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Environmental Racism in Canadian News Discourse. The Case of Grassy Narrows

Abstract: Grassy Narrows (Ontario, Canada) came to public attention in 1970 when it was revealed that an alarming number of the community members were displaying symptoms of the Minamata disease, a form of mercury poisoning. The source of pollution, Reed Paper chemical plant, had dumped between 4 and 9 kg of mercury per day into the Wabigoon river from 1962 to 1970.

In January 2017, the Canadian press covered the news again after Grassy Narrows chief urged PM Trudeau to engage the federal government in the clean-up of the river.

This paper takes into account the recent developments of this dispute – that bears important consequences for the community and the government – analysing the news reports published from early 2017 to early 2018. The paper compares and contrasts national and local newspapers' construal of the event and the political and social actors involved, to examine how the news was framed in relation to issues of (in)visibility as forms of violence. Special emphasis is further given to the concept of environmental racism which plays a pivotal role in how First Nations communities are treated in Canada.

Keywords: *Grassy Narrows, news discourse, environmental racism, First Nations communities*

1. Introducing the Case

Situated on the English-Wabigoon river system about 90 km north-east of Kenora (in north-western Ontario, Canada), Grassy Narrows came to public attention in 1970 when it was revealed that an alarming number of residents were displaying symptoms of the Minamata disease, which is a neurological syndrome caused by severe mercury poisoning.[1] Experts determined that the fish eaten by

[1] Symptoms included sensory disturbances, such as narrowing of the visual field, impaired hearing, abnormal eye movements, tremor, ataxia (impaired balance), dysarthria (poor articulation of speech). The history of mercury poisoning among First Nations in Canada is entangled with the 20th-century incident in the fishing village of Minamata, Japan, which also gave the name to the disease (before this disaster, the scientific community was unaware of the effects of mercury on humans). At the time, doctors established a link between methylmercury contaminated fish and human neurologic symptoms. As investigations proceeded in Japan from the late 1950s, a similar story began to unfold a few years later in Northern Canada – where, however, problems persisted for more than 50 years.

the community contained excessively high mercury levels. In fact, the mercury entering aquatic ecosystems was consumed by small animals and when larger fish ate them, mercury underwent biomagnification, reaching toxic levels. It then emerged that the source of the pollution was Reed Paper Ltd chemical plant operating upstream from the reserve as part of the Dryden Chemical Company's pulp and paper mill bleaching paper. From 1962 to 1970, between 4 and 9 kg of untreated mercury per day were dumped into the English and Wabigoon rivers, poisoning waters that had been vital for local people for centuries. Food became contaminated, commercial activities were closed and people were cut off from their main sources of income.[2] Although Reed Paper Ltd ceased using mercury in its operations in 1975 following provincial government orders, the economic and social impact of mercury pollution was devastating to Grassy Narrows. Tourism declined, while the loss of traditional ways of life originated a number of social problems like alcohol addiction, drug abuse, family violence, suicides and depression. Residents had worryingly elevated levels of mercury in their bodies, and despite the fact that compensation was offered – more than a decade later, (falsely) assuming that the effects of contamination would soon go away – community members currently continue to suffer from disproportionate rates of serious health problems. Indeed, recent surveys provide clear evidence that the physical and mental health of people in Grassy Narrows is poorer than that of other First Nation communities in Canada.[3]

As a matter of fact, Grassy Narrows was involved in one of the worst environmental disasters in Canadian history. Any discussion of the issue cannot leave the relationship of Indigenous peoples to their lands and territories out of consideration. It is a very spiritual, emotional, mental and physical tie based on the concept that land is not merely the biological environment, it is the ashes of ancestors and, as such, it must be preserved for future generations.[4] Indigenous communities consider their own history and culture to be closely and integrally connected to a specific ethno-habitat. It is through this land-culture connection and the ties to territories and natural resources that historical continuity with ancestors and origins can be maintained. However, there are several relevant differences between Indigenous views on territory, on the one hand, and institutional, legal and political definitions of territory, on the other. Indeed, while Indigenous conceptions are based on kinship ties, management of resources, oral histories, cultural and linguistic connections to the place, legal frameworks are based on

[2] In 1970, the Ontario government banned commercial fishing in the English-Wabigoon rivers – which had been a central source of income and employment for local people – posting 'Fish for Fun' signs throughout the region to discourage consumption. See Adam Mosa and Jacalyn Duffin, "The Interwoven History of Mercury Poisoning in Ontario and Japan", *CMAJ: Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 189.12 (2017), E475.

[3] See Daniela Germano, "Health in Grassy Narrows 'Significantly "Worse' than Other First Nations: Report", *CTC News* (24/05/2018).

[4] Lori A. Colomeda and Eberhard Wenzel, "Medicine Keepers: Issues of Indigenous Health", *Critical Public Health*, 10.2 (2000), 243-256.

geographical areas defined by major political entities, such as provinces and cities, bringing along the imposed idea of nation-state. Unfortunately, in contemporary politics, the Indigenous interests and the so-called Canadian interests have often diverged and clashed, making Indigenous sovereignty and land rights weaker and weaker, while their concerns were neglected.

