

## **Risk Management and Disadvantaged Groups:**

### **A comparative analysis of the First Nations drinking water crisis**

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#### **Abstract**

First Nations groups across Canada have been subjected to poor drinking water conditions for over 10 years. Through literature review, it was found that 70 per cent of First Nations communities have been effected by a drinking water advisory (DWA) at some point since 2004. Additionally, only 131 news stories about inadequate drinking water in these communities occurred over a 16-year period, suggesting that agenda setting has played a significant role in how the situation is being managed. The Flint, Michigan water crisis of 2015 is used as a case study to identify additional factors at play—the most significant being low media coverage and neglect of marginalized communities. This paper argues that the lack of action being taken by the Government of Canada is a result of risk racism and environmental racism. Underprivileged and unrepresented groups are more likely to be subjected to poorly-handled risk situations related to health and environment.

The Government of Canada has relied on a low-or-no-risk agenda when communicating with First Nation communities, and as a result, has ineffectively managed the water crisis. Further, an inability to engage in meaningful dialogue about the socioeconomic and cultural factors at play has culminated in a crisis of confidence that will be difficult to repair.

**Keywords:** Environmental racism, First Nations water crisis, risk racism, risk communications

#### **Research Question**

What are the significant factors causing poor risk communications and delayed action relating to the First Nation water crisis?

In 2012, the Government of Canada signalled that it would recognize water and sanitation as a human right (The Council of Canadians, 2012); still, First Nations communities across the country continue to be negatively impacted by contaminated drinking water and face frequent and long-standing drinking water advisories (DWAs). In 2015, it was reported that 138 DWAs were in effect across 94 reserves and lasted an average of 343 days (Lam et al., 2017, p. 2). In some communities, like that of the Neskantaga First Nation in Ontario, residents have been suffering through DWAs for over 20 years (Levasseur & Marcoux, 2015). This is a long-standing, national-level health crisis is the result of poor risk management by the Government of Canada.

In November 2013, the Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act was enacted to “develop federal regulation that will ensure access to safe, clean and reliable drinking water; effective treatment of wastewater; and protection of sources of drinking water on First Nations lands” (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, n.d., para. 4). This legislation occurred eight years after the first high-profile incident of poor-quality drinking water that affected the Kashechewan community in 2005 (Lam et al., 2017, p. 11). This delayed action from the Government of Canada suggests that there is a lack of understanding of the social, economic and health impacts that reserve communities face/have been facing across Canada for two decades.

Many First Nations groups have claimed that there is a double standard involved when the Government addresses water concerns in urban settings versus reserve settings (Lam et al., 2017, p. 11). To mitigate this claim, an engagement process facilitated by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) and the Government of Canada has been established to co-develop a framework on the direction forward for federal legislation on safe drinking water for First Nations (Government of Canada, n.d.). Although this seems to be an

effective plan for future risk management, it does not change that the Government of Canada has, up until this point, relied on a low-or-no-risk agenda that downplayed the severity of the crisis and ignored the needs of affected groups. This essay highlights the severity and perceptions of the 20-year crisis and compare its handling to the 2015 Flint, Michigan water crisis. In doing so, I argue that disadvantaged citizens face an increased risk of being affected by health-related crisis situations due to negative perceptions from both government and media. If risk communicators focus on a no-risk approach over a humanistic approach, distrust between persons will arise and a crisis of confidence will affect future communications.

### **Literature Review**

The following literature review provides more context for the severity and perspectives of the First Nations water crisis. Two articles (shared in chronological order) analyze DWAs and news coverage from the last decade to understand the timeline and length of the crisis and suggest that marginalization is a relevant factor. Additionally, insight is provided from Peter Sandman and Vincent Covello to understand risk communication processes.

Lindsay Galway (2016) has reviewed 402 DWAs issued to First Nation reserves between January 1, 2004 to December 31, 2013 to support her argument that inadequate access to drinking water is “compounded by the underlying social, political and economic marginalization and disadvantage faced by First Nations peoples across Canada” (as cited on p. 2). Drinking water advisories (DWAs) are issued to protect the public in the case of problems with drinking water equipment or microbiological contamination (Health Canada, as cited in Galway, p. 3). There are three types of advisories issued: boil water, do not consume and do not use (Murphy, Bhatti & McBean as cited in Galway, p. 3). Galway found that three per cent of DWAs were do not consume orders and 97 per cent were boil water advisories (p. 5). The average duration for

advisories was 294 days (p. 5). Galway also notes that 70 per cent of First Nations communities were affected by “at least one DWA during the 10-year study period” (p. 7).

