officials that the water was safe, the newspaper photographed or reported several residents displaying discolored, cloudy water and carrying signs saying, "Are you trying to kill us?" "Water for life, not profit," and, "No more poison." More than one sign had the word "Flint" accompanied by a skull.

Under the headline of "Would you drink this?" the *Free Press* quoted residents:

Cindy Marshall (a radiology coder): "People think all the crime happens in Flint and everyone is poor in Flint, so there's this stigma. Now we're fighting against dirty water. Really?...They said it's safe, but it's brown water. Why do we have to drink brown water? No one else has to drink brown water."

Corodon Maynard (who said he threw up violently after two glasses of water at bedtime): “I was throwing up like bleach water. It came up through my nose burning.”

Nayyirah Shariff of the Democracy Defense League: “I've taken to calling it ‘poop water.’”

Mexican restaurant manager Jorge Alcazar said business was off between 20 and 30 percent for fears of tap water being used in food preparation and waitress Ashley Trujillo said angry customers have left no tips or insulting pennies after being told they had to pay for bottled water as an alternative. Trujillo told the *Free Press*, “They call it ‘bull crap’—like we have something to do with it.”

Tired of what they considered “bull,” one resident, Florlisa Fowler, started a Facebook page titled “Flint Water Class Action Group.” In a January 23 *Flint Journal*/MLive story, the page claimed more than 1,300 members. “A lot of people are moving away,” Fowler told the newspaper. “They are fed up, and the ones that can afford it will leave the city.” General Motors retiree Dale Radford, who was drinking water out of 5-gallon jugs, said, “I know they say it’s safe to drink but I think everybody is kind of worried about it. I don't think the water tastes the same. I think the coffee in the morning tastes different.”[36]

The worries and cost of bottled water to low-income families cascaded to a level where, according to a January 28 report from the *Flint Journal*/MLive and Michigan Public Radio, hundreds of people lined up for 2,000 cases of such water in near zero-degree temperatures.[37] The water was donated by a title company, realtors and a Facebook group named Flint Strong. The head of the title company, Mike Sargent, told the *Journal* he was “shocked” at the turnout and also told Michigan Public Radio, “I knew that our intention would only be a band-aid on all that needed help. But it’s better to help those who we could help than none at all.”

Among the water recipients were residents Ray Lopez, who said his 8-year-old daughter was getting rashes from the water, and Oliver Lewis, 53, who added to the number who said his bleach-smelling water gave him an upset stomach. “I love Flint, but they’re treating us like dirt,” Lewis said.

As the state continued to downplay the water woes, with a Department of Environmental Quality engineer talking about the “good news” of declining trihalomethane levels, residents told *The Detroit News* in a February 2 story that they saw no reason to have confidence in the system. Sheila Keller, 72, said the water smelled like rotten eggs. She said, “We don’t drink the [city] water. We don’t cook with the water. We don’t make coffee or nothing with the water.”[38]

Flint-area Head Start programs stopped giving preschoolers tap water at the beginning of February. Thirteen pastors traveled to the state capitol of Lansing to demand from state officials an immediate return to Lake Huron water from Detroit.

The Rev. Alfred Harris, head of Concerned Pastors for Social Action, said, “We stand firm in the knowledge that lake water is 100 percent better than river water.”[39]

Churches ramped up bottled-water giveaways. “Once we recognized water was needed, we [knew we] would not have been part of the solution if we did not act,” Rev. Maurice Horne, pastor of Lincoln Park Church, told the *Flint Journal* in a February 3 story. “One gallon at a time, we are going to help.”

In that story, Randy Cockram said, “Even after I boil the tap water, it still looks nasty.” Rick Holtslander said he gave his German shepherd puppies only bottled water. “I haven’t drank a drop of it.” Holtslander said. “I probably would have killed my dogs if I gave them city water.” [40]

On a below-zero-degree week, about 50 residents marched on city hall and met with the investigator who assisted famed environmental activist Erin Brockovich in exposing industrial groundwater contamination in a small California town in the 1990s. Resident Jessica Owens demanded in the *Journal*’s February 14 coverage that if the city could not deliver clean water, the people should not pay bills. She said, “It’s water. It’s not like we're talking about something for leisure. We need it for human life…Why are we being charged for poison? The minute we stop paying is the minute they will start to recognize that we won’t stand for this.”[41]

The city hired a consultant from the global water, transportation and energy company Veolia, which deemed the water safe on February 18. But by now, almost all trust in government was broken with residents, who ever more were taking matters into their own hands. Grocery store chains sold bottled water at discounted prices and bottled water giveaways continued from churches, businesses and ex-cons from the M.A.D.E. Institute, an organization dedicated to helping former convicts transition back into society.

The founder of the institute, Leon El-Alamin, who himself had been incarcerated for drug dealing, told the *Journal* in a February 22 story, “There was an overwhelming display of humility and love from those who went to the last giveaway. The cases were gone within 15 to 20 minutes.” Another organizer of water giveaways, DeWaun Robinson, said, “We are helping on a small scale, but this is bigger than us.”[42]

As if to punctuate that point, the Flint Children’s Museum, which claims 40,000 visitors a year, blocked off its drinking fountains. On March 5, the first meeting of a city-appointed water advisory committee was held. In the *Flint Journal* coverage, Gertrude Marshall said the meeting was only “to buy time. This has been going on well over a year. We’re not going anywhere. We’re just going in circles.” A.C. Dumas added that the only solution left was “to connect back to Detroit or hook up to the county. This right here is much ado about nothing.”

One man, Tony Palladeno, was removed from the meeting by police after shouting into the face of Mayor Walling, “This water is killing me. I am losing my hair. I am

dying, and they keep saying we are not reconnecting with Detroit. While they are trying to figure this out, I am dying."[43]

By mid-March, the anger at Walling led more than a dozen candidates to file to run against him. A second meeting of the water advisory committee was less heated, but still full of distrust, symbolized by Jacqueline Hill saying, "You all are lying to us."[44]

On March 23, the city council heard enough from the residents and voted 7 to 1 to press the state emergency managers to reconnect to the Detroit water supply. Councilman Eric Mays said, in the *Flint Journal*'s coverage, "People in the community asked me to make this motion," Mays said. "Residents have suffered too long."[45]

The New York Times Parachutes into Flint

The drama finally reached the level the national media could not ignore. Two days after the council vote, *The New York Times* published a 1,100-word story titled, "A Water Dilemma in Flint: Cloudy or Costly?"[46]

The *Times* story began with a description of the water by 36-year-old resident and activist Melissa Mays. She said that at different times, the water might look blue or smell like mothballs or a swimming pool with too much chlorine. She said she had rashes and lost hair. Spending $400 a month on bottled water, she said, "My cat gets bottled water, our plants get bottled water, our fish gets bottled water. It takes four to five bottles of water to fill up a pot for spaghetti."

The story included emergency manager Gerald Ambrose's insistence that the water was safe and quoted his rebuff of the vote by the city council ("Water from Detroit is no safer than water from Flint."). It noted that Mayor Walling said he was still drinking the water.