In this respect, the concept of environmental justice, which has attracted increasing attention in the last decades, can be said to play a central role. According to Bullard, environmental justice "embraces the principle that all people and communities are entitled to equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations".[5] Linking a number of social movements (anti-racism, Aboriginal rights, the environmental movement), environmental justice is based on the assumption that all individuals have the right to be protected from pollution and to live and enjoy a clean and healthful environment. Most importantly, it brings together key dimensions relating not only to sustainable development but also to social inclusion. Within the American context, for example, a landmark study, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*, showed that some communities – mainly ethnic communities – were at disproportionate risk from commercial toxic waste, something which was confirmed by later research and then led to the newly-coined term 'environmental racism'. [6]

The concept of racism in relation to natural resources has been of pivotal importance in the development of environmental justice studies in the USA, which demonstrated that racism is embedded in multiple social structures, discourses, and dominant value systems operating within society.[7] Social scientists and environmental activists concerned about pollution began to use the term 'environmental racism' in the late 1980s, specifically referring to "the intentional siting of hazardous waste sites, landfills, incinerators and polluting industries in areas inhabited mainly by Blacks, Latinos, Indigenous peoples, Asians, migrant farm workers and low-income peoples".[8] This could be regarded as an

[5] Robert Bullard, "Environmental Justice: More than Waste Facility Siting", *Social Science Quarterly*, 77 (1996), 493.

[6] Benjamin Chavis and Charles Lee, *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States* (New York: United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, 1987); Bullard, "Ecological Inequalities and the New South: Black Communities Under Siege", *The Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 17 (1990), 105-115; Paul Mohai and Bunyan Bryant, "Environmental Injustice: Weighing Race and Class as Factors in the Distribution of Environmental Hazards", *University of Colorado Law Review*, 63 (1992), 921-932; Francis Adeola, "Environmental Hazards, Health and Racial Inequity in Hazardous Waste Distribution", *Environment and Behavior*, 26 (1994), 99-126. After opposing a proposed toxic-waste site slated for a poor, largely African-American community in North Carolina, the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice launched a study that revealed a disturbing pattern. Hazardous waste sites, landfills, incinerators and coal-fired plants were often placed in areas largely inhabited by African-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and the poor. Such marginalised groups were perceived as weak, vulnerable citizens unable to rally against the poisoning of their neighbourhoods. According to the study, such targeting was often deliberate.

[7] Bullard, *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997).

[8] James Hamilton, "Testing for Environmental Racism: Prejudice, Profits, Political Power?", *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 14.1 (1995), 107.

extension of institutional racism, causing racist discrimination in environmental policymaking.[9] As such, environmental racism evolved from a community-based movement struggling to raise public awareness of unequal environmental policies affecting low-income, ethnic communities, to a scholarly paradigm focusing on racism as a structural process involving communities that lack the resources or social status to partake in decisions that affect their territories.[10]

The scientific literature on environmental justice and racism has consequently recently become well-established, including disciplines ranging from toxicology and epidemiology to sociology and economics. This framework necessarily takes into account the historical legacies of contemporary racism and white privilege, also acknowledging the significance of the concept of social class which is at the origin of an uneven distribution of political and social power.[11]

Although such studies first appeared in the US, there is a growing body of academic and scientific literature highlighting a series of cases of environmental injustice in Canada too.[12] In particular, for instance, they prove that despite the fact that Canada has the world's third largest per-capita freshwater reserve, many Indigenous communities depend on contaminated water and difficult to access reservoirs.[13] So water pollution broadly appears a very controversial issue for First Nations communities.

[9] Andil Gosine and Cheryl Teelucksingh, *Environmental Justice and Racism: An Introduction* (Toronto: Emond Montgomery Publications Limited, 2008), 4.

[10] In the 1970s, the environmental justice movement emerged in the USA with a series of local 'acts of resistance', mostly by poor people and ethnic communities. The movement then gathered momentum in the 1980s, and it culminated in the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991. The movement's primary aim was to expose the environmental racism embedded within the policies and practices that negatively impacted some communities or groups in particular.

[11] Gary Bryner, "Assessing Claims of Environmental Justice: Conceptual Frameworks", in Kathryn Mutz et al., eds., *Justice and Natural Resources* (Washington: Island Press, 2002), 31-55; Oriana Palusci, ed., *Green Canada* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2016).

[12] See, among others, Michael Jerrett et al., "Environmental Equity in Canada: An Empirical Investigation into the Income Distribution of Pollution in Ontario", *Environmental and Planning*, A 29.10 (1997), 1777-1800; Randolph Haluza-Delay, "Environmental Justice in Canada", *Local Environment*, 12.6 (2007), 557-564; Leith Deacon and Jamie Baxter, "Framing Environmental Inequity in Canada: A Content Analysis of Daily Print News Media", in Julian Agyeman et al., eds., *Speaking for Ourselves: Environmental Justice in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 181-202; Deacon and Baxter, "No Opportunity to Say No: A Case Study of Procedural Environmental Justice In Canada", *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 56.5 (2013), 607-623. These studies posit that socially vulnerable groups – be they ethnic minorities or low-income groups – are usually disproportionately exposed to pollution. Most importantly, they stress that environmental justice is tied to broader issues of social and political justice endorsing the marginalization of some specific groups.

[13] See Sharon Nadeem et al., "Finding a Solution to Canada's Indigenous Water Crisis", *BBC News* (26/08/2018), and, for a general reference, the regulations followed by Indigenous Services Canada and First Nations Health Authority. In Canada, it is the federal government's responsibility to ensure that First Nations peoples living on reserve lands have safe and clean drinking water and proper wastewater systems. Under the Canadian Environment Protection Act, Environment Canada – the Department that coordinates environmental policies and programmes – is responsible to ensure the clean-up of hazardous waste, developing standards, guidelines and protocols for wastewater systems, while the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs is responsible to provide funding for the construction, operation and maintenance of wastewater treatment facilities (see Gosine and Teelucksingh, *Environmental Justice and Racism*, 39).

