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The Flint water crisis: An analysis of public relations as a mediator between human and corporate persons

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1. Introduction

Well before the Flint water crisis became an international news story, public health tragedy, political scandal and symbol of America's decaying urban infrastructure, a project manager in Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder's administration warned that the Flint water issue was a public relations crisis "waiting to explode nationally" (Anderson, 2016, para. 1). Performing the environmental scanning function of public relations, in January 2015, the project manager saw a *Detroit Free Press* newspaper article titled, "Who wants to drink Flint's water?" (Erb, 2015) and sent it to his boss, the governor's communication director. The project manager urged the governor's office to take action, but apparently his warnings were ignored. Thus, for nearly a year after the project manager signaled there was a problem, the people of Flint, Michigan, continued to be exposed to a drinking water supply containing high levels of lead, bacteria and toxic levels of disinfectants—all except for one person: the General Motors (GM) Corporation.

While the human persons in Flint complained to local and state government officials about the smell, look and taste of the water, as well as skin rashes, sickness and hair loss resulting from its use (Erb, 2015; Itkowitz, 2016; Sanburn, 2016a), the corporation—also considered a person under the law (*Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Company*, 1886)—was concerned that Flint River water was corroding its auto parts (Colias, 2016; Fonger, 2014a). Both persons—human and corporate—bemoaned the water quality and demanded improvements; however, one person received the state's cooperation to secure safe, clean water far more quickly than the other. That was the GM Corporation. Although GM received a clean water source in the fall of 2014, the rest of the people in Flint would have to wait until 2017 for their water to meet federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) standards, and they were advised to continue using water filters and bottled water to minimize lead exposure (Guillen, 2017; Virginia Tech, 2017). Table 1 provides a timeline of key events in the crisis.

The Flint water crisis has been explored from a variety of different angles: as a crisis situation (Young, 2016), as an issue of health disparities (Heavey, 2016), as environmental injustice and racism (Campbell, Greenberg, Mankikar, & Ross, 2016; The Editorial Board, 2016), and as an example of the decline of government efficacy (Gehl, 2016; Graham, 2016). All of these approaches provide meaningful ways to understand what happened in Flint. The purpose of this article, however, is to analyze the public relations discourse surrounding the Flint water crisis, particularly the implications for the human and corporate persons of Flint.

I argue that in addition to jeopardizing the safety of all persons in Flint—human and corporate—the government's response to the crisis drew attention to GM, raising questions about that corporation's responsibilities to the human persons of Flint and necessitating that GM engage in public relations activities, including corporate social responsibility. Thus, my analysis of the Flint water crisis focuses on the intersection of three key groups that constitute society: the government, corporate persons and human persons. It also shows that communities are complex sites of conflicting and conjoined interests and expectations that can evolve into new configurations of discord and unity, especially during times of crisis. I employ the Fully Functioning Society Theory (FFST) of public relations (Heath, 2006, 2011) as a theoretical framework to facilitate my analysis of the Flint water crisis, the role of government public relations, the role of corporate public relations and the implications of these communicative responses for the persons of Flint. FFST holds that as members of society—organizations and individuals—satisfy their own needs, they can also serve the needs of others in the community or at least operate in ways that do not harm others.

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Table 1
Timeline of Key Events in the Flint Water Crisis.

Date	Event
April 2014	City of Flint switches from its traditional Lake Huron water source to Flint River water
May 2014	Flint residents continue to complain about health issues resulting from river water use
October 2014	GM announces it will no longer use Flint River water because the water is damaging auto parts
December 2014	GM stops using Flint River water; returns to Lake Huron water
January 2015	Performing the environmental scanning function of PR, a project manager in the governor's office warns of Flint water problems
September 2015	Researchers report evidence of lead in Flint's water supply
October 2015	A State of Michigan news release claims Flint's drinking water is safe
January 2016	Michigan's governor delivers the State of the State address, apologizes for crisis and describes measures to resolve it
September 2017	Flint meets EPA water standards although residents are still advised to use water filters and bottled water to minimize lead exposure; residents also continue to receive free water filters from the State of Michigan

Beginning with an overview of the Flint water crisis, I next describe how FFST is used as a theoretical framework to analyze the crisis. Then the Flint water crisis is analyzed using two FFST premises: 1) corporate responsibility and 2) community as conflicting and conjoined interests and expectations. The conclusion asserts that governments, corporate persons and human persons all have important roles to play in contributing to a society that functions optimally. However, when the interests of powerful members in the community, such as governments and corporations aided by the support of public relations, supersede the interests of society's most vulnerable members, such as average individuals, the wellbeing of the entire community suffers.

