

**A Paradox in a Company Town: A News Media Analysis of the Canadian General Electric (CGE) Plant's
Toxic Legacy**

Includes:

Final Report

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Course Code: PLCW 3004H

Course Name: Community-Based Research Methods

Completion Date: April 21, 2025

Project ID: 6313



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Abstract

Context: For decades, workers at the Canadian General Electric (CGE) plant were exposed to hazardous substances without proper safety training or protective measures. **Objective:** This study examines how the news media has portrayed the illnesses suffered by former CGE workers due to the toxicity they were exposed to. It explores themes such as the “blanket of silence”, media framing, and how central ideas were reported on in relation to time of publication. **Methods:** The research involved quantitative and qualitative media analysis to assess coverage of the CGE plant’s occupational and environmental harms. Two databases were used to find the sources: Canadian News Stream (CNS) and Nexis Uni Plus. In total, 28 sources were found within the study’s timeframe of 2004-2018. **Results:** Quantitative data analysis finds that the years in which many media sources were published coincide with the CGE plants closure. Majority of news sources remained local to Peterborough with little national and international coverage. It was found that the most common person to be quoted in media coverage was former CGE workers although the most common topic of articles was illness developed from working at CGE and lack of compensation from the WSIB. Qualitative data analysis finds that the concept of a "blanket of silence" is a recurring theme in media coverage and worker testimonies regarding the toxic legacy of the General Electric (GE) plant in Peterborough. Recurring themes in analyzed articles include the portrayal of GE workers as victims, the challenge of securing compensation, and the failure of organizations and government agencies to address workplace health risks. **Conclusion:** This research underscores the significant delays in recognizing and addressing workplace hazards at the Peterborough GE plant. The struggles of former CGE workers, the continued absence of a public inquiry and the lingering silence in national discourse suggests that much work remains to uncover the “Blanket of Silence” among the CGE plant in Peterborough.

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Introduction

This project examines the health disparities faced by former Canadian General Electric (CGE) workers in Peterborough, who were exposed to hazardous chemicals without proper safety training, education, or protections. By analyzing news media coverage of the CGE plant, this research identifies gaps in reporting, limitations in information sharing, recurring themes and narratives, and the media's role in perpetuating the "blanket of silence." The ultimate goal is to support the John Ball Legacy group in their advocacy efforts and provide resources for those affected by the plant's hazardous conditions. This project and research contribute to developing and improving policies and interventions to ensure worker safety and education, as well as aid for the families affected.

Workplace Safety and Environmental Harms

Workplace safety has been a longstanding issue throughout history, with numerous cases leaving behind toxic legacies, much like the Canadian General Electric (CGE) plant. Industrial workplaces frequently expose workers to hazardous conditions, leading to severe health consequences (Liu et al., 2023). The John Ball Legacy Project sheds light on the CGE plant's impact, but similar cases reinforce the ongoing need for stricter workplace safety regulations, improved worker education and training, and greater corporate accountability.

Corporate negligence and industrial toxicity have long affected workers, families, and communities. The CGE plant serves as a case study of the long-term consequences of occupational exposure to hazardous substances. For decades, CGE workers handled toxic chemicals without adequate safety measures, resulting in widespread illness and premature deaths (DeMatteo & DeMatteo, 2019). However, the impact of such toxic environments extends

beyond workers—entire communities suffer from environmental contamination and systemic neglect.

The situation in Peterborough is not an isolated incident but part of a broader historical pattern of corporate negligence and worker safety failures. A notable parallel is the case of the "Radium Girls," women who unknowingly ingested radioactive materials while painting watch dials with radium-based paint (Burki, 2017). Their exposure led to severe radiation poisoning and premature deaths, sparking landmark legal battles that advanced worker protections. These cases underscore the far-reaching consequences of failing to address workplace hazards, highlighting the deep connection between labour rights and public health.

In Peterborough, the toxic legacy of the CGE plant continues to shape the health and well-being of its former workers, workers' families, and the larger community. Many families have lost loved ones from preventable diseases, and the lack of widespread media coverage of these injustices has harmed the wider Peterborough community. The John Ball Legacy Project seeks to uncover the extent of these harms, analyze how the media has reported on workplace and environmental hazards, and advocate for greater transparency and accountability.

Canadian General Electric Plant

The Canadian General Electric plant was the site of significant industrial pollution, exposing workers to hazardous chemicals and leading to serious long-term or fatal health consequences. Employees often were in contact with extremely toxic substances such as heavy metals and pesticides, commonly without adequate protective measures or training. The overall prolonged exposure to these materials has been linked to severe respiratory diseases, many forms of cancer, and neurological disorders. Many of the workers and their families have reported higher rates of lung disease, mesothelioma, and other cancers connecting them directly to the

workplace conditions of the CGE plant. It was found that GE male employees were up to 57% more likely to die from lung cancer than the general public and female employees were up to 129% more likely (Mojtehdzadeh, 2016). This finding was further supported through the report done by UNIFOR that highlighted 3000 toxic chemicals including 40 known carcinogens (DeMatteo and DeMatteo, 2017) being used at the plant with little to no safety procedures, equipment, or training for the staff.

Blanket of Silence

A “blanket of silence” refers to a deliberate or unintentional suppression of information, most often to protect certain interests, or narratives, or avoid controversy. These “blankets of silence” can occur when news outlets, governments, or corporations choose not to speak on or report specific topics, downplay significant issues, or ignore voices that challenge perspectives. By omitting key information, the media can shape public perception, leaving audiences unaware of critical events and or viewpoints they otherwise would not have access to.

This idea of a “blanket of silence” is not only relevant to larger entities but also plays a role in workplace and worker safety through the omission of or the suppression of information about hazardous conditions, accidents, or systemic issues within an organization. This silence can be driven by corporate interests seeking to avoid liability and bad publicity, or unintentional, stemming from a company environment that discourages or outcasts those who speak up about the potential or real harms. When these workplace hazards and issues are ignored or misrepresented, workers can be left unaware of the risks they face leading to preventable injuries, illness, or fatalities.

There was a “blanket of silence” around the toxic legacy of the CGE plant, as the harms caused to its workers were unspoken about both within the company as well as within the news

media. The media failed to report on this issue, but also during that time the working environment within GE was one of silence and acceptance of their current hazardous situation, believing that it was just part of the job. This mentality also led to the fear of alienation if anyone talked out, with GE being such a staple company within Peterborough not only did these people become ostracized at work but also within their greater community if they spoke out.

