

ABSTRACT

Framing Flint: Comparing Mainstream and Black Newspaper Coverage
in the Wake of Environmental Racism

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Flint, Michigan, has been in a water crisis for four years now after the predominately black community was lead-poisoned following the decisions of government officials they should have been able to trust. The city's insistence on using polluted river water along with a history of environmental injustices quickly drew criticism as an issue of environmental racism. Fighting environmental racism often originates from grassroots efforts and depends on voices from minority communities. By drawing on critical race and framing theories, this study considers how local black newspapers, the *Chicago Defender* and the *Michigan Chronicle*, have framed the Flint water crisis in comparison to mainstream newspapers, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Detroit Free Press*. Analysis found key differences in the way that the newspapers framed race, especially in the context of poverty. However, the top themes were the same across all four newspapers.

Framing Flint: Comparing Mainstream and Black Newspaper
Coverage in the Wake of Environmental Racism

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

When newsworthy stories such as the Flint water crisis, are communicated to the public, different framing techniques influence how a consumer views the story. Framing in media is used to describe the ways in which information is propped up and contextualized for the consumer to understand and process the information based on existing understandings of that context (Goffman, 1974; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Scheufele, 1999, 2000; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017; Weaver, 2007). For example, news coverage of Mari Copeny, the young advocate often referred to as Little Miss Flint, regularly referenced her young age and depicted her as very innocent, using language like “mini-ambassador” and describing her voice as “faint” (Felton, 2016; Fox 2, 2018; Jacobo, 2016). The depiction of Flint as mainly affecting children, like Copeny, framed the crisis with a very sympathetic victim that was easy for news consumers to agree with (Goffman, 1974; Hanson & Hanson, 2006).

This study specifically considers critical race theory, considering how racial hierarchy in the United States played a part in the Flint water crisis as an issue of environmental racism directs the analysis of news frames regarding race, justice and power (Crenshaw, 2011; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Pulido, 1996). The residents of Flint were subjected to lead poisoning through their household drinking water due to deliberate choices made by city officials, inadequate responses by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) and the Environmental

Protection Agency (EPA), and failed infrastructure. This study asks if black newspapers responded to this instance of environmental racism differently than mainstream newspapers in the same cities. Black communities have traditionally been the grassroots movement against environmental racism due to being disproportionately affected by environmental hazards and have the opportunity to advocate for justice in the form of news discourse (Bullard, 1993a, 1993b; Bullard & Alston, 1990; Chavis, 1987; Heinz, 2005).

While other studies have made the case of Flint being a key example of environmental racism and injustice, there is a gap in the literature on how the community around Flint has discussed and framed the crisis in news (Benz, 2017; Butler et al., 2016; Hammer, 2017; Pulido, 2016; Sadler & Highsmith, 2016). Knowing that black newspapers historically cover problems of environmental justice, this study will add valuable data regarding the differences between local black and mainstream press during a major environmental racism case (Campbell et al., 2016; Heinz, 2005).

Environmental Racism

The environmental justice movement derived out of the thought that no person or group of persons should be subjected to unnecessary environmental hazards or harm, particularly based on socioeconomic status or skin color (Emanuel, 2017; Holifield, 2001; Mahoi, Pellow, & Roberts, 2009). However, scholars have criticized the environmentalism and environmental justice movements have been criticized for being primarily White and leaning on colorblind approaches limiting the consideration of communities of color (Emanuel, 2017; Heinz, 2005; Holifield, 2001; Pulido, 2000).

Environmental racism was coined by Dr. Benjamin Chavis in a report outlining the deliberate placement of toxic waste sites in communities of color (Blanchfield, 2011; Chavis, 1987). Environmental racism, closely related to environmental justice, considers more how the existing power dynamics and systematic racism play into the unequal subjection of people of color to environmental hazards (Blanchfield, 2011; Chavis, 1987; Holifield, 2001; “Newsmakers,” 1993). Environmental racism concerns historically have focused on waste sites being placed in minority communities. While the report from Chavis was the first of its kind to relate waste sites and communities of color, research afterward showed that Chavis was correct and waste sites disproportionately impacted minority groups (Boer, Pastor, Sadd, & Snyder, 1997; Chavis, 1987; Holifield, 2001; Zimring, 2015).

Environmental racism has since been expanded to include injustices beyond waste sites, such as global climate change, air pollution and water contamination (Bullard, 1999, 2003; Holifield, 2001). The term was applied to the aftermath of hurricane Katrina in 2005 in which black communities were the most impacted and were seen in the news less favorably than white survivors (Bullard & Wright, 2012; Davis & French, 2008; Forgetting, King, & Dettrey, 2008; Haider-Markel, Delehanty, & Beverlin, 2007; Stivers, 2007; Sweeney, 2006). In this case, the definition included black communities being disproportionately placed in flood-prone areas with inadequate infrastructure and Blacks affected by Katrina felt that environmental racism was to blame (Adeola & Picou, 2017; Bullard & Wright, 2012; Forgetting et al., 2008).

Katrina and the issues of environmental racism in the aftermath serve as a foundation for evaluating the Flint water crisis as an issue of environmental racism as

both affected black communities, involved issues of infrastructure and a failed response by government officials in providing aid (Bullard & Wright, 2012; Butler, Scammell, & Benson, 2016; Davis & French, 2008; Forgette et al., 2008; Gostin, 2016; Pieper, Tang, & Edwards, 2017; Sadler & Highsmith, 2016; Stivers, 2007; United States Department of Homeland Security, 2006; United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2018).

Flint Water Crisis

On April 25, 2014, the city of Flint, Michigan, switched from treated water purchased through the then Detroit Water and Sewage Department (DWSD, now the Great Lakes Water Authority) to water sourced from the Flint River. Flint, at the time, was 54.3% black and 41.6% of residents were below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 2017). This switch was decided by Emergency Manager Kurtz. Michigan had placed numerous emergency financial managers over economic decisions in Flint. The focus of the financial managers was to make the most financially sound moves for the city. When moving away from sourcing water from the DWSD, there were three options on the table. The first option was simply staying with the Detroit water, the second was mixing water from Detroit and the Flint River, and the third option was to switch wholly to the Flint River. Multiple advisors recommended the second option, cutting the Detroit water with Flint River water, as it was the most financially responsible option due to the known infrastructure problems that would come with fully switching to the Flint River. However, Kurtz removed all options except switching to the Flint River, signed off on it, and then did not improve the water treatment infrastructure in Flint (Benz, 2017; Hammer, 2017; Pieper et al., 2017; Pulido, 2016).

The Flint River water system began supplying about 100,000 residents with drinking water. The use of the Flint River was intended to be temporary as the city planned to begin purchasing water from the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA) in 2016 (Pieper et al., 2017; United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2018). However, the Flint water treatment facility did not follow regulations for treatment against corrosion, a treatment previously handled in Detroit when Flint purchased its water from the DWSD. The lack of a corrosion control treatment (CCT) caused the leaching of lead into the water from the distribution system (Hanna-Attisha, LaChance, Sadler, & Champney Schnepf, 2015; Pieper et al., 2017; United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2018). Less than a month after the switch to the Flint River, residents began complaining about poor water quality and, by February 2015, had concerns of lead (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2018).

Citizens of Flint reported concerns to the EPA and collected their own water samples as proof of the contaminated tap water. Sampling from houses in Flint in April 2015 showed lead levels above the EPA action level, or the level of lead in water that marks the point at which the EPA takes action (Peplow, 2018; Pieper et al., 2017). A timeline of events from the EPA also shows knowledge lead contamination even earlier, in February of 2015 when one resident's tap water measured lead levels at 104 ppb, about seven times the action level. However, the City of Flint and MDEQ dismissed this resident's concerns and blamed the plumbing of the house despite the resident having plastic piping. EPA Region 5 was contacted by the resident and told of the high lead concentrations. Region 5 then contacted MDEQ asking for further sampling. By March 3, 2015, the lead levels in the home had jumped from 104 ppb to 397 ppb (Pieper et al.,

2017; United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2018). While the sampling showed rapidly increasing lead levels in home tap water, the MDEQ staff failed to implement corrosion control treatment and even miscommunicated to Region 5 in February 2015 stating that Flint did have optimized corrosion control measures in place. It wasn't until April 24, 2015 that MDEQ told the EPA that Flint didn't have CCT. By May 6, 2015 the City of Flint and Region 5 measured lead levels above the action level in multiple other homes. EPA Region 5 did not use its existing authority to require corrosion control measures or the authority to act when there is imminent danger of public health. Instead, Region 5 allowed the MDEQ to maintain authority over the situation in Flint and relayed advice that was not followed. From February to July 2015, scientists from Region 5 expressed concern that the sampling method of pre-flushing used by MDEQ was skewing the lead level results toward the lower end of measurement. However, MDEQ refused to change sampling methods. MDEQ reached out for legal advice in the midst of the water crisis over a disagreement between MDEQ and the EPA regarding the regulations of maintaining CCT. Reaching out for legal advice continued the delay of intervention and the MDEQ staff was described as having a sentiment of unimportance (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2018). Help did not come to the people of Flint until an independent scientist and local doctor put forth their own studies into the lead problem. On September 8, 2015, an independent scientist reported that 40% of Flint homes had major lead contamination in their tap water. Shortly after, on September 24, 2015, a local doctor released a report outlining a 90% increase in lead levels in the blood of Flint children since the switch the Flint River water system (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2015). The next day, exactly 17 months after the water source

switch, Flint issued a health advisory about their drinking water. A “Do Not Drink” advisory was not issued until October 1, 2015 and finally a state of emergency was declared by the Mayor of Flint on December 14, 2015 (Peplow, 2018; United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2018).