The article recited Flint's woes:

> Though the city has not declared bankruptcy, it has been in state receivership since 2011 and has deep-seated financial problems, which Mr. Ambrose was appointed to help untangle. Add to that a plummeting population and violent crime rates that rank among the nation's worst, and the water question becomes one headache among many…A sign downtown still refers to Flint as Vehicle City. Older residents recall growing up in a place that 200,000 people called home, where good-paying jobs in the General Motors factories were plentiful. Today, many of the auto plants are gone, the population is below 100,000, and once-prosperous neighborhoods are dotted with abandoned homes and vacant lots.

> As Flint has shrunk, its network of water pipes built for a much larger metropolis has deteriorated. With fewer customers, water sometimes languishes in the system, becoming discolored. Moreover, water bills in Flint are far higher than those in neighboring communities. Officials say the switch away from Detroit water saves the city $12 million a year.

The piece closed with comments from three more residents, who were unconvinced that the city and state were doing enough to provide safe water:

> Saterra Hill, 17, a health sciences major at the University of Michigan-Flint, said she and her father purchased several gallon jugs of water each month instead of drinking tap water. Vernon White, 57, said he often bought soda to avoid the water.
>
> For many, the water issue stirs emotions. On a recent weekday afternoon, dozens of people filled the basement of the city's transportation center for a meeting of a water advisory committee.
>
> Tony Palladeno Jr., who arrived at the meeting in a red Flint baseball cap, was escorted out by a police officer for repeated outbursts. Mr. Palladeno, 53, keeps a bottle of yellowish water with a layer of sediment that he said came out of his tap in January. He said local officials had not acted quickly enough to fix the problems.
>
> “I don't feel hopeful,” Mr. Palladeno said. “At one time, I loved this town. I still love it. There’s good people here. But the governing is killing us. I think we need a federal intervention.”

But the *Times*’ parachuting into the crisis missed things that would have made the story more urgent. There was no mention of the months of marches in frigid weather. There was no mention of the many bottled water giveaways in which all sectors of local society participated—Catholic Charities to Muslim ex-prisoners and from CEOs to secretaries.

While Ambrose and Walling were granted six paragraphs to say the water was safe and they were doing everything they could, there was not a single quote or single identification of any of the local politicians who for months challenged the proclamations of safety from the mayor and the state-appointed city manager.

The story mentioned General Motors in the history of Flint, but made no mention of the company fleeing from Flint’s water because of the rusting engine parts. It made no mention of the children’s museum telling children not to drink the water. It missed the Facebook communities being formed to protest the water and letters to the mayor and to the editor of the *Flint Journal*. After a strong opening with Melissa Mays, the *Times* story made no more attempts with the other residents to lay out the broad array of irritations and illnesses besetting the population.

Adding it all together—the space given Ambrose and Walling, compared to just one sentence given to the city council members who voted to go back to the Detroit water, the omission of red flags such as rusted GM car parts, and the absence of any narrative that the people from almost day one of the switch were pushing back and pulling together—gave the first national story on the Flint Water Crisis the appearance of granting far too much deference to those in power. That would seem to violate the Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics for newspapers to "give voice to the voiceless," as well as Finley Peter Dunne's admonition more than a century ago for the press to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.[47]

By contrast, a week and a half after the *Times* piece was published, Al Jazeera America published a lengthy story far more weighted to community voices than that of the *Times*, focusing on the ills of the residents and the effort of Arthur Woodson, a former Army chemical specialist and veterans advocate who would become known as one of the "water warriors," to get the EPA's attention. "This is what I do all day," Woodson told Al Jazeera as he was on hold with the EPA.[48]

The downplaying of community action by the *Times*, however unintentional, may have created a self-fulfilling lack of urgency, for neither that newspaper nor any other major newspaper or television station outside of Michigan would return to or visit the story for another half year.

The Grassroots Demand Action

The *Flint Journal* stayed attentive to the daily drumbeat of water unrest. In mid-April, the Concerned Pastors for Social Action, the Flint Water Class Action Group, the Democracy Defense League and Councilman Mays called a press conference to threaten a lawsuit to reconnect to Detroit's water supply. Alfred Harris, the pastor who had led his group to Lansing two months earlier, said, "We owe it to the people to hook up to it. Place our health and our welfare above everything else." [49] A protest to mark the one-year anniversary of the switch to the Flint River drew 70 people to the steps of city hall.

By June, the pastors and activists were launching legal efforts, saying the city of Flint "recklessly endangered" families with the local river water. Melissa Mays, now the founder of the activist group Water You Fighting For, told the Journal, "The smell and the color are way worse than last year." [50]

Yet that grassroots activity continued to simmer out of the sight of the national media. LeeAnne Walters, the parent who came to one of the January meetings with city and state officials with bottles of orange and brown water, was so disturbed by the rashes and clumps of hair falling off the heads of her children that she asked the city for a water test.

The tests in February and March showed alarmingly high levels of lead in Walters' water. That led to a series of emails between the regional Environmental Protection Agency and state environmental quality officials. One EPA email said, "Big worries here."[51] Walters, a trained medical assistant, began poring over available documents and could not find any evidence that Flint or the state had done anything to counteract the composition of Flint River water. EPA water expert Miguel Del Toral began peppering the state with inquiries as to whether proper corrosion controls had ever been used to treat the polluted water. One email from the state said that "optimized" corrosion controls were being used.[52]

It would famously become clear that no such controls were used—which would have cost no more than $200 a day, according to a report eventually issued by Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette.[53] Instead, the state repeatedly said all was well with the water and suggested that the problem must be in Walters' internal home pipes. Del Toral visited Walters' home in April and May to find that her pipes were safe plastic. He connected Walters to Marc Edwards, the Virginia Tech scientist known for helping to bring the Washington, D.C. water lead crisis to light a decade earlier. Del Toral and Edwards began a new round of tests. Walters herself had her children tested for lead.

The children tested positive for lead poisoning, and further testing of her home found lead levels higher than any Edwards had seen in an individual home. On June 24, Del Toral wrote a memo to his regional EPA drinking water chief, to warn that "The lack of any mitigating treatment for lead is of serious concern for residents that live in homes with lead service lines or partial lead service lines, which are common throughout the City of Flint." [54]

Meanwhile, the Michigan office of the American Civil Liberties Union released a nearly six-minute video summing up the frustrations of residents, titled "Hard to Swallow: Toxic Water in a Toxic System in Flint."[55] The chapter's investigative reporter, Curt Guyette, had already published many columns in African American newspapers analyzing the state's use of the emergency manager law and high water prices in predominately black and poor Michigan cities.

Two months after the April 2014 switch, Guyette calculated that because of Flint's low tax base and the cost of maintaining a dilapidated water and sewer system, "Flint households will be paying an average of more than $190 a month for a resource no one can live without. That's tough to swallow, especially in a city where nearly 40 percent of the population lives below the poverty line."[56]

The video showed snippets of protests both in the street and public sessions where citizens challenged city and state officials. A man is heard at a meeting shouting at officials, "You're killing us!" Alfred Harris said he no longer baptizes parishioners in city water. Claire McClinton said she was astonished that as "undemocratic" as she felt the emergency manager law was, "we never dreamed we would be faced with not being able to use our municipal water."[57]

Most importantly, the video included LeeAnne Walters, who talked about one of her children having lead poisoning. It was apparently the first time Walters was quoted in public about the spring lead tests. Yet, the response of officials in a *Flint Journal* story about the video was the same: the water is better.