John Ball Legacy

The John Ball Legacy Project is a volunteer-driven initiative that honours the work of the late John Ball (1933-2018), a former Canadian General Electric worker and activist in Peterborough. John worked at CGE from the early 1960s to the late 1990s, witnessing the widespread use of hazardous chemicals without proper safety measures or training. As younger co-workers fell ill and died from suspected workplace-related illnesses, he became a tireless advocate for workers' rights and safety.

This research aligns with John Ball's advocacy for justice for ill and deceased General Electric workers and their families, who suffered from serious illnesses or died prematurely due to workplace exposures. Many of these people's stories risk being forgotten, and this project seeks to ensure they are recognized while raising awareness about workplace safety and environmental injustice. Ultimately, this research will contribute to understanding how environmental and occupational harms caused by the CGE plant were reported in the media. This project will explore how limited coverage influenced community activism, empowerment, and justice while shedding light on the media's role in shaping public discourse on workplace safety and environmental harm. The findings within this project will serve as a resource for the John Ball legacy project, supporting their efforts to document the CGE plant's toxic legacy.

Previous Research Led by The John Ball Legacy Project

The John Ball Legacy Project has a long and productive relationship with Trent University and the Trent Community Research Center. Through this collaboration, they have conducted six previous research studies, each documenting and analyzing the toxic legacy of the Canadian General Electric (CGE) plant and its lasting effects. These reports and projects have been collected and created by students from varied disciplines allowing for the more complete exploration of information and topics by those closest to them and with the best understanding of them. Through the culmination of the expertise of Trent University faculty and students with the community-based research approach fostered by the TCRC, The John Ball Legacy Project serves as a platform to amplify stories of those who have been impacted by the CGE plant, ensuring their voices are heard and their experiences are not forgotten.

The projects have explored issues such as the ineffectiveness of Bill 70, the Occupational Health and Safety Act (1978) to protect workers (Padungpat, 2010), the links between toxin exposure at the CGE plant and disease incidence, highlighting elevated respiratory disease and cancer rates (Weafer-Schiarizza, 2009), and the systemic barriers faced by former CGE workers trying to access compensation through WSIB (Roome, 2015). Taken together, these reports shed light on the social, political, and legal challenges that have hindered affected workers in their attempts to seek justice and public awareness, contributing to a “blanket of silence.”

Despite the extensive research into documenting the environmental and occupational harms committed at the CGE plant, no comprehensive media analysis has yet to examine how these harms have been portrayed in the news media. While past studies cover the issue on a worker or occupational level, the role of the media’s power to influence public awareness and discourse on the issue has yet to be explored.

Media and the CGE plant

The analysis of news media portrayals of these toxic harms caused by the CGE plant is essential because the media plays a critical role in shaping public perception, policy, and corporate accountability. Current literature on media studies finds that corporate environmental harms often receive selective or negligent coverage, influenced by factors such as corporate public relations, media ownership, or political pressures (Faber, D. 2008). Media coverage can frame toxic exposures as isolated incidents rather than systemic issues, thereby minimizing public outrage and reducing pressure for regulatory reforms. Through the careful and thorough analysis of the news media surrounding the CGE plant, we can assess whether the media has played a role in perpetuating a “Blanket of Silence” that downplays or ignores corporate responsibility and the severity of occupational and environmental harms.

Project Goals and Research Questions

This project aims to analyze and break down the "blanket of silence" surrounding the Canadian General Electric (CGE) plant through a mixed methods analysis of news media coverage. We seek to understand how the harms caused by the CGE plant in Peterborough have been represented in the news media, with a particular focus on narrative strategies, volume of reporting, media reach, and platforms used. Through this process, we will explore how media coverage, or lack thereof, contributes to or reflects the "blanket of silence" within the Peterborough community about the environmental and occupational health impacts of the CGE plant. Overall, this project aims to provide insights that could help raise public awareness and inspire action toward justice and accountability for affected workers and the broader community.

This study is guided by the following three key research questions:

1. How extensive is the media coverage of the occupational and environmental harms caused by the Canadian General Electric Plant, and what is its reach?
2. How does the news media frame and portray stories about the occupational and environmental harms associated with the Canadian General Electric Plant in Peterborough?
3. How does the media coverage contribute to or reflect the “blanket of silence” in the Peterborough community regarding the toxic legacy of the Canadian General Electric Plant?

By addressing these questions, this project will critically examine how the CGE plant has been represented in the media. Through evaluating the framing, narratives, and extent of coverage, we will consider the role of the media in shaping public perception and contributing to the "blanket of silence" surrounding the plant's toxic legacy.

Methodology

Purpose of Community-Based Research

The project is informed by the principles of a community-based research (CBR) approach. Community-based research is quickly gaining recognition as an important asset in addressing Canada's complex environmental, health, and social problems (Minkler, 2005). It is defined as a research approach that involves active participation from stakeholders, those whose lives are affected by the issue being studied, and aims to produce useful results to create positive change (Flicker et al., 2008). In community-based research, the researchers and community members/organizations collaborate throughout the entire research process to gather and produce significant findings (Community-Based Participatory Research Design, 2017).

Community-based research is widely recognized as the most effective research approach to address local issues and empower communities (Flicker et al., 2008). It emphasizes the importance of principles such as collaboration, inclusivity, respect, and creating actionable results (Flicker et al., 2008). This fosters a relationship built on trust and mutual respect between researchers and community members/organizations to facilitate more open and honest participation, resulting in greater data quality (Springer & Skolarus, 2019). Many advocates of community-based research have argued that community involvement produces more responsive, understandable, and pertinent data, ensuring that the gathered research helps individuals make lasting personal and social changes (Flicker et al., 2008).

In this research project, our group collaborated with the John Ball Legacy Project to help solve the community issue. Community-based research served as the most appropriate and effective method to collect and produce our data. The goal of the John Ball Legacy Project is to seek justice for the ill and deceased former workers of the Peterborough CGE plant. The organization's objective is directly aligned with our goal to develop an understanding of how the environmental damage caused at the CGE plant has been covered in the media and the effects it has had on the local community.

Our collaboration was facilitated by Sarah Khaki, the Trent Community Research Centre (TCRC) project coordinator. Sarah introduced our team to Heather Brooks-Hill, a founding member of the John Ball Legacy Project and our primary partner representative. To conceptualize the project, there was a negotiation process between our group and Heather to ensure that the needs/wants of the John Ball Legacy Project were met while following the academic requirements and guidelines of the course. While Heather had initially proposed a project using primary data, due to time constraints and limited resources, we proposed an

alternative project based on a media analysis. Heather agreed and provided her feedback to help strengthen the research design and tailor it to the needs of the JBL Project. This demonstrated the reciprocity principle of community-based research, as both the goals and expectations of Heather and our team were met.