In the midst of Flint residents desperately trying to fight lead poisoning, the local General Motors plant was allowed to switch back to the Detroit water source after complaining of the Flint River water being corrosive to engine parts shortly after the switch (Benz, 2017; Pulido, 2016). However, after evaluating the poor response to the Flint Water Crisis, the EPA’s 2018 report *Management Weaknesses Delayed Response to Flint Water Crisis* blames poor communication and withheld information between MDEQ and Region 5. The report acknowledges that Region 5 did not intervene despite having the authority to do so, and that MDEQ did not place enough importance on the issue. A look into the history of Michigan and its water by Clark shows a long history of a devaluation of water in the state due to the exploitation of water for mining, hydraulic fracturing and CAFOs (2016). Clark blames a government indifference for poor water quality throughout Michigan. An attitude of unimportance regarding water quality for Michigan residents would explain the MDEQ’s response to Flint (Clark, 2016). While Clark explicitly suggests reasons other than race, other evaluations of Flint have suggested that low socio-economic status and a high population of black residents is why the MDEQ did not feel a sense of urgency and why the EPA held off on intervention, making Flint an issue of environmental justice (Berliner, 2018; Butler et al., 2016; Campbell, Greenberg, Mankikar, & Ross, 2016; Gostin, 2016; Hanna-Attisha et al., 2015; Peplow, 2018).

In fact, this isn't the first time that Flint fought against lead poisoning and environmental racism. In 1992, Flint activists struggled against the state of Michigan in a claim that environmental racism played a part in the chosen location for an incinerator that would burn house debris containing lead paint (Burke, 2017; Newkirk, 2016; Seigel, 1995; M. C. Tilles, 1995; Yeo, 2018). The complaint was filed with the EPA as violating Title VI of the Civil Rights Act for unfairly affecting black citizens of Michigan and exposing them to toxic fumes from the incinerator. There had already been four other incinerators placed in Michigan in areas that were 44% black, while the entire black population of the state was only 13.9% (Seigel, 1995; M. C. Tilles, 1995). The EPA took on hundreds of civil rights cases since 1993 but did not conclude this particular case of Flint for more than 20 years. In 2017, the EPA finally ruled on the case of the Genesee Power Station case, after it has been established and operating for years, finding that the residents of Flint were right and that environmental racism resulted in the incinerator being placed in area mostly affecting Blacks (Burke, 2017; Newkirk, 2016; M. C. Tilles, 1995, 1995; Yeo, 2018).

Since the Flint water crisis, several people have gained media attention for their response to the water crisis. Phillip Stair, who is White, found himself in the news after environmentalist Chelsea Lyons released a recording in which Stair used a racial slur in reference to the citizens of Flint. Stair claimed that “f—g n—s don't pay their bills” and used that as the reasoning for why Flint switched to the Flint River as a water source. Stair, before he resigned following his racist comments, was the Genesee County Land Bank sales manager and was responsible for handling the outcome of tax foreclosed homes in Genesee County (Ali, 2017; Defender News Service, 2017; Edwards, 2017;

Fortin, 2018; Howard, 2017). Stair, as a public official, denied that any responsibility was on the city or the state officials in the causes of the water crisis and particularly ignored the fact that the emergency financial manager over Flint chose to switch to the Flint River despite cheaper options.

Another example of a newsworthy story that popped up surrounding the Flint water crisis revolved around Little Miss Flint. Amariyanna “Mari” Copeny, commonly referred to as Little Miss Flint, is a Flint child who gained media attention when she wrote a letter to President Obama asking for him to recognize the citizens in crisis, stating she was one of the many children affected by lead poisoning. Obama wrote back to Copeny and even visited Flint amid (Goffman, 1974; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Scheufele, 1999, 2000; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017; Weaver, 2007) the crisis to meet her and hear the concerns of the citizens. Little Miss Flint worked in Flint to fundraise, distribute water bottles to citizens, and has continued her activism past the Obama era and called on Trump to aid her hometown (Felton, 2016; Jacobo, 2016; Javier, 2017; Starr, 2017). Copeny became the face of the Flint water crisis and made news earlier this year when she was selling shirts as a fundraiser with the printed words “Don’t forget Flint” (Copeny, 2018; Fox 2, 2018). When she was only 6 years old, Copeny took on demanding aid for her city from the officials who were intended to protect her and other Flint residents from being poisoned in their own homes. Now 10 years old, Little Miss Flint is still having to fight for her city (Copeny, 2018; Fox 2, 2018; Klein, 2018; Starr, 2017).

CHAPTER TWO

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory

To evaluate the coverage of the Flint Water Crisis in mainstream and African American newspapers, this study is guided by existing literature on framing of black people and communities, environmental racism, blame and responsibility, black press, and critical race theory (CRT). CRT arose out of legal discourse to provide an understanding of how the legal system upheld a racial hierarchy (Crenshaw, 2011; Crenshaw et al., 1995). A key aspect of CRT is unconscious racism that is influenced by those around an individual including media. Lawrence points out that it is not only intentional racism that affect one's interpretation of Blacks, but also "the ubiquitous presence of a cultural stereotype has influenced her perception that blacks are lay or unintelligent" which is experienced at an unconscious level due to the deeply ingrained cultural racism that exists in the U.S. (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. 238).

The framework of CRT must become more interdisciplinary as it now focuses more on the undercurrent of racism flowing through systems of power. The idea of a post-racial country came from the deconstruction of certain institutional barriers for Blacks like segregation. With the removal of more tangible examples of racism, society became colorblind, or stopped considering race as being relevant to hierarchical structures and laws. Thus, CRT can be used to consider the issue of unconscious racism (Crenshaw, 2011; Crenshaw et al., 1995).

The factors of both intentional and unintentional racism influenced by societal forces can be applied outside of legal discourse and used as a lens to evaluate how other discourses perpetuate racist ideologies (Crenshaw, 2011; Crenshaw et al., 1995). In the sciences, in an effort to be apolitical and objective, colorblindness has caused race to be ignored and left out scientific practices (Collins, 2015; Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010). Collins (2015) calls for future research in how colorblindness in science could potentially result in scientific racism and problematic practices. If race is not considered in science or scientific practices, then existing racial injustices are not factored into best practices which is particularly poignant in issues of health and safety (Collins, 2015; Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010). CRT aids this study in providing a framework for which to view the coverage of the Flint Water Crisis by mainstream and African American newspapers. CRT explains that there is likely unconscious racism and racial frames present in news discourse even if media aim for objectivity.

Environmental Racism

CRT focuses on the existing tones of racism in existing power dynamics which falls in line with the long-standing issue of environmental racism, a sub-category under environmental justice. Environmental justice comes from the idea that all people should be safe and protected from issues of environmental concern through policy and law. It is difficult to separate environmental justice from environmental racism as they both sprung from people speaking out against toxic waste dumping in areas that would affect communities, particularly black communities. However, overarching environmental justice studies can default to colorblindness language and ignore social injustices (Bullard, 1993b, 2003; Chavis, 1987; Mahoi et al., 2009; Pulido, 1996). Despite efforts

towards justice, failure to consider existing inequalities and disproportionate impacts on communities of color does little to fix any problems of environmental injustice (Emanuel, 2017; Mahoi et al., 2009). Environmental racism more poignantly addresses issues of racial inequalities and how those inequalities are interrelated to environmental hazards pushed on communities. Grassroots communities were the most influential in gaining attention for environmental racism issues (Bullard, 1993b, 1993a; Bullard & Alston, 1990).

Environmental racism has been most commonly studied in disposal of hazardous waste as most hazardous waste sites were placed near or in black communities. The report *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* gained significant traction for the environmental justice movement, spearheaded by Benjamin Chavis who famously coined the term environmental racism. This report linked toxic waste dumping sites with the socioeconomic and racial characteristics of the communities most affected by the sites. This was the first report of its kind and directly called the issue a form of racism (Chavis, 1987; Mahoi et al., 2009). Other research took into account this link between demographics and toxic waste locations and found the same correlations; areas of toxic waste were most commonly placed in communities of color (Boer et al., 1997; Hamilton, 1995; Holifield, 2001; Zimring, 2015).