2. Overview of the Flint water crisis

In April 2014, the city of Flint, Michigan, switched from its traditional Lake Huron water source provided by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department to Flint River water provided by the Flint Water Treatment Plant (Associated Press, 2017). Use of Flint River water was intended to be a temporary solution while the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA), a local organization, constructed a new pipeline that would eventually deliver Lake Huron water to Flint (Schuch, 2014). The switch to Flint River water was framed as a beneficial, cost-cutting necessity for the financially struggling city (Fantz & Sgueglia, 2016; Kennedy, 2016), which has some of the highest unemployment and poverty rates in the nation (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). Almost immediately after the switch, many of Flint's approximately 100,000 residents noticed a distinct change in water quality and reported a variety of health problems emanating from its use (Itkowitz, 2016; Lurie, 2016). By October 2014, GM announced it would no longer use Flint River water because it was damaging their auto parts (Fonger, 2014a). By December 2014, GM was receiving safe, clean water from Lake Huron (Colias, 2016), while Flint's human persons languished with river water.

The government continued to insist that Flint River water was safe despite evidence to the contrary. For example, in September 2015 a team of researchers led by Dr. Marc Edwards of Virginia Tech reported that there were significant levels of lead in the water (Adams & Tuel, 2016; Lin, Rutter, & Park, 2016). That same month Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, a local pediatrician at the Hurley Children's Center in Flint, announced that significant levels of lead had been detected in the bloodstreams of Flint schoolchildren, lending further support to claims that the water supply had been compromised (Guarino, 2017; Mandak, 2017).

As public complaints about Flint River water mounted—from fears of lead contamination to concerns about bacteria and worries about the high concentration of disinfectants used to treat the river water—city and state officials downplayed the water safety issue using public relations tactics such as posters, public meetings, speeches, statements and news releases (Carmody, 2015; Guillen, 2016). For example, an October 2, 2015, news release issued by the governor's office stated: "The water leaving Flint's drinking water system is safe to drink, but some families with lead plumbing in their homes or service connections could experience higher levels of lead in the water that comes out of their faucets" (Taking Action on Flint Water, 2015). Here, the language in the news release dissociated (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969) the government from any responsibility for lead in the drinking water. Instead, lead was framed as a problem in individual homes. By focusing on the idea that the plumbing in *their* homes and/or *their* service connections was the real problem, the news release employed a crisis strategy of denial (Baker, 2001; Benoit, 1997, 2014) that placed blame with the victims of the crisis while bolstering support for the state's position that Flint's water supply was safe. In addition, by emphasizing that the lead issue only affected *some* homes, the news release—indicative of the state's approach to Flint's water crisis—minimized the systemic, macro-implications of the problem.

The type of discursive evasion demonstrated in the news release is an example of what Dutta (2016) has described as a communicative inversion: "Uses of communication to shift symbolic representations to signify the opposite of the material formations that communication seeks to represent. Inversions thus are communicative turns that shift material representations, dislocating them from their underlying structural configurations and material bases" (p. 251). In the case of the Flint water crisis, it may be true that lead pipes in residents' homes exacerbated the lead problem; however, the more significant cause of lead contamination resulted from the switch from Lake Huron water to improperly treated Flint River water (Adams & Tuel, 2016; Sanburn, 2016a), which the state did not readily acknowledge. The news release's communicative inversion enabled the state's discursive construction to produce a symbolic reality opposite of the material realities manifested in the bodily suffering of Flint's human persons and evidenced in the damage of products, which also compromised the profits of Flint's corporate persons (Houck, 2016).

At times the state even seemed to contradict itself. For example, "When state officials were telling worried Flint residents their

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