Throughout the research process, we maintained regular communication with Heather via Zoom meetings and email exchanges, allowing us to provide updates on our research progress, receive expert insights, expectations, and feedback, clarify questions as needed, and access key documents such as past literature reviews and reports on media coverage of CGE-related harms. This ongoing engagement with Heather significantly enriched our understanding of the issue and reinforced the effectiveness of the CBR approach. Her expertise, support, and flexibility allowed us to conduct our research in a more informed and meaningful way, ensuring that our findings contribute to broader efforts for justice, awareness, and accountability.

Methods

The methods used in the research involved a combination of quantitative and qualitative media analysis to provide a strong overview of how news media have portrayed the environmental harms caused by the Canadian General Electric plant. The media analysis involved examining news articles, to understand their content, influence, and impacts (Matthes et al., 2008).

Throughout the research process, a thorough review of previous projects on the John Ball Legacy took place to observe more background information about the topic and to inform data collection and analysis. From that point, we analyzed news media articles for themes, narratives, and biases that shaped public perception of the issue. The analysis looked at the different types of language used in the media and how it can influence public perception, which took place in

two ways: by drawing attention or downplaying the issue. The quantitative and qualitative media analysis process consisted of three steps: a sample section, coding and analysis, and synthesis.

In the sample section, various media texts were collected, including online content from local and national sources. Before starting the research process, our group consulted with a Trent University library technician to ensure a comprehensive and diverse sample was found to maximize the quality of the findings. To find the strongest sources, the databases Canadian Newsstream (CNS) and Nexis Uni Plus were used. Each database provides access to a wide range of current and historical Canadian newspapers, news magazines, and newswires. To ensure that the most relevant sources were found, certain search terms were used, including "environmental harm at CGE Peterborough," "CGE plant cancer cases," "whistleblower accounts at CGE Peterborough," and "code of silence environmental harm." The timeframe was set between 2004 to 2018, as this corresponds with the dates when the OEHCP steering committee operated. After a concise overview and screening out duplicate and non-relevant articles, there were 28 useful articles published by local and national networks, including CBC, Canadian Press, Global Data Point, Global News, Postmedia Breaking News, Peterborough This Week, Peterborough Examiner, and MetroNews.ca.

The coding and analysis consisted of a concise review of the recurring themes, patterns in framing, and areas where media coverage may be lacking. The quantitative and qualitative media analysis portions were divided into separate portions. In the quantitative media analysis portion of the research, a detailed table was created to answer the first research question: "How extensive was the media coverage of the occupational and environmental harms caused by the CGE plants, and what was its reach?". The table demonstrates the extent of the media coverage based on the

key descriptive attributes of each article. It is descriptively organized, covering factors such as the publication type, source, publication date, word count, and primary focus or topic category.

In the qualitative media analysis component, a thematic content analysis was conducted to answer the second research question: “How does the news media frame and portray stories about the occupational and environmental harms associated with the CGE plant in Peterborough?”. This qualitative media analysis conveys others’ views about the blanket of silence regarding the CGE plant in Peterborough. This qualitative media analysis also tells the project’s story through media framing. All in all, this media analysis breaks down how the media portrays the toxicity of the CGE plant in Peterborough and how it has affected former CGE workers. The analysis involved identifying recurring themes, assessing how the media portrays the situation, analyzing the choice of language, and evaluating whether the articles prioritized industry voices. The analysis involved identifying recurring themes, assessing how the media portrays the situation, analyzing the choice of language, and evaluating whether the articles prioritized industry voices. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, the dual approach provides a broad overview and detailed understanding of the narratives surrounding environmental harm at the CGE plant in Peterborough.

The synthesis included the utilization of patterns within the media and an examination to see whether they are beneficial in contributing to hiding the environmental issues caused by the CGE plant. An additional table was created to determine whether the coverage framed the issues as isolated incidents or a part of an ongoing issue. The research collected from the quantitative and qualitative media analysis of each article was reviewed and listed as framing the issue as isolated or ongoing. This portion of the research project also answered the third research

question: “How does the media coverage contribute to or reflect the 'blanket of silence' in the Peterborough community regarding the toxic legacy of the Canadian General Electric Plant?”.

Overall, the research combines quantitative and qualitative media analysis methods with a community-based research approach. These methods ensure that a thorough and community-focused understanding of how the environmental damage caused by the CGE plant has been reported and experienced by community members is produced. Using tools such as analyzing media coverage and following community-based research principles of collaboration and inclusivity, the study is completely aligned with the needs and perspectives of the community and the John Ball Legacy Project. The use of analysis, such as identifying themes and organizing findings into visual tools like tables, helped identify gaps and patterns in media narratives. Ultimately, the research used has presented conclusions in accessible, actionable formats that community members and the John Ball Legacy Project can use to advocate for greater awareness.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

Distribution of Articles Published by Year

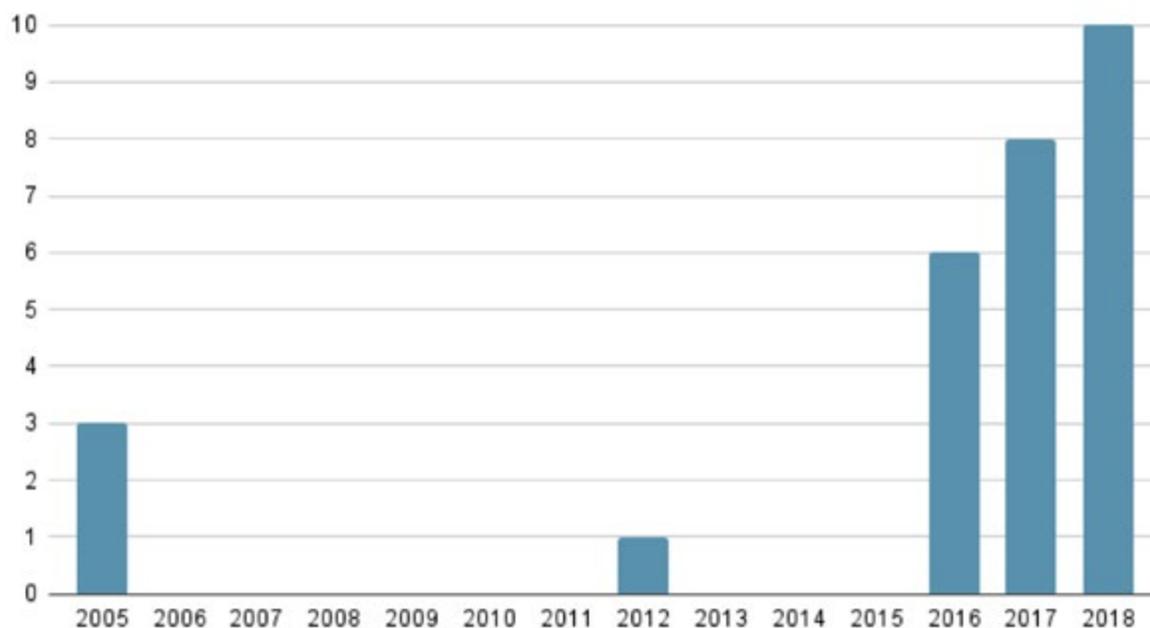


Figure 1: Bar graph of distribution of articles by year.