Since the federal government was aware of the water quality and the severe health problems suffered by the Grassy Narrows community, it can be argued that the institutional refusal – or delay – to take responsibility for ensuring clean drinking water and a safe environment for food sources (mostly deriving from fish) can be deemed as a case of environmental racism. The federal government's lack of action was a practice that, intentionally or unintentionally, affected community members, treating them as second-class citizens. Indeed, generally speaking, whenever government decisions might affect the rights of First Nations communities, Canadian law requires a process of good faith consultation and accommodation of Indigenous concerns – in some cases it requires that no action be taken except with the consent of the affected peoples.[14] The case of Grassy Narrows would have urged the government to apply the highest standards of protection to their rights. Instead, the community was left unheard for decades, seeking justice while paying the price of systemic racism in state legislation and sovereignty with their health. Reflection on how events happened and were handled might allow an understanding of the extent to which Canada is complicit in forms of environmental racism, producing effects of displacement to which Indigenous people are subjected. This may critically question the image of Canada as a fair and just society – which continues to prevail, even if it is contradicted by policies that appear somehow rooted in neo-colonial, racist attitudes and practices towards Indigenous peoples.

2. Framing Environmental Justice through News Discourse: A Theoretical Perspective

Media research on environmental justice integrates reflection on geographical space and environment into theories on social processes and politics, critically thinking about how differences in ecological, economic, political and social conditions are produced, while evaluating how such differences are portrayed and discursively construed by the media.[15] This seems crucial since most people learn about environmental justice/injustice from the media, that act as a filter, either as a constructor or as a silencer of environmental disputes and issues. In this respect, affected communities may suffer from under-representation – resulting in general indifference or serving to perpetuate environmental inequity. Therefore, news discourse seems worth being investigated to examine and monitor how the media react to some critical events and what overall impact they have at a local scale. Especially when concentrating on areas that tend to be geopolitically remote in relation to centres of power, media research has approached the complex weave of people, nature, geography and politics in terms of

[14] See Amnesty International, "Grassy Narrows", *Indigenous People in Canada*, https://www.amnesty.ca/our-work/issues/indigenous-peoples/indigenous-peoples-in-canada/grassy-narrows, last accessed 20 November 2018.
[15] David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 5.

environmental justice rather ambivalently. Indeed, when justice and geography are at stake, media *misframing* can become a major source of injustice, as a form of misrepresentation occurring when some social groups or individuals are denied access to just representation due to their geographical location and political status.[16] Injustices are often (un)recognised as such in relation to the status of people, which is directly connected to the media as much as politics.

The importance of considering the intricate connections between news media and Indigenous people – in cases of environmental justice – is often underscored. According to some scholars, environmental disasters receive increasing attention when they impact white, higher-income communities or neighbourhoods.[17] In other words, news media tend to treat members of Indigenous communities as "un-people", unimportant and, therefore, unworthy of coverage.[18] The way ethnic diversity is covered – or, as some view it, undercovered – also points to an economic undergirding of the media industry, marginalising environmental issues when poor and/or ethnic communities are involved.[19] Framing thus appears crucial. How cases are approached, construed or silenced, the amount of attention given to them, the perspective included in the reporting, are all relevant factors when critically analysing media and news discourse.

Scientific literature on media, Indigenous people and environment – whether in the Canadian context or not – has mostly focused on climate change.[20] In fact, Indigenous people often inhabit areas that are most exposed to shifts in the environmental context as far as acute climate change effects are concerned. The topic of climate change has usually been addressed in terms of climate justice, as an ethical issue, linked as it is to global equality, human rights, political responsibilities and marginalisation. While discursively framing legal disputes in the domain of environmental pollution

[16] Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in Globalizing World* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2008), 114.

[17] Teresa Heinz, "From Civil Rights to Environmental Rights: Constructions of Race, Community, and Identity in three American Newspapers' Coverage of the Environmental Justice Movement", *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 29 (2005), 47-65.

[18] Valerie Alia, *Media Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Psychology Press, 2004); Alia, "Un/Covering the North", *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 33-34 (2006), 179-198.

[19] Rodney Benson, "American Journalism and the Politics of Diversity", *Media, Culture and Society*, 27.1 (2005), 5-20.

[20] See, among others, Conny Davidsen, "Amazon Struggles in the Global Media Age: Framing and Discourses in Environmental Conflict", in Simon Cottle and Libby Lester, eds., *Transnational Protests and the Media* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 172-184; Katherine De Onis, "'Looking both ways'. Metaphor and the Rhetorical Alignment of Intersectional Climate Justice and Reproductive Justice Concerns", *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, 6.3 (2012), 308-327; Anna Roosvall and Matthew Tegelberg, "Misframing the Messenger: Scales of Justice, Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Media Coverage of Indigenous People and Climate Change", in Elizabeth Eide and Risto Kunelius, eds., *Media Meets Climate* (Nordicom: Sweden, 2012), 297-312; Roosvall and Tegelberg, "Framing Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples", *International Communication Gazette*, 75.1 (2013), 392-409.

and justice, media can and do play a pivotal role in amplifying or downplaying individual and social perceptions of risk about hazardous facilities in First Nations territories.[21]

Since, as is evident, great interest lies in the concepts of *dominance* and *inequality*, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was privileged for this investigation,[22] paying attention to the discursive strategies employed, as they are "systematic ways of using language […] at different levels of linguistic organization and complexity to achieve a certain social, political, psychological or linguistic aim".[23] In the attempt to achieve a series of multifaceted aims, language sustains discourse, and as such, it constitutes a central means by which discourses are conveyed to reproduce the existing order of things. In this context, the basic assumption is that all texts and discourses bear the mark of power, defining and maximising/minimising issues.[24] In any society, "there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated or implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse".[25]

3. Corpus Description and Methodology

This article aims to contribute to the scientific research in the above-mentioned field, examining the discourses embedded in the news coverage of a case of mercury contamination that poisoned the ecosystem upon which the First Nation community of Grassy Narrows depended. On 1st January 2017, the Canadian press started to cover the news again following declarations by the chief of Grassy Narrows, Simon Fobister, who urged Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to publicly engage the federal government in the clean-up of the river, after several letters had gone unanswered.