Steven Lam, Ashlee Cunsolo, Alexandra Sawatzky, James Ford and Sherilee Harper (2017) conducted a media scan to evaluate how risk perceptions related to access to safe drinking water for First Nations groups are shaped through agenda setting. Agenda setting is the theory that the media has the ability to “focus public attention on key topics [...] and influence what issues the public learns about and considers important” (p. 2). Lam et al. argue that media coverage regarding Indigenous issues is “problematic” and uses a “negative tone,” resulting in the public having an incomplete picture of the issue (p. 1).

Media from January 1, 2000 to Dec. 31, 2015 was scanned via ProQuest, and four major sources were identified: *Windspeaker*, *The Globe and Mail*, *National Post* and *Toronto Star* (p. 3). Information was coded based on the following sub-categories: focus on water or other, positive, negative or neutral valence, episodic or thematic, and substantive or ambiguous content. In total, two hundred and fifty-six articles were identified as relevant to First Nations and drinking water (p. 4). Lam et al. concluded that “coverage of Indigenous water scrutiny over the 16-year period appeared to be limited and inequitable” and suggested that supporting the Truth and Reconciliation Act’s call for more Indigenous news coverage will close this media reporting gap and raise awareness for Indigenous issues (p. 12).

Sandman and Covello (2017) discuss the evolution and revolution of risk communication, providing obstacles, stages and rules for approaching it. First, the authors highlight the “large gaps remain[ing] in understandings of risks that effect risk assessments” (“Obstacles to Risk,” para. 1). Because of this lack of knowledge, the “outcomes of most risk assessments are best seen as estimates” and don’t provide the full picture (“Obstacles to Risk,” para. 3). The second

obstacle is distrust between experts, organizations and spokespersons due to reasons such as mismanagement and neglect. Thirdly, news media presents a challenge to risk communication due to a tendency to sensationalize or omit information. The final obstacle is human psychological and social factors that “influence how people process information about risk” (“Obstacles to Risk,” para. 9).

Sandman and Covello (2001) identify four stages of risk communication: ignoring the public, learning to explain risk data, dialogue with the community and treating the public as a partner. In order to reach this final stage, the authors suggest following the Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication that aid in the understanding of “what people mean by risk [as opposed to] what technical experts commonly mean by risk” (Sandman & Covello, 2001). The rules are as follows: accept and involve the public as a legitimate partner; listen to the audience; be honest, frank and open; coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources; meet the needs of media; speak clearly and with compassion; and plan carefully and evaluate performance. In following these rules, organizations can maximize the effectiveness of risk communication and control dialogues.

### **Case Study: Flint, Michigan**

For many reasons, the First Nations water crisis bares similarities to the 2015 water crisis of Flint, Michigan. Both were crises ignored by respective governments for an extended period of time (20-plus years in Canada and two years in Flint); both affected disadvantaged communities and both were ignored by traditional media. In looking at the mistakes and issues that occurred in Flint, Michigan (mainly: a “crisis strategy of denial” [Logan, 2017, p. 48]), the Government of Canada can identify similarities and areas of opportunity for creating its own risk communication plan.

The Flint water crisis occurred between 2014 and 2017. As a temporary infrastructure plan, the city's water supply was switched from Lake Huron to Flint River (Logan, 2017, p. 48). Soon after, the majority of Flint residents reported a change in water quality and the emergence of health problems as they were unknowingly being poisoned by lead. Despite a red flag emerging in early 2015 during a media scan, the issue was ignored and ultimately transitioned into a crisis by October of that year (p. 48). The risk communication from the state's government followed a no risk, denial strategy that "downplayed the water safety issue" and "dissociated the government from any responsibility" (p. 48).

Flint is an overwhelmingly disadvantaged community. Approximately 56 per cent of its population is black, and at least 40 per cent of citizens live in poverty (Logan, 2017, pp. 52-53). Many people have suggested that the treatment of Flint citizens was a result of "environmental racism" and "risk racism" (p. 52). Environmental racism is described by Logan (2017) as "a process by which environmental hazards plague communities of predominantly poor, racial minorities" (p. 52). Risk racism, as defined by Waymer and Health, describes "processes of environmental racism in which majority-black communities are unfairly [...] positioned as risk bearers, allowing white communities to remain free of environmental risks" (as cited in Logan, 2017, p. 52). If the population of Flint was predominantly white and middle-upper class, it's likely that "the state government would have rushed in to help," or prevented the crisis from ever happening (The Editorial Board, as cited in Jackson, 2017, "National Media Coverage," para. 15).

Similarly, approximately 80 per cent of First Nations reserves in Canada have a median income that is below the poverty line (Press, 2017), and as result, First Nations people on reserves are 90 times more likely to have no access to running water in comparison with other

Canadians (Morrison, Bradford & Bharadwaj, as cited in Galway, 2016, pp. 1-2). Additionally, Lam et al. (2017) found that only 131 news stories of Indigenous water issues occurred in a 16-year period, while 652 news stories about a water crisis in Walkerton (a predominantly white urban community) occurred in a two-year period (pp. 9-10). With this information and the comparison to Flint, it's clear that there's a need to "acknowledge the economic, political and ecological factors" that have created a "multi-layered problem" in Canada (Galway, 2016, p. 9).

