

Flint Revisited: The media's overwhelming indifference to the existence and impact of environmental racism

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Abstract

The government changes to the water source in Flint, Michigan's exposed many people to lead in their water. Lead exposure disproportionately impacted the Black community in Flint. This paper argues that more media attention should have focused on the racial aspects of the Flint water crisis. The media has an ethical obligation to expose environmental racism and injustice.

Keywords: environmental ethics, lead poisoning, access to water, Flint, EPA, vulnerable populations

I. Introduction

Lead is a neurotoxin so potent that major environmental agencies, including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), have found that there is absolutely no safe level of exposure, especially for children who are the most vulnerable to its effects.¹ Despite there being no safe level of lead exposure for children, the EPA has established a 15 parts-per-billion (ppb) limit on lead in drinking water.² In Flint, Michigan, an impoverished and predominantly Black city,³ the tap water that tens of thousands of children consumed and bathed in from April 2014 to October 2015 exceeded 15 ppb, with at least one sample registering greater than 1,000 ppb.⁴

While many are familiar with the Flint crisis due to its extensive media coverage, the impact that race played in the disaster was largely neglected by the mainstream media. Classic environmental racism was mostly ignored. The mainstream media overwhelmingly failed in their ethical obligation to report the environmental justice aspect of the calamity.

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With the renewed awareness concerning racial justice taking place around the world, it is an instrumental time to bring the issue of environmental racism into focus. The media plays a key role in this task. Indeed, the media is ethically obligated to bring the issue of racism *in all of its forms* to the forefront before a wide, public audience. Environmental racism, which may easily be overlooked amidst more overt forms of prejudice, is no exception. It is imperative that we revisit how the issue of race was handled by the media during one of the more recent, and highly publicized environmental catastrophes.

II. Contamination and deception

The Flint water crisis began when Flint government officials decided to switch from the Detroit water system to the highly contaminated Flint River, which historically had served as a repository for industrial waste.⁵ The move was motivated by cost.⁶ Prior to the switch, several government officials had voiced concerns that the Flint river water was corrosive and posed a public health hazard.⁷ A slew of emails between government officials, exchanged well in advance of the switch, discussed the public health concerns around using the Flint River as a water source.⁸ In addition, there was a study conducted in 2011 demonstrating that the river was unsuitable as a water source since it was hazardously corrosive.⁹ Nevertheless, the switch ensued in April 2014. The corrosive Flint River water ate away at the city's ancient pipes leaching the pipes' disintegrating lead interior coating into the water.¹⁰ Notably, the city failed to implement any anti-corrosion controls in blatant violation of the requirements of federal law, and subsequently proceeded to misrepresent to the EPA that such controls were in place.¹¹

Flint's water supply not only was dangerously corrosive and contaminated with lead, but it also contained hazardous and illegal levels of E. coli, total coliform bacteria, and total trihalomethanes (TTHM).¹² Soon after the switch, Flint residents began complaining that the water smelled horrid, was brown, caused rashes, and was making them ill.¹³ Around the same time, General Motors (GM) complained that it could no longer use the water at its manufacturing plant because it was corroding car parts.¹⁴ Flint officials outright disregarded private citizens' concerns¹⁵ and even went so far as to belittle, deride, and accuse worried residents of acting in furtherance of a political agenda.¹⁶ Behind the scenes, however, officials quietly changed GM's water supply source and began using bottled water for themselves and for government office visitors.¹⁷

Amid mounting concerns regarding water quality, Flint officials offered citizens sham assurances that the water had been tested and was safe.¹⁸ However, water samples had actually failed lead testing by exceeding federally mandated criteria.¹⁹ To remedy this, officials skewed the data reported to the EPA so the water would pass muster.²⁰ Flint officials continued to deny there was any problem with the water even after independent testing conducted by a team from Virginia Tech (VT), commissioned by a mother whose children were sickened by the water, uncovered exceedingly high levels of lead in Flint's water supply.²¹ Again, officials accused the VT scientists of bad science and acting pursuant to a hidden agenda.²² When the contaminated water supply caused two large-scale, deadly outbreaks of Legionnaires' disease that killed twelve people,²³ Flint officials blamed the disease on a local hospital.²⁴

On September 24, 2015, a local pediatrician, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, released the results of an independently commissioned study that tested elevated blood lead levels in Flint's children.²⁵ The study found that the blood lead levels in the children had doubled and, in some cases, even tripled from the period preceding the switch to the Flint River.²⁶ The study was largely the impetus for the office of Flint's governor, Rick Snyder, to finally

issue – after a year and a half – a press briefing announcing that Flint would be switching back to the Detroit water system.²⁷ The alleged reason for the reversion back to Detroit water, according to the release, was that Detroit water “will be easier to manage” since it comes from “a more stable source than the river” and residents will have “more confidence in this water source.”²⁸ The change came too late: Around 100,000 people,²⁹ including tens of thousands of children,³⁰ had already been poisoned.