This bar graph shows the years in which the articles were published. It shows that 3 articles were published in 2005, 1 in 2012, 6 in 2016, 8 in 2017, and 10 in 2018. As can be seen by the graph, most of the articles were published around the time the CGE plant was closing or had already been closed in 2018. Considering that very few articles were published about the toxicity of the CGE plant when it was open, we would argue that this contributes to the silence surrounding workplace safety. Instead of the media reporting on the issue when it was taking place, it reports on the impact of the CGE plant. For years, while the CGE plant in Peterborough was open, very few people recognized and reported on the initial issue.

Distribution of New Sources

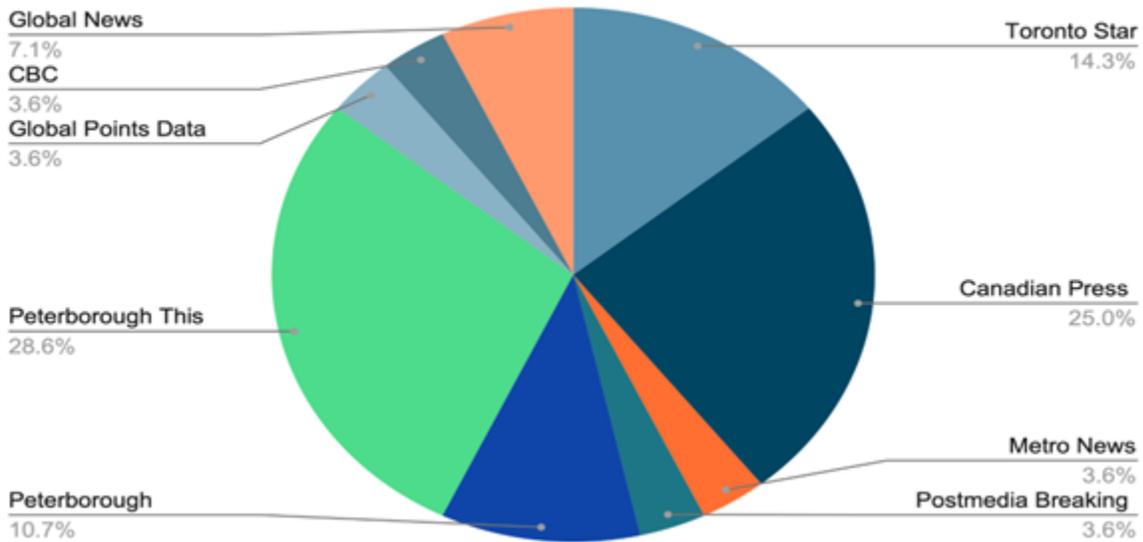


Figure 2: Pie graph of news sources.

This pie graph shows the number of articles we analyzed from each news source. From this pie graph, we can see that the majority of the coverage remains local to the city of Peterborough. There is some national media coverage concerning the Canadian Press, but very little international coverage. This would reflect silence around the Peterborough GE plant because not many people would be able to easily access the already little media coverage. It appears that Peterborough residents may come into contact with local coverage by reading the newspaper, although this issue would not circulate beyond Peterborough.

Breakdown of Quoted Individuals in Articles

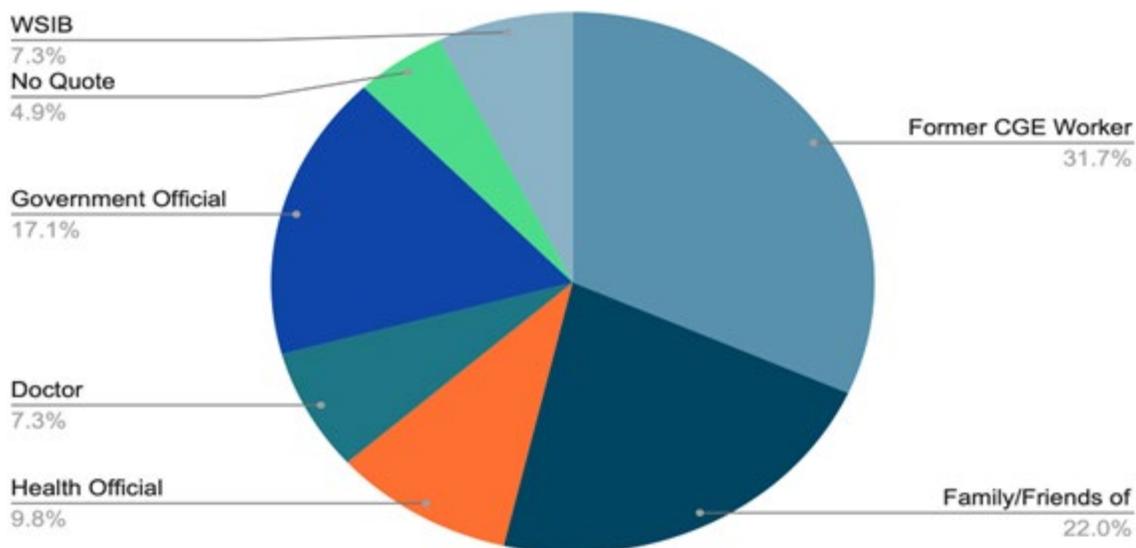


Figure 3: Pie graph of quoted individuals.

