

Blog The Watchful (Grumpy) Citizen - Sewage pollution scandal: Citizens shouldn't be made to feel guilty

Here my latest post on the infamous water sewage pollution scandal. A piece in *The Conversation* got on my nerves a bit... Or at least got me thinking. Can individuals be held responsible for environmental crises?

In an opinion piece she contributed to the website last August, Randa L. Kachef, a lecturer in geography at King's College reacts to the series of regulatory fines faced by several water companies that Ofwat, UK's Water Services Regulation Authority, announced recently. The sanction had long been expected and called for by frustrated customers and activists, swimmers and surfers' groups in particular.

Yet Kachef puts a real damper on any potential celebratory reaction, if you'll excuse my watery metaphor. She states that such measures are no more than symbolic ones meant to pacify people's annoyance / resentment / rage. Not only do they just come down to a tiny financial glitch for the companies but they're bound to increase customers' bills – a scenario being played out over and over again.

So if not fines, what else? And who should be held responsible?

I'm all in when Kachef suggests a stint in prison may get some sense of responsibility into those companies' top-executives. As she says herself, they repeatedly committed a criminal offence as defined by the Environmental Protection Act.

Responsibility does not only lie with them though. And on this point I simply resent Ms Kachef for concluding that unless the public take *their* responsibility and start paying attention to what they flush and wash down things are not really going to improve. (272)

The public really?

Not the conservative governments for never implementing the Flood and Water Management Act since 2010? Not the construction developers for failing to green urban areas as required? Nor Ofwat, the regulator, for ... well for not regulating as explained by Sandra Laville in *The Guardian* for example.

The regular visitors on my blog know what my motto is: public goods (water, forests, coastlines and so on) and public services should be managed or at least strictly regulated by public institutions! I believe that Water utilities should never have been privatised, at least privatised completely. THE STATE and GOVERNMENTS need to take their responsibility. Keir Starmer toyed with the idea renationalising but seems to have walked back. It would be too costly for the taxpayers. But surely the Labour government can impose heavier sanctions and threaten to let the companies go bust without bail-out, without taxpayers' contribution!

More generally, whether it be water management, pollution levels, climate change or else rampant misinformation and I'm sick and tired of individual citizens being made to feel guilty when they are just puny soldiers in a globalized war. Sure, every single one of us is part of the problem and absolutely must try to contribute – consume less, recycle, ride rather than drive, aim for the right sources of news – that is those of us who *can*!

But honestly what are we faced with cover-ups and green washing, cronyism at the state level and with super powerful oil lobbies working hard to derail efforts to contain for climate action, cleaning or transition. (*See how the anti-moderation, so-called free speech absolutist tech bros have joined forces with Donald Trump; they oppose ANY form of moderation. Well, I approve whole-heartedly of the EU's efforts to do just so, moderate the content of their platforms to protect citizens!*)

Talking about polluted environment and water reminds me of the fight of the mothers of Corby in the toxic waste scandal depicted in the new series Toxic Town or of the one against a chemical giant in Hinckley, California as depicted in the Oscar-winning movie "Erin Brockovich". These mothers, these citizens were left to fend for themselves for far too long.

Don't blame *me*, a mere citizen, for the water scandal unfolding right now. Protect me, a mere citizen, against it. (611 – 654 words)

Extraits du rapport de jury X-ENS (2024)

Nous rappelons par exemple que le nombre de mots doit être indiqué (sans tricher) à la fin de chaque exercice par les candidats, sous peine de malus. A noter que les barres de compte de mots de la même couleur que l'écrit rendent les copies difficilement lisibles – il est conseillé d'utiliser un crayon ou une autre couleur. De plus en plus de copies sont rédigées de manière indéchiffrable – un effort de lisibilité serait appréciable.

Si certains titres ont semblé un peu prévisibles, d'autres étaient courts et percutants, avec parfois des allusions cinématographiques ou littéraires pertinentes ou des jeux de mots astucieux. **Ces suggestions pertinentes ont fait l'objet de bonus pour les candidats.**

Il est regrettable que les candidats fassent l'impasse sur le langage inclusif. Les auteurs des articles y sont systématiquement des hommes, même quand l'auteur n'est pas nommé.