Two weeks later, Guyette and the ACLU put Walters and the lead testing in her household front and center. As it turned out, Del Toral was so concerned about the safety of residents that he gave a copy of his June 24 memo to Walters, who in turn gave it to Guyette. He posted a story on the ACLU's website detailing not only the problems for Walters but also the high possibility many other people had no idea what their true lead levels were. Del Toral noted that city testing involved pre-flushing of household systems before collecting samples, a method that could easily minimize lead capture. "From a technical standpoint," Del Toral told Guyette, "there's no justification for the way Flint is conducting its tests. Any credible scientist will tell you [the city's] method is not the way to catch worst-case conditions."[58]

Michigan Radio followed up with a story four days later, featuring a dismissive quote from Department of Environmental Quality spokesman Brad Wurfel. He said, "Let me start here—anyone who is concerned about lead in the drinking water in Flint can relax…It does not look like there is any broad problem with the water supply freeing up lead as it goes to homes."[59]

The day after the ACLU report was published, another rally for clean, affordable water was held in Flint, coinciding with a Detroit to Flint "Water Justice" march. That attracted the interest of one national media outlet. On July 29, the website of *The Atlantic* magazine published a feature from Flint, leading the piece with the health woes of activist Melissa Mays. The media consultant and band publicist said her water was so high in lead and copper it affected the arteries around her brain, making her head feel like it had "exploded."[60]

The piece also quoted residents Walters, McClinton, Hazard and scientist Edwards about the poor water and said Flint might be symbolic of aging water infrastructures around the nation. Mays told *The Atlantic*, "I've never seen a first-world city have such disregard for human safety."

In August, the Concerned Pastors told residents to test their water, announced a home water filter giveaway program and were part of a campaign that delivered a petition with 26,000 signatures to Mayor Walling demanding a cutoff from the Flint River. The Rev. Allen Overton said in the *Flint Journal*, "How long will this Walling administration continue to deny the citizens of Flint, Michigan, pure, clean, fresh water? How long?…How many more lies will this Walling administration continue to tell us?" Walling himself told the *Journal*, "The problems from 2014 are being addressed."[61]

The very next day after Walling's pronouncement, Guyette posted a column in the alternative *Detroit Metro Times* saying that Edwards' Virginia Tech team found

amounts of lead above EPA limits in 20 percent of preliminary samples from home testing kits.[62] In a citizen science effort supported by the ACLU, Water You Fighting For, and other activists, 300 kits were handed out. Local television covered the release of the results, with Walters telling the story of the lead poisoning of one of her sons to the ABC outlet.[63] Edwards said the results made any findings offered by the city and state untrustworthy, even as a state spokesman for the Department of Environmental Quality said such "knee-jerk" statements were "fanning political flames irresponsibly."[64]

Local journalists kept fanning the flames of truth. A September 19 *Flint Journal* review of state data after the 2014 switch to the Flint River found the highest levels of lead in tap water in more than 20 years.[65] *The Atlantic* returned to the story with a September 23 posting on the testing by Virginia Tech.[66] Four days later, a team of researchers from Flint's Hurley Medical Center, led by Michigan State University pediatrician Mona Hanna-Attisha, released the devastating analysis of blood samples from more than 1,700 children. The team found a doubling of elevated lead blood levels citywide and tripling in particularly disadvantaged neighborhoods. The team recommended that Flint should stop using its river water as soon as possible.

Both Flint and Detroit media covered the story.[67] A state public health official responded that the problem could not be the water, but a *Detroit Free Press* analysis of state data found that it matched up with that of Hanna-Attisha.[68] The day after Hanna-Attisha's team announced its results, Flint issued an advisory for students to bring bottled water to school and for residents to flush pipes and use filters. That was enough for the *Flint Journal* editorial board to declare, "It's time to abandon the Flint River and go back to Lake Huron for Flint's drinking water. And it's up to Gov. Rick Snyder to do it."[69] From Detroit, *Free Press* columnist Nancy Kaffer wrote, "It's hard to understand the resounding yawn that seems to have emanated from the governor's office, following news that an increasing percentage of Flint kids have been lead poisoned after a switch in the city's water supply…it is Snyder who must come to Flint's rescue."[70]

The Detroit News featured long-suffering residents such as Ashley Holt, a mother of three, who said her water looked like urine and smelled like the sewer. "The only option I've got is just to not drink the water and stick with pop and juice," Holt told the *News*. "(I) go to the store and get a gallon of water a day, if I can afford it at the time."[71]

The latest developments attracted the first mainstream national coverage since the *New York Times* story in March. A Michigan Radio report was broadcast September 29 on National Public Radio, quoting Walters, Hanna-Attisha, Edwards and Walling.[72] By October 1, local and state politicians were calling for the reconnection to Detroit water, and a coalition of activists (impressive for its multi-racial nature and its blend of residents and scientists) filed a petition with the EPA for emergency action to reconnect. The coalition, as listed in its press release, was:

> Pastor Allen Overton of the Coalition for Clean Water; Melissa Mays and LeeAnne Walters of Water You Fighting For; Claire McClinton of the Democracy Defense League; Pastor Alfred Harris of Concerned Pastors for Social Action; Marc Edwards and Siddhartha Roy of the Flint Water Study Team; Dawn Kettinger of the Michigan Nurses Association; Yvonne M. White of NAACP Michigan State Conference; The American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan; Natural Resources Defense Council; Jeffrey L. Edison of the Michigan Chapter of the National Conference of Black Lawyers.[73]

Genesee County declared a health emergency, telling Flint residents to use filters. The Michigan Associated Press joined the *Flint Journal* in reporting that the General Motors Foundation and the United Way led a drive that raised $105,000 for filters for 5,000 people. The *Detroit News* editorial board urged the state to get the residents of Flint drinkable water, saying, "The decision to disconnect Flint from Detroit water lines was made under the state's watch. The state has a responsibility to find a fix, and soon."[74]

The AP's coverage was picked up by many newspapers across the country.[75] On October 2, the state announced it would buy $1 million worth of home water filters for residents, offer free water testing and treat the system with anti-corrosives. The plan infuriated residents and local politicians because there was no immediate plan to switch Flint off its river water. Snyder said only that he would study the possibility. The *Flint Journal*'s Fonger quoted Brenda Clack, a Flint representative on the Genesee County board of commissioners as saying, "This breaks my heart. I think I know what these people are going through, having had conversations with many of the residents. Is it the high crime rate? Is it the housing? Is that why he's ignoring us?"

"At this point, my hands are virtually tied, and this attitude of just ignoring or not even recognizing the plight of so many people is sending a negative message, and that message is, 'You don't count. You don't matter.'"[76]

In the same edition, the *Flint Journal* editorial board ramped up its demand for the state to get Flint off its river supply. The editorial opened simply and poignantly, "Not good enough," and continued in no uncertain terms: "Promises of more study won't restore the tattered confidence in the safety of our drinking water. Anything short of reconnecting to the Detroit water system is a continued failure of local, state and federal officials who already have betrayed the people of Flint…Every day officials wait to reconnect is another day of Russian roulette with the health of this community's most precious asset—our children."[77]

Also on the same day, Kaffer wrote a column in the *Free Press* quoting the plight of many residents, yet Snyder "still won't call it an emergency."[78]

With tensions between residents and the mayor and the state bubbling to a full boil and local newspaper opinion makers demanding dramatic action from Snyder,

national and international media for the first time finally began to noticeably descend upon Flint. The British *Guardian*, NPR, CBS and *The New York Times* were there during the first week of October.