This pie graph shows the breakdown of individuals quoted in the news articles. Although 31.7% of articles quoted former CGE workers, many of these articles shared a narrative that quoted the same people. The most common former CGE workers to be quoted included Roger Fowler and Ron LeBeau. 22% of articles also quoted family and friends of former CGE workers. One of the more common narratives for friends and family of former CGE workers consisted of them speaking about the illness of their friend/family member or the issue of not receiving WSIB compensation for the illness caused by working at CGE. It was rare to find a quote from a health official or government representative, but when this was found, a common narrative of these quotes shifted the blame from themselves to the CGE plant or even the former CGE workers. Some articles frame this issue as individual while others frame it as systemic. One occupational disease expert calls the factory a “cancer generator” (Mojehezadeh, 2016). Whereas WSIB workers claim “What they shouldn’t do is keep stringing them along,” in relation to WSIB

claims made by former CGE workers (GE Peterborough workers' cancer cases get second look, 2017)

Comparison of People Quoted in Articles Pre- and Post-CGE Plant Closure

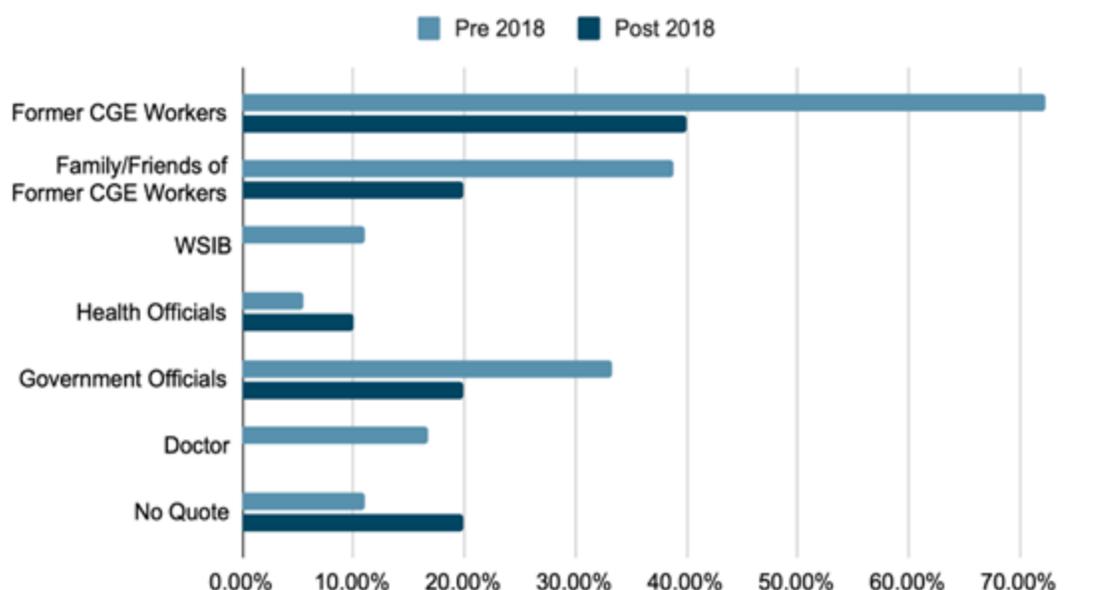


Figure 4: Bar graph of quoted individuals and time of publication.

Figure 4 shows the proportion of articles before and after 2018 (the year the CGE plant was closed) that include quotes from selected individuals or groups. The proportions were calculated by dividing the number of articles that quoted a particular group by the total number of articles during that time period (pre or post 2018), then multiplying by 100. Articles that were published before the closure of the CGE plant quote former CGE workers the most, followed by family and friends of former CGE workers and government officials. Articles pre-2018 tend to quote health officials the least, with second-to-last place being the WSIB. Articles published after the closure of the CGE plant similarly quote former CGE workers the most, with friends

and family of former CGE workers being quoted the second most. Articles published post-2018 tend to quote government officials the least and do not quote the WSIB or doctors at all.

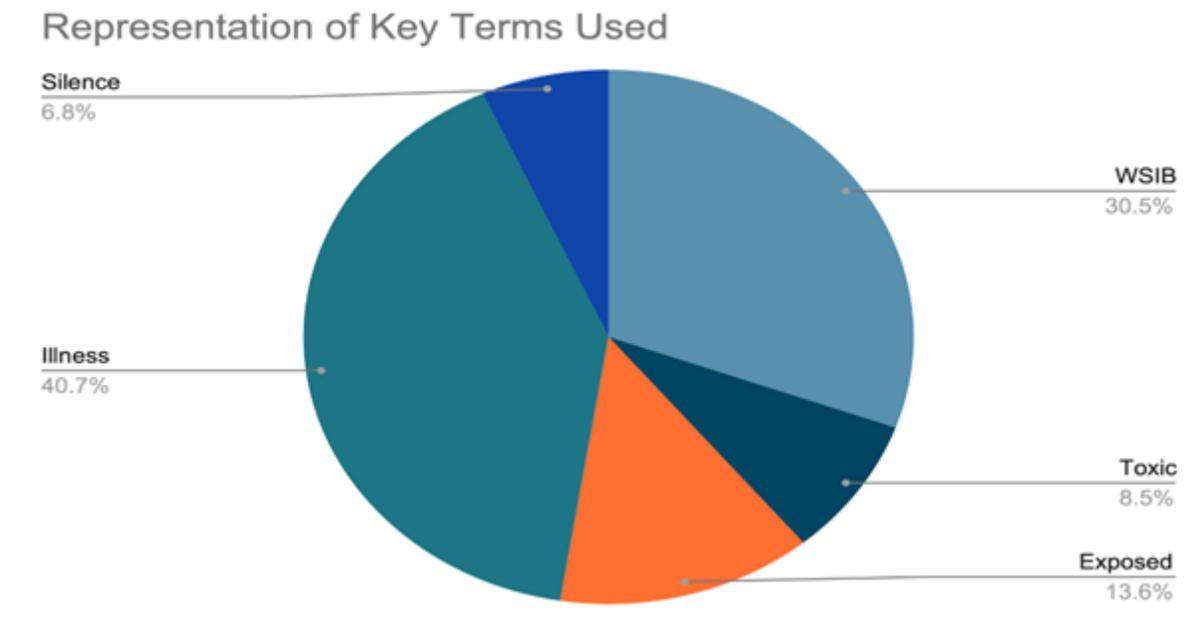


Figure 5: Pie graph of key terms used.

This pie graph shows the representation of key terms within the articles we analyzed. Due to the majority of these articles being published after the CGE plant closed, 40.7% of articles discussed the illnesses former CGE workers had developed. If this issue had been given more attention earlier on, not only would these statistics most likely be different, but also the pain and suffering former CGE workers and their families face may have diminished. Many articles discussed the lack of compensation former CGE workers received from the WSIB. A common theme was the fact that hundreds of former CGE workers were denied by the WSIB despite the illness and pain they suffered. Only 13.6% of articles discussed how former CGE workers were exposed to toxic chemicals. This shows the lack of coverage on the initial issue and more focus on the impacts of the CGE plants. Similarly, only 8.5% of articles analyzed speak to the toxicity

of the CGE plant, coinciding with the silence around the initial issue of the CGE plants. Only 6.8% of articles actually speak to the silence that has been impacting former CGE workers and their families. To summarize, all of these key terms speak to the silence by not only highlighting the overlooked former CGE workers but also showing that the lack of compensation is talked about more than the main issue, which is the toxicity of the CGE plant.