III. The devastating aftermath

Lead cannot be eliminated from the human body and is a cumulative toxin.³¹ Lead poisoning includes, among other things, brain and nervous system damage, slowed growth and development, learning and behavior problems, hearing and speech problems, and lowered IQ.³² The damage is life long,³³ and, according to recent studies, can even lead to epigenetic effects upon affected children’s grandchildren.³⁴ As Dr. Philip Landrigan and Dr. David Bellinger, two experts in childhood lead poisoning, have explained:

Lead is a devastating problem. It damages children’s brains, erodes intelligence, diminishes creativity and the ability to weigh consequences and make good decisions, impairs language skills, shortens attention span, and predisposes to hyperactive and aggressive behavior. Lead exposure in early childhood is linked to later increased risk for dyslexia and school failure.³⁵

Lead exposure also exacerbates the ill effects of poverty.³⁶ Therefore, Flint’s children, who were already suffering from malnutrition and other stressors associated with being destitute, were at an even higher risk of harm from lead.³⁷ For a year and a half, these young children were exposed leaving them ill, struggling with behavioral issues, and falling behind in school.³⁸ According to an epidemiologic assessment conducted by the CDC from May 17-19, 2016, more than 50 percent of families in Flint reported that at least one member of the household had an increase in behavioral health concerns since October 2015 requiring behavioral health services.³⁹ The same percentage reported that at least one member of their household experienced a decline in physical health due to the water switch.⁴⁰ Therefore, the children of Flint who started out with a disadvantage in life due to poverty now have to contend with another hurdle to overcome: damage from lead poisoning.

IV. The bioethical principles and the impact of environmental racism

The actions of Flint governmental officials were not merely negligent – they were criminal acts. Officials knew Flint water was toxic but allowed countless people, especially children, to be sacrificed for financial savings. So far, prosecutors in Michigan have brought criminal charges against 15 Flint government officials for their role in the crisis.⁴¹ Flint officials’ actions were also egregious breaches of their bioethical obligations to Flint’s citizens. Unquestionably, government officials breached the duties of beneficence and non-maleficence owed to their constituents by enacting environmental practices that were extremely harmful to residents and then failing to protect them from that harm. Officials also failed to honor residents’ right to autonomous decision making by denying them the information necessary to give informed consent.

Officials also violated the duty of distributive justice. The bioethical principle of distributive justice demands that all people, regardless of race, socioeconomic class, religion, and ethnicity, be treated equally. Environmental justice, which can be viewed as a form of distributive justice, is the “fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.”⁴² The victims in Flint were not only poor, but they were also predominantly Black. Dr. Robert Bullard, dean of the School of Public Health at Texas Southern University, said the Flint crisis is classically illustrative of environmental racism,⁴³ which is a violation of both distributive and environmental justice. Environmental racism is “any environmental policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups or communities based on race or colour.”⁴⁴ As Dr. Bullard has explained, the Flint disaster which included a cover-up, shirking of responsibility, and denial that there was ever any problem can be starkly juxtaposed against how environmental issues are addressed in predominantly white areas.⁴⁵

The role of environmental racism in the Flint crisis was also documented in an independent report (the Report) commissioned by Gov. Synder and released on or about March 23, 2016. In the Report, a panel of experts analyzed the underpinnings of what occurred in Flint and concluded that:

The facts of the Flint water crisis lead us to the inescapable conclusion that this is a case of environmental injustice. Flint residents, who are majority black or African American and among the most impoverished of any metropolitan area in the United States, did not enjoy the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards as that provided to other communities.”⁴⁶

V. The media’s collective failure to address environmental racism in Flint

The Report’s focus on the civil rights violations in Flint rightly portrayed Flint governmental officials as perpetrators of environmental racism. The Report, which also contained several remedial recommendations, was highly publicized in several periodicals, including the New York Times (NYT).⁴⁷ In its coverage of the Report, the NYT noted:

The five-member panel put a spotlight on a long-running civil rights issue: whether minorities and the poor are treated differently when it comes to environmental matters, relegating them to some of the most dangerous places in the country: flood prone areas of New Orleans that were devastated after Hurricane Katrina; highly polluted parts of Detroit and the Bronx; and “cancer alley” in Louisiana, where residents who live near factories suffer disproportionately from disease.⁴⁸

Among other things, the NYT also quoted in its article Rep. Dan Kildee, whose district includes Flint, who stated, “I could not imagine this happening in an affluent community that was not a majority minority community and the same reaction occurring.”⁴⁹