Trop de problématiques se reposent sur l'expression « to what extent » : or celle-ci marque trop souvent une absence de problématisation. Peu de candidats parviennent à formuler des problématiques qui rendent compte de l'ensemble des aspects du dossier. A contrario, les bonnes copies ont articulé une présentation des documents déjà problématisée en introduction (et non une simple liste descriptive des documents), ou mentionné le fait que la source du document 4 est donnée dans le document 3.

La synthèse est un exercice exigeant où les candidats doivent examiner des points de vue divergents pour parvenir à une conclusion équilibrée. Il est essentiel de reformuler l'essentiel des documents avec ses mots propres, en utilisant un vocabulaire précis pour capturer la finesse des arguments. Les opinions variées des auteurs ou des spécialistes cités dans les textes doivent être fidèlement et impartialement présentées, en respectant les nuances des déclarations, sans simplifications, jugements ou caricatures. Les mots de liaison doivent être maîtrisés et refléter la logique du texte, plutôt que d'être utilisés systématiquement.

Si l'exercice de la seconde partie a été bien compris et effectivement traité par la majorité des candidats, ils n'ont pas toujours répondu de manière appropriée, et beaucoup ont encore manqué de temps pour la rédiger ou la terminer. Bien que l'exercice exige des candidats qu'ils prennent position sur la question, il convient en effet d'éviter toute partialité excessive. Que les candidats soient en accord ou en désaccord avec l'auteur du texte d'opinion, leur réaction doit rester mesurée. Il est tout à fait possible de ne pas être d'accord avec l'auteur, à condition d'avancer des arguments accompagnés d'exemples précis. Le jury a néanmoins constaté que beaucoup moins de candidats ont cédé à la tentation de l'invective – beaucoup ont souligné qu'ils ou elles étaient en accord avec le texte, mais qu'ils souhaitaient le nuancer, et l'ont fait avec **des exemples pertinents et des arguments solides**. Des formats originaux ont été proposés : billet de blog, format « article review », « letter to the editor » etc.

Certains candidats font encore l'impasse sur le texte d'opinion et partent directement sur une dissertation déconnectée du sujet. A l'inverse, d'autres collent trop au texte et le décortiquent point par point sans apporter de références nouvelles. Le jury rappelle que **le texte d'opinion ne peut pas se limiter à un résumé de l'éditorial**. Il est également conseillé de rédiger un plan de son argumentation, l'écriture au fil de l'eau donnant souvent des copies maladroites, voire contradictoires.

Il est regrettable que la majorité des candidats ne donnent que très peu d'exemples non cités dans le texte, ou ne se réfèrent même pas à l'actualité, pourtant en lien direct avec la problématique soulevée. **En revanche il était tout à fait possible de s'appuyer sur les éléments présents dans les documents de la première partie, sans pour autant répéter le contenu de la synthèse.**

Les structures simples sont en général bien maîtrisées. En revanche, beaucoup de copies ne savent pas introduire correctement une problématique et ne maîtrisent pas la syntaxe de la question (style indirect ou direct). On note également des erreurs liées à la thématique proposée, en particulier pour ce qui concerne la manière de se référer aux articles, plusieurs d'entre eux provenant du magazine *The Economist* : on trouve ainsi « the 2 The Economist articles » ou encore « The Economist's graph », voire « the economist's article », transformant ainsi le nom d'une publication en un métier de l'auteur. A cet égard, la manière de se référer aux articles anonymes tend parfois à personnaliser le texte lui-même (the article tries to understand* / the article seems to think*), ou à réduire le collectif au seul auteur nommé (Blaise Agüera y Arcas). On trouve encore quelques copies qui utilisent IA au lieu de AI, ou l'emploi de pronoms masculins ou féminins pour des entités non vivantes (AI, ChatGPT...). Beaucoup de candidats ont eu des difficultés avec la construction de to steal (qu'ils ont parfois même confondu avec stealth). Le prétérit et le participe passé de to steal posent ainsi très souvent problème, même quand la phrase n'est pas construite de façon erronée. Enfin les termes nécessaires pour parler du graphique sont souvent approximatifs.