The definitions of environmental justice and racism have grown to describe more than just toxic waste sites. Bullard (1999) defines environmental racism as “any environmental policy, practice or directive” (Bullard, 1999, pp. 5–6) that negatively impacts people because of their race disproportionately whether intentionally or unintentionally. Pulido (1996, 2000) acknowledged that existing environmental racism

literature failed to expand the definition and consider multiple different types of racism. Bullard was fundamental in helping to define environmental racism and expand the term to include more than toxic waste sites (Bullard, 1993b, 1993a, 1999, 2003).

In relation to Flint, lead levels in the U.S. have historically been an issue of environmental racism. In 1994, lead levels measurements in 1.7 million children showed that black children, across all income levels, were poisoned with lead at a rate over twice that of White children (Bullard, 1999). Heinz (2005) states that black newspapers have unique coverage on environmental justice issues because large, historical black newspapers exist in areas that have experienced major environmental concerns. Environmental justice conversations within the black community even draw upon civil rights language in the fight against racial inequality (Heinz, 2005).

A more recent example surfaced during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Blacks made up the majority of those affected by the hurricane and aid was not given nearly as quickly as it should have been. The lack of integrity regarding infrastructure led to questions of long-standing racial inequality as black communities were more negatively affected and at risk than other communities. Infrastructure problems and delayed aid in the aftermath of a serious environmental incident caused some to classify the events as environmental racism (Davis & French, 2008; Houston, 2008; Mahoi et al., 2009). However, within the environmental justice movement is the argument between race and class. The distinction between race and class can be made, but discourse surrounding environmental justice often links the two (Mahoi et al., 2009; Meyers, 2004). Discussion of Hurricane Katrina commonly related the two social

inequalities, making it difficult to distinguish between an issue of environmental racism or environmental poverty (Davis & French, 2008; Houston, 2008).

The Flint water crisis has already been connected to environmental injustice and racism by several other studies (Benz, 2017; Berliner, 2018; Butler et al., 2016; Campbell et al., 2016; Gostin, 2016; Hammer, 2017; Inwood, 2018; Pulido, 2016; Sadler & Highsmith, 2016). Clark (2016) argues that the failed infrastructure is the result of a long-term devaluation of water and resources in the Flint area, linking that to poverty rather than race. Clark thus touches on the environmental justice debate mentioned previously of race versus class, stating that the Michigan government has systematically contributed to environmental injustice, but denies that race and systematic racism played any part in that injustice (Clark, 2016).

Butler, Scammell and Benson (2016) mention that others have made the case that delayed aid and management failure was due to the high minority percentage but did not argue that themselves. They also connected high minority percentage to the high percentage of those below the poverty line (Butler et al., 2016). Several other studies have directly attributed the issue of failed infrastructure and devaluation of resources in the area to systematic racism (Hammer, 2017; Hanna-Attisha et al., 2015; Pulido, 2016; Sadler & Highsmith, 2016). Pulido (2016) draws on the theory of racial capitalism, stating that capital and the state abandoned Flint long before the water crisis due to the majority of the residents being black and the high number of residents below the poverty line. The city of Flint was “racialized as black” and considered less valuable or

contributable to society after the deindustrialization of the city when motor plants moved production outside of Michigan resulted in White flight and loss of jobs (Pulido, 2016, p. 2).

Pulido (2016) labeled the water crisis in Flint a purposeful poisoning of the city. While the failing infrastructure was a major contributor to lead levels, it was only part of the story. The switch to the Flint River for a water source was unbelievable to residents as it was notoriously polluted and considered corrosive enough that the General Motors plant in town complained of the water rusting materials. In the middle of Flint residents fighting for clean drinking water, the city allowed the GM plant to switch their water source back to Detroit to avoid corrosion of engine parts. Therefore, city officials knew that the water was corrosive enough to ruin engine parts, but still did not change the source of drinking water for Flint residents. The toxic properties of the Flint River water were only multiplied by the erosion of infrastructure (Pulido, 2016).

Both Pulido (2016) and Benz (2017) stated that the crisis in Flint was an outcome of neoliberalism and the tendency toward colorblindness to promote the free-market. Neoliberalism ignores race and racial inequality in favor of meritocracy. This promotes environmental racism as it removes the responsibility from government entities and places blame on the individual (Benz, 2017; Pulido, 2016). Pulido and Benz stated that GM wanting to switch their water source, the voices of residents, the legionella outbreak and the residential lead levels all should have been a clear indication that the residents' drinking water was compromised, but the city prioritized the plant over the citizens and chalked their failure to respond up to miscommunication (Benz, 2017; Hanna-Attisha et

al., 2015; Pieper et al., 2017; Pulido, 2016; United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2018).

Benz also tackled the issue of poverty in Flint. Flint had been placed under Emergency Financial Management, which is why the city switched to the Flint River. While EFM is supposed to be determined by a neutral evaluation of impoverished cities, emergency managers are most often assigned to black-majority cities despite white-majority cities in comparable financial states (Benz, 2017). Hammer (2017) similarly points to economic gain and neoliberalism to explain the biased and coded racism in the response to Flint. Strategic racism is taking into account the structural or institutional racism, intentional racism and unconscious racism, then exploiting those dynamics for political or economic gain. *Structural* and *institutional racism* refer to the racial hierarchy that is present in existing power structures and institutions (Hammer, 2017).

Studies on Flint and environmental racism acknowledge that racism is an ever-evolving term, particularly in a “post-racial” U.S. The distinction between different enforcements of racial inequalities shows that Flint was the victim of racism at multiple levels (Benz, 2017; Hammer, 2017; Holifield, 2001; Inwood, 2018; Pulido, 2016). Structural racism in Flint set up an institution and power dynamic through numerous different emergency financial managers whose goal was to fix the financial state of the city without concern for the well-being of the community (Hammer, 2017). Thus, the residents of Flint were vulnerable to being ignored for the sake of economic or political gain.

Strategic racism came into play when then Emergency Manager Kurtz intentionally removed options other than switching completely to the Flint River as a

water source despite advisement that it was not the best option (Hammer, 2017). Even when the Detroit Water and Sewage Department offered drastically reduced rates for Flint to continue purchasing safe, treated water from Detroit which would have saved Flint a significant amount of money, Kurtz refused the offer. When MDEQ was contacted for help in fighting against an unnecessary and expensive shift to the Flint River and the Karegnondi Water Authority pipeline, note was made that MDEQ was apparently not equipped to handle economic matters (Hammer, 2017; Pieper et al., 2017; United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2018).

White innocence contributed as well to the lack of aid in Flint, most obvious in the quotes from Phillip Stair in which, as an executive for the Genesee County Land Bank, he directly blamed black residents of Flint for the water system failure and even used racial slurs in reference to the residents (Fortin, 2018; Inwood, 2018). This mindset places blame on the residents and fails to hold government entities responsible for their catastrophe. By blaming a black community for environmental hazards, response and aid is not prioritized because this bias views those community members as deserving of the atrocities that were due to long-standing racial prejudices (Inwood, 2018).

Overall, the devaluation of Flint as a black city rather than the devaluation of water resulted in systematic racism and colorblind thought that placed residents disproportionately at risk for environmental hazard because of their race. City, state and federal organizations left Flint residents with toxic drinking water and delayed aid despite clear evidence of lead contamination because the institutions were set up to fail Flint long before the water crisis for the sake of economics and politics (Benz, 2017; Hammer,

2017; Inwood, 2018; Pulido, 2016; Sadler & Highsmith, 2016; United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2018). Flint is a clear example of environmental racism, but the conversations surrounding environmental racism are mostly shaped by news media discourse and the framing of impacted communities, responsibilities and race.

Framing

To best critically analyze news coverage, the journalistic frames surrounding the topic must be evaluated. Framing Theory, originally referred to as Framing Analysis by Goffman (1974), refers to the use of certain lenses used by journalists to help add context and meaning to a story. Journalists can use different structures to build up the frame for which a story is viewed through. Framing is closely related to agenda setting and salience of issues and is even referred to as second-level agenda setting. While first-level agenda setting is concerned with setting the importance of issues by *what* is covered, second-level agenda setting is concerned with *how* issues are covered (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017; Weaver, 2007).

Although not every study has equated framing and second-level agenda setting, both deal with the salience of topics. Framing can aid in setting salience of a topic through contextualization, but it is not the only way that journalists communicate salience. Agenda setting, priming and framing are all closely related while still being distinct. Framing can be thought of as including particular themes in media as a way to characterize a topic of discussion to set a perceived importance (Goffman, 1974; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Scheufele, 1999, 2000; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017; Weaver, 2007).

Framing is critical to media analysis due to the influence it can have on the audience. The way that a consumer experiences news depends in part on the context and structure provided by the journalists, or the frame, which is then reconciled with pre-existing viewpoints and understandings the consumer has acquired throughout their lives. Framing can create a strong influence on an audience as frames construct reality for the consumer, but framing is limited in its audience reach (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Scheufele, 1999, 2000; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017). Framing analysis is used in several other disciplines, but in the context of news discourse, framing theory evaluates news texts as being full of structured emblematic themes and devices that interact with a consumers predisposed thoughts to formulate an perceived reality (Goffman, 1974; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Scheufele, 1999, 2000; Weaver, 2007).

