The Necessity of Accuracy: Investigating the Failures of the Flint Water Crisis

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Section 1 — Introduction

Figure 1

Fearful of using the tap water to wash their food, Flint residents Melissa and Adam Mays prepare meals with bottled water | Brittany Greeson

Note. From "Flint Water Crisis: Everything You Need to Know" By Denchak, M., 2025, Natural Resources Defense Council.

1.1. Overview

The Flint Water Crisis began in 2014 when the local government of Flint, Michigan switched its water supply from Lake Huron to the Flint River without proper anti-corrosion measures (Butler & Scammell, 2018, p. 93). This was done in an attempt to save money but resulted in residents of Flint being supplied with untreated water infected with lead. Widespread contamination and prolonged exposure followed, leading to a health crisis and public outcry for over 18 months (Denchak, 2025, p. 2).

The situation was a complete crisis communications failure, with government officials constantly mitigating the public health emergency and shifting blame. By repeatedly putting out inaccurate statements and false assurances, the local government extended the crisis well beyond what was morally ethical, harming the citizens of Flint and eroding away trust (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 1). As we will explore, the local government of Flint, Michigan completely failed on all facets of crisis communications. Its statements and actions were never timely, constantly inaccurate, and disregarded any empathy for the residents that it serves.

1.2. Identifying Involved Parties

The main parties that caused the Flint Water Crisis were a number of local governing bodies and the Michigan governor, all working in their own best interest instead of serving the city's population. Firstly, the local government of Flint managed the water system. Next, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality ensured compliance with environmental regulations. Then, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services monitored public health monitoring. Finally, the Environmental Protection Agency provided federal oversight. Additionally, key decisions were driven by Rick Snyder, the governor of Michigan. Due to these agencies operating across municipal, state, and federal levels, jurisdiction frequently overlapped and further fragmented accountability (Denchek, 2025, p. 3).

1.3. The Significance of the Flint Water Crisis

The Flint Water Crisis affected many different fields through its multiple failures. Most importantly, public health was immediately affected, exposing citizens to lead poisoning and long-term health issues. As the most affected population was low-income and minority communities, resources to mitigate lead poisoning were limited and exposure was increased. This caused a complete collapse of the Flint government's credibility, as their communications

repeatedly claimed that the water was safe, contradicting actual lived experiences by residents, independent testing by scientists, and investigative journalism by reporters.

1.4. Thesis Statement

Despite the Flint government's additional lack of empathy and timely responses, the primary variable would be its inaccuracy. Not only did denial of the crisis cause public distrust, but independent research confirmed residents' fears of lead exposure (Denchek, 2025, p. 5). This only further increased the government's communication failures, as its inaccuracy negatively affected its reputation and its population's health. This then demonstrates that accuracy is not optional, but rather imperative in crisis communications, especially when dealing with uncertainty and scientific data.

Section 2 — Background on the Flint Water Crisis

2.1. Flint and its Local Government

To understand a whole picture of the Flint Water Crisis, we must first examine the city and its government. Due to Flint's long-term economic decline, the city was extremely vulnerable to crises. Once a major manufacturing center, the city experienced intense deindustrialization going into the twenty-first century, losing 77% of its manufacturing employment and 41% of its overall employment since 1980 (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 2). By 2014, the city's population fell to 100,000, with 41.6% of residents living below the poverty line (Butler & Scammell, 2018, p. 94). In 2011, Flint was placed under emergency management by the state of Michigan due to its significant budget deficit (Denchek, 2025, p. 3). This allowed state-appointed officials to make decisions regarding the city, taking power away from local officials with the mandate to save money.

This model created constraints on local oversight. While decisions were once handled by local government, state officials now controlled infrastructure, budgeting, and public services, limiting input from residents and local representatives. This structure lack accountability, as authority was split between local government, state officials, and state agencies (Denchek, 2025, p. 3). No single entity maintained full responsibility for decisions and their consequences, leading to the switch in water sources that caused massive amounts of lead exposure to Flint citizens. In this way, cost reduction was prioritized but oversight was weakened.