This time, amid the backdrop of irrefutable lead tests and relentless resident anger, the *Times* granted far more space to the residents and the facts at hand than to state officials and the mayor. Alfred Harris said, "We've been talking about this for the last 14 months, and they did not give a sincere ear to any of us. Shame on you!"[79]

The reporting by CBS, *The Guardian* and NPR cast the harshest light on the state. CBS quoted Walters as saying about her lead-poisoned son, "We were told by the state nurse, 'It's just a few IQ points. It's not the end of the world.'"[80] *The Guardian* revisited the state's pooh-poohing of resident complaints and NPR, through a Michigan Radio reporter, recounted the original claims by the state that it was using corrosion control when it never did.[81]

On October 8, 2015, with the eyes of the outside world increasingly upon him, Snyder announced that Flint would be switched back to the Detroit water system in about two weeks. "It will be better for the citizens of Flint, in terms of public safety, which is our paramount concern," Snyder said.

But any relief for residents was severely dampened with incredulity of how long it took and fresh evidence of the exposure of children to poisoned water. Snyder's announcement was accompanied by the news that three schools had high levels of lead in their water. [82] Children could presumably have gulped that water for more than a year before the late September advisories, leaving ever more uncertainty of the level of lifelong damage.

As Rev. Allen Overton of the Concerned Pastors told *The Guardian*, "It's very sad. I believe there needs to be a federal investigation."[83] Resident A.C. Dumas told the Associated Press, "I feel betrayed. I feel that the elderly and the children, all of us feel betrayed."[84]

LeeAnne Walters told the *Times*, "They should have taken it seriously back months ago when we tried to tell them, but they chose to ignore it. If they had been doing their jobs from the start, it wouldn't have taken all this."[85] Claire McClinton told the *Flint Journal*, "You told us the water was safe…A year ago, General Motors said this Flint River water is rusting our parts…You didn't tell GM the water was safe."[86]

Government Corruption and Incompetence Exposed

The Flint Water Crisis continued to spin out of control into a city, state and federal emergency at the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016. Contrary to Snyder's claim that public safety was his paramount concern, his own Flint Water Task Force would conclude in March of 2016 that the crisis was a tragedy of "government failure, intransigence, unpreparedness, delay, inaction, and environmental

injustice." Snyder's Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) was said to have "failed in its fundamental responsibility to effectively enforce drinking water regulations," and his Department of Health and Human Services was said to have "failed to adequately and promptly act to protect public health." The report said "both agencies, but principally the MEDQ, stubbornly worked to discredit and dismiss others' attempts to bring the issues of unsafe water, lead contamination, and increased cases of Legionellosis (Legionnaires' disease) to light."[87]

Thousands of emails show that Snyder's inner-circle was well aware at a very early stage that something was very wrong after the switch to the Flint River. In October 2014, after General Motors withdrew from Flint water because of the rusting car parts, Valerie Brader, senior policy adviser and deputy legal counsel to Snyder, wrote in an email to other top aides that getting back to Detroit's water was "an urgent matter to fix." She worried that "comments about being lab rats in the media" were going to get worse as more bad reports of water quality came out. Snyder's legal counsel, Michael Gadola agreed, writing back, "The notion that I would be getting my drinking water from the Flint River is downright scary…My Mom is a City resident. Nice to know she's drinking water with elevated chlorine levels and fecal coliform…They should try to get back on the Detroit system as a stopgap ASAP before this thing gets too far out of control."[88]

The EPA acted as an enabler to the state. Despite Miguel Del Toral's red flag memo on the high lead levels in LeeAnne Walters home, his superiors ultimately ignored him and left everything to the state and city. The EPA's inspector general did not cite Del Toral by name, but concluded in an October 2016 report that the regional agency had sufficient information via his June 2015 report to take emergency action as "state and local authorities were not acting quickly to protect human health." The report said emergency action by the EPA "could have required the city and state to provide alternative water supplies to affected residents, study the extent and severity of lead contamination within the water system, or immediately begin corrective actions to reduce and eliminate lead contamination in the drinking water system."[89]

Another October 2016 report, this one commissioned by the Michigan Legislature, would echo the EPA, saying "Federal, state, and local workers failed to look past technicalities in order to protect and maintain the public health in Flint. In sum, government has failed the people of Flint and, by extension, all Michiganders."[90]

The *Flint Journal* would discover through documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act that city, county and state officials investigated and clashed for 15 months without informing the public of any possible connection between use of the Flint River and an outbreak of Legionnaires' pneumonia disease that killed at least 12 people and sickened 79 others in Genesee County after the 2014 switch. Normally, according to a state report, there are between a dozen or fewer annual cases of Legionnaires' in the county.[91] Emails obtained by Michigan Progress, a liberal advocacy group, showed that state officials knew about the spike in Legionnaires' at least 10 months before informing the public.[92]

Attorney General Schuette launched an ongoing investigation that, as of June 2017, has ensnared 15 state and local officials in a web of failing to act on the Flint Water Crisis, to stem disease from lead and death from Legionnaires'. Five state and local officials have thus far been charged with involuntary manslaughter: former state-appointed Emergency Manager Earley, Health and Human Services Director Nick Lyon, former state Water Quality Director Liane Shekter-Smith, regional Water Supervisor Stephen Busch and former Flint Water Department Manager Howard Croft.

Others, including Eden Wells, the state's chief medical executive, and Ambrose, the former emergency manager at the beginning of the crisis, face charges ranging from obstruction of justice and lying to tampering with evidence and conspiracy over false pretenses. Calling the Flint Water Crisis a "man-made disaster of significant proportions," Schuette said he visited a home where three generations of women were boiling water "straight out of frontier days from 100 years ago…No one in Michigan or in America should live that way in the 21st Century."[93]

In addition, many citizen lawsuits have been filed against the state, including a class-action lawsuit filed on behalf of Melissa Mays and other Flint residents against Governor Snyder, his state agencies and emergency managers. In October 2016, the Michigan Court of Claims allowed that suit to proceed, saying if the allegations of neglect and cover-up are proven to be true, they "shock the conscience."[94]

There was political fallout as well. Mayor Walling lost the trust of voters and was ousted from office by businesswoman and clinical psychologist Karen Weaver. Snyder, who flirted with running for president in 2016 as a self-described business nerd, remains as of this publishing unscathed by the scandal. But his legacy and national ambition continue to be battered by the task force report and lawsuits.