Les correcteurs et correctrices ont noté des efforts réels d'apprentissage de tournures et structures idiomatiques, mais regrettent de retrouver en parallèle des erreurs récurrentes telles que « to what extend* » (au lieu de « to what extent ») ou des défauts dans l'usage de la ponctuation (absence de virgules, absence de points, phrase qui commencent après une virgule ou après rien). Les confusions sont fréquentes entre few / a few ; stop to be / stop being ; don't have to / mustn't ; feel / feel like ; as / such as ; actual / current ; problematic / issue ; arrive / arrival au lieu de advent ; apparition / appearance pour emergence ; prevent / warn ou stop from ; threat / threaten ; scared / scary ; era / area ; politics / politicians ; actual / current ; ask / demand ; resume / summarize ; scrape / scrap ; *benefic ou benefical pour beneficial ; expose pour exposer. On rencontre également des difficultés de distinction entre humankind et humanity, human et humane, humans, human beings.

Les correcteurs et correctrices invitent les candidats à soigner l'orthographe, qui est souvent influencée par le français : *ressource pour resources ; *developpment ; *technologie ; *futur ; *responsability ; *engeneer ; to / too ; waist / waste ; it's / its ; were / where. Les préfixes et suffixes posent également problème (ex : *powerfull / carefull / usefull ; *unecessary), de même que la formation des adverbes (*sincerly / technically / illegaly / precisly / extremly / finaly etc.) ou les doubles consonnes (*dropped).

Parmi les erreurs les plus courantes, on note des difficultés avec les s : le s final du pluriel ne nécessite pas d'être précédé d'une apostrophe ; these et those ne nécessitent pas de - s pluriels, tout comme les adjectifs en général. De même on trouve encore souvent des s de 3^{ème} personne du singulier absents là où il en faudrait mais présent après des modaux (ex : it can highlights). Le s du génitif pose aussi souvent problème (the threat of AI's, people opinion...).

WHAT NOT TO DO

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Swimmers and surfers having to withhold from practicing their favourite activities in their local rivers or at their local beach; parents deciding not to go for a plunge into the local stream in the midst of a heatwave for fear their children might get sick; people having to go to hospital because they did get seriously sick from the water; scared and angry citizens and determined activists, who "marched for Clean Water" in London last November... (74)

I wonder what all of them would make of Randa L. Kachef's piece published in *The Conversation* last August. [*Some would be totally downcast on reading her realistic assessment; she would probably get a round of applause for her most radical suggestion and cause a stunned silence if not full-blown outrage with her conclusion*]. My immediate reaction on reading her article was a mix of that: dejection and outrage.

Let me explain. (146)

In an opinion piece she contributed to the website, the lecturer in geography at King's College reacts to the series of regulatory fines faced by several water companies that Ofwat, UK's Water Services Regulation Authority, announced recently. The sanction had long been expected and called for by frustrated customers and activists. They long ago lost patience with these water companies' greed and apparent lack of action in the face of one of the UK's most serious environmental plagues: the spilling of sewage into rivers. (231)

Yet Kachef puts a real damper on any potential celebratory reaction, if you'll excuse my watery *metaphor* (*Mind you, she does use one herself calling such measures "mere drops in the bucket"*). She states that they / such measures are no more than symbolic ones that are simply meant to pacify people's annoyance / resentment / rage. And that it is just the same scenario being played out over and over again. (295)

As infuriating it may be to admit it, she is right when she claims that for those giants, it only comes down to a tiny financial glitch. *Hardly will it affect their massive yearly revenue*. More likely, as she bluntly reminds us, and it hurts to have to admit that too, it's bound to further increase / to increase even more customers' water bills. (355)

On a positive note, the geographer believes that paying those fines is a way for the biggest company (and the most

shouted down one), Thames Water, to gain time and peace until the long-awaited mammoth Tideway Tunnel project is complete. Let's grant that. And let's hope that this attempt at modernising London's antiquated, long-neglected sewage system will really make a difference. She does not seem to think it will. (424)

So if not fines, what else?

I'm all in when Kachef suggests a stint in prison may get some sense of responsibility into those companies' top-executives. What for? As she says herself for repeatedly committing a criminal offence as defined by the Environmental Protection Act. But may I add? For failing the consumers' expectations and plaguing them with ever increasing water bills. For under-investing in the system they've been in charge of since privatisation while rewarding their shareholders with indecent dividends. (500) The responsibility does not only lie with them though. And on the point of responsibility, I simply resent Ms Kachef for concluding that the public should take *their* responsibility and start paying attention to what they flush and wash down.