2.2. Events Leading up to the Crisis

The crisis developed over a series of major events, with clear disparities between public observations and official communications. Beginning in April 2014, Flint's water supply switched from Lake Huron to the Flint River as a cost-saving measure (Denchek, 2025, p. 2).

Immediately following this switch, residents began to complain about the water quality, including its color, odor, and taste. By the summer of 2014, bacteria was detected in the water, leading to an advisory to boil the water before its use (Denchek, 2025, p. 5). Throughout this time, lead leaked from aging pipes into the water supply due to a lack of corrosion control, further creating harmful byproducts of Michigan trying to save money. Finally in 2015, independent research identified elevated lead levels in water samples, as well as rising blood lead levels in the children of Flint (Denchek, 2025, p. 5).

At each stage in this timeline, official messaging diverged from actual evidence. In response to complaints, the local government assured them that the water met rigorous safety standards (Denchek, 2025, p. 5). When this wasn't enough, boil advisories confirmed contamination, but not to its full extent. Perhaps the most egregious, when independent testing revealed elevated lead levels, state agencies initially disputed findings and delayed acknowledgment (Denchek, 2025, p. 1). This continuous misalignment between accurate data and inaccurate communication allowed Flint citizens to be harmed through inaction, disregarding their concerns time and time again.

2.3. The Nature of the Crisis

As public health data provides empirical evidence of the crisis, research conducted by independent scientists and journalists proved a significant increase in elevated blood lead levels in children following the water source change (Denchek, 2025, p. 2). Not only this, but the statistics were localized to Flint without any comparable findings in the surrounding areas, providing a direct link between the water source switch and the negative health effects (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 2).

This established the Flint Water Crisis as purely preventable. Had the switch never occurred, appropriate testing been done, or corrosion control been implemented, the crisis would not have happened. Due to its severity, it can be understood as being compounded by two main failures. The first is operational failure, as the lack of water treatment allowed the crisis to happen in the first place (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 10). The other is communication failure, with the government's inaccurate information extending the crisis and increasing public harm (Denchek, 2025, p. 2). This proves that while the crisis may have been originally accidental, it could have ended at any stage with proper acknowledgement of the crisis, rectification of its systematic problems, and empathetic apologies to the community members of Flint.

2.4. Key Affected Stakeholders

Across multiple facets, the Flint Water Crisis affected a large number of stakeholders, with each group having their own level of exposure to lead and influence on the situation. Firstly, the primary stakeholders of the crisis are obviously the residents of Flint, particularly children and those who are immuno-compromised. These are the population of people who first identified the negative effects of using the water and recognized rising health issues (Denchek, 2025, p. 5).

The secondary stakeholders would then be anyone who was not directly affected by the water supply change, but still involved in the crisis. This includes the state and federal agencies and officials that were responsible for the regulation of standards, oversight of procedures, and response to the crisis (Butler & Scammell, 2018, p. 96).

The third group of stakeholders is then the journalists, independent scientists, and activists that uncovered hidden details regarding the crisis, publishing and investigating discrepancies between official claims and empirical evidence (Butler & Scammell, 2018, p. 96) (Denchek, 2025, p. 6). As the relationship between the Flint population and its government was

already strained due to increasing poverty, trust quickly deteriorated once the crisis became public through independent investigations, further distancing the two groups (Denchek, 2025, p. 12).

Section 3 — Crisis Communication Response

Figure 2

Five-month-old Dakota Erler of Flint gets blood drawn to have her lead levels tested at Carriage Town Ministries in 2016. | Brittany Greeson

Note. From "Flint Water Crisis: Everything You Need to Know" By Denchak, M., 2025, Natural Resources Defense Council.

3.1. How the Government Responded

The government response to the Flint Water Crisis can be understood as following four different and distinct phases: denial, minimization, justification, and acknowledgement. Each

phase marks a shift in the government's communication strategy as public pressure and more irrefutable evidence emerges.