The Flint Water Crisis was also the worst hour in the otherwise respected tenure of EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy. Her regional director, Susan Hedman, resigned as outrage mounted over EPA's failure to act on Del Toral's early warnings. One symbol of the EPA's failures that came out in congressional testimony was an internal email from the chief of state and tribal programs for Region 5, voicing skepticism about offering Flint federal funds for water filtration. That email said, "I'm not so sure Flint is the community we want to go out on a limb for."[95]

By not going out on a limb, the EPA contributed to unknown lead damage to the brains of children. About 9,600 youth under the age of six live in homes served by the Flint water system. The Centers for Disease Control analyzed and compared the blood tests of 7,300 such children. They were nearly 50 percent more likely to have elevated lead levels above federally acceptable levels (though there is no actual safe level for lead). The percentage of young children with elevated levels shot up from 3.1 percent to 5 percent.[96]

That was similar to Hanna-Attisha's findings, where the percentage of children with elevated levels spiked from 2.1 percent to 4 percent across the city and more than 6 percent in particularly impoverished neighborhoods. Roughly 200 children in Flint were poisoned because of government decisions that were "entirely preventable," according to Patrick Breysse, director of the CDC's National Center for Environmental Health.[97]

Flint's lead poisoning will be costly because of the social and economic cost to the affected children. Columbia University public health professor Peter Muennig said in August 2016 that the "decision to switch its water supply was penny wise and pound foolish. In an effort that would have saved approximately $5 million, the city of Flint will suffer losses 80-fold greater."[98]

There is now little question as to the dereliction of duty by government officials. An outstanding question is how much more quickly would government have acted and how many less children might have been poisoned had the national media cast their inquiring gaze upon Flint.

National Media Coverage: Too Little, Too Late, Too Biased?

After Governor Snyder announced a switch back to Detroit water in early October 2015, the national media disappeared again for two months, returning only when new Mayor Karen Weaver declared an emergency over the overwhelming task to repair the human and infrastructure damage. Even then, the coverage remained sporadic, with Al Jazeera English responding first. Rhonda Kelso, a 52-year-old stroke survivor whose water was lead contaminated and who joined a class-action suit against the city and state, tearfully said:

"The city of Flint residents—they are not people that are disposable. We just are not. We're not a permanent underclass."[99]

The most consistent national television coverage in that period came from MSNBC, led by a crusading Rachel Maddow. According to Media Matters, Maddow spent 10 times more minutes on Flint than all the networks combined, providing 68 minutes worth of coverage between December 15 and January 5, the latter date being when Governor Snyder finally declared an emergency in Flint and Genesee County. Maddow said Flint was an "utterly hair-raising, blood boiling, horrifying story."[100] She stridently speculated why editors around the country had not yet dispatched reporters to cover this tragedy, saying:

> I think the resistance to this being seen as a national story is because people think of lead as being like a long-term infrastructure problem like things went bad in that old city that needs work. This is like, if you want to make an analogy to personal health, this is not like something finally coming due after you've had a bad diet and no exercise for 20 years.

> This is the personal health equivalent of having been shot. This is not something that went bad over a long period of time. This is they flipped a switch to turn off one spigot last April and turn on a different spigot. And the spigot they turned on poisoned the kids.

Maddow continued on, laying ultimate blame on Governor Snyder:

> The kids of Flint, Michigan, have been poisoned by a policy decision, all at once. The town has been poisoned under your watch, Governor, through the actions and inactions of people who report to you and the people who you appointed. The emergency manager who signed that initial order to get ready for drinking from the river, he reported directly to Governor Snyder and to no one else.
>
> The emergency manager who sold the pipeline that should have been the escape hatch, he reported directly to Governor Snyder and no one else. The agency that did not tell Flint how to do this safely and that ignored the fast-rising lead levels in Flint's water and that disparaged first the EPA whistleblower and then the professor and then the local doctor who all tried to help, that agency reported to and continues to report only to Rick Snyder, the governor of Michigan.[101]

By devoting such time to the crisis, Maddow was able to provide a more nuanced and diverse portrait of Flint residents stepping into the void created by government inaction and ineptitude. A few months later, MSNBC colleague Lawrence O'Donnell had Maddow on his show and told her, "Congratulations for having kept the attention on that story, when no one else, no one else in national television was doing that. You gave the story oxygen when it needed it."

Maddow responded, "Well, thank you, Lawrence, it's really nice for you to say. I mean, all credit to the people of Flint who yelled loud enough that I heard them, and that's all it was."[102]

If the yelling did not yet attract other national media, the spigot of news finally opened wide the first week of January with Snyder's January 5 emergency declaration and his calling out the National Guard to distribute bottled water to Flint residents. On January 16, President Obama issued emergency orders that allowed federal aid. Governor Snyder apologized to Flint residents in his State of the State address on January 19. The next day, Obama visited Detroit, where he said of Flint, "If I was a parent up there, I would be beside myself that my kids' health would be at risk."[103]

There was abundant reporting in the remainder of 2016, from the release of emails in the Snyder administration dismissing the concerns of Flint residents, to the blame game at congressional hearings between federal, state and local officials, to

the fact that as of December 2016, the state was still under order to provide bottled water to some residents.

The crisis sparked words of outrage from editorial boards, most notably that of *The New York Times*. It issued seven editorials between January 15 and March 25 of 2016, going so far as to describe the Flint Water Crisis as a symbol of environmental racism.[104] One editorial said:

> The 274 pages of emails released under pressure on Wednesday by Gov. Rick Snyder of Michigan show a cynical and callous indifference to the plight of the mostly black, poverty-stricken residents of Flint, who have gone for more than a year with poisoned tap water that is unsafe to drink or bathe in.
>
> There is little doubt that an affluent, predominantly white community—say Grosse Pointe or Bloomfield Hills—would never face such a public health catastrophe, and if it had, the state government would have rushed in to help. At every juncture when state officials could have avoided or reduced the harm in Flint, they ignored public pleas and made every effort to dismiss the truth.[105]

The *Times* also admitted to something else. It counted itself among the national media that too long ignored the public pleas coming from Flint. In a strongly-worded critique of her newspaper's coverage, the *Times* then-public editor, Margaret Sullivan, addressed the seven-month gap in coverage from its initial March 2015 story by saying, "If, for example, the March article had been followed up with some serious digging, and if the resulting stories had been given prominent display, public officials might have been shamed into taking action long before they did."

Sullivan asked *Times* deputy editor Matt Purdy to account for the gap. He said the paper's Midwest staff was stretched thin, covering stories such as the shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland and the unrest over police brutality in Ferguson, Missouri. "We certainly can't get to every important story and we can't go deep on every one we get to," Purdy said.

Sullivan responded by asking readers:

> Were such resources really unavailable in this case? After all, enough *Times* firepower somehow has been found to document Hillary Clinton's every sneeze, Donald Trump's latest bombast, and Marco Rubio's shiny boots. There seem to be plenty of *Times* resources for such hit-seeking missives as 'breadfacing,' or for the Magazine's thorough exploration of buffalo plaid and 'lumbersexuals.' And staff was available to produce this week's dare-you-not-to-click video on the rising social movement known as "Free the Nipple."

> If the *Times* had kept the pressure on the Flint story, the resulting journalism might not have made the "trending" but it would have made a real difference to the people of Flint, who were in serious need of a powerful ally.[106]

Marty Baron, editor of *The Washington Post*, essentially agreed with Sullivan, telling the watchdog group Media Matters for America:

> We could have done more sooner, no question…the *Post* covers the country. When water supplied to a large community is unsafe to drink—and when the crisis has persisted for a long time and may not abate soon—there's no question that we should cover that aggressively. There are also important, overarching issues of whether the population in Flint was treated inequitably by government, given that its population is heavily black and poor.[107]

In the *National Journal*, the Washington news organization that prides itself on "equipping government and business leaders with the information, insights and connections they need," columnist Ron Fournier chided himself for doing a "flattering" December 2015 column on Governor Snyder's leadership style without mentioning Flint. He said:

> This would not have happened in a wealthy city like Traverse City, Michigan, or Snyder's hometown of Ann Arbor…Where was the media? Why did a scientist in Virginia crack the case with a FOIA request, rather than an investigative journalist? For that matter, why did I write a column about Snyder's leadership that didn't even mention Flint? There's no good answer, no excuse. I took my eye off the ball. I blew it.[108]

In an interview with Mayor Weaver, CNN host Jake Tapper closed by apologizing, "I'm sorry that it took us so long to get on this story."[109]

Tapper could have been apologizing on behalf of all the national media. In a September 2016 posting on the Environmental Health News website, Peter Dykstra, a former executive science and environment editor at CNN, noted that one of the key people who broke the story about Flint drinking water was not a mainstream media reporter. It was advocate Curt Guyette of the Michigan ACLU.