Goffman (1974) suggested that people interpret the world through “primary frameworks” classified into natural versus social frames (Goffman, 1974, pp. 21–22). Natural frames are frames which arise logically and naturally out of unintentional cause. Social frames are derived from deliberate human actions to create a specific understanding. Natural and social frames are not mutually exclusive and can be seen in how a journalist decides to communicate a topic of discussion. Frames, whether in a journalistic story or not, are how humans interact and understand the world due to the limited viewpoint of any one person. This applies to how a writer presents a subject to their audience and to the consumer’s pre-existing ideas that aid in the understanding (Goffman, 1974; Scheufele, 2000). Another important note is that a single frame can be interpreted differently by different people due to different consumers’ own primary frames (Goffman, 1974; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017).

There are multiple ways that a journalist can use and employ frame devices in a news story. Pan and Kosicki (1993) defined four categories of structures that exist in news: syntactical, script, thematic and rhetorical structure. Syntactical structure refers to the physical organization of news discourse. News is commonly written in the inverted pyramid syntactical structure where the most impactful words are in the headline and trickle down to the lead and then into the body. Syntactical structure can also refer to ways in which journalists imply objectivity and balance through quotes and points of view. Script structure is the organization of news which allows for a consumer to experience news as a *story*. A story is constructed by providing a beginning, middle and end while the journalist also relates the news events to consumers' own environment. News scripts allow for the answering of the who, what, when, how and why of a newsworthy event. Thematic structure involves a journalist positing a theme and then providing support for that theme such as events, sources and quotes. This can also be referred to as hypothesis-testing as a cause-and-effect relationship is implied through the format of the news article. Finally, rhetorical structure defines the choices made by journalists stylistically to create an intended effect. This would include visual aids, metaphors, catchphrases and other methods of coloring a news story more vibrant including the author's own opinion (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). All four of these types of frame structures can be extant at once and allow for a journalist to contextualize and provide meaning for consumers.

Diction ties together the multiple framing structures. Word choice is vital to designing the frame of a story. Like a word association game, the lexical choices of journalists have the power to file subjects into certain connotations. Individual diction

choices can be analyzed in isolation but are important to consider in the context of the whole work and in the presence of other themes. Word choice can also be read different ways by different people, which means that diction is not the only aspect of framing that is important to pay attention to. Evaluating visual elements is necessary for accurate frame analysis (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017).

A piece of factual information can be framed in several ways. The individual piece of information remains equivalently factual across the frames but can be understood in dissimilar ways due to what frame is used. This is what Scheufele and Iyengar (2017) refer to as “equivalence framing”. Studying framing through equivalence allows for the comparison of the same news but covered differently through framing. The researcher can also assume that consumers experience the framing in a closed system, as in the consumer is unaware that a different frame could be used. This assumption does not account for the possibility of encountering similar or opposing frames that can collectively influence viewpoints (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017). By evaluating both visual and non-visual framing techniques, the contextualized whole of a frame in news discourse becomes more specific.

Framing Social Issues

Framing analysis has been popular in evaluating press coverage of various social issues and events. Ashley and Olson (1998) argued that one can expect groups that are socially deviant to be framed negatively while groups that follow the social norm are more likely to be framed positively. Their study on coverage of the Women’s Movement by the *New York Times*, *Time* and *Newsweek* over 20 years found feminists were framed in a way as to delegitimize the movement by commenting on appearance, disagreements

within the movement and most commonly placing movement language in quotation marks as if it were not valid speech. The frame of delegitimization happened in 96% of cases regarding feminism while only appearing in 4% of discourse on anti-feminists (Ashley & Olson, 1998, pp. 267–268). Reporters made note of feminists not wearing bras and not shaving with one reporter even calling them ugly, while anti-feminists were considered to be “crisp and composed” (Ashley & Olson, 1998, pp. 268–269).

Framing of the Women’s Movement included presenting feminists as caving-in from lack of agreement among each other. The anti-feminist groups, however, were framed as unified. Headlines often placed women or feminists in opposition to other groups such as other women or minority groups which framed the story as feminists being divisive instead of focusing on concerns for equal rights. In fact, coverage commented on the movement’s goals infrequently and focused instead on deviation from the status quo. Placement of the stories within the newspaper or magazines varied frequently but were rarely placed towards the front of a publication which is seen as the most salient area. The Women’s Movement was not covered consistently or regularly, but clear frames are present when there was coverage. Framing can result in poor coverage when a movement or issue is treated a trivial (Ashley & Olson, 1998).

Considering whether journalists frame similar issues in a general pattern or if individual issues are framed in unique ways, Shih, Wijaya and Brossard (2008) evaluated the framing of health epidemics throughout multiple news cycles from the *New York Times*. Specifically, the framing of avian flu, mad cow disease and West Nile virus across each distinct coverage cycle. Evaluating framing of these diseases gives insight into how journalists structure frames during coverage of dangerous events. In the coverage of

avian flu, mad cow disease and West Nile virus, there were consistent common frames of action, or efforts by authorities, and consequence, or cases of infection. These dominant frames show that journalists rely on patterns of framing for coverage of similar events.

Previous framing analyses can be useful in predicting frames used for events alike in subject and affect. Shih et al. (2008) also found the reassurance frame to be present in mad cow disease coverage as a way to “alleviate public panic” (Shih et al., 2008, p. 155). Story placement in the newspaper also aids in framing. Determining whether a story is salient enough to place in the front of the newspaper speaks to framing of the story. The West Nile stories were most often located in the Metro section of the New York Times, as the stories more specifically applied to New York rather than all of the United States or the world like mad cow and avian flu (Shih et al., 2008).

Framing Blame

A key aspect of framing in news media is that it is intended to contextualize subjects by making them easier to comprehend. Amid fitting information in an easy-to-understand box, journalists can leave out important context or build a poor frame. Thus, in an effort to create a better understanding, a journalist can “promote a particular problem definition” (Kim, Carvalho, & Davis, 2010, p. 565). News consumers then use these problem definitions as a way to determine who is responsible for the cause or the solution of a social issue. Causal responsibility refers to a view of who is to blame for causing the issue, whereas treatment responsibility refers to the view of who should fix the issue (Kim et al., 2010, p. 565).

The who in the view of responsibility is viewed two ways: that individuals and their faults are the problem, or broader conditions are to blame like socio-economic

disparities. In the former school of thought, the individuals blamed are most often those affected by the social problem at hand and solutions focus on changing the individuals' behaviors. This was seen in the framing of the Women's Movement when news media focused on the appearance of feminists rather than the social changes they were trying to further (Ashley & Olson, 1998). The latter viewpoint calls for remedy in the form of larger social changes such as policy change or better business practices. News discourse has been criticized for focusing on individuals in social problems instead of offering up larger, societal solutions (Kim et al., 2010).

Kim et al. (2010) found that in the framing of poverty, news media did use individual-blaming frames not nearly as often as societal-blaming frames. Conservative newspapers and liberal newspapers were slightly different in their framing, but not significantly so. Despite the majority of the framing focusing on social responsibility, the individually focused frames were problematic in contributing to poor definitions of poverty. The most common individual causal frame used was broken family, which was most commonly used in the context of classifying the poor as sexually deviant and irresponsible (Kim et al., 2010). If framing influences the viewpoints of news consumers, then these individual-level frames are still relevant to the creation of problem definitions despite the use of society-level frames.

Injustice is rationalized by individuals through either placing blame or excusing blame. The application of blame allows for individuals to act in their own self-interest by letting off bystanders as a non-responsible party and by placing the weight of a problem on the backs of others (Hanson & Hanson, 2006). Also known as victim blaming, this human tendency results in a view point of people deserving what happens to them as

some fault of their character, choices or the like. To avoid confrontation with the reality of injustice, people tend to dissociate and rationalize the injustice through blame (Hanson & Hanson, 2006).

Hanson and Hanson (2006) analyzed what they termed the *blame frame* which allows people to perceive their version of justice while staring at injustice, used here in the context of individuals' pre-existing thought patterns that allow for their perceived reality (Hanson & Hanson, 2006, p. 425). When victims are perceived as similar to us or are especially likeable, then we are more eager to aid. Hanson and Hanson specifically reference "innocent children" (2006, p. 425), which is particularly relevant to this study as the victims of Flint did not receive aid until the study by Dr. Hanna-Attisha revealed elevated lead levels in the blood of children (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2015; United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2018).

However, most of the time, victims are not viewed as sympathetic. The blame frame was used to justify slavery in the United States through invoking divine providence and blaming black people for being created differently (Hanson & Hanson, 2006). The use of God shifted into the use of pseudo-science to justify treatment of Africans. Thomas Jefferson framed African slaves as innately inferior to justify his ownership of other human beings while penning his well-known words in the Declaration of Independence (Hanson & Hanson, 2006; Zimring, 2015, Chapter 2).

