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## Environmental Injustice: Examining How *The New York Times* Frames the Flint Water Crisis

Mark Congdon Jr.  
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*Perceived as one of the current environmental controversies in the United States, the Flint water crisis represents a case of environmental injustice and has attracted public attention and scrutiny. Among mainstream news media outlets, The New York Times is the newspaper that has intensively published news stories addressing the issue. Using qualitative frame analysis as the method, the researchers examined the way in which The New York Times framed the Flint water crisis from when a federal state of emergency was declared in 2016 to the one-year anniversary of this declaration. Examining how the Flint water crisis is framed in a mainstream United States national newspaper is valuable, especially during major national environmental disasters, with holding public officials and government(s) accountable. The researchers found that the newspaper employed four major frames in its coverage: causes and effects, responsibility, remedial efforts, and health crisis. The significance of this research expands and contributes to timely and germane scholarship on coverage and framing of environmental injustice in the print news media. However, a small sample size (N = 29) is one of the limitations of this study.*

### Introduction

The water crisis in Flint, Michigan, which had negative and detrimental effects on many of its residents in terms of life and health quality, prompted President Obama to declare a federal state of emergency on January 16, 2016 (Hanna-Attisha, 2019; Southall, 2016). The complexity and sensitivity of this environmental controversy, in which civilians' fundamental right of access to safe drinking water is jeopardized and violated, have penetrated public discourse. It has further sparked public debate about the dwindling of the quality of life around the affected community (CNN Library, 2019; Renwick, 2019). The incident has unequivocally created an uproar in American public. Several news media outlets have vocally condemned the state government to its neglect of doing its supposedly required and elected job: to protect the community from environmental hazards. In other words, the state government failed to control the lead level in the water and did not come up with effective solutions.

The Flint water crisis is among the most prominent environmental crisis scandals in the United States (U.S.) in recent years. The urgency and severity of the crisis have resulted in an emergent body of research that examines political actions, criticizes government's handling of the Flint water crisis, and addresses health problems related to drinking lead-contaminated water (Hanna-Attisha, 2019; Nickels & Clark, 2019; Renwick, 2019; Stephens, 2018). For instance, showing the ineffectiveness of governmental regulations in terms of protecting and controlling the quality of the water, Butler and her colleagues (2016) perceived the Flint water crisis as a case of environmental injustice. However, little is known about how the national press portrayed the Flint water crisis in its coverage.

Print media, in particular newspapers, can be considered as a major communication channel for the transmission of information, addressing and discussing issues affecting communities to the general public (Atanasova, 2019; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007; Weathers & Kendall, 2016). Therefore, examining how mainstream and national newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, frame stories about

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environmental crises, can enhance public understanding on these issues, can hold individuals, governments, and/or industries accountable, and can encourage actions to help remedy them (Berlemann & Thomas, 2019; Mayeda, Boyd, Paveglio, & Flint, 2019; Nickels & Clark, 2019; Rebich-Hespanha et al., 2015). This study therefore aims to explore the way in which *The New York Times* frames the Flint water crisis after it gained such a monumental status in the U.S.

Given that *The New York Times* is an influential source of news in the American society, it is important to acknowledge its orientation toward the way in which its news stories are framed and reported. That is, *The New York Times* is among mainstream newspapers with a “left-leaning” political slant in its news coverage (AllSides, 2019; Stone, 2011). Many scholars have found public perception of *The New York Times* as politically left leaning to be generally accurate (Chiang & Knight, 2011; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010; Groseclose & Milyo, 2005; Puglisi, 2011). Nevertheless, others have argued that news reporting in *The New York Times* has minimal partisan bias and that its news coverage is politically neutral or balanced (Dalal, Adlim, & Lesk, 2019; Otero, 2019). To that end, acknowledging the orientation of *The New York Times* indicates how its journalists may adopt certain bias in constructing news stories. That is to say, journalists who write for other more “right-leaning” and/or “politically balanced” newspapers may employ different frames to cover the Flint water crisis.