"That's the quandary facing journalism in general, and the environment beat in particular," Dykstra wrote. "The reporter who broke one of the major environmental stories of the decade would not be eligible to be an active member of the association that sees itself as the bastion of environmental reporting, the Society of Environmental Journalists."[110]

By coming late to Flint, the national media utterly failed to capture and depict all the agency and self-empowerment of the populace to speak for themselves.

Newspapers and networks missed the many months of people showing up at city hall and meetings to complain about the water and the rashes and illnesses, or the eagerness to participate in the citizen testing organized by Virginia Tech and others. In a city 57 percent African-American, 37 percent white, and 40 percent poor, the media missed a story of citizen action that cut across racial and class lines to complain about, and campaign against, the use of Flint River water.

To be sure, later national media stories inspired other cities, towns and school systems to step up their testing for lead and provided a reminder of how toxic many neighborhoods are across this country. “Untold cities across America have higher rates of lead poisoning than Flint,” said one headline on *The Washington Post* website.[111]

That is small comfort for Flint residents themselves. By the time the biggest media organizations got there, reporters could see only downtrodden, defeated and trapped victims—instead of citizens demanding democracy and public health and working across race and class to force earlier this year an $87 million settlement with the state to replace lead pipes. The plaintiffs in the lawsuit leading up to the settlement were the Concerned Pastors for Social Action, Melissa Mays, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Michigan ACLU.

Typical was a January 21, 2016 *Wall Street Journal* headline that blared, “Flint’s Water Woes Make Residents Feel Like ‘the Walking Dead.’” The grim story pictured residents coming to get bottled water at either a daytime shelter with “busted blinds” and “worn-out sofas” or at firehouses where IDs were checked by National Guardsmen. It quoted residents who drove 20 miles to bathe at a relative’s home or to reach firehouses for bottled water. Two residents worried that their high blood pressure was caused by lead poisoning, with one of them, 53-year-old Renee Wilson, saying, “I really want to pick up and leave town, but I can’t afford it.”[112]

A March 2016 CNN story featured the despair of a mother who had a miscarriage and a massive increase in school suspensions for her son after the switch to the Flint River. She blamed it on the bad water. Cheryl Farmer, whose 8-year-old daughter suffered a spike in lead in her blood, said, “I need to get my child and really just move out of here…because it’s going to get worse. I’m done. As much as I used to love Flint, it’s over.”[113]

That same month, *The New York Times* ran a story with the headline of “Desperate to Leave Flint, but Seeing No Way of Escape.” It led with the plight of carpenter Charles White and his girlfriend Tia, who discovered that their two small children had lead poisoning. “She spent all day crying, trying to figure out how we’re going to get out of here,” White said of Tia. “I'm prepared to sell everything I own to get out and save my children.”[114]

A *Washington Post* October 2016 story said, “The anger and frustration over Flint's contaminated water, so visceral at first, over time has given way to something almost worse: resignation.” The story quoted the Rev. Rigel Dawson talking about

his parishioners at North Central Church of Christ: “You see the pain it’s caused. You see the discouragement and frustration. Members are enraged, depressed, despondent, hopeless. You see the full gamut of emotions.”

Dawson had the opportunity to speak to President Obama when he came to Flint that prior May. “I told Obama, ‘It makes you feel like you don't count,’” Dawson said. “People sometimes feel that we don't really matter. We’ve had to fight and wait, fight and wait, for things that should have happened but haven't.”

Elementary school teacher Darlene McClendon said that when the extent of lead exposure was finally clear to the public, the news got down to her students. “I heard children say, ‘Am I going to die? Am I going to get sick?’ How do you respond without tearing up?” McClendon told the *Post*. “I told them, ‘No, you're not going to die. [But] I don’t know that they're not going to get sick later.”[115]

Besides the looming intellectual and economic toll, there was even speculation that the Flint Water Crisis would cost the blue-collar city its outsized role in producing star college and professional athletes. A *Washington Post* sports column, under the headline, “The Water is Bad and Flint’s Long Athletic Tradition Could Run Dry,” said:

> Until now, there was never a threat to Flint’s athletic talent running out. Even as the auto industry, which once made Flint the second-largest city in Michigan, flagged over the past quarter century, Flint’s athletics continued to blossom and bolster the city’s pride. Four years ago in London, [Claressa] Shields became the first U.S. woman to win boxing gold. In 2009, [Mark] Ingram Jr. won the Heisman Trophy.
>
> Just last season, Michigan State went to its sixth Final Four in the 2000s, a decade that started with those Flintstones leading it to a national championship. But 2015’s Final Four team was the first of those teams without a player from Flint. With this health crisis, it could be a while before any more come along.[116]

Interestingly, perhaps because of unconscious assumptions that sports is the only way out in a poverty-stricken and predominately black town, there were no headlines in newspapers that read, “The Water is Bad and Flint’s *Academic* Potential Could Run Dry.”

A final fault line of coming late to the Flint crisis was that the national media fell into the trap of settling for a narrow “hero narrative.” Over the course of the last year and a half, Edwards, Hanna-Attisha and Walters were referred to as heroes in prose, narration or headlines.

The trio was indeed inspiring for their research and activism. In a telephone interview, Walters said Edwards deserved his media attention for his public presence in Flint. “The citizens did the work and they weren’t listening,” Walters

said of the national media. “We were grateful. We wanted him there. I don’t think we would have had the same outcome had he not been there in person.”[117]

But some in the scientific community have wondered if scientists like Edwards -- who went on to testify about Flint before Congress—should have redirected the media to affected citizens. Virginia Tech anthropologist Yanna Lambrinidou, who collaborated a decade earlier with Edwards in exposing the lead water crisis in Washington D.C., said in a September 2016 letter to the *Environmental Science & Technology* journal: “When scientists themselves assume the role of ‘saviors’ or ‘protectors’ and try to take the lead in bringing social change, they risk leaving affected publics in the margin, replicating the very structural inequalities that render environmental injustices possible in the first place.”[118]

Edwards wrote a rebuttal to the same journal, “Our collaboration that exposed this disaster is a triumph by any reasonable measure and we do not apologize for helping Flint residents ‘save their own day.’”[119]

It is striking that in a city of 100,000 people that is nearly three-fifth’s black, no African American figure of the Flint Water Crisis was specifically described as an individual “hero” by major U.S. newspapers or on television (Hanna-Attisha is a first-generation Iraqi American).