Key Term Frequency by Publication Time

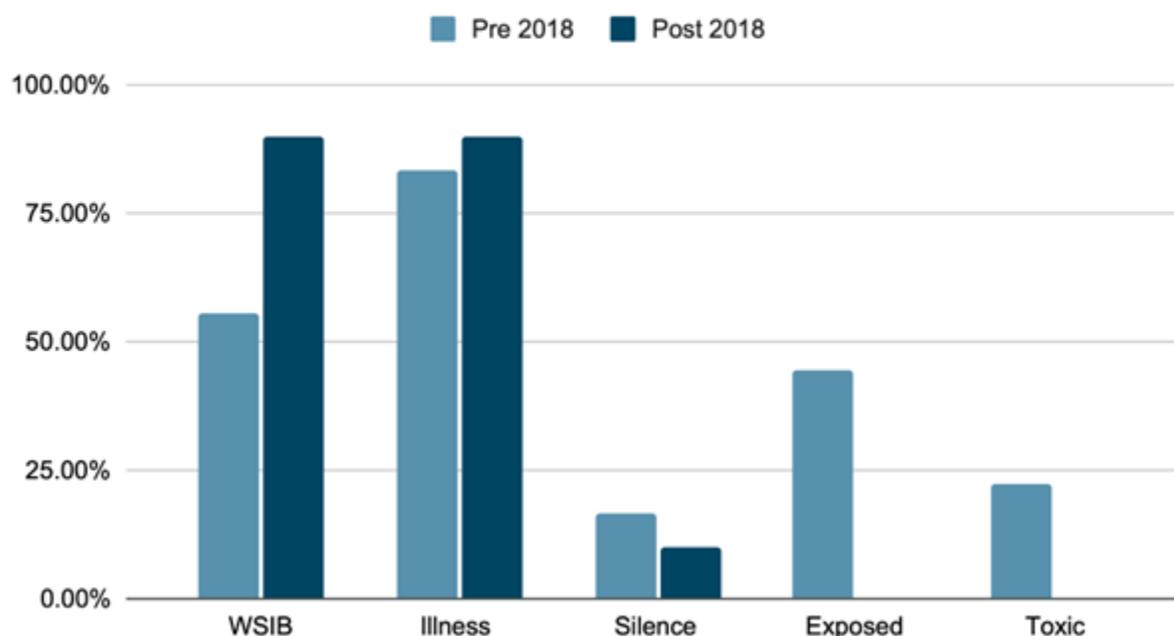


Figure 6: Bar graph of the key terms and time of publication.

This bar graph shows the key terms in articles in relation to the time of publication. Articles that have been published after the CGE plant closed (in 2018) heavily emphasize the topics of illness and WSIB claims, with very little to no focus on the blanket of silence and the exposure of toxic chemicals. Articles published prior to the CGE plant's closure similarly focus on illness and WSIB claims but also focus more on exposure to toxic chemicals, as well as the silence surrounding this issue.

Media Framing

The Focus on Individual Cases vs. Systemic Crisis

An analysis of articles surrounding the John Ball Legacy Project reveals how media narratives about workplace-related illnesses and compensation struggles among former GE Peterborough workers are framed in two distinct ways: some focus on individual cases, while others emphasize broader systemic issues. For example, certain media reports detail the personal struggles of individuals like Roger Fowler, whose fight against WSIB was captured in a Toronto Star article that quoted him saying, “Every day I wake up, I wonder if it’ll be my last. They won’t even admit what happened to us” (Mojtehedzadeh, 2018). In contrast, other articles frame these stories within a wider critique of corporate negligence, government inaction, and WSIB barriers. A Toronto Star investigative report, for instance, argued, “These illnesses are not isolated tragedies. They are the direct result of decades of neglect and corporate indifference” (Toronto Star, 2016). This variation in framing highlights the tension between personal narratives and systemic critiques within the media coverage of this issue.

The Use of Emotional Storytelling

Media coverage frequently employs emotional storytelling to highlight the severity of the issue. Articles feature grieving families and workers fighting for compensation despite deteriorating health. A Peterborough Examiner article described Marilyn Harding’s struggle: “She held a framed photograph of her late husband, his once-strong hands reduced to frail bones by disease. ‘He just wanted someone to believe him,’ she said, her voice breaking” (Peterborough Examiner, 2018). By focusing on personal loss, these narratives generate public sympathy and underscore the urgency of addressing the crisis.

The Portrayal of GE Workers as Victims

A dominant theme is the portrayal of GE workers as victims of hazardous working conditions. Personal testimonies—such as Roger Fowler’s account of developing cancer after decades of chemical exposure—highlight extensive and preventable workplace hazards. One article in *The Toronto Star* quoted an anonymous worker: “We were breathing in death every single day, and nobody cared” (*Toronto Star*, 2016). Reports emphasize exposure to carcinogens like asbestos, lead, and arsenic, reinforcing that these illnesses are not isolated cases but part of a wider occupational health crisis.

Criticism of WSIB’s Compensation Barriers

Another recurring theme is the challenge of securing compensation. Despite scientific research linking illnesses to workplace exposure, WSIB has been repeatedly criticized for denying claims. Data from news reports illustrates the systemic nature of these rejections: out of 233 reviewed cases, only 71 were overturned, while 105 remained denied (Mojtehdzadeh, 2018). Critics argue that WSIB’s strict evidentiary standards place an unfair burden on victims, despite a 2016 Supreme Court ruling stating that workers should be given the benefit of the doubt in borderline cases.

Institutional Neglect and Government Inaction

The failure of organizations and government agencies to address workplace health risks is another significant theme. Despite growing medical evidence and advocacy efforts, official

responses are characterized as slow, ineffective, and hindered by institutional resistance. The lack of proactive monitoring, preventive measures, and support for affected workers is framed as a form of institutionalized neglect.

Calls for Justice Reform

Many articles conclude with calls for justice, urging the government, WSIB, and GE to take greater responsibility for the harm caused. Advocacy groups like the Occupational and Environmental Health Coalition, along with statements from affected families, emphasize the need for comprehensive health screenings, fairer compensation processes, and stricter workplace safety regulations.

Blanket of Silence

The concept of a "blanket of silence" is a recurring theme in media coverage and worker testimonies regarding the toxic legacy of the General Electric (GE) plant in Peterborough. This silence takes many forms, including corporate and governmental denial, limited national media attention, bureaucratic barriers to compensation, and a broader societal reluctance to acknowledge the extent of the harm caused fully.