The justification for racism against black people morphed into whatever it needed to be as long as the frame "made the victims blameworthy while excusing the rest of us" (Hanson & Hanson, 2006, p. 436). As the blame frame changed into what it is now, the use of God or nature to justify racism fell behind to make way for the frame that choice

places African Americans in a state of racial inequality through their own preferences and character. This is not unlike the previous forms of the blame frame, as it allows for self-deception and the placing of responsibility on the victim in order for oneself to feel separate from the problem along without perceiving any connection between racial inequality and social injustice (Hanson & Hanson, 2006).

Framing Race

The use of the blame frame, or victim blaming, can be seen through the responses to the 2014 deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown (Mills, 2017; Moody-Ramirez & Cole, 2018). Rather than drawing attention to a larger social issue of systematic injustice, the media and the public framed the two victims as deserving of deadly violence. In both instances, White police officers used deadly force against black men which bystanders said was unnecessary. Brown was shot in a parking lot while in a position of surrender and Garner was being questioned by police after breaking up a fight when an officer illegally placed him in a choke hold until death. Both deaths sparked wide response on social media and even made way for the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Mills, 2017; Moody-Ramirez & Cole, 2018).

Twitter users framed the death of Brown particularly by categorizing him as criminal who was better off dead through photos of Brown smoking, reference to a juvenile arrest record, and even using a photo of a completely different person with a gun and circulating it as being a photo of Brown. Garner was commonly framed through his physical appearance, and poor health was often blamed for his death rather than the illegal choke hold. Another frame used race and class to blame the men's deaths on them being "thugs" and focus was shifted from White police brutality of black men and women

to black-on-black crime to justify the injustice these men faced (Moody-Ramirez & Cole, 2018). While many of the frames from individuals on Twitter used the blame frame to justify injustice, several other frames emerged which attempted to counteract the victim blaming narrative through family images of Brown and Garner, drawing attention to a broken justice system and discussion of grief. Overall, the public used racial frames to justify injustice and the idea of a post-racism society is a myth that can clearly be debunked by looking at the rationalization of oppression and racism (Moody-Ramirez & Cole, 2018).

If individual blame frames allow for the justification of racism and indifference to injustice, the use of media frames to contextualize issues of race and racial injustice become vital to either instigating corrective action and empathy or reinforcing existing harmful racial stereotypes and problem definitions. Fox News also perpetuated the racist framing of Michael Brown by insisting on calling him a criminal (Mills, 2017). Fox's framing also depicted Brown as a large, scary man rather than a teenager, while the news hosts referred to the police officer who killed Brown as being a "kid" (Mills, 2017, pp. 42–43). Another common frame used by Fox was to criticize black leaders, especially President Obama as he happened to be vacationing at the time of Brown's death. Fox chose to only play soundbites of Obama condemning police brutality but not his statement against violence towards police (Mills, 2017). Blame was also placed on Attorney General Eric Holder as if he, alongside Obama, instigated the unrest in Ferguson during the protests following Brown's death. Fox placed Holder in context through words like "fuel" and "inflamm", which frame the situation with negative connotation and the feeling of Holder himself pouring gas on the flame. Fox framed

black leaders as being responsible for violence while simultaneously being irresponsible leaders in an attempt to delegitimize them. Fox, similar to Twitter users, brought up black-on-black crime to misdirect consumers away from the overarching social issue of police using excessive force (Mills, 2017).

News coverage of the Million Man March, a protest demonstration in which an estimated 800,000 black men participated on October 15, 1995 in an effort to reinforce black men's community participation, focused on perceived threat and minimized the event rather than focusing on the reason the men were marching (Watkins, 2001). Framing used in television network news coverage involved contrasting the leaders of the march with other black leaders, just as with framing Ferguson. Specifically, language used discounted the march leaders as being invalid versus what the media considered valid black leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr (Watkins, 2001). Coverage framed the march through criticism of black protest methods and offered "parameters for how whites might define suitable forms of black political advocacy" (Watkins, 2001, p. 97). Justification for the dislike and discomfort associated with the demonstration was given by framing the men in the march as threatening and divisive.

The framing of the African Americans and black events diminishes community-oriented demonstrations into hostile events and calls for justice into calls for violence and are perceived as being against Whites instead of for Blacks (Watkins, 2001). Although, perhaps that assumption came from Whites generally having an implicit pro-White and anti-black racial bias (Axt & Trawalter, 2017; Herring, Jankowski, & Brown, 1999; Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002; Sinclair, Kenrick, & Jacoby-Senghor, 2014).

Coverage of the black community requires a newsworthy events or crises, such as the Million Man March or the killing of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and the framing of these events has a clear anti-black racial bias which associates African Americans with violence and out of line from where White people think they should be. Like Flint, the aftermath of hurricane Katrina in 2005 gave way to a conversation on race and how it may have affected the response time in aiding the heavy-hit and black communities, specifically New Orleans. For most of the United States and President Bush, the only context the public had regarding the state of those affected by the category 4 hurricane was the collective media coverage of the crisis. The framing of the issue became critical to how the citizens of the U.S. would interpret and understand what survivors were experiencing (Davis & French, 2008; Haider-Markel et al., 2007; Sweeney, 2006).

Television news media became flooded with images of victims of the storm. Sometimes, the images of black victims were framed much more negatively than white victims. This was common when describing where survivors of Katrina got their food from. Since government aid was delayed, survivors had to rely on what was left in grocery and convenience stores to survive and feed their family. When White victims were depicted taking food from stores, they were framed as “finding” the food and being resourceful. Black victims were said to be “looting” resorting to stealing food as criminals (Haider-Markel et al., 2007, p. 590). Blacks were expectedly more sympathetic to black victims than non-blacks. Blacks were also more likely than Whites to believe that slow response and aid was because the community affected was poor and black, as were Democrats, those living outside of the U.S. South and people who paid closer attention to the news coverage of Katrina (Haider-Markel et al., 2007). Print news

repeatedly referred to victims as “poor and black” which reinforced the inclusion of class and race as part of readers’ definition of victimhood (Davis & French, 2008, p. 249).

Frames from print media also excessively associated black victims with criminal activity only furthering a mental association for readers between class, race and criminal activity. Framing the victims who were trying to survive as criminals and poor Blacks only perpetuated problematic racial context (Davis & French, 2008). A third emergent frame depicted survivors as irresponsible as it was assumed they had previous specific knowledge of how dangerous Katrina would be. The irresponsible frame also presumed that these survivors had prior transportation and resources for evacuating the area (Davis & French, 2008). Print coverage used thematic structure through survivor testimonies to give the impression of neutrality (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). However, the quotes were used to further the racial narrative of poor Blacks acting criminally and violently as well as being irresponsible (Davis & French, 2008).

Sweeney (2006) argues that the long-standing structural inequalities in black communities were the reason why the majority of the survivors who were not able to evacuate so heavily affected. The structural inequalities only show a long history of racial injustice and give insight into why delayed government response was so devastating to the communities who already believed the government to be against them (Haider-Markel et al., 2007; Sweeney, 2006). The issue of structural inequality is ignored by the myth of meritocracy because U.S. citizens, specifically white people, believe that a person’s situation in life is due to hard work or lack-there-of and completely ignores the privilege that comes with being White. Meritocracy is a prime example of the blame frame as it allows for Whites to justify injustice through the idea that everyone starts at

the same place in society and succeeds based on merit, which allows for covert racism in ignoring the racial hierarchy of U.S. society (Sweeney, 2006).

While the trajectory and force of the hurricane were technically natural, the affect it had on people was largely influenced by existing inequalities that poor and people of color faced. However, the framing of Katrina followed meritocracy and color-blind ideologies which avoid discussion of racial injustice but don't avoid victim blaming. Many responses from the public showed that they could not comprehend "how race has anything to do with a natural disaster", yet the rest of their language included underlying racism (Sweeney, 2006, pp. 168–169). The frame of individual choice was common, which has shown up in other framing language of victims; rather than focusing on the issue of systematic racism and inequality, the language focuses on the choices of the individual and blames them for their own hardships. Sweeney found that much of the language used to discuss Katrina was covertly racist, but several responses to Katrina directly challenged frames of color-blindness and meritocracy, pointing instead to issues of racial injustice (Sweeney, 2006).

The framing of black survivors of Katrina followed similar frames seen in the previously mentioned studies of racial news discourse. Blacks were framed as violent and/or criminal, as well as irresponsible (Davis & French, 2008; Haider-Markel et al., 2007; Mills, 2017; Moody-Ramirez & Cole, 2018; Sweeney, 2006; Watkins, 2001). Therefore, the problems that they were facing post-Katrina were their own fault and not the fault of delayed aid. The frames used also decreased race as an issue while maintaining racial language to covertly blame black individuals for their situation (Davis

& French, 2008; Haider-Markel et al., 2007; Hanson & Hanson, 2006; Moody-Ramirez & Cole, 2018; Sweeney, 2006).