The public really? Not the conservative governments for never implementing the Flood and Water Management Act since 2010? Not the construction developers for failing to green urban areas? Not Ofwat, the regulator, for ... well for not regulating! (576)

Those regular visitors on my blog know what my motto is: public goods (water, forests, coastlines and so on) and public services should be managed and regulated by public institutions! Water should never have been privatised, at least privatised completely. THE STATE and GOVERNMENTS need to take their responsibility.

And I'm sick and tired of individual citizens being made to feel guilty when they are puny soldiers in the face of the the vested interests and cover-ups of huge companies, of cronyism at the state level and of super powerful lobbies working hard to derail efforts to contain global warming, to curb pollution, to transition environmentally.

Talking about polluted environment and water, the mothers of Corby, the toxic town depicted in the recent series, the citizens of Flinch, Michigan, of Hinckley, California whose battle was depicted in the Oscar-winning movie Erin Brockovich were let down. Don't blame *me*, a mere citizen, for the water scandal unfolding right now. 734

Is pollution in England's rivers really getting worse? There's more good news than you might think

Michelle Jackson, The Guardian, Mon 16 September 2024

Public outrage over river pollution has been heartening to see. Over the past few years, stories about sewage contamination in rivers have captured public attention, and prompted campaigns and protests, such as the forthcoming River Action UK march for clean water on 26 October in London. It is important to protect our rivers because they are biodiversity hotspots and essential for human health. However, as a freshwater ecologist, I know there is more nuance to the story than you may have been led to believe. From my perspective, there is some good news when it comes to our rivers. I would even say that some rivers in England are in the best state they have been in for hundreds of years.

Many rivers in England are polluted, but we need to recognise that this is not an emerging issue but a much longer-standing one that has been largely ignored by the media and politicians for decades. Much of the recent furore over pollution has to do with increased awareness, rather than a sudden increase in pollution itself. It's only by understanding how these ecosystems have changed over time and reflecting on previous successes that we can make real progress.

It has been widely reported that English rivers have gone from 97% being classified as having "good chemical status" in 2016 to none in 2019. Across England, the Environment Agency monitors water quality by directly measuring some pollutants and characterising the life in the river. This data is then used to classify our rivers' water quality: "high", "good", "moderate", "poor" or "bad". However, rather than water quality actually declining this drastically within this timeframe, the way we measure it has changed – this perceived decline is an artefact of the data. From 2019, new chemicals were included in the testing, among them "ubiquitous, persistent, bioaccumulative, toxic substances", which accounts for this major change.

The media has also reported increases to the number of "sewage spills" – when raw sewage (rather than treated sewage) is pumped into our seas, lakes, and rivers. In 2016, data was only available from 862 storm overflows, with this increasing to 6,182 in 2018, 12,092 in 2020, and 13,080 in 2022. Of course, the thought of any raw sewage entering water bodies is disgusting and we should work to reduce this to zero by updating our Victorian wastewater infrastructure. The point, though, is that the problem may have not got worse in recent years – it is just that we are only now looking for it properly.

Other measures of water quality show that some things have actually improved. For instance, many invertebrates can only survive when pollution levels are low, so assessing what species are present provides a quick and cheap way of measuring water quality. Various metrics are calculated from data of invertebrate counts – and a higher score means the water is cleaner. Using this data (and associated metrics on algae, fish, hydrology and nutrients), only 15% of rivers in England are currently classified as "good ecological status", which sounds pretty terrible, especially as this has declined from 24% in 2009.

However, there are a few factors to consider. First, a robust analysis of 223,300 sampling points of the invertebrate data by researchers at the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, using records from 1989 to 2018, showed that invertebrate biodiversity has increased over time across England regardless of river size and land cover. Although this trend has slowed in some cases in the last 20 years, the headline here is that more wildlife is being found in our rivers now than there was three decades ago. For instance, the mayfly, stonefly, and caddisfly families (which are particularly sensitive to water quality) have increased by 300% during that time period.

Second, the way rivers are classified uses a "one out, all out" rule. This means that rivers only have to fail on one of 20 metrics to be downgraded from "good" to "moderate" ecological status. In other

words, the metric with the worst score determines the overall status. So, overall water quality can be more positive than it initially seems. The increase in river invertebrate biodiversity across England is good news and it shows how far we have come in improving water quality in my lifetime.