A key aspect of this silence is the refusal of major stakeholders to acknowledge responsibility. General Electric has largely avoided addressing the findings of independent studies, such as those by Dr. Kerin, which identified high rates of cancer and asbestos-related diseases among former workers (CBC, 2005). Dr. Kerin stated that 50 of 123 former GE workers he examined had serious diseases, including asbestosis and cancer, and estimated that up to 5,000 of the workers were exposed to the harmful substances (CBC, 2005). Despite mounting

evidence, GE has not publicly responded to these concerns. Likewise, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) has been slow to recognize the occupational origins of many illnesses, leading to widespread claim denials—250 of which have been rejected (Mojtehdzadeh, 2018). Families, such as Ron LeBeau's, have had to battle multiple rejections before securing compensation, illustrating systemic resistance to acknowledging the problem (Peterborough Examiner, 2018).

Although these articles have shed light on this issue, coverage has largely remained confined to local media, reinforcing the broader silence. Reports from publications like *The Toronto Star* have given voice to affected workers and their families, but these stories often fail to gain sustained national attention. For example, *Toronto Star's* investigative reports have highlighted the struggles of workers like Roger Fowler, but national outlets have not followed up to amplify these findings (Mojtehdzadeh, 2018). The media's tendency to focus on individual cases rather than framing the issue as a large-scale occupational health crisis contributes to the perception that these are isolated incidents rather than symptoms of systemic failure. Additionally, layoffs and economic downturns in Peterborough have often overshadowed the ongoing health crisis affecting former GE workers.

Even within Peterborough, a "culture of silence" has been ongoing for decades. Worker testimonies indicate that safety concerns were discouraged, and protective equipment was rarely provided before 1980 (Toronto Star, 2016). One former worker recalled, "If you spoke up about the chemicals, they'd tell you to keep your head down and get back to work" (Toronto Star, 2016). Efforts to advocate for affected workers have often met resistance, with some alleging that both workplace management and unions played a role in suppressing concerns about chemical exposure. Many affected families report feeling isolated and frustrated, as their

struggles for justice remain largely unacknowledged outside the local community. Natasha Luckhardt, a workplace safety advocate, noted that “both governmental structures and compensation systems have contributed to perpetuating this silence, though recent media attention has begun to challenge it” (Peterborough Examiner, 2018).

Despite these barriers, some progress has been made. Reports have amplified the voices of affected workers like Marilyn Harding and Roger Fowler, pushing the issue into public discourse (Mojtehdzadeh, 2018; Wiebe, 2012). Fowler had been fighting for compensation from WSIB since 1992 and was rejected more than once. In April 2018, he received a phone call notifying him that his WSIB claim had finally been accepted (Mojtehdzadeh, 2018). "It's over," he said in an interview, minutes after learning the news. "It's for real!" This demonstrates the reality of the struggles that former GE workers encountered in receiving compensation and the relief of justice finally being served. Some previously denied claims have been reconsidered, with 60 workers now receiving compensation, including 15 recent approvals (Wiebe, 2012). However, the absence of a public inquiry and continued bureaucratic resistance indicate that many obstacles remain. While media coverage has helped expose injustices, it has not yet led to sustained national attention or significant policy reforms.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the persistent "blanket of silence" surrounding workplace safety issues at the former Canadian General Electric (CGE) plant in Peterborough. The analysis of media coverage reveals that reporting on the toxic working conditions and resulting illnesses was significantly delayed, with most articles emerging only after the plant had closed. This aligns with previous research on occupational health crises, where recognition of

industrial hazards often lags behind exposure, leading to preventable harm (Michaels, 2008). Historically, industrial disasters such as asbestos-related illnesses and lead poisoning have followed similar patterns, where workers and their families suffer long-term consequences before regulatory intervention occurs (Markowitz, 2006).

One of the most striking findings is the imbalance in media focus—while 40.7% of articles addressed the illnesses suffered by former CGE workers, only 13.6% discussed their initial exposure to toxic chemicals, and a mere 8.5% explicitly examined the plant’s toxicity. This supports prior studies on environmental and workplace injustice, which indicate that media narratives frequently emphasize the consequences rather than the root causes of occupational health crises (McCauley et al., 2006). The limited coverage during the plant’s operational years likely contributed to delayed public awareness and policy responses.

The role of the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) emerged as another key theme, with widespread denial of compensation claims despite clear scientific evidence linking illnesses to workplace exposure. Media reports illustrate this deflection, with WSIB officials often citing insufficient evidence or procedural barriers as reasons for claim denials. For instance, articles in the *Toronto Star* (2018) highlight cases where workers provided medical records and exposure histories, yet their claims were dismissed on technicalities. Out of 233 reviewed cases, only 71 were overturned, while 105 remained denied. This reflects broader systemic barriers within compensation systems, where strict evidentiary requirements disproportionately burden workers rather than employers (McCauley et al., 2006). The study also found that workers and their families were the most frequently quoted sources in media reports, yet their voices remained largely confined to local news, further perpetuating the silence at a national level.

Moreover, the analysis highlights the lack of accountability from major stakeholders. General Electric has largely avoided public acknowledgment of worker illnesses, while government officials and WSIB representatives, when quoted, often deflected responsibility. This aligns with previous research indicating that corporate and institutional actors often employ strategies to minimize liability and shift blame onto individual workers (Jasanoff, 1998). Jasanoff describes how organizations use bureaucratic complexity, shifting regulatory language, and narrowly defined scientific standards to create barriers for workers seeking compensation. By requiring unattainable levels of proof or dismissing claims due to minor technicalities, these institutions effectively shift the burden onto workers, reinforcing a system where accountability is obscured.

Despite these challenges, the findings also point to some progress. Investigative journalism has played a crucial role in amplifying the voices of affected workers, leading to the reconsideration of some denied WSIB claims. Reports from Peterborough This Week (2018) have helped expose inconsistencies in WSIB's decision-making process and pressured policymakers to reassess their approaches to workplace compensation. Investigative journalism is widely recognized for its role in breaking codes of silence and exposing systemic injustices (Ettema & Glasser, 1998). Research on media influence suggests that in cases of corporate negligence, sustained investigative reporting can lead to policy changes and increased accountability (Hamilton, 2016). However, the absence of sustained national media coverage or a formal public inquiry indicates that many barriers to justice remain in place.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the scope of media analysis was constrained by the focus on news articles, excluding social media and other digital platforms that significantly contribute to public discourse. Future research could examine how social media influences public perception and mobilization on workplace safety issues. Second, while the study identifies key patterns in media framing, it does not measure the direct impact of these narratives on public opinion or policy decisions—an area for further exploration.