Black Press

The framing of Blacks by Whites leads to colorblind language and racist undertones in which media can influence the public and vice versa. Can this be fixed through diversity in the news room? Redding (2017) considered how black communicators speaking on black issues are directed by White media bosses and owners. Through White editorial bias, black communities are misconstrued. Black journalists working for White media owners or management are limited by what the management believes to be appropriate black content rather than allowing black media professionals to connect with their community in the way that they want to (Redding, 2017). Black professionals working for Whites get lost in White privilege, where the image of Blacks in media is forced into the biased frame of the black thug or gangster. White management forces discourse on black individuals to fit into their own White image of what black communication should look like (Redding, 2017).

Studies on black-owned press have allowed for the comparison of framing between black press and white, mainstream press. In the coverage of a Supreme Court decision on an affirmative action case, mainstream media framed the Supreme Court as “above politics” and completely neutral and fair in their interpretation of the Constitution (Clawson, Strine, IV, & Waltenburg, 2003, p. 789). The use of quotes and authoritative language was used to create thematic structural frames of balance and justice. Another significant difference was that the mainstream media was more concerned with appearing objective and neutral by presenting both pro- and anti-affirmative action viewpoints. The

black press was less likely to include anti-affirmative action opinions and instead focused on advocacy and voices from the black community. The black media included many more black sources for both pro- and anti-affirmative action viewpoints. Lastly, despite including both viewpoints on the matter, the mainstream press framed the story as a “reverse discrimination” issue, which creates a bias in the coverage despite any effort to be objective (Clawson et al., 2003, p. 796).

Through a study on pollution, poverty and incarceration, Kensicki (2004) found that many news media overwhelmingly used neutral language indicating no framing of the subject in one direction or another. This neutrality, however, actually creates an apathetic response to major societal problems. The coverage of these issues contained neutral frames, which still create an influence even in the ironic effort to avoid exactly that. The coverage created a disconnect between consumers and the individuals affected by major social problems. With no implications for responsibility, consumers lack any influence to get involved or demand improvement of the problem (Kensicki, 2004).

In the effort to maintain objectivity, the journalist promotes apathy by muting significant puzzle pieces of the story and makes the larger picture impossible to understand. Apathy was increased through the decision to omit words such as “activist” or “advocate”, furthering the importance of diction choice by journalists (Kensicki, 2004, p. 66). Media also failed to encourage the possibility of a solution, which only increases the apathetic response in a reader who does not see a solution as possible. I would posit that the tendency towards neutrality is only reinforced by the nature of self-deception to justify injustice as described by Hanson and Hanson (2006).

The need to rationalize injustice is only perpetuated by an apathetic response to political issues, particularly when the consumer does not perceive the social problem as being connected to themselves. A benefit of looking at African American newspapers is an inclusion of advocacy and activism. In response to issues of injustice, advocacy and call for action could provide a better framing of the issue than an apathetic response and result in real policy change (Clawson et al., 2003; Heinz, 2005).

Research Questions

This study focuses specifically on Flint and the Flint Water Crisis as an environmental justice and racism issue. The coverage of environmental justice issues in mainstream media has resulted in contrasting affected black communities with white authoritarians and experts. This usually means only using quotes and sources from Whites while generalizing the communities affected without giving them a voice (Bullard, 1993a; Clawson et al., 2003; Heinz, 2005; Redding, 2017). Black press has been covering environmental justice concerns since the 1970s, and many prominent black newspapers are positioned in areas with historically significant environmental justice cases. The coverage of environmental racism injustices from black press is vital to providing a voice for those affected and demands political action and aid by framing environmental racism as criminal activity (Heinz, 2005).

Existing scholarly work shows not only that mainstream media and black media cover issues of race much differently, but also that an attempt to be objective still creates an implicit bias due to existing racist frameworks in the mainstream media. However, increased neutrality is not the answer because it can create an apathetic response from consumers and lead to hopelessness (Kensicki, 2004). Since Whites have been shown to

have an implicit prejudice against Blacks, framing of black communities and issues can result in racist undertones that hide under colorblindness language. It is important to consider black press vital to the larger news community and consider how the frames used differ from those of mainstream media which is dominated by White voices (Axt & Trawalter, 2017; Nosek et al., 2002; Redding, 2017; Sinclair et al., 2014).

There is a clear gap in the literature regarding the framing of Flint. Similar studies to this exist for other environmental racism events, most noted here hurricane Katrina (Adeola & Picou, 2017; Davis & French, 2008; Forgette et al., 2008; Haider-Markel et al., 2007; Sweeney, 2006). Flint is a prime example of environmental injustice and racism, making research on it incredibly valuable to social justice issues. This study will provide insight into how black press frames issues of environmental racism, consider how objectivity can create apathetic frames in mainstream press and provide a comparable lens to that of other environmental racism cases. For the purposes of this study, I consider the following hypotheses and research questions:

RQ1: Do the frames present in mainstream newspapers and black newspapers differ in their coverage of the Flint Water Crisis?

RQ2: Is blame oriented toward the individual/Flint residents or toward broader social issues?

RQ3: How is race framed and is it in relation to poverty?

RQ4: Are there frames of justice and how are they related to environmental racism?

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

This study is a content analysis of four newspapers, two mainstream newspapers and two African American newspapers, to analyze the ways in which the Flint Water Crisis have been framed. This study looks at the Flint Water Crisis within the context of environmental racism. The case is made here that the citizens of Flint were placed at a higher risk for lead poisoning due to structural racism and that the response to community concern was ignored because of strategic racism, racial capitalism, White innocence and neoliberalism (Benz, 2017; Hammer, 2017; Inwood, 2018; Pulido, 2016; Sadler & Highsmith, 2016). The response by authorities toward Flint was rather apathetic until Dr. Hanna-Attisha (2015) presented a highly sympathetic victim through her study on children's blood lead levels (Hanson & Hanson, 2006; Kensicki, 2004; United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2018).

By considering Flint within the context of environmental racism, it is clear why consideration of coverage from black press is necessary. African American newspapers have long covered environmental justice concerns and can provide a more representative viewpoint for issues of environmental racism. Newspapers around the Flint area are also more likely to have community insight and present news as corrective against misrepresentations from mainstream newspapers which makes them valuable for analysis (Clawson et al., 2003; Heinz, 2005; Redding, 2017).

The two black newspapers chosen for this study for their relation to Flint are the *Michigan Chronicle* and the *Chicago Defender*, both of which have a long history and are well established through high circulation in the area which they service. The *Chronicle* was established in 1936 and is a weekly newspaper. The *Defender* was founded in 1905 and is also a weekly newspaper (BPRC, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2018; “The Chicago Defender,” 2018; “The Michigan Chronicle,” 2018; Tripp, 2014; Wilson, 2013).

In comparison, the mainstream newspapers chosen for this study are the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Chicago Tribune*. The mainstream newspapers service the same cities as the black newspapers chosen. They are also well established and within the top five circulating newspapers in the Midwest and the *Tribune* is third in national circulation (Cision, 2013, 2017). The *Free Press* and *Tribune* are both daily newspapers (“Chicago Tribune,” 2018; “Detroit Free Press,” 2018). Analysis of the four newspapers allows for a direct comparison of framing of Flint from communities who have the same relation and proximity to Flint.

For gathering newspaper articles, ProQuest allowed for access to Ethnic Newswatch which contained archives of the *Defender* and the *Chronicle*, and ProQuest Central gave access to the *Free Press* and the *Tribune*. Newspapers articles were found using the keyword combination of “Flint” and “water crisis” between the dates February 1, 2015 to April 30, 2018. The month of February 2015 included the start of concerns of lead poisoning and the first official measurement of a household tap with exceptionally high lead levels. April 2018 included the completion of the EPA’s audit on Flint and the closing of all free water bottle distribution sites for Flint residents (Carmody, 2018;

Chavez, 2018). This time frame includes the major newsworthy events that came forth from the Flint crisis and encompasses the main time period of coverage.

Articles were briefed to determine if the articles' main topic was the water crisis. Opinion pieces were also omitted from the analysis, leaving a total of 89 articles from the *Chronicle* and two from the *Defender*. For the *Free Press*, 818 articles were analyzed and 129 articles for the *Tribune* were analyzed. While the daily newspapers have significantly more articles than the weekly newspapers, the nature of this research made partial collection and analysis of the mainstream articles unfavorable due to chance of missing out on important themes and tones. Therefore, a total of 1038 articles were analyzed.

The articles were then coded for common themes and tones using NVivo 12. Themes were found through targeted text searches that included synonyms and derivatives, allowing for in-text verification of the theme. The tones were auto-coded into the categories of positive and negative overall. Once verified, descriptive statistics were calculated for theme averages per article and percentage of total for tone. Headlines were considered to be the most important in framing and setting salience, then the body text was considered (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Scheufele, 1999, 2000).