Starting with denial, officials immediately rejected claims of water contamination by Flint residents, with reports of filthy water and negative symptoms disregarded as unfounded and exaggerated. Official statements falsely noted that the water met regulations and standards, dismissing lived experiences and observations (Denchek, 2025, p. 5).

Next, as issues with the water became more public, the government recognized some issues and put out a boil-water advisory, hoping to minimize the crisis. While some validity was given to citizens' complaints, the underlying issues of lead contamination by corroded pipes were left unaddressed (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 1).

Following this, as independent research began to reveal elevated lead levels in residents, the government challenged the validity of the findings. Research was questioned and alternative explanations were proposed, hoping to justify prior claims through defensive statements (Butler & Scammell, 2018, p. 95).

Finally, after increased pressure from scientific findings, national media coverage, and public outcry did the government officially recognize lead contamination in the Flint water (Denchek, 2025, p. 2). This acknowledgement was entirely forced only after prolonged exposure to the polluted water, demonstrating how the different phases of communication were not proactive, but reactive to the current situation.

3.2. Examining Official Statements

A core failure of the local Flint government's crisis communications were the constant differences between its statements and its city's conflicting evidence. Officials repeatedly communicated that the water met safety standards, relying on regulatory standards rather than

how citizens were harmed (Denchek, 2025, p. 5). It was only until independent research revealed that elevated lead levels exceeded federal limits did the official narrative switch from overassurances of safety, to acknowledging limited issues, before ultimately accepting the reality of contamination (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, pp. 4-5). This failure to integrate scientific data into official communications severely impacted the Flint government's credibility, denying claims until the evidence became indisputable (Butler & Scammell, 2018, p. 95).

3.3. Investigating Communication Strategies

As the government consistently disregarded the crisis, communication relied on conventional channels rather than adapting to the evolving situation. Primarily, press releases, public meetings, and official reports were all used to address community concerns, assure regulation compliance, and deny claims of contamination (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, pp. 4-5). This was coupled with a limited engagement with investigative journalists, resulting in an adversarial relationship that destroyed any chance of communal collaboration (Denchek, 2025, p. 2).

While the government attempted to control public perception, their dismissals of lived experiences undermined their credibility. Additionally, credible independent experts were not incorporated into early official communications, causing the public to distrust the government (Butler & Scammell, 2018, p. 96). As reports of the local crisis became national, media scrutiny for acknowledgement and change followed, reducing the government's ability to control the narrative as independent research filled the gaps of information. As a result, independent sources such as journalists and scientists became more trusted than official government channels (Butler & Scammell, 2018, p. 97).

3.4. Major Decisions

Several key decisions shaped both the trajectory of the crisis and its communication with the public. By refusing to revert the water source back to Lake Huron early in the crisis, officials prolonged its negative effects instead of preventing them (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 1). This harm was only heightened through delayed warnings regarding lead exposure, before finally being officially recognized after increased pressure (Denchek, 2025, p. 5). Only after all of these decisions to prolong the crisis did the government finally provide Flint with a safer water source and begin replacing corroded pipes (Denchek, 2025, p. 6). Despite this long-awaited recognition, public trust had already been fully lost at that time as the failure to provide accurate information transformed an operational issue into a sustained public health emergency (Denchek, 2025, p. 12).

Section 4 — Applying Crisis Communication Theories

4.1. Crisis Classification & Characteristics

4.1.1. Hermann's Three Characteristics

Looking back to a crisis communication theory that we examined earlier this year, Hermann's three characteristics defined a crisis by its surprise, threat, and short response time (Ulmer et al., 2017, p. 34).

While officials falsely claimed that the water was safe, the surprise of the crisis should have been expected, as residents' complaints correlated with the switch in water supply. In essence, the government should not have been surprised, but rather swiftly rectified the situation (Ulmer et al., 2017, p. 35).

As the crisis was a severe public health risk, the threat was magnified through official inaction and inaccurate communications (Ulmer et al., 2017, p. 36). With lead being a harmful toxin, its exposure to children threatened early brain development (Denchek, 2025, p. 5).