No citizens who complained publicly about the water almost right away were cited as heroes, nor were any of the pastors who organized months of protests and marches. Neither were any of the local politicians who took the people seriously early nor any of the community coalitions, local businesses or ex-felons who participated in bottled water drives when Flint was only a local story. Most of the original families who promptly conducted home lead testing remain anonymous.

There were a handful of attempts in state, alternative and international press to broaden the definition of heroism. Early in the crisis, the Michigan ACLU videos presented an integrated picture of vocal opposition to the poisoned water.

Columnist Andrew Heller of the MLive chain, of which the *Flint Journal* is a part, wrote in October 2015, “You can sense the worm turning on Flint’s water woes, which is obviously a good thing. Odds are the city will now get the help it needs, thanks to the protesters and researchers who refused to swallow the city line that all was well.”

“I seldom use this grossly overused word, but those people are heroes. Their persistence needs to be called out and hailed. By refusing to knuckle under and accept the pablum the city was trying to spoon-feed everyone, they may have just saved Flint and the city’s next generation of kids.”[120]

Al Jazeera America offered a more inclusive description of the heroes than most newspapers and television stations: “Along with fellow Flint resident Melissa Mays, Walters started an advocacy group called Water You Fighting For? With the ACLU of

Michigan, Concerned Pastors for Social Action, and the Democracy Defense League, the activists helped get Edwards to come to Flint and conduct an independent analysis of the water."[121]

In June 2016, the British *Independent* newspaper reported not just on the well-known figures but also on the efforts of Bobby Jackson, a pastor who stored donated bottled water in his homeless shelter and distributed it to residents. "There are a few heroes here," the newspaper wrote, "Pastor Jackson is one."[122]

The progressive *In These Times* magazine published an April 2016 story titled "The Real Heroes of the Flint Water Crisis." It wrote: "The media narrative has focused on a few villains—Snyder, the state Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)—and a handful of heroes—the physicians and researchers who spoke out about dangerous levels of lead in the blood of Flint children and the investigative journalists who broke the story."

"What's been less-reported is the key role Flint residents played in exposing their city's water crisis and containing its deadly effects. Nor is their fight over; organizers in Flint are still struggling to get justice and healthcare for those affected and to reclaim the democratic control that might have prevented the disaster." *In These Times* presented an integrated picture of the fighters, including Melissa Mays, Claire McClinton, Nayyirah Shariff, and Pastor David Bullock and resident Quincy Murphy, who led the campaign to recall Governor Snyder.

McClinton said defiantly to *In These Times*, "The story is not over. They poisoned the wrong city."[123]

In a January 2016 story titled, "Meet 5 Everyday Heroes of Flint's Water Crisis," *Mother Jones* magazine cited Hanna-Attisha, Edwards and Walters. But it also included Bobby Jackson for distributing bottled water and Miguel Del Toral for trying to warn the state about the lead in Walters' water.

"Long before Flint's water crisis made national headlines, there were plenty of people raising hell about the tainted water or working to lessen its burden in this impoverished, majority-black city of nearly 100,000 people." [124]

How Media Ignore Communities of Color and the Poor

For many longtime environmental justice and environmental racism researchers and activists, the failure of the national media to pay attention to people raising hell confirmed their long-held skepticism that the nation's top newspapers, magazines and television news staffs rarely dedicate themselves to sustained, sensitive and searing coverage that changes government and corporate behavior on toxic dumping in poor communities and communities of color.

Nicky Sheats, director of urban environment studies at Thomas Edison State College and a co-founder of the New Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance, told me at a 2016 Union of Concerned Scientists conference, "Whether it's Flint or Katrina, the stories read like reporters discovered disparities for the first time. There's coverage of disasters but they often don't have the context for why things happened. If you don't have the context, it makes explaining environmental racism and environmental justice hard work."

Robert Bullard, an urban planning and environmental policy professor at Texas Southern University, is considered the father of environmental justice for more than three decades of research showing how communities of color, regardless of class, are disproportionately near toxic sites. In his co-written 2012 book, *The Wrong Complexion for Protection*, Bullard wrote:

"Millions of African Americans have learned the hard way that waiting for government to respond to environmental crises can be hazardous to their health…Too often, it is government that is to blame for poisoning black people and their communities. It becomes problematic for victims of poisoned communities to ask that government for protection, equal treatment, and justice when government is the perpetrator."[125]

But the media cannot help unless it takes off its own blinders. Bullard said it felt like Flint did not get traction as a national story until non-black protagonists were identified. "It's like drugs," he said. "When black people are identified as drug users, they're written off as criminals. But as soon as white people are identified as having a problem with heroin, crack and meth, it's a health epidemic that needs medical treatment.

"Flint did not seem to resonate as a big story until a visible number of white people were poisoned. We have black communities poisoned right now all over the country, living near coal ash, and it's been impossible to get coverage."[126]

Beverly Wright, who co-authored *The Wrong Complexion for Protection*, which detailed how African Americans disproportionately live with toxic industries, contamination, and are disproportionately positioned to receive the worst physical and health damage from climate change, agreed with Bullard. She said Flint "got good coverage late, but good coverage at the beginning could have saved children from a lot of damage."[127]

Peggy Shepard, executive director of WE ACT for Environmental Justice in West Harlem and a recipient of the Heinz Award for the Environment, said not much has changed since 1988 when her group formed to protest a sewage treatment plant. "It still has to take an egregious situation before newspapers care about communities of color," she said. "There have been a few every couple of years, with Flint being the most salient. I think media believes that people of color don't know what they're talking about when it comes to anything involving science and the environment."[128]

To a major degree, Hanna-Attisha would not disagree. Even as she has basked in awards and has been a guest on "Who Wants to be a Millionaire," she said she in an interview, "We would be nowhere without local coverage from MLive [*Flint Journal*] and Curt Guyette. He didn't stop digging until he got the EPA memo. After my research was dismissed, the *Detroit Free Press* was part of the turning of the tide validating it." But she added:

> My role was the last domino. It shouldn't have taken evidence of children's lead levels. I think of that often. Why wasn't great local reporting followed up by national interest? People felt betrayed. This wouldn't have gone on a day in an affluent community…race has to be part of the story…I'm a brown person but there were water warriors everywhere, so many heroic voices. There was a strong group of African American pastors who couldn't get heard. There were so many missed opportunities. Where were the alarm bells when General Motors stopped using the water because of the corrosion to their engine parts?[129]

That haunting question should be the lasting media legacy of the Flint Water Crisis. There are alarm bells to be rung in countless other cities, towns and rural areas across America. As for the specific issue of lead at the tap, a June 2016 report by the National Resources Defense Council found that more than 5,300 water systems were in violation of the EPA's lead and copper rule, potentially affecting 18 million Americans. With little EPA enforcement, the NRDC said, "There is no cop on the beat."[130]

It is more critical than ever for the media to be a leading "cop" as EPA environmental justice enforcement—as faulty as it was—shifts from the Obama administration, which otherwise helped forge a new global climate change treaty, promoted renewable energy and enacted the historic automotive and industrial emissions standards and rules. President Donald Trump, a pro-business conservative, has pledged to bring back the coal industry and "to get rid of" the EPA "in almost every form." To run the EPA, Trump selected former Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt, who sued that very agency 14 times on behalf of industry against clean air and water rules, against reductions in mercury, greenhouse gases and other pollutants, and even against protecting vistas on federal scenic lands from haze.[131]