The paper thus takes into account the most recent developments of the issue – a dispute that bears important consequences, at different levels, for both the community and the Canadian government – analysing the news reports published afterwards, from early 2017 to early 2018. More specifically, the paper compares and contrasts the media construal of the political actors involved and the event as conveyed, on the one hand, by national, broad-scale newspapers – namely, *The Globe and Mail* and *National Post* – and, on the other hand, by the local newspapers from one of the largest metropolitan areas and major regions across Canada, Ontario, where Grassy Narrows is situated. Newspapers were

[21] Sarah Wakefield and Susan Elliott, "Constructing the News: The Role of Local Newspapers in Environmental Risk Perception", *The Professional Geographer*, 55.2 (2003), 216-226.
[22] Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 1995).
[23] Michael Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Anti-Semitism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 386.
[24] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).
[25] Ibid., 93.

selected among the wide range of dailies published in Canada following three criteria: they had to be a major daily with the highest circulation rates in their regional market, available electronically and published in English. Accordingly, the following newspapers were comprised in the corpus: *Toronto Star*, *Ottawa Sun*, *Ottawa Citizen*, *The Hamilton Spectator*, *Chronicle Journal*, *Cornwall Standard Freeholder*, *Thunder Bay Chronicle*, *Simcoe Reformer*.[26] Despite the fact that, for pragmatic reasons, the latter were labelled as 'locals' (constituting a sub-corpus to be contrastively investigated with the 'nationals' sub-corpus), it is worth noting that every major city and/or region in Canada is home to dozens of papers which tend to have wide readerships.[27]

This study draws on a qualitative and quantitative investigation of the texts comprised in the corpus, which is meant to examine differences and similarities in the reporting while also examining how the news is framed in relation to the main themes tackled by newspapers, in the first place, and issues of visibility/invisibility as forms of violence, in the second place.[28] Special emphasis is then given to potential debates on governmental responsibilities and the concept of environmental racism which, according to many views, plays a pivotal role in how First Nations communities are treated in the country.[29]

Searching for the string 'Grassy Narrows' in the online archive LexisNexis, about 120 news reports could be retrieved and included in the corpus.[30] Table 1 provides an overall numerical overview on the *GrassyNarrows* corpus, detailing the number of news reports and tokens in each sub-corpus, the *GrassyNarrows_Nationals* and the *GrassyNarrows_Locals*.

	Nationals	**Locals**	**Total**
No. of news reports	12	104	116
No. of tokens	4,389	64,126	68,515

Table 1. Corpus information

[26] See News Media Canada, "Daily Newspaper Circulation Data", https://nmc-mic.ca/about-newspapers/circulation/daily-newspapers, last accessed 20 November 2018. The article does not take into account First Nations newspapers not only because they had lower circulation rates – while analysis of the articles retrieved from national and local newspapers' was meant to highlight the most widespread construal of the event – but also because they would expectedly (and understandably) privilege one particular perspective in their reporting, portraying the case as a major crime.

[27] In the Canadian context, newspapers continue to be an important source of information for Canadians: 50-60% of the population read them daily and over 80% read a newspaper once a week: See News Media Canada, "FAQ About Newspapers", http://www.newspaperscanada.ca/about-newspapers/faq-about-newspapers, last accessed 20 November 2018.

[28] Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard and Rosamund Moon, "'Curvy, Hunky, Kinky': Using Corpora as Tolls for Critical Analysis", *Discourse and Society*, 21.2 (2010), 99-133; Paul Baker et al., *Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2013).

[29] Deacon et al., "Environmental Justice: An Exploratory Snapshot Through the Lens of Canada's Mainstream News Media", *Canadian Geographer*, 59.4 (2015), 419-432; Roosvall and Tegelberg, "Framing Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples".

[30] See LexisNexis (2018), https://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic, last accessed 20 November 2018. The archive gives access to the full texts of documents, without images and media files.

An initial comparison of the amount of news reports published by the different types of newspapers can then be drawn, shedding light on a greater coverage by Canadian local newspapers resulting both from the number of articles as well as the number of tokens – also signalling that articles are, on average, longer texts and possibly offer more in-depth overviews.

4. Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The first step of analysis was carried out with a meticulous, qualitative reading of all the articles comprised in the *GrassyNarrows* corpus – amounting to a total of 116 news reports – paying attention to the most recurrent topics and social actors in the news reports, examining how they are discursively represented. Such investigation seems relevant in that it may uncover how the overall meaning of media texts and the recurrent themes mentioned in connection to Grassy Narrows are shaped.

4.1 The 'GrassyNarrows_Nationals' sub-corpus

Starting with the *GrassyNarrows_Nationals* sub-corpus, it is worth noting that the two national newspapers, *The Globe and Mail* and *National Post*, published a very limited number of news reports: in fact, only 12 articles could be retrieved, amounting to less than 10% of the texts included in the whole corpus. Such figures provide an important initial indication of the newspapers' – overall scarce – coverage of the issue.

Extensive reading allowed the identification of some key topics, that were then double-checked with quantitative (statistical) information provided by the online platform Sketch Engine.[31] Table 2 details the first thirty keywords that were extracted as multi-words, ordered by their keyness score. Such keywords are meant to help analysts understand what are the main topics of the corpus.[32]

[31] Adam Kilgarriff et al., "The Sketch Engine", in Williams Geoffrey and Sandra Vessier, eds., *Proceedings of the 11th EURALEX International Congress: EURALEX 2004* (Université de Bretagne-Sud: Lorient, 2004), 105-116.