This study, then, examines what frames *The New York Times* utilized to construct news stories surrounding this crisis, and therefore adds to the expanding scholarly work on coverage of environmental injustice in the news media. More specifically, this study hopes to add to the environmental communication literature by investigating how the print media may frame underlying concerns about marginalization and disenfranchisement related to environmental crises.

## Literature Review

This study relies on several areas of scholarship within mass communication and environmental communication, specifically focusing on framing theory and environmentalism within news coverage. We first provide a review of literature on news coverage and environmental issues. Next, we elaborate on the Flint water crisis and environmental injustice in greater detail. Finally, we discuss framing theory, before stating the research question of this study.

### News Coverage and Environmental Issues

In his discussion on environmental coverage in mainstream newspapers from 1970 to 1982, Howenstine (1987) argued that reporters dedicated more space and length to address environmental stories, which allowed them to mention economic/developmental aspects contributing to or resulting from these environmental issues. In addition, Anderson (1991) stated that the press paid less attention to environmental news stories, had a tendency to sensationalize stories to attract viewership, focused on green consumerism in news coverage of environmental affairs, and politicized reportages on this topic. According to Major and Atwood (2004), because “the press defines [environmental] problems primarily in terms of conflicts and losses instead of solutions” (p. 18), it apparently does not offer enough information for readers to form their viewpoints of how a possible solution can be reached. McCluskey (2008), who investigated journalists’ utilization of news sources in reporting environmental issues, pointed out that journalists who predominantly covered or were assigned to cover environmental issues tended to develop and cultivate auspicious attitudes toward environmental groups in addition to providing in-depth information on the issue.

According to Deacon, Baxter and Buzzelli (2015), reporting environmental stories did not highlight problems pertinent to affected communities but instead focused lenses on their economic/developmental aspects that apparently justified the action to make use of natural resources. This tendency resulted in language choices “that minimized or silenced any potential environmental injustice issues” (p. 429). Heinz (2005) wrote that news media coverage of environmental issues neglected certain perspectives and viewpoints while placing emphases on others, leading to skewed representations of how racial minority groups are affected by the environmental injustice. Reporting environmental issues this

way promotes the idea that as long as the majority of the population benefits from environmental exploitation, spatial elements or characteristics of inflicted communities can be bypassed and erased.

Past research on reporting environmental stories have shown how news media has gradually adopted frames that prioritize the aspects of social justice and environmentalism to provide affected and marginalized communities with the opportunity to have their voices heard, and to ask for changes in public policies to demand justice (Hopke, 2012). For instance, Weathers and Kendall (2015) found an increase in news stories that focus attention on the public health dimension of environmental crises linked to climate change. They indicated how climate change is framed as a human health issue. Applying framing theory to examine news media representations of water issues as health risks, Mayeda, Boyd, Paveglio, and Flint (2019) concluded that journalists tend to frame water issues around pollution and contamination but not as a human health issue. However, missing from these studies is an attention to how health and water issues related to environmental crises come to impact what communities and groups of people.

Further, Taylor (2000) argued for environmental justice frame “as a master frame used to mobilize activists who want to link racism, injustice, and environmentalism in one frame” (p. 514). This frame underlines the importance of addressing the idea of intersectionality and, thereby, functions in a way that can facilitate aggrieved communities’ participation in social movements to address and challenge environmental injustices. That is, an investigation into how mainstream and national newspapers cover environmental injustice and how they construct stories that draw connections between past policies and the perpetuation of the marginalization of communities is crucial. By examining the reportage of the Flint water crisis in *The New York Times* within this context, the study hopes to add to the environmental justice and environmental communication literature.

### **The Flint Water Crisis and Environmental Injustice**

Located in Michigan, Flint is a city in financial distress as a result of the evaporation of the automobile industry that once built it and fostered its economic development. Most of its residents are perceived to belong to the working class with low incomes and are currently seen as being “among the poorest in the land and disproportionately African American” (Gostin, 2016, p. 2053). Against this background, emergency managers were appointed rather than elected by the people in order to develop strategies to bring the city out of its dire conditions. Therefore, the appointment process was considered as “the problem of a democracy deficit” (Washington & Pellow, 2016, p. 53). It appears that the emergency managers cared more about salvaging Flint financially and economically than protecting the well-being of its residents. In other words, this emphasis on finding a solution for the economic problem adds more problems to Flint—a city already in (economic) decay. Since the Flint water crisis can be considered to have both economic and racial backstories, it offers a valuable opportunity to investigate the news media reportage of environmental injustice.