Conclusion

This research underscores the significant delays in recognizing and addressing workplace hazards at the Peterborough GE plant. The findings contribute to the broader understanding of how occupational health crises are framed in the media, emphasizing the role of corporate silence, resistance, and limited national coverage in shaping public awareness and policy responses.

A key contribution of this study is its demonstration of how media narratives express the consequences of workplace exposure rather than its causes. This reinforces the need for reporting on occupational hazards before they escalate into crises. Additionally, the study highlights systemic issues within the WSIB compensation process, supporting calls for reform to ensure fairer assessments for affected workers.

Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge to address the ongoing silence surrounding workplace safety violations. Increased investigative journalism is crucial, as national media outlets should prioritize long-term investigations into occupational hazards rather than only reporting on their consequences after crises have already unfolded. However, this recommendation must be considered in the context of declining public trust in news media. The

rise of "fake news" narratives and alternative sources of information has undermined traditional journalism, making it more challenging to sustain investigative reporting on complex labor issues (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). Strengthening media literacy and public trust in reputable journalism will be essential to ensuring that these issues receive the attention they deserve.

Policy reforms in compensation systems are also necessary, particularly within the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB). The WSIB should adopt more worker-friendly standards, aligning with the Supreme Court's ruling that workers should receive the benefit of the doubt in borderline cases. Additionally, greater corporate accountability must be enforced, ensuring that companies like Canadian General Electric are held responsible for workplace safety violations. This could include legal consequences or financial reparations for affected workers and their families. Beyond corporate and institutional changes, public awareness initiatives play a vital role in preventing future cases of workplace exposure. Unions, advocacy groups, and policymakers should work to increase awareness of occupational health risks, ensuring that workers in hazardous industries are informed of their rights and protections.

Lastly, further research is necessary to understand how media coverage influences policy decisions and whether increased visibility leads to meaningful institutional changes. Addressing these gaps through investigative journalism, policy reforms, corporate responsibility, public awareness efforts, and continued research will be essential in breaking the cycle of silence surrounding workplace safety.

While progress has been made in recognizing the struggles of former CGE workers, the continued absence of a public inquiry and the lingering silence in national discourse suggest that much work remains. Without attention and reforms, the legacy of workplace exposure at CGE

may continue to be overlooked, reinforcing the very silence that has harmed so many workers and their families.

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Appendix A:

Overview of Sources in Media Analysis

Author / Title	Year	News Source	Who Quoted	Key Terms (WSIB, Exposed, Toxic, Illness, Silence)
Wiebe, J.	2012	Peterborough This Week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roger Fowler (Former CGE Worker) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSIB
Troubling health problems emerge among CGE Workers	2005	CBC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Kerin • Morris Hughes (Former CGE Worker) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposed • Toxic
Joelle Kovach	2018	Peterborough Examiner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sandy LeBeau (Wife of former CGE worker) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSIB • Illness

Sara Mojtehdzadeh	2018	Toronto Star	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sue James (Former CGE Worker) • Bob DeMatteo (Former Health Official) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illness • WSIB
Jesse Thomas & Greg Davis	2017	Global News	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSIB
Sarah Deeth	2017	Global News	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSIB • Illness

Sara Mojtehdzadeh	2016	Toronto Star	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roger Fowler (former CGE worker) • Cindy Crossley (Family of former CGE worker) • Dr. Jim Brophy (occupational disease expert) • Jim Dufresne (former CGE worker) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illness • WSIB • Toxic
One of earliest, most prominent GE Peterborough activists has died.	2018	Peterborough This Week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marion Burton (friend of former CGE worker) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illness

Almost half of 250 reassessed WSIB claims for Peterborough GE workers rejected.	2018	Peterborough This Week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Armando Fatigati (WSIB vice-president) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WSIB Illness
Work safety advocates say there's plenty of work to be done.	2018	Peterborough This Week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loretta Michaud (Worker health and safety center) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WSIB Illness
GE retirees, wives and children continue fight with WSIB despite hardships.	2018	Peterborough This Week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sara Sharpe (wife to former CGE worker) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Silence Illness WSIB
GE worker's health claim finally accepted.	2018	Peterborough Examiner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Roger Fowler (former CGE worker) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Illness WSIB

Q&A with WSIB and eff deal planned for former GE workers on April 12.	2018	Peterborough This Week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSIB
GE widow frustrated with lack of response to letters to minister of labour and premier.	2018	Peterborough This Week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSIB • Illness
Lack of funding for new cancer claims 'devastating,' GE Peterborough workers say.	2018	Toronto Star	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Former CGE workers • Ministry of Labour Representa tive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSIB • Illness

<p>A year of raised hopes, painful losses for ailing CGE Peterborough retirees.</p>	2017	Toronto Star	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Former CGE workers • Former CGE workers families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illness
<p>CGE Peterborough workers' cancer cases get second look</p>	2017	Peterborough This Week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roger Fowler (former CGE worker) • Labour Minister Kevin Flynn • WSIB workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSIB • Illness • Exposed
<p>Peterborough laying off 150 workers.</p>	2017	Global Points Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jeff Leal (son of former CGE worker) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toxic • WSIB • Illness
<p>Rob Gillies</p>	2017	Canadian Press	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Former CGE workers • Ontario Labour Minister 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illness • WSIB

ason Bain	2016	Peterborough Examiner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District Labour Council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illness
GENERAL ELECTRIC CO	2016	Canadian Press	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Former GE Workers • Marion Burton (Peterborough and District Labour Council) • Family of former CGE workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illness
General Electric's Legacy: A river of loneliness	2016	Canadian Press	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family of former CGE workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSIB • Illness • Exposed

Sara Mojtehdzadeh	2016	Canadian Press	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Former CGE workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSIB • Illness • Exposed • Silence
Sara Mojtehdzadeh	2016	Canadian Press	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family of former CGE workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Silence • Illness
Rachel Punch	2005	Canadian Press	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doctors • Official with the area health unit • Canadian Auto Workers national representative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illness • Exposed • Silence

Saira Peesker	2005	Canadian Press	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Former CGE worker • Occupational health specialist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illness • Exposed • Toxic
Staff - Torstar News Service	2017	MetroNews.ca	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSIB • Former CGE workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposed • Toxic • Illness
We are the Erin Brockovich of Peterborough': Retirees at GE plant seek health claims for decades-long exposure to toxins.	2017	Postmedia Breaking News	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Former CGE workers • Labour Minister Kevin Flynn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSIB • Illness • Exposed