[32] The keywords thus retrieved evidence how the corpus under investigation differs from a reference corpus. Sketch Engine uses, by default, general language corpora as reference corpora to represent non-specialised language.

Rank	Multi-word	Score
1)	mercury poisoning	2,902
2)	paper mill	2,840
3)	english-wabigoon river system	2,031
4)	ongoing source	1,829
5)	remediation action plan	1,688
6)	environmental group	1,542
7)	mill site	1,514
8)	mercury contamination	1,489
9)	conservation-advocacy group	1,344
10)	old paper mill	1,344
11)	disused paper mill	1,344
12)	mercury remediation	1,344
13)	conducting mercury tests	1,344
14)	expanded mercury testing	1,344
15)	paper company	1,343
16)	provincial government	1,343
17)	chemical plant	1,341
18)	action plan	1,339
19)	comprehensive remediation action	1,338
20)	toxic leak	1,335
21)	federalist game	1,317
22)	causing ongoing health problems	1,313
23)	cleanup efforts	1,313
24)	proper support	1,298
25)	working group	1,270
26)	river cleanup	1,269
27)	full assessment	1,261
28)	supporting role	1,260
29)	prime minister	1,247
30)	provincial issue	1,244

Table 2. Keywords retrieved from the *GrassyNarrows_Nationals* sub-corpus

As Table 2 shows, national newspapers tend to concentrate their reporting, in the first place, on mercury poisoning and contamination, providing full details on the leakage that destroyed the eco-system of the English-Wabigoon river system and heavily affected Grassy Narrows community – by quoting a number of studies, surveys and testimonies. In doing so, they mainly put the blame on the paper mill which caused this disaster, as some concordances retrieved from the corpus exemplify.

1) Few have endured hardships like those suffered in Grassy Narrows, where 90 per cent of residents are showing signs of *mercury poisoning*. (*Globe and Mail*, 2/01/2017)
2) Strangely, though, 90 per cent of the people of Grassy Narrows still suffer from *mercury poisoning*, at the highest levels in Ontario. (*Globe and Mail*, 16/01/2017)
3) A retired *paper-mill* worker confirmed … that mercury had been dumped there in the past. (*Globe and Mail*, 17/01/2017)
4) Researchers have reported that more than 90 per cent of the people in Grassy Narrows and the Wabaseemoong First Nation show signs of *mercury poisoning*. (*National Post*, 14/02/2017)

5) A report commissioned by Grassy Narrows … revealed there is ongoing *mercury contamination* in the area from a paper mill in Dryden, Ont. (*National Post*, 3/03/2017)

Both *The Globe and Mail* and *National Post* acknowledge the current situation in which almost the totality of the population shows signs of mercury poisoning, and they further support their reporting by frequently citing a former worker at the paper mill who confirmed the dumping of mercury occurred back in the 1970s.

Moreover, while constantly reminding that the ongoing mercury poisoning was caused by the paper mill in Dryden, national newspapers aptly avoid any reference to the government's responsibilities (mostly for its lack of action and intervention). Interestingly, instead, great emphasis is given to the government's good intentions and laudable initiatives to clean up the river system in the future – regardless of the past five decades. In fact, the keywords retrieved from Sketch Engine signal high score values for lexical items such as 'remediation action plan', 'clean-up efforts', 'comprehensive remediation action', among the others (see instances 6-8 from concordances).

6) the government is conducting *expanded mercury testing* around the site of an old paper mill in the province's northwest in the hopes of *cleaning up* an area that has left a First Nation plagued with mercury poisoning for more than 50 years. (*National Post*, 14/02/2017)
7) the government … is now *testing the entire mill site*. "We are completely committed to working with all partners to identify all potentially contaminated sites." (*Globe and Mail*, 14/02/2017)
8) the federal government is a key partner in creating and implementing a *comprehensive remediation action plan*. (*National Post*, 3/03/2017)

Besides stressing the government's good intentions, promoting its initiatives to support remediation and amend the ecological disaster in Grassy Narrows, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau seems to sharply hint at the provincial government's responsibilities, thus shifting attention from the federal government (as is evident from example 9 below).

9) the Prime Minister described mercury contamination at Grassy Narrows First Nation as 'very much' an Ontario issue. (*National Post*, 03/03/2017)

Among the many promises to be firmly committed to do everything in his power to solve the health crisis and give proper support to Grassy Narrows community, Trudeau highlights that, although it is a provincial issue, the federal government, under his leadership, "is certainly very engaged with the province to ensure [they] are moving forward in the right direction" (*National Post*, 3/03/2017). As a

matter of fact, national newspapers lend themselves to the blame game, devoting space in their reporting to an official source, such as the Prime Minister, who is simply passing the buck. However, it is also worth noting that unlike the *National Post*, *The Globe and Mail* occasionally mentions the fact that responsibility for the mercury problems straddles provincial and federal jurisdictions. It then admits that, although the province of Ontario has borne much of the blame for the contamination, federal responsibility can also be traced as far as the health of First Nations is concerned (since it falls under the monitoring activities of Health Canada).

4.2 The 'GrassyNarrows_Locals' sub-corpus

The *GrassyNarrows_Locals* sub-corpus comprises the great majority of texts – namely 104 – not only because it includes more newspapers (eight) but also due to the fact that such newspapers covered the event with a higher number of news reports compared to the national papers.

