

Sophie Shemas

Dr. Arbuckle

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### Love Canal: The Environmental Ignorance of American Society

There is a profound ignorance globally in regard to environmental issues, but that ignorance is especially apparent in American society. We are surrounded by environmental disaster, yet it seems that much of the time the media has been the one to drive fear of these issues into us. If our environmental problems aren't dramatic enough, they rarely garner attention from the general public, and even when they do, the attention is fleeting for most. Layzer highlights in her book *The Environmental Case: Translating Values Into Policy*, this general lack of concern by the American people through the Love Canal disaster and explains how media attention to the issue was vital for its resolution.

Love Canal was a quiet, safe town near Niagara Falls, New York. It was also home to the Hooker Chemical Company, which chose to exploit the town as a hazardous waste dumping site. When a small canal project was abandoned in the early 1900s, the town government decided to turn the partial ditch left behind from the canal project into a municipal and industrial chemical dumping site (Beck). From the 1940s through the early 1950s, Hooker, with government sanction, used the site as a chemical waste dump (Beck). By 1953, the landfill held 21,000 tons of toxic waste, including a number of chemicals that were known carcinogens ("Love Canal – A Brief History"). That year, Hooker Chemical decided it wanted to be relieved of its responsibility for the site and capped the landfill. They then pressured the Niagara Falls School Board into buying the property for one dollar, while attempting to escape liability for any potential disaster by including a warning about what lay beneath the land in the property deed (Revkin).

Despite the warning, the area was developed. Over time, about one hundred homes and a school were built on and near the site. All seemed well until the late 1970s, when record rain fall combined with the poor construction of the landfill led to extreme chemical leaching (Beck). There were plenty of people to blame, but as Layzer argues, the residents were at some level of fault as well. When the first fumes and health symptoms arose in the community, Lois Gibbs questioned her neighbors about their concerns regarding the developing chemical issue, and many of them placed more emphasis on their worries about a decrease in property value of their homes than health problems (Layzer). It seemed that even though they were witnessing the effects firsthand, they still weren't convinced of the severity of the issue. Some residents even admit to being aware that these chemicals were lurking just beneath their homes. One long-time resident stated in an interview, "We knew they put chemicals into the canal and filled it over, but we had no idea the chemicals would invade our homes," (Beck). One could plead ignorance to the danger had they not known about the chemicals. These residents knew, but they just weren't worried enough. Residents and the city were also especially hesitant to mobilize because of the presence that Hooker had in the community and the employment and wealth that the company brought (Layzer). It wasn't until the media placed such a heavy emphasis on the crisis and instilled fear in the hearts of the residents that they spoke up about the disaster.

While we can continue as citizens to blame corporations and some lack of government regulation for environmental disasters, we can't be transparent to the fact that we are not simply victims here. I completely agree with Layzer's analysis of the public's reaction to the issue at hand. The fact is that both the Niagara Falls School Board and the residents placed their economic ventures first. The school board was so focused on acquiring the land for almost no cost and on community development that would bring more money into the school system that they refused to heed the Hooker Chemical Company's warning about the property. The residents

were more focused on the economic benefit that the company brought to their community and the potential drop in the value of their homes that they neglected their own health issues and the initial signs of the chemical leaching crisis.

It's a sentiment that is still echoed in the United States today when it comes to environmental issues: the economy takes precedent over current environmental issues, even sometimes when the health of citizens are at risk. A recent issue that is reminiscent of the Love Canal disaster—though not to its extent—was the January coal-cleaning chemical spill at the Freedom Industries facility in West Virginia. Though the response to this problem was undoubtedly quicker than the response to Love Canal, mainly because of how rapidly and obviously the signs of a chemical spill developed around the community, the dynamics of the crisis are the same.

This spill marked the third major chemical spill for the region in the past five years (Gabriel). There were clear-cut signs of a need for more regulation of chemical facilities like Freedom's. But as residents admitted, West Virginia needs the economic boost from coal. As Maya Nye, president of the West Virginia organization People Concerned About Chemical Safety stated, "We are so desperate for jobs in West Virginia, we don't want to do anything that pushes industry out," (Gabriel). The main problem is that coal mining is one of the main industries in West Virginia. They are already suffering from the nationwide shift to focus on natural gas production, so stopping coal production and coal-cleaning chemical production would be devastating to their economy. The saddest part about the whole situation is that as quickly as national attention shot to the chemical spill disaster, the media and the rest of the nation was back to worrying about other things. Although Freedom Industries was forced to pay a huge price economically, there has yet to be a major push by the community or by the nation to regulate companies like this better.

Another equally appalling issue that sounds similar to Love Canal is the ongoing water supply emergency in California. It perfectly demonstrates how Americans rely on the media to bring about concern about environmental issues. Even though California had been dealing with drought in the middle of the state for three years now, few people realized how dire the situation was until recently (even my Environmental Studies II professor hadn't heard about the crisis until after I myself had mentioned it to her). There have been signs for a while now that the drought was serious, yet there wasn't much of an outrage about the situation until California was forced to declare a drought emergency. That's when the misgivings about California's water management began to leak out. Most notably, Californians took a lot of heat for not having installed water meters and for very seldom monitoring their water usage (Rogers). In this kind of situation, there is no company to blame, unless you want to start pointing fingers at nature—though you could make a good argument blaming climate change for this one. In this case, it clearly should have partially been the impacted citizens' responsibility to speak up about the impending crisis and force the government into taking action.

Both of these examples show that we as a nation have learned very little from Love Canal. Of course, the Love Canal disaster brought about plenty of healthy distrust of potentially harmful industry and most importantly led to the creation of Superfund, which is the EPA agency that deals with the cleanup of hazardous wastes. But we ourselves, as citizens, have yet to accept the responsibility of working to prevent these kinds of disasters. We fear our up-and-down economy almost as if it were a god, and in such a media-driven world, we have become numb to news to a point where it takes one heck of a compelling story to even catch our attention. Love Canal needs to serve as an example to the people of this country that it is vital that we become more environmentally aware. As convenient as it may be to forget this, we are all players in the development and incidence rate of anthropogenic environmental disasters, so we cannot take

comfort in solely being a victim. We are inhabitants of a planet that we often forget we are destroying, and it is our duty to wake up and fight for it's safety and thus for our own.

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