Based on Heinz's (2005) study on environmental justice coverage and other studies on black press, expected themes would be discussion of black community and a sense of unity, framing of environmental racism as criminal and violent, justice, poverty, and critique of government and power dynamics as being key in racism (Clawson et al., 2003; Rasmussen, 2014; Redding, 2017).

Existing studies on framing of race and social issues lend to expected themes of meritocracy, blame and responsibility, class and poverty with the use of colorblind

language and criticism of black leaders (Ashley & Olson, 1998; Clawson et al., 2003; Haider-Markel et al., 2007; Hanson & Hanson, 2006; Kim et al., 2010; Mills, 2017; Moody-Ramirez & Cole, 2018; Pellow, 2016; Rasmussen, 2014; Watkins, 2001). Tone for the mainstream newspapers was expected to be neutral, considering the push toward objectivity and neutrality while the black newspapers are expected to shy away from neutrality toward either positive as in advocacy or negative as in government critique (Mourão, Kilgo, & Sylvie, 2018). The analysis format also allowed for emergent themes throughout the articles with consideration for posited hypotheses and research questions.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Through analysis, common themes and sentiment were determined from all four newspapers. To compare the frames between black newspapers and mainstream newspapers, the frames of the *Chronicle* and *Defender* were compared to those of the *Free Press* and *Tribune*. A total of 10 themes were found to be prevalent in the four newspapers. Tone was evaluated as either positive, negative or neutral. A description of each theme category can be found in the Appendix in Table A.1.

The two groups of papers showed similar themes through their discussion of government and leadership, critiquing response and the role of MDEQ and the emergency manager in the crisis. As shown in Table 4.1, the government and leadership theme appeared at an average of 23.11 and 37.26 times per article for black and mainstream news respectively. The second most common theme found across both groups of newspapers was discussion of justice and injustice, which encompassed demands for solutions and consideration of basic human rights.

Another common frame for both mainstream and black articles was the use of humanity or relatable words to describe those affected by the water crisis. For example, “families” and “children” were commonly used, making those affected easy to relate and sympathize to as previously discussed in Hanson and Hanson’s (2006) theory of the blame frame. The humanity frame was also used when reminding the reader that schools and veterans were affected, and even referring to the Flint residents as Americans as a

form of patriotic relatability. The articles even regularly reminded the reader that the flint residents were “human” and address the potential for a similar water crisis to occur in other cities.

Safety was a common frame used, often referring to clean and safe water which taps into the basic human desire to be safe and healthy. The safety frame was used across both groups of newspapers nearly equally per article. Blame and responsibility was a theme common in both groups as well, but slightly more common in the mainstream group. Less frequent was reference to the water crisis in terms of a natural force, such as environmentally related or even as a “disease” in comparison to a man-made disaster. These frames appeared across both groups more than average of once per article, with the natural frame appearing a bit more often. The other common frames were poverty and economics. Poverty was commonly used to refer to Flint residents and failing city infrastructure.

Table 4.1. Average number of theme appearances per article in black and mainstream news

Theme	Black News	Mainstream News
Government/Leadership	23.11	37.26
Justice/Injustice	15.14	22.01
Humanity	7.18	8.25
Community	7.57	5.57
Blame/Responsibility	4.69	6.19
Safety	5.62	5.74
Race/Ethnicity	5.10	0.96
Natural	1.88	2.78
Man-Made	1.08	1.72
Poverty	1.43	1.23

Common frames that arose from the *Chronicle* and the *Defender* fit the expected themes such as critique of governance, as discussed above, and community. The

community theme appeared slightly more often in the *Chronicle* and *Defender* than in the mainstream papers. Community in the *Chronicle* and *Defender* was commonly specifically black community, with common references to black-owned businesses and black celebrities coming together for Flint. Another common reference to community across both groups of newspapers was discussion of local churches and their fundraisers. The local faith community was a major portion of the community theme.

One of the key themes analyzed for this study was race. As shown in Table 4.1, race appeared as a theme an average of 5.10 times per article across the *Chronicle* and *Defender*. However, it only appeared as a theme an average of 0.96 times, less than one reference per article, for the *Free Press* and *Tribune*. Race, therefore, appeared as a theme more than five times as often in black news than it did in mainstream news, making race the theme with the largest difference in coverage between black and mainstream newspapers.

The overall tone of the articles was determined to be mostly negative for both groups of newspapers, as shown in Table 4.2. The *Free Press* and *Tribune* were more negative overall with 88.17% of the 947 articles measuring negative than the *Chronicle* and *Defender* at 70.33%. The *Chronicle* and *Defender* together had more than twice the percentage of both positive and neutral articles, at 21.98% and 7.69% respectively, than the *Free Press* and *Tribune* at 8.34% positive and 3.49% neutral.

Table 4.2. Percent breakdown of overall article tone
across black and mainstream news articles

Tone	Black News	Mainstream News
Majority Positive	21.98%	8.34%
Majority Negative	70.33%	88.17%
Majority Neutral	7.69%	3.49%

The analysis shows that there both key similarities and differences between the black newspapers and the mainstream newspapers. In addressing RQ1, the differences between the coverage can be seen in the coverage of race and in tone. The *Chronicle* and *Defender* have more positive and neutral tone articles which would fall in line with previous research indicating that black press promotes advocacy more than mainstream news (Clawson et al., 2003; Heinz, 2005; Rasmussen, 2014). The majority negative tone was unexpected for the Free Press and the Tribune based on previous research that neutral tones created a disconnect from readers (Kensicki, 2004). However, the common themes of humanity, safety and community draw on sympathetic responses that might balance out the negative tones, creating a dichotomy of sympathetic and disconnected.

The second research question can be answered through looking at both the frames of blame and governance. While blame wasn't as major of a theme, accountability of leadership and government officials was the most prominent theme across both groups of newspapers. Responsibility was placed upon those officials who allowed for the water crisis to originally occur and then continue without aid. Contrarily, certain officials were praised for their responses to the crisis. For instance, this quote from one of the *Chronicle* articles criticizes the motif of the emergency manager: "After all, it was the governor who appointed the all-powerful emergency manager who approved the deal allowing for Flint's population to drink poisoned water to save money." The quote places responsibility on the emergency manager for the water crisis and calls into question financial motif for deliberately poisoning the city. Whereas, the *Chronicle* also ran a headline reading "House passes \$170 million Flint aid package championed by Congressman Dan Kildee" which praised Kildee for his efforts to bring aid to Flint. The

Defender criticized Trump's plans for having "no specific allocation to solve the lead water crisis in Flint." The mainstream articles did not directly praise or criticize officials as much, discussing them more in regard to their views. This quote from the *Free Press*, "Karen Weaver, an African American ... has said state officials were slow to react, due, in part, to her community's makeup" even makes note of Weaver's race and relates it to the Flint community.

The framing of race was covered much differently between black newspapers and mainstream newspapers. While race was infrequently referenced by mainstream newspapers, it was mentioned on average more than five times per article in the black news articles. Mention in mainstream articles was mainly with reference to city demographics while discussion in black news surrounded community members, celebrities and church leaders. For example, the headline, "Black-owned Toronto water company donates to Flint crisis victims" from the *Chronicle* emphasized the importance that the company was black-owned and donating to Flint. One headline from the *Chronicle*, "Flint residents visit D.C. to discuss lead in black communities...should other cities be concerned?" related the water crisis to other black communities. While the *Defender* and *Chronicle* framed race in the context of community and strong unity, the *Tribune* and *Free Press* didn't relate community and race with the same frames. Both the *Free Press* and the *Tribune* focused on demographics of the city as seen in the *Tribune* example, "the predominantly African-American city of 100,000 north of Detroit." With occasional relation to poverty or crime.

Poverty was a more prominent frame than race for the mainstream articles, but not for the black articles. However, both groups covered poverty with similar frequency

rather than it being a theme that was significantly more prominent in one group over the other like the race theme. Poverty was occasionally mentioned in relation to race, often when listing demographics of Flint in both groups of newspapers. One example from the *Chronicle*, “The events in Flint - whose residents are disproportionately poor and of color...” frames demographics with race and poverty together. The *Free Press* frames race and poverty together in the following example, “...the water crisis in Flint, a majority African-American city with deep poverty...” in a similar way as the *Chronicle*. However, the pairing of race and class or poverty was more frequent with the *Free Press* and *Tribune*. The *Free Press* ran the following headline, “Racism, classism to blame in Flint”, with the body text of the article containing quotes like “Race and poverty are mixed in a cocktail”, “undercurrent of race and class” and “poor, black residents”. One article from the *Tribune* took a much different approach, arguing that “race is more distraction than explanation” and that “once you are poor, the array of slights to which you are subjected is remarkably consistent across that racial gap.” This argument goes against what the environmental justice studies surrounding waste sites reported, that when it comes to environmental hazards, black communities were disproportionately affected even when controlling for class (Boer et al., 1997; Bullard, 1993a; Bullard & Wright, 2012; Hockman & Morris, 1998; Moss, 1996; Zimring, 2015). Specifically in Michigan, race was still found to continually be a better predictor of environmental hazards than poverty (Hockman & Morris, 1998). However, this piece from the *Tribune* is unique to this study because it was written by Leonard Pitts, a black journalist known for writing about race and politics. While this conclusion by Pitts seems to go directly against existing studies on environmental injustices, the point he seems to hit is that

poverty and race are not the same and shouldn't be equated, even if they can both contribute to injustices. The *Tribune* connected race, class and crime with the following statement, "children in wealthy suburbs have donor-funded drinking fountains flowing with clean water while children in the city's poorest neighborhoods have crime tape ... divided by race and class." The *Chronicle* and *Defender* did not relate class and race in the same way that the *Tribune* and *Free Press* did and never related either to crime or criminal activity. The connection being drawn between crime and race is reminiscent of covert racist language in frames from other mainstream news coverage of race and from individual responses to tragedy involving black victims (Davis & French, 2008; Haider-Markel et al., 2007; Moody-Ramirez & Cole, 2018; Watkins, 2001).

