

Public Abstract

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Title:ONLINE MEDIA ATTRIBUTION OF PIPELINE INFRASTRUCTURE FAILURE, SOURCING AND THE PUBLIC HEALTH MODEL: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF NEWS STORIES ON WATER AND WASTEWATER PIPELINE FAILURES

Pipeline infrastructure in the United States serves 54,000 community water systems, and includes over one million miles of drinking water and 600,000 miles of wastewater pipelines. The health and well-being of these systems affects approximately 90% of the country's population. With water main breaks numbering in the hundreds of thousands,, and more than 3 billion gallons of untreated wastewater dumped into natural water habitats each year, various news media regularly report on issues and events related to pipelines when communities are affected by failing infrastructure.

The following study is a content analysis on how online media covers pipeline failure in North America. It uses the Public Health Model of Reporting, Sourcing and Attribution Theory to answer questions related to the cause and consequences of pipeline failure. The content analysis looked at 112 online articles from 2010 highlighting events and issues related to pipeline and infrastructure failure such as sewer collapses, water main breaks and sinkholes.

The articles were coded for frequency of the various failures, consequences and causes. The story type and sources of all articles were also coded to determine if there were any relationships between the variables. Additional information was gathered relating to other criteria specific to online articles, such as the availability of photos and video and social media feedback.

The research found relationships between story type, source type, cause of failure, attribution and the recorded consequence of each pipeline failure as covered by the news media. Implications of the research suggests that journalists covering pipeline failure should seek out more academic and objective sources while also reporting on the actual cause of pipeline failure as opposed to simply the consequences of the event.