Qualitative reading of the articles combined to quantitative investigation carried out through Sketch Engine allowed a comprehensive identification with statistical confirmation of the main topics and themes tackled by the local newspapers. Table 3 lists the first thirty keywords that were extracted as multi-words, ordered by their keyness score.

Rank	Multi-word	Score
1)	mercury contamination	5,791
2)	mercury poisoning	5,787
3)	paper mill	5,779
4)	river system	5,778
5)	treatment centre	5,762
6)	mill site	5,760
7)	ongoing source	5,743
8)	provincial government	5,727
9)	environment minister	5,708
10)	mill property	5,695
11)	mercury contaminated soil	5,686
12)	loss of muscle coordination	5,684
13)	ongoing mercury contamination	5,667
14)	impaired peripheral vision	5,641
15)	cognitive damage	5,609
16)	mercury problem	5,383
17)	stinging pain	5,317
18)	cord blood	5,290
19)	gross neglect	5,261
20)	mercury cleanup	5,250
21)	compensation fund	5,193
22)	liberal government	5,175
23)	symptoms of mercury poisoning	4,994
24)	elevated mercury exposure	4,874
25)	environmental commissioner	4,801
26)	dump site	4,729

27)	potent neurotoxin	4,685
28)	appropriate investigative action	4,617
29)	impaired speech	4,608
30)	social environmental catastrophe	4,581

Table 3. Keywords retrieved from the *GrassyNarrows_Locals* sub-corpus

What surfaces very clearly in the *Locals* sub-corpus is an overt attention to the mercury contamination involving Grassy Narrows and, above all, the consequences and diseases resulting from it. Indeed, great emphasis is given to the several medical conditions and impairments affecting members of the community, as some concordances retrieved from the sub-corpus show in the examples below.

1) The symptoms of *mercury poisoning include impaired peripheral vision, muscle weakness, impaired speech, hearing and cognitive function and numbness or stinging pain* in the extremities and mouth. (*The Hamilton Spectator*, 20/11/17)
2) Reportedly 90 per cent of the community suffers from some form of *mercury poisoning*…. While early research suggested *mercury poisoning* could only occur through direct ingestion, recent studies indicate it can be passed on to children through the placenta. The *mercury poisoning* in Grassy Narrows is now inter-generational. Children are literally being born into suffering and death from *mercury poisoning*. (*Toronto Star*, 23/11/17)
3) The people of Grassy Narrows, including children, continue to bear the *physical and emotional scars of mercury contamination*. (*Thunder Bay Chronicle*, 28/11/17)
4) Physical symptoms of *mercury poisoning* include *loss of muscle coordination and tunnel vision*. Fetuses are particularly vulnerable to *cognitive damage*. (*Toronto Star*, 29/11/17)
5) A 2016 study … found those with cord blood mercury levels greater than 7.5 ppb were four times more likely to have an IQ score below 80, the clinical cut-off for borderline intellectual disabilities. (*Toronto Star*, 13/02/18)

As is evident, in the local newspapers' reporting, great space is devoted to scientific studies and surveys on both mercury contamination and the seriousness of the symptoms and impairments resulting from mercury poisoning.

However, in addition to scientific data, the newspapers also allow community members to tell their stories, voicing their current disabling conditions and diagnoses (see instances 6-10), thus heavily relying on the emotional aspects of the event. This strategy seems to somehow counterbalance the cold 'scientific facts' of other (mostly national) news reports, resulting in a potentially enhanced involvement of readers.

6) Fobister, whose hands and feet ache daily, says something else about the symptoms: "They will never go away.… His cousin Steve has been diagnosed with ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.… He has become dependent on a feeding tube to survive, his family says. His daughter, Sherry, has symptoms, too – as do her mother, her 18-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son." (*Thunder Bay Chronicle*, 20/11/17)
7) Bill Fobister says his granddaughter, Betty, needs a speech therapist and physical therapist. Both he and Betty get mercury board disability benefits … adding that his sense of taste and smell are gone and his hearing is poor. (*Toronto Star*, 29/11/17)
8) Betty is forced to use a wheelchair and is unable to speak.… But there is no specialised care for her in Grassy Narrows First Nation…. So [she] lives with a foster family in Fort Frances, Ont., a town 280 km from her parents, siblings … and culture. (*Toronto Star*, 29/11/17)
9) Chrissy Swain was one of hundreds of infants who, between 1970 and 1992, had their umbilical cord blood tested for mercury by the federal government.… Swain grew up with problems that could be attributed to mercury poisoning. Her mother took her to a doctor as a toddler because she was clumsy. Into adulthood, her hands began to tingle. Today, she can't open bottles. (*Toronto Star*, 13/02/18)
10) Fisher, who is 31, … says she experiences dizziness and gets the shakes. Her hands often turn numb, as if they have fallen asleep.… "Sometimes I'm scared of driving, I'm scared I can't feel my hands […]," she says, adding she once accidentally dropped a knife and cut her hand.… When she talks about holding her newborn daughter she begins to cry. (*Toronto Star*, 13/02/18)

By providing detailed descriptions of people's highly debilitating diseases and the resulting complications in their everyday lives, local newspapers allow their readerships to almost 'experience', in their turn, the challenges faced by members of the community, forcing them to realise the extent to which their lives were made to change without them being even aware of it. Accordingly, Grassy Narrows residents are interviewed, their words extensively quoted, thus strengthening readers' sense of involvement and sympathetic identification with them. Several community members claim they feel violated and wronged since the government was well informed about the mercury contamination but it restrained from admitting it for decades, which resulted in one of the worst cases of gross neglect in Canadian history.