Chronologically, the causes of the Flint water crisis can be traced back to the month of April in 2014 when city officials decided to switch the water supply. Instead of continuing to use the water provided by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, they chose the Flint River as a replacement and as the main source of water supply for the city—a decision made because government officials believed that it would help cut cost and save money for the already financially struggling city of Flint. Following this switch, residents began complaining about the deterioration of the quality of the water in terms of its taste, color, and odor. Residents simultaneously expressed concerns over its safeness (Gostin, 2016; Hanna-Attisha, 2019; Kennedy, 2016). To complicate the matter further, city officials initially ignored these complaints from the community and did not respond in a timely manner. Moreover, government officials manipulated the procedure of testing used to determine the safe lead level in the water, and even stated that the water was safe for daily consumption. In September 2015, nevertheless, a research team from Virginia Tech University conducted tests and published a report highlighting the alarmingly high level of lead in the water. As these events gradually unfolded, the state government finally apologized to the community of Flint for the mishandling of the water crisis whilst filing charges against individuals who were responsible for this catastrophe (CNN Library, 2019; Kennedy, 2016; Rothstein, 2016).

Mainstream news media has vocalized their criticisms of the state government's responses toward the Flint water crisis.

The environmental justice frame foregrounds the relationship between social justice and environmentalism. By adopting this master frame, journalists address *who is impacted by the issue, who is responsible for it, and what kind of social justice will entail*. Nickels and Clark (2019) drew upon framing theory to examine interviews, speeches, and newspaper op-eds of local grassroots associations and high-capacity nonprofits in their responses to the Flint water crisis. They found that these organizations come to frame the policy solutions to the crisis as an equal impact, which minimizes “the issue of race and class or the impact of racism—and instead focus on moving forward” (p. 215). Nickels and Clark's (2019) findings highlight this environmental injustice by recognizing the silencing of concerned residents of Flint and, at the same time, emphasize a natural cause of the crisis, which disregards issues of racism and classism in the crisis. Therefore, centering this study on the environmental justice frame is of significant importance and allows for the possibility of paying attention to marginalized positions and including other factors, such as race and class, in the reportage of the Flint water crisis in *The New York Times*.

### **Framing Theory**

Framing theory is a productive theoretical framework that enables an investigation into newspapers coverage of environmental issues and crises (Atanasova, 2019; Berlemann & Thomas, 2019; Nisbet, 2009; Rebich-Hespanha et al., 2015). Researchers in the field of mass communication commonly use framing theory to understand media phenomena and journalistic practices within the context of culture (Bryant & Miron, 2004; Gorp, 2007). Gamson (1989) conceptualized "a frame" as "a central organization for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue" (p. 157). Goffman (1981) perceived frames as “a central part of a culture and are institutionalized in various ways” (p. 63), where culture is constituted by an “organized set of beliefs, codes, myths, stereotypes, values, norms, frames, and so forth that are shared in the collective memory of a group or society” (Gorp, 2007, p. 62). Shoemaker and Reese (1996) contended that “individuals make use of these cultural phenomena, precisely as media workers apply and magnify them in media content and present them to their audiences” (p. 60). Gorp (2007) underscored that framing is an important journalistic technique because the adoption of particular frames can influence the outcome of how a news story is constructed and received. In his own words, “the same events make different kinds of sense depending upon the frame applied” (Gorp, 2007, p. 63). Gorp (2007) further added that frame analysis is “useful to identify the frames that are dominantly applied in other social, political, or historical contexts and periods” (p. 63).