The NYT’s coverage did not end with its article regarding the Report and its disturbing findings. Indeed, two days following publication of its article on the Report, the NYT published an editorial entitled “The Racism at the Heart of Flint’s Crisis.”⁵⁰ The editorial opens with the line “[a]n important new report makes clear the principal cause of the water crisis in Flint, Mich: the state government’s blatant disregard for the lives and health of poor black residents of a distressed city.”⁵¹ The editorial proceeds to discuss the Report and the role

that race played in the Flint crisis, observing that “[w]hile [the Report] avoids using the word “racism,” it clearly identifies the central role that race and poverty play in this story.”⁵²

The NYT’s inclusion of the issue of environmental racism in its coverage of Flint is an exception among mainstream media. While many mainstream media outlets heavily covered the Flint crisis and collectively did an excellent job uncovering the scandal, most failed to discuss or even mention the racial inequities fueling the disaster. Included among these periodicals is a major US news outlet – The Washington Post (WP).

On March 23, 2016 – the same day that the NYT published its article concerning the Report – the WP released an article entitled “Scathing independent report blames state officials for Flint water crisis.”⁵³ While the article correctly observes that the Report lays blame for the Flint crisis squarely at the feet of Flint governmental officials, it wholly sidesteps discussion of one of the key contributing factors to the crisis central to the Report: the issue of race. Notably, the WP article is completely devoid of any mention of the word race or the topic of race.⁵⁴ In fact, aside from a few articles that mention, in passing, the role of environmental injustice in Flint, a search using key terms in the WP’s search function was unable to produce any WP articles about Flint that focus on the impact that race played in the crisis there.

The Report’s central focus on environmental racism should have made the topic a critical point of discussion in the mainstream media. Even if there had been no report, environmental racism served as a basis for the criminal disregard of Flint’s residents, warranting a serious and pervasive national conversation. The media’s lapse in discussing environmental racism could have been fueled by the same indifference that led to the water crisis.

VI. Conclusion

Environmental racism is insidious and can persist undetected. However, it can be just as devastating as overt prejudice and can cause life-long physical damage. Environmental racism is arguably a manifestation of the larger problem of structural racism. Tackling it will require vast reforms, not only in environmental policy and practice, but in housing, tax, and other policies that historically have disadvantaged and oppressed people of color. However, the media must empower people with information before we can prevent environmental racism and attempt to repair its ruins. The media bears a special responsibility to report on environmental racism. The major media outlets that failed to discuss the issue of race as a motivating factor behind the Flint crisis were derelict in their responsibility to bring environmental racism to light. The public is not served by this type of journalism – nor are the people of Flint or the victims of the next environmental disaster that may be caused by environmental racism.

¹ CDC website, Health Effects of Lead Exposure, <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/prevention/health-effects.htm>; WHO website, Lead poisoning and health, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/lead-poisoning-and-health>

² Environmental Protection Agency website, <https://www.epa.gov/ground-water-and-drinking-water/basic-information-about-lead-drinking-water>

³ United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/flintcitymichigan/PST045219>);

⁴ Ruckart, P.Z., et al. "The Flint Water Crisis: A Coordinated Public Health Emergency Response and Recovery Initiative." *J Public Health Manag Pract.* 25 (Suppl 1 Lead Poisoning Prevention): S84-S90, S85 (January 1, 2011). https://journals.lww.com/jphmp/Fulltext/2019/01001/The_Flint_Water_Crisis_A_Coordinated_Public.14.aspx; Flint Water Advisory Task Force, Final Report, p. 25. March 2016. https://www.michigan.gov/documents/snyder/FWATF_FINAL_REPORT_21March2016_517805_7.pdf; Hanna-Attisha, M. "The Future for Flint's Children." *The New York Times*. March 26, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/opinion/sunday/the-future-for-flints-children.html>

⁵ Natural Resources Defense Council, <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/flint-water-crisis-everything-you-need-know>

⁶ Hanna-Attisha, M, et al. "Elevated Blood Lead Levels in Children Associated with the Flint Drinking Water Crisis: A Spatial Analysis of Risk and Public Health Response." *Am J Public Health.* 106:283-290, 283 (2016). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4985856/>

⁷ Flint Water Advisory Task Force, Final Report, pp. 20-21; Kennedy, M. "Lead-Laced Water in Flint: A Step-by-Step Look at the Makings of a Crisis." *NPR.* April 20, 2016. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/04/20/465545378/lead-laced-water-in-flint-a-step-by-step-look-at-the-makings-of-a-crisis>

⁸ Flint Water Advisory Task Force, Final Report, pp. 20-21

⁹ Gostin, L.O. "Lead in the Water: A Tale of Social and Environmental Injustice." *JAMA.* 315:19:2053-2054, 2053. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2521956>

¹⁰ Ruckart, p. S85

¹¹ Gostin, p. 2053; Flint Water Advisory Task Force, Final Report, pp. 22-23, 32

¹² Hanna-Attisha, p. 283; Kennedy. TTHM is a carcinogenic disinfection byproduct that occurs when chlorine interacts with organic matter, such as human waste, in the water.