Infrastructure condition was commonly referenced as part of the poverty theme. The failing infrastructure of the Flint water system gave way to lead poisoning and was a result of decreased financial security for the city. In other words, Flint was too poor to upgrade the infrastructure and thus lead piping in conjunction with old facilities contributed to the crisis (Butler et al., 2016; Gostin, 2016; Pieper et al., 2017; United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2018). The *Chronicle* referred to the Flint as having "aging infrastructure" with all the other publications containing similar phrases and descriptions.

The fourth research question asks if there were frame of justice and if they related to environmental racism. The justice frame was the second most prevalent theme in across both groups of newspaper articles. Justice was commonly used to call for aid and response from government leaders and related the injustice of the Flint water crisis to disregard for basic human rights. The water crisis injustice was framed as a deliberate

choice by the emergency manager, which relates to the theme of government accountability. Discussion of environmental racism and how racism played into the water crisis was mainly discussed by the *Chronicle* and *Defender*. Structural racism in politics was directly discussed by the *Chronicle*, “taking power from black and brown communities and placing it in the hands of white lawmakers ... many view the policy as old school racial disenfranchisement.” The mainstream papers rarely brought up race at all, which was expected as previous studies have indicated colorblind language and the ignoring of race as a factor in leadership structure and strategy (Adeola & Picou, 2017; Berliner, 2018; Clawson et al., 2003; Davis & French, 2008; Haider-Markel et al., 2007; Hammer, 2017; Herring et al., 1999; Watkins, 2001).

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

Conclusions

The framing of the water crisis as both a natural force and a man-made force was unexpected, particularly from the *Chronicle* and the *Defender* since black newspapers have been known to frame environmental injustices as criminal (Heinz, 2005). While the framing of the events as criminal was present, it was focused on the actions of the leadership and government officials rather than framing the environmental aspects of the crisis in criminal terms. The articles often wrestled with the idea of the choice and deliberate poisoning because, as the *Free Press* points out, “Why would anyone intentionally help poison a city?” Man-made was a common word used to describe the crisis, with the *Free Press* stating, “Flint's drinking water is a man-made catastrophe,” and the *Chronicle* termed it a “man-made crisis.” The term man-made points the reader back to the role that officials played in creating the crisis, linking it to the government and justice themes.

The theme of humanity is key to gaining a sympathetic response from readers which was prevalent in both groups of news articles. The articles often framed the crisis as affecting children, which are known to be easy to sympathize with (Hanson & Hanson, 2006). Family and derivatives thereof were also common, making the crisis victims more relatable. One story from the *Chronicle* even covered a military veteran being impacted by the water crisis, drawing on a sense of American patriotism to frame a sympathetic

victim. The humanity theme paired with the safety theme play on basic human sympathetic responses and needs such as children having a basic right to be safe and healthy. Despite these themes not being the same as the justice/injustice theme, they still work toward demanding justice by calling on the reader to feel for those affected and also want the families of Flint to have clean and safe drinking water.

The two groups of newspapers ultimately had similar themes and frames with government critique and justice being the most prominent themes. The key difference found between the newspapers was their coverage of race and its relation to poverty. The higher rate of racial framing from the *Chronicle* and *Defender* fit within their intended audience and content. The framing of race in the *Chronicle* and *Defender* followed a pattern of emphasizing unity and togetherness. Demographics for Flint were mentioned with poverty and race but were not continually paired together or equated like they were in the *Free Press* and *Tribune*. The *Free Press* articles in particular followed along the same framing patterns as seen in the aftermath of Katrina and the news' insistence on equating "black and poor" (Adeola & Picou, 2017; Davis & French, 2008; Haider-Markel et al., 2007; Stivers, 2007). The *Tribune* did publish an article from Leonard Pitts, a well-respected black journalist, in which he discussed the issue of race, poverty and Flint from the perspective of focusing on class rather than race. While I can't begin to conjecture what Pitts might have been thinking when writing it, the article seems to push against viewing race and poverty as one and the same, equating Blacks with poverty. The existing research on the influence of poverty and race on environmental injustices continually points to race as being the main contributing factor but does not ignore that

class also contributes (Boer et al., 1997; Bullard, 1993a; Hockman & Morris, 1998; Zimring, 2015).

The framing of race is key in making sure that problem definitions don't arise, making frames of community and strength preferable to those of poverty and pity. The article from Pitts could have been influential to those reading the mainstream Tribune and possibly other newspapers that framed blackness and poverty together. Despite not following the existing research on how race and poverty play into environmental injustices, Pitts did separate race and class which was rather uncommon for the rest of the mainstream articles. The lack of this separation in the mainstream articles is critical to how readers understand racial inequalities, and could perceive Flint as being poor because it's majority-black and thus somehow deserving to be poisoned, as insinuated by Phil Stair (Ali, 2017; Defender News Service, 2017; Edwards, 2017; Fortin, 2018; Howard, 2017). Critiquing the framing of the mainstream papers' discussion of race and poverty does not mean that it shouldn't be discussed, but rather that the way in which it is framed should be handled differently. Blackness and poverty being paired over and over without discussion of how Flint's poverty rate raised only creates a link between being black and being poor in the mind of the reader, perpetuating problem definitions that ignore structural racism and classism that make way for injustices like Flint to occur (Davis & French, 2008; Hanson & Hanson, 2006; Stivers, 2007; Sweeney, 2006).

Limitations and Future Research

The analysis of this study was limited by the extremely low number of articles acquired from the *Defender*. With such a low sample size, the *Defender* contributed little to the findings and analysis since there was such little text to analyze. The two articles

analyzed did contain some of the common frames, but the common frames present across the group containing the *Chronicle* and *Defender* would not have varied much had the *Defender* articles been omitted. This study would benefit from adding a third newspaper to each group, perhaps from Columbus or Cincinnati, to provide a wider sample size.

The next step in research would be to widen the sample size and likely the time frame to begin in 2014 at the time of the switch to the Flint River as a source. The crisis is still considered to be going on and is still being covered. Future work should include a time frame that ends at a later date than the one I have chosen here to include the entirety of the crisis and coverage. Along with a wider time frame, it would be helpful to do a deeper analysis of the history of environmental racism in Flint, incorporating the instance of the furnace and lead poisoning from 1995 (Seigel, 1995; M. C. Tilles, 1995, 1995)

Finally, a major limitation for this study is that I am white and thus must remain hyperaware of my own privileges and implicit prejudices when analyzing and interpreting the words of black press. My understanding of racial inequalities must be informed by voices of color as I will never experience it, and thus can only understand it so far. Therefore, my interpretations here can be helpful in evaluating the differences between the mainstream and black press, but ultimately black voices should be listened to far before my own.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Table

Table A.1. Theme descriptions

Theme	Description
Government/Leadership	Any praise or critique of individuals or groups in government or leadership positions who were directly involved in the water crisis or in a position to levy for/against the people of Flint during the crisis, e.g., Mayor Weaver, Governor Snyder, EPA
Justice/Injustice	Direct mention of (in)justice as well as reference to acquiring answers, demanding action, calls for help, and considering the crisis a violation of human rights
Humanity	Discussion of Flint victims in terms that draws on humanity such as children, families, humans and Americans
Community	Frames of unity surrounding the Flint people, often in relation to faith leaders, community groups and fundraisers
Blame/Responsibility	Insinuation or obvious placement of fault for the crisis or for the crisis fix on a particular person or group
Safety	Outlining of the crisis in terms of health, safety, and cleanliness particularly in the context of basic livelihood
Race/Ethnicity	Framing the Flint crisis and those affected in the context of race or ethnicity
Natural	Descriptions of the crisis in terms of natural force uncontrolled by man such as disease, natural disaster and a symptom of something more
Man-Made	Descriptions of the crisis in terms of a man-made force that was deliberate and controlled, such as poisoning
Poverty	Framing the Flint crisis and those affected in the context of class, specifically poverty including reference to failing infrastructure

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