In his proposal of how frame was constructed, Entman (1993) pointed toward two essential components in framing: "selection" and "salience." Journalists create news stories through their ways of framing social life and events, and therefore have the power "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the items described" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). To frame, in this context, involves journalists' attempts to make an angle of an issue appear more prominent and dominant in a media text to provide the audiences with a version of a problem, to engage them in the conversation, to arouse their judgment, and to propose them with solutions or remedies. Wide arrays of issues that the public reads and receives on newspapers are constructed through frames. With the power to do the "selection" and to contribute to the "salience" of the news stories, journalists can push for problems and issues that they think the public needs to pay more attention to as well as take notice of. Clearly, frames are essential and unavoidable in the practice of journalism. Since it is nearly impossible for the media to capture the whole picture of the world, frames offer the reader with heuristic and oversimplified, albeit essential, lenses into viewing the world and its reality.

In this study, we investigate how a U.S. news media print outlet framed the coverage of the Flint water crisis. *The New York Times* dedicated several news stories to covering this environmental controversy. Understanding how this mainstream and national newspaper, with high readership and circulations, approaches this crisis and informs its readers of what transpired in Flint respecting the issue

of lead-contaminated drinking water can be beneficial, because it helps shine a spotlight on the kind of environmental injustice residents of Flint were exposed to. Specifically, we ask the following research question:

RQ: What frames does *The New York Times* utilize to portray the Flint water crisis?

### **Methodology**

News stories about the Flint water crisis published in *The New York Times* were examined. Our decision to focus on *The New York Times* in this study was primarily based on this: Of mainstream and national print outlets, *The New York Times* was the one newspaper, with a prestigious status, that not only reported extensively but also included in-depth coverage on this subject. Framing analysis was used for this study (Gorp, 2007; Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

#### **Framing Analysis**

Since the news media can influence how individuals perceive events, we conducted a qualitative frame analysis, using the approach proposed by Entman (1993), Gorp (2007) and Pan and Kosicki (1993) to understand frames that were utilized to cover the Flint water crisis in *The New York Times*. Pan and Kosicki (1993) explained that frame analysis requires researchers to view news stories “as a system of organized signifying elements that both indicate the advocacy of certain ideas and provide devices to encourage certain kinds of audience processing of the texts” (pp. 55-56). Framing analysis is different from other approaches, such as content analysis, to study news stories because this method does not focus on the psychological aspects with objectively identifying meanings (Livingston, 1998). Rather, framing analysis calls attention to how meanings are constructed out of the organized symbolic devices within news stories (Gorp, 2007; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Framing analysis additionally “does not assume the presence of frames in news texts independent of readers of the texts” (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 58). Taken together, framing analysis is subjective because it enables researchers to look at how meaning-making is organized within the news stories.

As such, we considered framing analysis as the most appropriate method for this study because it enabled the possibility of “analyzing news discourse mainly deals with how public discourse about public policy issues is constructed and negotiated” (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 70). A framing analysis of the news coverage of the Flint water crisis in *The New York Times* further helped uncover the influence of this news outlet on shaping “the importance individuals attach to particular beliefs” (Nelson & Oxley, 1999, p. 1041) regarding this issue. In this study, we carefully perused each news story to evaluate and identify frames and sub-frames that were used to construct the discourse around the water crisis in Flint, focusing on the selection and salience components of framing (Entman, 1993).

#### **Sample**

News articles from *The New York Times* were sampled from January 16, 2016 (when President Obama declared a state of emergency for this issue) to January 16, 2017 (the one-year anniversary of the Flint water crisis being declared a state of emergency). The Lexis-Nexis online database was used to locate news stories reporting on the Flint water crisis in *The New York Times*. In particular, headline and lead paragraph were searched using the keyword “Flint water crisis.” Additionally, only articles written in English were considered. The option of “high similarity” was selected to remove duplicate articles from the search results. Furthermore, editorials and opinion columns were eliminated from the sampling pool, because we focused only on the factual aspects of news stories. Articles were then reviewed and discarded if they did not have a substantial focus on the Flint water crisis, were duplicates, were editorials or opinion pieces, or were non-articles. The decision-rule for inclusion was whether or not articles predominantly focused on the Flint water crisis.

