

# IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY IN THE FLINT WATER CRISIS

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## Background on the Flint Water Crisis

- In 2014 Flint, Michigan switched from Lake Huron water processed by the Detroit Water and Sewage Department (DWSD) to Flint water processed by the Flint Water Treatment Plant (FWTP).
- Flint failed to add chlorine and corrosion-control measures to the water, causing a bacterial outbreak and an influx of lead in the water, respectively.
- Citizen complaints were ignored until Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha revealed that children in Flint had increased concentrations of blood-lead levels at a press conference.



## Research Question

How did the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) engage in impression management during the Flint Water Crisis?

## Theoretical Framework

### Dramaturgical Theory

Erving Goffman

- People and organizations present differing versions of themselves based on the situation.
  - Frontstage:** the version of the self that is presented.
  - Backstage:** where the Frontstage is fabricated and traits are selected.
- Impression Management is how people use dramaturgy for self-preservation in times of crisis.
  - Normalization of Deviance**
- Normalization of Deviance occurs when an organization becomes accustomed to regularly altering and violating set policies

## Methods

- A comparison of 15,733 emails from the DEQ relating to the Flint Water Crisis to 100 public statements published by the DEQ.
- The emails are cross-referenced with public statements to identify backstage normalization of deviance and frontstage image maintenance.

## Findings

- The DEQ and the Governor's office knew as of Jan 30, 2015 about the Legionnaire's outbreak and suspected that it could have been caused by the water [Fig. 1a] and Wurfel plainly tells Murray "let's not [go public] just yet."
- Both offices explicitly avoided telling other departments involved [Fig. 1b] and Flint residents [Fig. 1c] about the possible connection between the quality of the water and the Legionnaire's disease outbreak.

Figure 1a

"Yes. But my answer is going to be let's not just yet. And the reason is that I don't want my director to say publicly that the water in Flint is safe until we get the results of some county health department epidemiological traceback work on 42 cases of Legionnaires disease In Genesee County since last May."

Email from Brad Wurfel (DEQ) to David Murray (GOV)  
Jan 30, 2015  
DEQ14 p.1

David Murray from the Governor's office emails Brad Wurfel to "call to pick your brain" for an event on 2/3/15. Brad Wurfel responds he does not want his director (Dan Wyant) to publicly say the water in Flint is safe to drink.

Figure 1b

"The water today is within all acceptable guidelines — and that's an improvement over where it was a couple months ago," Ambrose said. 'That says the water is safe. It doesn't say the quality is acceptable, and that's not acceptable to us.'"

Snyder grants \$2 million to Flint for troubled water system  
Feb 03, 2015  
<http://www.toledoblade.com>

Emergency manager Gerald Ambrose publicly states the water is safe to drink the same day the Governor's office pledges \$2 million to update Flint's water systems. This is likely the "event" Murray mentioned.

Figure 1c

"Public health officials identified the Flint River as a potential source of a deadly outbreak of Legionnaires' disease some 15 months ago, but people using the water were never told until this week [Jan 2016] ... Officials said there's no evidence of a clear link between the outbreak and the decision to use the river ... in April 2014, but documents show public officials ... were aware of the potential connection more than a year before disclosing it."

Public never told, but investigators suspected Flint River tie to Legionnaires' in 2014  
Jan 16, 2016  
<http://www.mlive.com>

Article from Ron Fonger at Michigan Live asserts the DEQ and other agencies failed to alert the public to the possible connection between the Legionnaires outbreak and the water from the FWTP.

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