Indeed, local newspapers do emphasise federal/provincial responsibilities in (mis)handling the case, downplaying the extent of mercury poisoning, releasing false statements and making (unrealised) promises. While independent scientists sounded alarms over the years, governments invariably reiterated that the river was cleaning itself naturally and that there was no source of neurotoxin – official spokespersons claimed there was no evidence to suggest that mercury levels in the river system

were such that further remediation was needed beyond natural recovery (as emerging from the instances below).

11) The Province admitted in the legislature Tuesday that it had received an updated report about mercury contamination at the Dryden pulp mill last fall, but didn't say why it apparently didn't share the report's contents with Grassy Narrows First Nation. (*Thunder Bay Chronicle*, 15/11/2017)
12) Ontario's government has had a report in hand about mercury contamination upstream from the Grassy Narrows First Nation for more than a year, but the Premier says she didn't see it.… The report was received by the government in September 2016, but it apparently never made its way to Premier Kathleen Wynne. (*Simcoe Reformer*, 16/11/2017)
13) Until recently, provincial officials had said *the site was not an ongoing source of mercury* to the river system. Scientist John Rudd has said that, historically, paper mills have been known to be sources of contamination long after they stopped using mercury in the paper-bleaching process. (*Toronto Star*, 5/02/18)
14) In 2015 an environment ministry staffer assured community leadership in an email that "*the Dryden pulp mill is not a source of mercury*". This echoed what another ministry spokesperson told the public around that time: *there is "no evidence to suggest that mercury levels in the river system are such that any remediation … is warranted or advisable"*. In late 2016, Ontario's environment minister announced the province had searched for the *barrels* and concluded they *did not exist*. (*Toronto Star*, 5/02/18)
15) The province did not explain why it took one year to confirm *The Star*'s results. The underground metal 'anomalies' were detected in October by a government worker who scanned the area with a hand-held electromagnetic surveying device. (*Toronto Star*, 5/02/18)

Instance 15) specifically refers to a survey jointly carried out by *The Star* and the environmental advocacy group Earthroots which had the soil tested in 2016 and found that it showed mercury readings up to 80 times natural levels. According to the newspaper, the provincial government knew in the 1990s that mercury was visible in soil under the mill site but never told community residents. For decades, politicians maintained that the river would clean itself naturally, while test results from soil, fish and river sediment revealed there were still dangerously high levels of mercury.

This is a crucial point in the local newspapers' reporting of the case of Grassy Narrows. The *Toronto Star*, for instance, is very straightforward on it, referring to 'plausible deniability' and pleas of ignorance as a tactic to provide impunity to people in power (19/11/2017). The newspaper goes so far

as to frame the issue in terms of 'environmental racism'.[33] In fact, it further argues, if mercury contamination were found in the water supply of an upscale Toronto neighbourhood, it seems unlikely it would be allowed to poison peoples' lives for three generations. Grassy Narrows poisoning is, therefore, explicitly termed as a crime against humanity, appalling, heart-rendering, shameful, rage-inducing (*Toronto Star*, 23/11/2017). In this context, it is portrayed as a moral and legal question, something that started as negligence and then became a form of persecution through continuing harm. In the words of Stephen Bede Scharper, Professor of Environment and Anthropology at the University of Toronto, "the experience of Grassy Narrows must be understood as part of the legacy of decades of mistreatment of Canada's Indigenous people by the government and industry" (*Toronto Star*, 23/11/2017).

Accordingly, local newspapers uncover the fact that the government has been concealing the report and term this omission as a form of treachery; people were not only deceived, but then paid the price of such a misdeed with their own health. They further resort to official sources from the community, such as the Environmental Coordinator for Grassy Narrows, Judy Da Silva, stating "they should have told us, it's not all on [Kathleen Wynne]. We are used to people not treating us like humans, as if we are not worth it" (*Cornwall Standard Freeholder*, 16/11/2017). While noting Ottawa has turned a blind eye to this environmental disaster, the local press urges the government to acknowledge that if the institutional negligence of the past cannot be changed, there should be a moral obligation to find credible solutions.

One of the solutions mentioned by the press – which also emerges as a pivotal topic from the analysis of news reports – is the need to provide Grassy Narrows population with a treatment centre addressing the health issues related to mercury poisoning on the reserve, so that people will not have to travel to other (more or less distant) centres to receive care (see examples 16-19 below).

16) The prospect of a treatment facility for Grassy Narrows residents suffering from the effects of mercury poisoning is to be discussed in Toronto today at a special meeting, as pressure to establish a facility mounts. (*Chronicle Journal*, 29/11/17)
17) "I beg the government to make a commitment that they will do something in our community for the sake of those who are suffering." Fobister and other Grassy Narrows leaders are in Toronto this week to ask provincial and federal officials to help build a care home for survivors. (*Toronto Star*, 29/11/17)

[33] To such extent, the newspaper draws a comparison between the case of Grassy Narrows and the Holocaust, in terms of knowing and not knowing, highlighting people's responsibilities for knowing more than they somehow acknowledged about the genocide.

18) "We've been requesting this for years and years", said Grassy Narrows Chief Simon Fobister. "The government of Canada has stepped up to build a mercury home and treatment centre for our people." (*The Hamilton Spectator*, 30/11/17)

19) For four years, Grassy Narrows leaders have been asking for help for survivors of the industrial pollution that has sickened the community for decades.… Now it appears that, subject to a feasibility study, the federal government will build a treatment centre that can provide palliative care, physiotherapy, counselling and traditional healing to those suffering from mercury poisoning.… The treatment facility can't be built soon enough." (*Toronto Star*, 30/11/17)

As is evident, such aspect is addressed with urgency. Chief Simon Fobister has long pressured the federal government to plan and fund a new facility with specialised equipment on the premises of the reserve so that people who continue to bear the physical and emotional scars of mercury contamination, can receive treatment closer to home. This is something to which local newspapers devote great attention, unlike the national press.