Over the course of an 18 month period, any chance of a short response time was ignored by government officials, instead choosing to maintain a narrative of safety rather than issuing immediate protective instructions (Ulmer et al., 2017, p. 37) (Denchek, 2025, p. 5).

4.1.2. Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Situational Crisis Communication Theory explores how crises can be assessed by their reputational threat and corresponding response (Ulmer et al., 2017, p. 70). The Flint Water Crisis can then be placed under the "preventable cluster" crisis type, as it resulted from intentional policy decisions and regulatory negligence, such as the failures to implement corrosion control or early inaccurate communications (Coombs, 2007, p. 6) (Butler & Scammell, 2018, p. 95).

Coombs describes crises such as what happened in Flint as having strong attributions of crisis responsibility, with citizens obviously looking to their government for assistance regarding the water quality. This created a severe reputational threat for the Flint government, as the harm was viewed as purposeful and avoidable (Coombs, 2007, p. 6) (Denchek, 2025, p. 3).

Following these classifications, Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory recommends that rebuild strategies are necessary for preventable crises such as the Flint Water Crisis through the use of full apologies to citizens, corrective action in reverting the water supply and replacing corroded pipes, and even financial compensation (Coombs, 2007, p. 8). Instead, the actual initial response by the government was defined by its constant denial, shifting of blame, and delayed action (Denchek, 2025, p. 5).

4.2. Organizational Response Theories

4.2.1. Image Repair Theory

Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger define Image Repair Theory as focusing "on how organizations respond to accusations or account for their actions after being accused of a transgression. An effective response is designed to repair the organization's damaged image or reputation." (Ulmer et al., 2017, p. 69). As early communication strategies focused on denying residents' experiences and observations, much work must be done well after the crisis to repair the government's image in the eyes of the public. This is further intensified due to an initial lack of apology or corrective action, causing more reputational damage (Denchek, 2025, p. 5).

4.2.2. Corporate Apologia

Following this idea, Corporate Apologia is described as "primarily defensive and […] designed principally for an organization to account for its actions after a crisis" (Ulmer et al., 2017, p. 68). While defensive communications took place instead of corrective actions, it was

done to shift the blame and protect the government's image rather than apologize for its wrongdoing. This only had the inverse effect, prolonging harm against the public without managing the overall threat or recognizing its existence (Butler & Scammell, 2018, p. 96).

4.2.3. Discourse of Renewal Theory

In the same way, the Discourse of Renewal Theory "emphasizes learning growth and opportunity following crises" (Ulmer et al., 2017, p. 71). Despite this, the Flint government's lack of accountability harmed its reputation and public perception severely. This created an extremely minimal chance of renewal in the public's eye, with corrective action taking place only after external pressure from the medical community and federal intervention forced a shift toward infrastructure replacement (Denchek, 2025, p. 7).

4.3. Media & Information Dynamics

4.3.1. News Framing Theory

In terms of theories involving the news media, the News Framing Theory examines how "the controversy inherent in many crises often intensifies and polarizes the framing process" Ulmer et al., 2017, p. 59). This creates a situation where organizational control over the narrative is paramount, making the Flint government's failure on this front even more apparent. While early official communications attempted to dismiss the crisis as nonexistent and overexaggerations by community members, the actual narrative of the crisis was reframed by investigative journalists and scientists into a man-made public health crisis (Butler & Scammell, 2018, p. 94).

4.3.2. Crisis News Diffusion

Crisis News Diffusion is defined by how the impact of crises can cause "curious and concerned publics [to] often view television or Internet coverage continuously" (Ulmer et al., 2017, p. 63). As the Flint Water Crisis created an intense public interest, the challenging of official statements was accelerated by national news coverage and independent research (Denchek, 2025, p. 2).