Pruitt's vengeance on Obama-era rules in just his first four months is already the largest attempted regulatory rollback in the 47-year history of the EPA, environmental lawyers told *The New York Times* in July. Ignoring most of the agency's 15,000 career employees, Pruitt's new policies appear to be solely dependent on the desires of America's heaviest polluters in the oil, gas, chemical, fertilizer and pesticide industries. He has gone so far as to reverse a ban on a fruit crop pesticide EPA scientists say can damage children's brains.[132]

Part of that rollback is the elimination of the agency's Office of Environmental Justice. For practical purposes, it became toothless anyway when a key founder of that office, Mustafa Ali, resigned in March of 2017.[133] Despite having worked under two Republican and two Democratic administrations, Ali told me in an interview for my blog for the Union of Concerned Scientists that he could not serve a Trump administration that appeared to be on a mission of "deconstructing the safety nets."[134]

These changes do not bode well for federal intervention, compared to the Obama administration's decision to finally block the completion of a fossil fuel pipeline in North Dakota after the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe said the pipeline route came too close to drinking water and sacred lands. Similar to Flint, the national media was also criticized for slow, inconsistent coverage.[135] Seeking environmental justice at the state level will also be a stiff challenge as, with the exception of more environmentally-friendly West Coast and Northeast states, two-thirds of U.S. state houses are dominated by Republicans whose pollution policies are frequently and heavily criticized by environmental organizations.

Environmental justice struggles abound on many other fronts. Concerns are mounting in many communities about the air, water and earthquake risks of oil and gas hydraulic fracturing ("fracking"). Several studies and reports show that the rural white poor and people of color disproportionately live near drilling operations and wastewater disposal wells, from Pennsylvania to California.[136] That goes along with longer-standing issues, such as child asthma caused by dust and pollutants spewing from scrap metal facilities refineries, incinerators and power plants and coal ash water contamination in the rural Deep South, and fresh knowledge about the insidious effects of living alongside toxic sites.

An exclamation point to the risks came in June in the form of a study published of more than 60 million Medicare beneficiaries in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. Researchers from the Harvard School of Public Health found that airborne fine particulate matter and smog-causing ozone exposures currently considered safe by the EPA kill thousands of Americans a year. At the biggest risk of premature death were African Americans, low-income populations and men. That prompted NEJM Editor-in-Chief Jeffrey Drazen to co-write an editorial saying that Trump's proposed rollbacks will have "devastating effects on public health." So devastating are those effects that Drazen told National Public Radio that worse air quality will "kill a lot of people."[137] The actions Drazen feared were well underway as earlier in June, Pruitt announced a one-year delay in enforcing Obama-era rules tightening ozone emissions.[138]

A 2016 study by researchers from Northwestern University and the University of Florida found that children born near Superfund sites had lower test scores, had more school suspensions and more cognitive difficulties than siblings born after those Superfund sites were cleaned up. The study said, "clean-up of severe toxic sites has significant positive effects on a variety of long-term cognitive and developmental outcomes." Furthermore, the study concluded:

> The fact that poor and minority children are more likely to be exposed to environmental toxicants has profound implications for environmental justice and residential segregation. If Black children are more likely to live near Superfund sites, and these sites affect their cognitive development, pollution exposure could partially explain the Black-White test score gap—our estimates suggest that pollution accounts for between a tenth and a fifth of the Black-White test score gap. Furthermore, if Superfund sites negatively affect housing values and poor children are more likely to live nearby, environmental toxicant exposure might also partially explain the widening socioeconomic test score gap.[139]

That conclusion is in line with what Bullard and Wright wrote in *Wrong Complexion for Protection*. They said decades of slow or discriminatory response by government to "public health emergencies, environmental hazards, industrial accidents, and natural and human-induced disasters have left blacks less safe and less secure than whites in their homes, schools, neighborhoods and workplaces. There can be no homeland security if people do not have homes to go to and if they lose trust in the government's willingness to respond to an emergency in an effective, fair, and just way."[140]

The same thing should be said about the national media. There is not much hope for the environmental security of all Americans if the media does not respond to emergencies in a nondiscriminatory way. The media are not yet up for the task. A 2012 *Columbia Journalism Review* article praised the shoestring efforts of the Web-based Environmental Health News to highlight environmental justice, relative to its lack of coverage in the mainstream media.

"A number of media reports in the last year have examined the impacts of toxic pollution on communities, but few have emphasized, let alone focused on, the fact that low-income, minority neighborhoods tend to bear the brunt of the burden," the article said. "The environmental-justice angle is often missing or subdued in major reports on toxic pollution, such as *USA Today*'s 'Ghost Factories,' published in April, or NPR's 'Poisoned Places,' published in November."

"These were public-service investigations of the highest caliber, to be sure, but they stopped short of connecting the socioeconomic dots. *USA Today* tested soil samples from 21 neighborhoods across 14 states where lead smelting used to occur, and found that lead concentrations were 'generally highest in places like Chicago, Cleveland, and Philadelphia—where old inner-city neighborhoods mingled with industrial sites.'"

There is no better time to connect the socioeconomic dots and report on such conditions. Brian Bienkowski, the editor of Environmental Health News, said in an interview, that despite the national coverage that finally came to Flint, "there's still a big vacuum left, especially in places like Alabama dealing with coal ash pollution

for years. You're seeing everyone show up now at Standing Rock, but pick a tribe and you can find pollution, like abandoned uranium mines in Navajo country. Lead paint in older homes is still huge. Look where coal plants are belching toxics."

Bienkowski implied that quality coverage requires newsroom diversity. "It's hard for reporters to go into a community where they're not familiar with that community and comfortable in communities with income disparity," he said. "It takes gumption, overcoming a level of discomfort and there are not enough journalists who reflect the communities they cover. There is no substitute for meeting people on the ground and walking the neighborhood."[141]

When everyday citizens ring the alarm bell on issues, like water and air pollution, the national media must start from the assumption that locals know what they're talking about.

To borrow from Rhonda Kelso in her Al Jazeera interview, when the government treats the people like those in Flint as disposable, it is the duty of the media not to help government throw the people into the landfill. Instead, the people in these communities deserve serious treatment by reporters, even as government seeks to discredit them.

Acknowledgments

This paper was girded by one word from Emily Moore, my insightful, diligent and dogged research assistant.

“Agency.”

After her first couple of weeks of digging through reams of digital news clippings, she told me that the overwhelming depictions of Flint residents in the national media, which offered no sustained coverage until a year and a half into the crisis, were of a completely beaten down, powerless, almost feckless populace. That would make us focus on the local coverage, where we discovered plenty of fortitude, fight and demand for the right to clean water. Our weekly discussions were punctuated with, “The people have agency in this piece,” or “They’re only victims in this piece.”

With Emily’s help, I hope this paper assists the media in getting to environmental justice hotspots as people are at the height of their “agency.”

I also thank the Shorenstein Center staff and my fellowship colleagues, who probed and fleshed out my focus on Flint with their wide-ranging political, social and historical perspectives, with special concept and editing nods to Thomas Patterson, Richard Parker, Nancy Palmer, Nicco Mele, Emily Roseman and Nilagia McCoy.

I give final thanks to my listening post at home, my wife and medical researcher Dr. Michelle Holmes, who inspires me with her own agency in studying diet and breast cancer and lifestyle health in Africa.

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