When searching within these parameters, 49 results emerged. Of these 49 results, 20 were eliminated because they did not meet the criteria that we discussed above. The following articles that

appeared in the search results were eliminated: six articles focused on other issues besides the Flint water crisis (i.e. the 2016 Presidential Election, EPA Budget, and 2016 Michigan Election), four articles were duplicates that made it through to the search results, three articles were blogs, three articles were published in *The New York Times Magazine*, two articles were opinion pieces, and two articles focused on water pipes in the state of New Jersey. Therefore, with news story as the unit of analysis, 29 news stories were finally chosen for the purpose of this study (see Appendix A for list of the 29 articles).

**Procedure.** Adopting an approach to framing analysis proposed by Entman (1993), Gorp (2007), and Pan and Kosicki (1993), we first read the 29 news articles collectively to get a sense of what was reported in *The New York Times* (Entman, 1993; Gorp, 2007). To situate the selection component of framing, we re-read each article to analyze what was selected and how what was selected was organized (Entman, 1993). Here, we paid close attention to selected keywords and target phrases that would constitute larger structures of meaning (Entman, 1993; Gorp, 2007; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Finally, we read each article a third time to look for the salience component of framing (Entman, 1993), which includes “certain information” that is made “more significant so that the audience will notice it more easily” (Gorp, 2007, p. 67). Here, we sought for reasoning devices, which focus on the explicit and implicit statements that deal with justifications, causes, and/or consequences in a temporal order (Entman, 1993; Gamson, 1988; 1989; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Gorp, 2007; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Based on the qualitative framing analysis of the 29 *New York Times* articles, the following four frames emerged: 1) the cause and effect frame; 2) the responsibility frame; 3) the remedial efforts frame; and 4) the health crisis frame.

## Results and Analysis

*The New York Times* published most of its news stories of the Flint water crisis within the first five months after President Obama declared a federal state of emergency in the middle of the month of January in 2016 (22 articles reported from January 2016 to May 2016). One possible explanation is that when this environmental crisis first captured public and national attention, journalists might have had more materials and more sources to work with. During the months after the beginning of May 2016, the frequency of news stories reporting on the Flint water crisis, however, drastically decreased. The analysis of news stories from *The New York Times* produced four major frames: causes and effects, responsibility, remedial efforts, and health crisis. Also, journalists might combine frames to construct their news stories on the crisis. For instance, a story mainly about government’s efforts to remedy the crisis might also employ other frames, such as responsibility or health crisis.

### Frame 1: The Cause and Effect Frame

Reports in *The New York Times* identified causes leading to the presence of an astronomical level of lead in the water supply after the state decided to use the water of the Flint River. Several news stories highlighted the state’s failure to employ anti-corrosion chemicals in the treatment of the water to make sure that it would be safe enough for public consumption. One story particularly noted, “The pipes began leaching lead into the water supply in 2014, when the Flint River became the primary source of water for the city and officials failed to add corrosion controls to prevent the pipes from eroding” (Bosman, 2016). Another cause of the problem stemmed from the decision to prioritize cost-cutting, and therefore, downplaying the well-being of the community.

News stories further addressed the effect of the crisis. Journalists expressed their concerns that the exposure to lead-contaminated water would put residents of Flint at risk in terms of health. They further asserted that the problem with lead in the water would cost the state government money and time to come up with a tangible solution (Bosman, 2016). Several news stories attributed the Flint water crisis to delayed responses to its handling even though civilians complained the quality of the water as well as vocalized concerns over their health. State officials were warned about the Flint River’s water, yet they did not develop strategic plans and tactics to handle it. These delayed responses galvanized journalists to adopt a sub-frame: *socio-economic and racial factors*.

In many news stories, journalists drew a connection between these two factors and government's mishandling of the issue. In these stories, they repeatedly discussed the failing economy of the city of Flint, which relegated its people into the condition of poverty. They underscored that the population is constituted by a high number of members of a racial minority group. One of the news stories stated the following:

An independent panel has concluded that disregard for the concerns of poor and minority people contributed to the government's slow response to complaints from residents of Flint, Mich., about the foul and discolored water that was making them sick, determining that the crisis "is a story of government failure, intransigence, unpreparedness, delay, inaction and environmental injustice" (Bosman, 2016).