¹³ Hanna-Attisha, p. 283; Flint Water Advisory Task Force, Final Report, p. 41

¹⁴ Campbell, C., et al. "A case study of environmental injustice: the failure in Flint." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health.* 13:951, 2 (2016). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5086690/>; Kennedy

¹⁵ Gostin, p. 2053; Hanna-Attisha, p. 283.

¹⁶ Bosman, J., Davey, M., Smith, M. "As Water Problems Grew, Officials Belittled Complaints from Flint." *The New York Times.* January 21, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/21/us/flint-michigan-lead-water-crisis.html>

¹⁷ Ruckart, p. S85; Flint Water Advisory Task Force, Final Report, p. 22

¹⁸ Flint Water Advisory Task Force, Final Report, p. 41; Bosman

¹⁹ Flint Water Advisory Task Force, Final Report, pp. 48, 55; Kennedy

²⁰ Gostin, p. 2054; Flint Water Advisory Task Force, Final Report, pp. 54-55

²¹ Flint Water Advisory Task Force, Final Report, pp. 25-26; Kennedy

²² Kennedy

²³ Ruckart, p. S85

²⁴ Bellware, K. "There may have been dozens more deaths linked to the Flint water crisis than previously known." *The Washington Post*. September 12, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/09/12/there-may-have-been-dozens-more-deaths-linked-flint-water-crisis-than-previously-disclosed/>

²⁵ Ruckart, p. S85

²⁶ Hanna-Attisha, p. 285

²⁷ Caravallah, L.A., et al. "Lessons for Physicians from Flint's Water Crisis." *AMA Journal of Ethics*. 19:10:1001-1010, 1003 (2017). <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/lessons-physicians-flints-water-crisis/2017-10>; Flint Water Advisory Task Force, Final Report, p. 25; Kennedy, M.

²⁸ Kennedy

²⁹ Caravallah, p. 1001

³⁰ Flint Water Advisory Task Force, Final Report, p. 36

³¹ WHO website, Lead poisoning and health, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/lead-poisoning-and-health>

³² CDC website, Health Effects of Lead Exposure, <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/prevention/health-effects.htm>

³³ Hanna-Attisha, M. "Flint Kids: Tragic, Resilient and Exemplary." *American Journal of Public Health*. 107:5:651-652, 651 (2017). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5388977/>.

³⁴ Hanna-Attisha, p. 286

³⁵ Campbell, pp. 2-3

³⁶ Hanna-Attisha, p. 286

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Green, E.L. "Flint's Children Suffer in Class After Years of Drinking the Lead-Poisoned Water." *The New York Times*. November 6, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/06/us/politics/flint-michigan-schools.html>

³⁹ Ruckart, p. S86

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Boufides, C.H., et al., "Learning from Flint Water Crisis: Restoring and Improving Public Health Practice, Accountability and Trust." *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*. 47 S2:23-36, 25 (2019). <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1073110519857310>

⁴² Bullard, R.D., "Dismantling Environmental Racism in the USA." *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*. 4:1:5-19, 7 (1999). <https://content.ebscohost.com/ContentServer.asp?T=P&P=AN&K=1694191&S=R&D=eih&EbscoContent=dGJyMMTo50SeqLQ4yOvsOLCmsEiep7RSsKq4S7aWxWXS&ContentCustomer=dGJyMPGot02xqrVLuePfgeyx44Dt6fIA>.

⁴³ Campbell, p. 4

⁴⁴ Bullard, pp. 5-6

⁴⁵ Campbell, p. 4

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 4-5

⁴⁷ Davey, M., Bosman, J. "Emails Show Michigan Aides Worried About Flint's Water a Year Before Acting." *The New York Times*. February 26, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/27/us/emails-show-michigan-aides-worried-about-flints-water-a-year-before-acting.html>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ The Editorial Board. "The Racism at the Heart of Flint's Crisis." *The New York Times*. March 25, 2016.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/25/opinion/the-racism-at-the-heart-of-flints-crisis.html>

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Dennis, B. "Scathing independent report blames state officials for Flint water crisis." *The Washington Post*. March 23, 2016.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/scathing-independent-report-blames-state-officials-for-flint-water-crisis/2016/03/23/82692d52-f12f-11e5-a61f-e9c95c06edca_story.html

⁵⁴ Ibid.