4.3.3. Exemplification Theory

Exemplification Theory describes how "crises, by their nature, evoke emotional responses, [providing] insight into how these emotional reactions are communicated and remembered over time [through] short, vivid, and emotionally arousing visual, written, or spoken messages" (Ulmer et al., 2017, p. 65). A prime example of these emotionally arousing pieces would be the visuals and witness statements provided by Flint citizens, proving even more effective once scientific research backed claims of contaminated water (Denchek, 2025, p. 5).

4.4. Application of Course Principles

4.4.1. Speed, Empathy, & Accuracy

At the core of our class, the three fundamentals of speed, empathy, and accuracy have defined the most important aspects of organizational responses to a crisis. With the local government's communications regarding the Flint Water crisis, we can see how all three elements failed. For speed, action was delayed by 18 months (Denchak, 2025, p. 2). Regarding empathy, there were numerous dismissals of residents' physical and emotional suffering as a result of the contaminated water. Most importantly, all early messaging dealt with inaccurate information and refusal to acknowledge the severity of the crisis, further elongating the harmful situation. Only until pressure from outside sources did the government attempt to rectify their

previous failures through recognition of the crisis, finally giving accurate information complimented with forced empathy.

4.4.2. Lessons on Effective Crisis Communication

Regarding the ten lessons on effective crisis communication, more than half were outright failed by the Flint government. Firstly, Lesson 3 “Acknowledge Stakeholders as Partners,” Lesson 5 “Prioritize Listening,” and Lesson 6 “Communicate Early and Often” were initially disregarded, treating stakeholders not as partners to be listened to, but as opponents to be silenced. This made communication into a one-way process, where the public voiced ignored concerns, losing trust between the government and its population. Similarly, Lesson 7 “Acknowledge Uncertainty,” Lesson 8 “Avoid Overreassurance,” and Lesson 9 “Promote Self-Efficacy” were also violated, as the government only increased transparent communication about the severity of the crisis after national media attention made the crisis impossible to ignore, finally offering accurate information and providing citizens with practical, useful, and realistic instructions on how to protect themselves from the crisis (Ulmer et al., 2017, p. 111).

Section 5 — Evaluating the Government's Response

Figure 3

Resident Lorenzo Lee Avery Jr. stands outside of Flint City Hall during a Flint Lives Matter event in 2016 while the city's water crisis left residents dependent on bottled water. | Brittany Greeson

Note. From "Flint Water Crisis: Everything You Need to Know" By Denchak, M., 2025, Natural Resources Defense Council.

5.1. Overall Assessment

5.1.1. Strengths

The strengths of the government's responses to the Flint Water Crisis are vastly overshadowed by its negative aspects, but eventually came after 18 months of pressure from national news coverage, independent scientific investigations, and constant complaints from Flint citizens (Denchek, 2025, p. 5). The city finally issued health advisories and declared a public health emergency in late 2015, providing transparency on the issue with the Environmental Protection Agency finally enforcing the Safe Drinking Water Act (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 5) (Butler & Scammell, 2018, p. 94). This included a $12 million plan to change Flint's water source to that of Detroit's, as well as a court-ordered settlement that required the city to replace thousands of lead pipes (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 5). As of July 2025, more than 28,000 pipes have been excavated and nearly 11,000 lead lines have been replaced (Denchek, 2025, p. 8).

5.1.2. Weaknesses

The government's communication responses were fundamentally ineffective, choosing to provide inaccurate information instead of owning up to their mistakes. By delaying their response for 18 months, over 9,000 children experienced toxic lead exposure (Denchek, 2025, p. 5). Additionally, the consistent denial of credible evidence and overassurance that the water was safe further prolonged the crisis, even when residents presented jugs of discolored water and reported skin rashes and hair loss (Denchek, 2025, p. 2). This contradicted independent research, which showed citywide lead spikes and a doubling of elevated blood lead levels (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 1) (Denchek, 2025, p. 5). This forced residents to organize their own sampling efforts and eventually sue the state to secure safe water (Denchek, 2025, p. 6).