These conditions of Flint further prompted a journalist to particularly pose the question, "If Flint were rich and mostly white, would Michigan's state government have responded more quickly and aggressively to complaints about its lead-polluted water?" (Eligon, 2016). Within this frame, issues of poverty and race, which were linked to the government's delayed responses to the crisis, were also recognized as one cause of the crisis.

### **Frame 2: The Responsibility Frame**

The frequency of Michigan Governor Rick Snyder being mentioned in many news stories as the main person responsible for delayed responses to handle this crisis underscored this frame. News stories repeatedly highlighted that the governor publicly expressed his contrition for the incident. For instance, one news story wrote:

Gov. Rick Snyder of Michigan issued a sweeping apology on Tuesday to the residents of Flint for a contaminated water supply. He pledged to promptly release his emails about the issue and laid out more specifics than had previously been known about the state's handling of the matter. (Bosman & Smith, 2016)

Despite this, the governor was adamant that his aides misled him and told him that water was safe enough for daily consumption. In a sense, Snyder considered his staff members as the source of responsibility for causing the crisis when they did not provide him with accurate information on the issue.

Environmental Protection Agency (E.P.A.) was also blamed for the crisis. The reports noted that laws required by the agency in terms of determining the quality of the water were not effective. Indeed, E.P.A. did not develop strict regulations when it comes to testing the water supply. Also, E.P.A. did not handle the issue the way it should be handled. In one report, the journalist observed that:

Members of a congressional oversight committee excoriated a former Environmental Protection Agency official on Tuesday for not responding more forcefully when she learned last year that Flint, Mich., was not adding a chemical to its new water supply that would have prevented the city's pipes from corroding and leaching lead. (Goodnough, 2016)

As the event unfolded, news stories reported that three state officials and two emergency managers were charged for misconducts in terms of handling the water. Also, private sectors were sued for their involvement in the crisis. These stories fit into this frame because they aimed to acknowledge who was responsible for the Flint water crisis.

This frame had one sub-frame, *Democrat vs. Republican criticisms*. On one hand, Democrats criticized the failure of the Snyder's admiration for neglecting affected people and its ineptitude in handling the problem. On the other hand, Republicans attributed the crisis to E.P.A. because the agency was "a source of government incompetence and overreach" (Goodnough, Smith, & Bosman, 2016).



### Frame 3: The Remedial Efforts Frame

Journalists paid attention to how the state government would fix the water problem in Flint, and this was reflected in their news reporting. A news story addressed difficulties in replacing the old pipeline that continually leached lead into the water. Efforts to switch the water supply back to the one in Detroit would not solve the problem as “the pipes are so deeply corroded that lead is still poisoning the water” (Bosman, 2016). Other new stories discussed the possibility of pressing charges against those responsible for the Flint water crisis even though such actions would not be easy to carry out. A few items asserted possible remedial and therapeutic plans from both Democrat and Republican parties to handle the issue. Moreover, the federal government took the issue in its hand and announced plans to protect residents of Flint. In one story:

The Department of Health and Human Services announced a \$10 million grant on Wednesday for health services in Michigan, including \$1 million for a health center in Flint that is treating those affected by the water. White House officials said the federal government had already provided nine million liters of water and 55,000 water filters. (Shear & Bosman, 2016)

### Frame 4: The Health Crisis Frame

News coverage of the Flint water crisis in *The New York Times* framed it in terms of a health crisis by highlighting diseases related to the consumption of the lead-contaminated water from the Flint River. One journalist stated that:

The Legionnaires’ cases started popping up as Flint residents were complaining about the foul-smelling, discolored water flowing into their homes after the city switched to a new water source, the Flint River, in April 2004. Soon they were reporting rashes and stomach ailments, and whistleblowers eventually pointed to alarming levels of lead in the water supply and in children’s blood. (Goodnough, 2016)

Concerns over using the Flint River’s water further led to several residents feeling paranoid and worried about their health. One news story interviewed many residents who were directly affected by the Flint water crisis. They spoke out about how being exposed to the water put pressure on their mental health. One interviewee elaborated, “I poisoned other people’s children” when she offered her children and their friends drinks made with the Flint River’s water (Goodnough & Atkinson, 2016). Within this frame, children were presented as most susceptible to health issues once exposed to the water. One account suggested that children’s consumption of lead-contaminated water would have detrimental effects on their “growth, behavior, and intelligence over time” (Goodnough, 2016).

