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Nov 04, 2016 by [Mark Dillen](#)

Please Don't Drink the Water ^[1]

Next week in New York, the U.N. Commission for Social Development is set to hear testimony from activists speaking about a community that has been cut off from access to safe drinking water. Undoubtedly, the story will get coverage in the international press. Why? Because it's another infrastructure failure in a Third World country? No — because it concerns Detroit and Flint, Michigan, two American cities lying next to the largest body of fresh water in the world.

This story is a black eye for America's image abroad and a complicated object lesson for cash-strapped industrial cities around the world with aging infrastructure. The Governor of the State of Michigan, Rick Snyder, is suddenly in the media hot seat, and has enlisted the help of two PR agencies to help explain to the public a kinder, gentler view of what happened.

Before listening, though, it's worth reviewing the background:

As the Columbia Journalism Review recently pointed out, it wasn't a traditional journalist who broke the story about the poisonous tap water in Flint, Michigan. It was Curt Guyette, a reporter employed full-time by a local branch of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

Flint, much like its better known urban big sister, Detroit, prospered in the mid-twentieth century as the automobile industry expanded—and then collapsed as the industry declined. Detroit went from 1.8 million residents in 1950 to 750,000 today; Flint went from 200,000 to less than 100,000 today. Some of the consequences were also mimicked on a smaller scale. Detroit went bankrupt and Flint nearly so, and both wound up being managed by state legislators who, like Rick Snyder, were tied to other parts of the economy, mainly non-urban, mainly Republican, and mainly white. When some citizens of Detroit stopped paying their water bills, state managers ordered the customers' water turned off.

All this, against the backdrop of a partial take-over of local government decision-making by state government, and you have a perfect storm: a weakened economy, poor governance, and inadequate journalism. A perfect storm, that is, of undrinkable water that dirties America's image abroad.

It was a recipe for further disaster. While Detroit's trainwreck trajectory (and recent gradual, fitful recovery) has gotten plenty of media attention, the collapse of nearby Flint was, until now, largely overlooked. Even activist filmmaker Michael Moore, Flint's most famous native son, who chronicled the 1980s demise of his home town in *Roger and Me* (1989), was not in on the poison water story until recently, when he called out President Obama for attending the Detroit Auto Show but not coming to nearby Flint to see the city's crisis first-hand.

So why did traditional media fail to raise an early alarm?

Part of the reason is that the local news media themselves are so weak. At the same time that traditional industry was collapsing in Detroit and Flint, traditional media were failing too. The largest newspapers, *The Detroit News* and *The Detroit Free Press*, shrunk drastically and were consolidated under the same ownership. They even stopped printing daily editions. More importantly, the number of journalists employed in Detroit—and Flint—declined precipitously. Despite the region's revival—more U.S.-origin cars were produced last year than ever before—the number of working journalists in this part of the state remains low.

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Now the state of Michigan has launched a criminal investigation into whether laws were

broken—and at what level of government—since Flint began drawing water from the Flint River in April, 2014. A U.S. District Attorney’s office is also investigating. Last fall, the state’s top official for water quality resigned. This month, the Governor apologized and released emails showing that some state employees had dismissed citizen complaints about water quality out of hand. The state wants federal disaster assistance.

The fact remains that for a year and a half, the government said to local citizens in Flint, Michigan that their river water was safe while children drank water that had dangerous levels of lead. Only after other outside investigators took an interest—a federal agency (EPA), a public university (Virginia Tech) and a reporter for a civil rights organization (ACLU)—did local media find the story compelling.

So the blame game commences—was it local government or state officials that led to this public health disaster—or the lack of media watchdogs?

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