5.2. Outcomes

5.2.1. Media Reactions

As the crisis began to gain national attention, news coverage shifted from neutral reporting to adversarial investigation. This reframed incorrect official statements as being byproducts of environmental injustice, where independent research more accurately portrayed the situation (Butler & Scammell, 2018, p. 96) (Denchek, 2025, p. 3).

5.2.2. Stakeholder Responses

By way of these inaccuracies and inaction, public trust in the government completely collapsed (Denchek, 2025, p. 12). As residents were felt abandoned by the agencies designed to protect them, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission concluded that the crisis was a "result of systemic racism" against the lower class and primarily minority citizens (Denchek, 2025, p. 2).

5.2.3. Reputational Impact

Long-term reputational damage is still felt to this day after the Flint Water Crisis, with "city, state, and federal missteps [destroying] residents' trust in government agencies" (Denchek, 2025, p. 12). It is the most well-known landmark case of organizational regulatory failure in recent memory, with a permanent stain on all levels of the government residing over Flint (Butler & Scammell, 2018, p. 94).

5.3. Attempting to Restore Trust

Despite civil settlements attempting to rectify Flint residents' pain and suffering during the crisis, trust has not been fully restored in the government and will probably remain low for the foreseeable future (Denchek, 2025, pp. 7-8). Although "in 2021, nine people were charged by the attorney general's office, including Governor Snyder," criminal prosecutions ended in 2023

without any individuals facing criminal penalties (Denchek, 2025, p. 9-10). However, a civil lawsuit was settled that same year for $626 million in favor of Flint residents (Denchek, 2025, p. 10). This is only a small victory when put in perspective of the 18 month crisis, which resulted in irreversible brain damage, reduced IQ, and behavioral problems for both children and adults alike (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 1 & 6).

Section 6 — Lessons Learned

6.1. Key Takeaways

As the government failed throughout the Flint Water Crisis, there are many lessons that we can learn from its mistakes. Above all else, accuracy must come before protecting an organization's reputation to keep stakeholders from harm (Coombs, 2007, p. 3). The government instead did the opposite of this, prioritizing the city's budget and civil reputation over the safety of its citizens (Butler & Scammell, 2018, p. 94).

Additionally, scientific verification must precede claims of overassurance. This is especially true in a public health emergency, as officials' repeated statements that the water was safe despite visible evidence of discoloration and resident complaints only amplified the problem (Denchek, 2025, p. 5). In the case of the Flint Water Crisis, independent scientific research was essential for correcting official timelines and ensuring accountability, circumventing the government's inaccurate claims (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 2).

As a foundational aspect, stakeholder trust before a crisis is key (Coombs, 2007, p. 3). Before the Flint Water Crisis, the government and its citizens lacked any trust due to the declining local economy and history of racial discrimination (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 2). This gave the government very little freedom for error once the crisis actually started in 2014, further increasing tensions.

The final takeaway then involves how delayed action and information amplifies harm. During this public health crisis, lead exposure had devastating consequences, affecting nearly 9,000 children and resulting in "increased fetal deaths and reduced birth weights." (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 2). The 18 month delay increased these statistics severely, demonstrating the importance of speed in times of crisis (Denchek, 2025, p. 5).

6.2. Recommendations

In order for the crisis to be handled more effectively, I would have implemented four significant changes to the crisis communications, with two taking place prior to the crisis and two taking place during its timeline and two acting as the basis before it occurs. For the changes during the crisis, specifically when reports of resident complaints first started to come in, I believe that mandatory third-party research should have been conducted to confirm their validity. This would have prevented unethical ambiguity rampant throughout the crisis, providing oversight from independent scientific institutions from the start (Butler & Scammell, 2018, p. 94).

Also a proposed change during the crisis, I would have utilized consumer confidence reports and the Environmental Protection Agency's Safe Drinking Water Information System more publicly, highlighting the efforts made to maintain water quality standards (Denchek, 2025, p. 13). Instead of this information being hidden from the public, the government should have been transparent about the information, constantly testing to keep quality in accordance with regulations.