In review, four major frames emerged from the qualitative frame analysis of the 29 *The New York Times* articles: 1) causes and effects, 2) responsibility, 3) remedial efforts, and 4) health crisis. Most of the articles were published within the first five months of President Obama declaring a state of emergency. During this timeframe, *The New York Times* published 22 articles about the Flint Water Crisis. Additionally, journalists combined frames in certain instances to construct the news stories of the Flint water crisis.

## Discussion

The reporting of the Flint water crisis on the pages of *The New York Times* indicated an emphasis on its causes and effects. News stories further highlighted the incompetence of state officials in handling the issue and underlined the effects that the crisis had on the people of Flint. Several news stories specifically identified and perpetually addressed those responsible for the crisis. Governor Snyder, state officials, and state agencies were to be held accountable for ignoring people’s complaints and for taking too long to respond to the crisis. Moreover, the remedial efforts frame allowed journalists to discuss what had been proposed to control the issue and to have it handled. Unfortunately, news stories underscored

some of the obstacles that the community would encounter in its efforts to contain and solve the water crisis.

*The New York Times* asked the question of whether the economic condition and racial factor contributed to the failure of Governor Snyder's administration in its responses to complaints from residents of Flint regarding the quality of the water. This approach allowed the newspaper to adopt Taylor's (2000) environmental justice frame. In other words, addressing the question of racial and economic status in its coverage prompted journalists of *The New York Times* to construct news stories that would gain public support for demanding and obtaining justice for the people of the city of Flint. Readers could feel more sympathetic towards the aggrieved community in that the state governor and his administration had done their constituents wrong. Indeed, the Flint water crisis does have long-lasting effects on Flint's people. In other words, it is our contention that the newspaper took this matter in its own hands when it provided spaces for journalists to criticize the state government for its delayed attention and lackadaisical responses toward this environmental catastrophe. Journalists further used *The New York Times* to communicate messages that demanded answers for the state's wrongdoings and requested justice for Flint's residents in their coverage.

Pan and Kosicki (1993) addressed a close relationship between framing analysis and agenda setting theory. When news stories on the Flint water crisis framed it as a health crisis, they underlined its severity. The health of the people, in particular children, were being undermined and in danger. Thus, *The New York Times* journalists' adoption of the health crisis frame indicated their intention to amplify problems with the Flint water crisis. Journalists, therefore, constructed this issue in a way that would garner their readers' attention as well as would provide a validation for seeking justice for the affected community. This could be seen as journalists' attempt to set an agenda.

### **Future Research**

Due to the ongoing investigation status of the crisis, *The New York Times* only covered what was discovered. Whether the people of Flint succeeded to combat against this environmental injustice and whether remedial efforts from the federal and state governments would work remain unknown. Once everything is settled, future research should investigate whether *The New York Times* adopts different frames to cover the Flint water crisis. A limitation of the study included is its small sample size and a focus on only one newspaper—*The New York Times*. Therefore, a comparison on the news coverage of this crisis between mainstream and alternative news media (i.e., print, broadcast, and/or digital/online news media) would help better comprehend how frames would be different between different media platforms.

### **Conclusion**

Examining how the Flint water crisis is framed in a mainstream United States national newspaper is valuable, especially during major national environmental disasters, in that it indicates how the kind of frames journalists adopt or utilize come to matter. The significance of this research then expands scholarly work on coverage and framing of environmental issues in the print news media, and calls attention to the need for news media outlets to recognize how a variety of factors, such as race and class, can be tied to environmental injustice. Much is still to be learned from how environmental injustice is framed in the media, especially since the Flint water crisis is still ongoing (CNN Library, 2019; Hanna-Attisha, 2019; Renwick, 2019; Stephens, 2018). However, by showing how *The New York Times* perceived the events surrounding the Flint water crisis and constructed news stories about it, this study not only shed new light onto the issue, but also emphasized the important and integral role of news media outlets in keeping the public informed of this issue, so that the American people could hold the state and federal government accountable for misconduct or wrongdoing.