Similarly, the local press also tackles the social consequences of the river poisoning.

20) Since the mercury was dumped in the river more than 40 years ago, the neurotoxin has sickened generations…. It has also had tremendous social impacts. The pollution decimated a robust fishing industry and many of the people in Grassy Narrows, who worked as guides, lost their jobs. (*Toronto Star*, 30/11/17)

Indeed, some newspapers note that in Grassy Narrows, time can be measured in two blocks – before and after the mercury was dumped. Before, most people worked in the local fishing and trapping industries, catering to tourists taking daytrips to catch walleye. After, everything changed, the jobs disappeared, and the community became plagued with intractable problems, such as poverty, alcoholism, drug addiction, and suicides.

5. Conclusions

By taking into account the case of Grassy Narrows, this study seeks to contribute to current research on environmental conflicts across media discourse in the Canadian context. If media discourse is said to hold a central role in how legal disputes are re-contextualised and framed to encourage citizens' involvement on public policy issues,[34] the way the environmental disaster of Grassy Narrows was

[34] Girolamo Tessuto et al., eds., *Frameworks for Discursive Actions and Practices of the Law* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018).

discursively construed can certainly offer a lens to investigate which power relations are enacted and reinforced when vulnerable groups are involved. Indeed, examination of such relations permeating news discourse can provide insights into how society is constituted, shedding light on questions of visibility and invisibility as forms of violence that embed acts of institutional racism.

A contrastive qualitative and quantitative analysis between the national and local press in Canada has allowed the identification of some major differences, mostly pertaining to how the event was linguistically depicted, what topics were recurrently tackled in relation to the specific case, which voices were (or were not) reported, narrated and heard.

The sub-corpus of national newspapers – which, in itself, comprised a very limited number of news reports, signalling an equally limited press coverage at national level – principally concentrates on one particular topic: mercury poisoning and contamination, supported by evidence from a series of studies and surveys. While all blame for the disaster is on the paper mill, there is hardly any reference to the government's responsibilities in managing the event. On the contrary, the national press seems to praise the government for its good intentions to clean the river system – despite its lack of action and intervention in the past five decades. Therefore, newspapers tend to downplay threats to the Indigenous community's health, minimising (or muting) issues concerning environmental injustice with the rhetorical support of institutional spokespersons (their primary, authoritative sources) providing reassurances that all measures have been taken to guarantee the residents' safety and health, following national laws and regulations. In line with this trend, readers are aptly given more information and factual details about the positive initiatives launched by the government in terms of remediation and/or compensation.

The local newspapers, on the other hand, provide their readerships with a much more articulated reporting of the event, offering an array of perspectives to report the case of Grassy Narrows. Mercury contamination is certainly the central topic, but unlike the national press, it is always related to the diseases and medical conditions affecting community members and the seriousness of their symptoms and impairments. Such aspects are additionally emphasised by resorting to ordinary people's testimonies and interviews which call on readers' emotional involvement and sympathetic identification with the victims of this environmental injustice. Accordingly, the local press highlights the government's responsibilities (both at federal and provincial level) and their false statements when claiming that the river system was recovering naturally. This institutional denial and the subsequent pleas of ignorance are explicitly described as a strategic move to dismiss – and, eventually, divert – responsibilities in the mishandling of the case, while covering 'uncomfortable knowledge' about

mercury contamination in Grassy Narrows.[35] In doing so, local newspapers manage to bring such uncomfortable knowledge back into policy debates and environmental discourses, thus counteracting its prior exclusion. By amending the misinformation spread by media, they undermine the national newspapers' (more or less intentional) campaign to build public trust in the government's work which seemed to aim at maintaining a status quo – whether depending on political conservatism, preserving national self-image and so forth – despite the threats posed by an ongoing environmental disaster.

Most importantly, the sub-corpus of local newspapers addresses the complicated and politically sensitive issue of environmental racism which appears not just as a concept or an abstract notion, but as a practice that is inherent in institutional policies. Indigenous populations experience the violence of environmental racism, negligence and degradation as something occurring gradually, over time, and out of sight – unlike other forms of violence manifesting themselves with immediacy and sensationalism. Varying degrees of visibility/invisibility are then ingrained in the representational strategies enacted to report the case of a community suffering from mercury poisoning for over five decades. To a certain extent, Grassy Narrows residents found themselves victims of a partial invisibility and collective amnesia. They were forgotten, their stories faded out of (some part of) mainstream media, through a process which allowed the Canadian Society to selectively leave behind the predicament of a particular people and place. This is a clear example of how amnesia may pervade language and discourse, something which can, in turn, become a signifying metaphor of the violence of social neglect and silent abuse.

If, over the last decades, there has been a surge of environmental conflicts and legal disputes in news discourse – mostly due to the key role played by media in framing and, thus, defining controversies, marking what counts as relevant, implying blame and recognition, inferring causes to explain why something occurred – what increasingly emerges is the need to address such disputes critically, as battlegrounds where discursive struggles between oppositional tensions take place. While discourses are produced and reproduced in the public sphere through competing narratives which are closely related to major agenda items, they also provide coherence and meaning to social events. In doing so, discourses can affect people's perceptions and value orientations, setting the parameters for policy debates. Therefore, investigating news discourse on environmental conflicts in Canada offers a critical lens to explore both the complexities and inherent ambiguities of the country.

[35] Steve Rayner, "Uncomfortable Knowledge: The Social Construction of Ignorance in Science and Environmental Policy Discourses", *Economy and Society*, 41.1 (2012), 107-125.