For the changes ensuring that the crisis is better managed before it occurs, the first should revolve around cultivating an equal, honest, and open relationship between the government and its citizens. This would reduce any preexisting tensions going into the crisis, avoiding ineffective interactions and treating residents' "concerns as legitimate, even before a crisis occurs" and tying into Lesson 4 of the ten lessons on effective crisis communication "Organizations need to develop strong, positive stakeholder relationships." (Ulmer et al., 2017, pp. 86-87).

On the side of governmental work, the focus should not be entirely on avoiding the crisis, but rather simulating what could be done during its events. This would allow plans to be made in case a crisis does take place, avoiding the structural collapse of operations and communications through prepared exercises and mock simulations to mitigate a crisis' negative effects (Ulmer et al., 2017, p. 178).

6.3. Learning from the Mistakes of Flint's Local Government

As we have seen, communications executives can learn much from how to work during a crisis such as what happened in Flint. Thus, communication should be more than just a tool, acting as an operational function designed to deliver information in times of uncertainty (Coombs, 2007, p. 3). By using messaging defensively, Flint officials failed to effectively justify the water switch and keep the public safe (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 1). This should be done in relation to the constantly evolving evidence present during the crisis, with the official narrative reflecting the physical reality experienced by stakeholders. (Coombs, 2007, p. 2). In this way, when early complaints regarding the water first occurred, officials should have pivoted their strategy toward investigation rather than dismissal (Denchek, 2025, p. 2). Instead, the government relied on the overassurance that the water was safe, which backfired once independent testing proved the presence of widespread lead contamination (Denchek, 2025, p. 5). This made later admittances of harmful water quality even more volatile, as the 18 months of lead poisoning could have been avoided from the start (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 6).

Section 7 — Conclusion

Figure 4

A Flint Resident Protests Governor Snyder | Source: Photo by Erik McGregor/Pacific Press/LightRocket via Getty Images.

Note. From "Effective Crisis Communication: Moving from Crisis to Opportunity (4th Ed.)" By Ulmer, R. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Seeger, M. W., 2017, SAGE Publications.

7.1. Synthesis of Findings

The Flint Water Crisis serves as one of the definitive case studies of organizational communication failure in the twenty-first century. While the lack of corrosion control was a catastrophic technical error, the government's reliance on inaccurate information only intensified

the crisis. This prolonged the situation for 18 months, dismantling any trust Flint citizens had in their government (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 6).

7.2. Revisiting Foundational Statements

Due to initial official statements maintaining that the water was safe, the local government underwent extreme reputational damage once the truth emerged (Denchek, 2025, p. 12). This was only possible due to the intervention of independent scientific research and investigative journalism, both of which forced the government to recognize the reality of the crisis and correct their mistakes (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 5). Due to the Flint Water Crisis being a public health emergency, accuracy should have been given the utmost importance, acting not as a civil courtesy but as an ethical mandate. This would have protected both the physical health of the citizens and the reputational health of the government, making accuracy a paramount obligation in any crisis communications.

7.3. Final Argument

In the event of a public health emergency, accuracy is not optional. It is inherent to effective crisis communications and crisis management, determining both the physical outcome of those affected and the reputational outcome of the organization. In the case of the Flint Water Crisis, this was the detrimental health issues of over 9,000 Flint children, as well as the loss of credibility by the government (Denchek, 2025, p. 5).

7.4. Future Implications

Looking forward, it is imperative that future public health issues require the collaborative utilization of scientific research, accurate communication, and rapid acknowledgement of uncertainty. This will be done to ensure public safety, putting those at risk of harm before the

reputation of the organization involved (Coombs, 2007, p. 1). As the crisis in Flint was amplified due to a lack of accurate communication, it should be seen as an unfortunate example of when the truth is pushed to the side in favor of reputation. In this way, organizational accuracy should have been in place from the start, protecting the health of Flint residents instead of the image of their failing government. As the Flint Water Crisis demonstrates, public health emergencies do not recommend, but require accuracy throughout crisis communications, otherwise irreversible and lifelong health complications may result from organizational failure (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016, p. 6).

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