Media coverage also had an effect on the timeline of Flint's water crisis. Although this situation was high risk (i.e. had negative health effects on children/future generations), it could be perceived as low outrage due to the lack of media coverage at the time. It is suggested that this lack of coverage was a result of "people of colour [being] underrepresented in the media" and being subject to negative stereotypes (Jackson, 2017). These negative stereotypes have a "dehumanizing effect" that often prevents the media from wanting to report on matters affecting these groups (Jackson, 2017). In the case of Flint, it wasn't until 20 months after the initial water source switch—when the state and President Obama declared a state of emergency—that the media began reporting on the crisis (Jackson, 2017).

Lam et al. (2017) suggest a similar situation is happening in Canada, and this is why the country's water crisis is still being ignored. A 2013 study shows that "news stories on Indigenous issues in Ontario, Canada amounted to 0.46 per cent of all stories and had limited coverage of health or water issues" (Journalists for Human Rights as cited in Lam et al., 2017, p. 3). Further, the authors found that news coverage increased during and after a prominent water event (such as the 2005 Kashechewan crises) but was not "well-covered before the event despite the chronic and on-going water security challenges in many communities" (p. 10). In both cases, the media's agenda prevented high outrage and downplayed the crisis severity. If the media treated

disadvantaged communities seriously, “even as the government seeks to discredit them,” more priority would be placed on the risk communications (Jackson, 2017).

### **Outcomes of Poor Risk Management**

The poor handling of the crisis by Michigan’s government had severe, adverse effects on the community, especially in terms of health. Rep. Elijah E. Cummings explained that “an entire generation of children [will] suffer from brain damage, learning disabilities and many other horrible effects from lead poisoning” (as cited in Logan, 2017, p. 49). In Canada, First Nations are at an increased risk of waterborne illnesses compared to non-Indigenous Canadians (Lam et al., 2017, p. 2). According to Sandman and Covello (2001), any situation that has adverse health effects on children or future generations is perceived as high risk by the public. Despite this, both governments have or continue to ignore health complaints of affected citizens by claiming low-or-no-risk situations. In Flint, the governor’s office initially issued a news release stating that “water leaving Flint’s drinking water system is safe” (as cited in Logan, 2017, p. 48). In Canada, Indigenous Services Minister Seamus O'Regan has been quoted as saying that drinking water on a Vernon-based reserve is “safe because it’s certified” despite the band’s largest water system being on a do not consume order (as cited in Keating, 2019). If this ignorance is continued, many citizens are likely to face severe health consequences.

The first goal in any risk communication plan should be to “establish trust and credibility,” but if these are lost, they are incredibly difficult to reobtain (Covello & Sandman, 2001). In both Flint and Canada, the affected groups were neglected and harmed, and as a result, lost trust and confidence in their governing bodies. Multiple First Nations group in Canada have moved forward with suing the federal government, including an Okanagan Indian Band, Ermineskin Cree Nation, Sucker Cree First Nation and two Alberta First Nations groups

(Okanagan Indian Band, 2019). Because these groups have felt like they're not being heard, it's likely that they will be unwilling to listen to the Government (Sandman & Covello, 2001). This crisis of confidence will make it difficult for the Government to reframe its risk communications in the future.

### **Conclusion**

When creating risk communication plans, it's important to consider audience needs, particularly when dealing with disadvantaged communities. Often, disadvantaged citizens face negative perceptions from media and government that result in an increased risk of being affected by health-related crises. Successful government relations and risk management "require effectiveness, cultural appropriateness and legitimacy from those being governed" (Baird et al., 2015, p. 243). If communications don't consider socioeconomic factors, it's likely that First Nations communities will continue to be victims of environmental racism and risk racism.

As demonstrated by the Flint water crisis, severe consequences will arise if the affected community is ignored by its governing body. Baird et al. (2015) suggest taking an adaptive co-management approach to address the problems in First Nations communities (p. 244). This is similar to the third stage of risk communications presented by Sandman and Covello (2001) that emphasizes the need for real dialogue between all involved parties in order to successfully reduce outrage. The introduction of a First Nations-led committee adopts this type of participatory process, but after 20-plus years of neglect, it's possible that the crisis of confidence is too strong for successful partnership. As suggested by Sandman and Covello (2001), it's not enough to just "acknowledge people's outrage—you must communicate that they are entitled to be outraged, and why." To achieve successful government relations, the Government of Canada must learn from the mistakes made in Flint, as well as its own mistakes, and focus on

proactively, accurately and compassionately sharing risk information to rebuild trust. Once trust is rebuilt, a carefully planned and executed risk strategy can take place.

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