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## Appendix A

### List of *The New York Times* Journal Articles (Sorted by Oldest to Newest)

- Southall, A. (2016, January 17). State of emergency declared over man-made water disaster in Michigan city. *The New York Times*.
- Bosman, J., & Smith, M. (2016, January 20). 'I let you down,' governor says of Flint crisis. *The New York Times*.
- Eligon, J. (2016, January 22). A question of environmental racism in Flint. *The New York Times*.
- Perez-Pena, R. (2016, January 23). Governor denies race affected Flint response. *The New York Times*.
- Steinhauer, J. (2016, January 29). Senate democrats seeking federal aid for Flint crisis. *The New York Times*.
- Goodnough, A. (2016, January 30). Flint tallies tainted water's cost to its children. *The New York Times*.
- Goodnough, A., & Steinhauer, J. (2016, February 4). Congressional grilling on Flint's water crisis takes on a partisan tone. *The New York Times*.
- Chozick, A. (2016, February 8). In Flint, Clinton prods congress and calls response to crisis 'immoral'. *The New York Times*.
- Bosman, J. (2016, February 12). Why it won't be cheap or easy to fix Flint's water crisis. *The New York Times*.
- Goodnough, A. (2016, February 23). Flint outbreak was treated with silence. *The New York Times*.
- Davey, M., & Bosman, J. (2016, February 27). Emails show Michigan aides worried about Flint's water a year before acting. *The New York Times*.
- Bosman, J. (2016, March 5). 2 who helped expose flint water crisis win PEN awards. *The New York Times*.
- Goodnough, A. (2016, March 15). Former E.P.A. official to defend handling of Flint water crisis. *The New York Times*.
- Goodnough, A. (2016, March 16). House panel denounces E.P.A. actions in Flint crisis. *The New York Times*.
- Goodnough, A. (2016, March 18). Michigan governor tells congress he was misled on Flint water. *The New York Times*.
- Bosman, J. (2016, March 24). Report on Flint cites 'injustice'. *The New York Times*.
- Davey, M., & Perez-Pena, R. (2016, April 21). Three officials facing charges on Flint water. *The New York Times*.
- Davey, M., & Goodnough, A. (2016, April 25). Emails deepen criminal cases in Flint, but charges may be tough to prove. *The New York Times*.
- Goodnough, A., & Atkinson, S. (2016, May 1). Flint water crisis also hits at mental health. *The New York Times*.
- Bosman, J., & Atkinson, S. (2016, May 3). Michigan governor backtracks, seeking to meet Obama in Flint. *The New York Times*.
- Shear, M. D., & Bosman, J. (2016, May 5). 'I've got your back,' Obama declares in Flint. *The New York Times*.
- Atkinson, S. (2016, May 5). One defendant to cooperate in water inquiry. *The New York Times*.
- Smith, M., & Bosman, J. (2016, June 23). Contractors are blamed by state over Flint. *The New York Times*.
- Haimerl, A., & Goodnough, A. (2016, July 30). 6 more state workers charged over Flint water crisis. *The New York Times*.
- The Associated Press. (2016, September 14). In plea deal, ex-Michigan official admits silence in Flint water crisis. *The New York Times*.
- Davenport, C. (2016, September 15). Senate approves funding for Flint water crisis.

*The New York Times.*

Bosman, J. (2016, October 20). E.P.A. waited too long to warn of Flint water danger, report says.

*The New York Times.*

Chokshi, N. (2016, November 11). Judge orders that bottled water be delivered to residents of Flint, Mich. *The New York Times.*

Davey, M., & Smith, M. (2016, December 21). 2 former Flint emergency managers are charged over tainted water. *The New York Time.*