At least in part, this can be linked to improvements in sewage treatment causing declines in nutrient pollution, with research showing a large decline in phosphate concentrations from 1997. This followed the European Union's 1991 urban waste water treatment directive, which tightened laws and forced water companies to improve the treatment of wastewater. However, nutrient levels are still higher today than they would naturally be due to sewage and agricultural practices, so there is still work to be done. Some of my group's own research has shown that additional reductions of phosphorus from improved sewage treatment would be the most effective way to further benefit biodiversity.

Water companies do need more scrutiny as there is evidence to suggest that they often still breach their licences. They are only supposed to release raw sewage when there is high rainfall. If this reaches such a critical level that the sewage would back up and risk coming out the wrong way, so to speak, water companies are legally allowed to release the untreated waste. With the growing public concern, laws are starting to tighten on this, hence the increase in monitoring data. Only time will tell, as the data from the new network of event duration monitoring devices that are on all storm overflows (as of 2023) is analysed. While we need to limit the use of storm overflows, at the moment we cannot confidently claim that these are, in fact, being used more often now than they have been in the past. This is not to diminish the problem, only to say that it may not be a recent one.

There are still reasons to protest at events such as the River Action UK march. I will certainly be there. Despite the improvements to nutrient concentrations and biodiversity, there are emerging chemical pollutants and we have very little information on their impacts. This is where I think the concerned public should now turn their attention. These pollutants are typically household and medical products that go down the drain and are not removed at wastewater treatment plants, such as beauty products and pest treatments. Globally, freshwater ecosystems – which act as hotspots for biodiversity – are one of the most threatened ecosystems on the planet. They are also often overlooked in legislation – so don't stop campaigning, just make sure you represent the facts correctly so that we can make real actionable change.

- Michelle Jackson is associate professor of freshwater/marine ecology at the University of Oxford. Prof Jackson previously conducted one study that received funding from a wastewater treatment company, and currently has no industry funding.

Dear Professor Jackson,

I have just read your opinion piece on the quality of the water in England's rivers. You explain that, even though the situation is worrying, this is not as bad as people may expect as you detail measures you made on those rivers over a period of 30 years. I wish I were as optimistic as you as far as water quality is concerned. (64)

First, you explain that biodiversity in English rivers, more particularly invertebrates, has increased in 30 years. I was amazed at reading your findings, yet I cannot help but wondering how the populations of invertebrates react with the growing and concerning presence of Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in water. I watched a film entitled "Dark Waters", which was released in 2019. This film tells the true story of a lawyer who fights the chemical manufacturing company Dupont which dumped chemicals in a town in the USA. This film shows the terrible disasters of those PFAS on the animals that drank the contaminated water, but also on humans. Nowadays, those forever chemicals are everywhere, from non-stick pans to carpets. The BBC published an alarming article in March 2022 saying that in most British rivers, the level of PFAS exceeded the European Food Standards Agency tolerable limit of 2.2 nanograms per litre. (214)

You also mention your concern about the high level of nutrient pollution in British rivers. I cannot but agree with you about the agricultural practices in today's world. The continuing pressure of agriculture lobbies makes the European Union backpedal on matter that should be prioritised. The nefarious effects of glyphosate, a widely sued pesticide, on human and animal health were more than explained and denounced by scientists. Monsanto, the creator of glyphosate, even lost a trial in the USA and had to pay 857 million dollars in damages after a lawsuit started by a school in the USA. Still, the EU decided not to forbid this pesticide out of concern from the EU farmers that they would not have such an efficient product to protect their crops. Definitely, profit is more important than public health. (349)

Finally, you denounce the fact that water companies in England are to blame for the low quality of English rivers. In my opinion, this is the most difficult point to change. Indeed, an article published in The New York Times in October 2024 explains the privatisation of water companies occurred in 1989. Those companies only have two words in mind: profit and dividends. The price of their services are awfully, not to say indecently, expensive, and they are more anxious with giving billions in dividends to their shareholders than to upgrade the country's obsolete sewage systems. Needless to remind you of the fact that London's sewages systems have been the same since their creation in the Victorian era ... And I would add that the ones that are to blame are the successive Conservative government which, for 14 years, have done nothing to change the problems. Again, lobbying is the strongest as the Conservative Party received donations from property developers – 10% of all its donations – so that they delayed the implementation of sponge cities, which would have helped absorbing the excess of water due to heavy rainfall, as denounced by an article from The Guardian issued in January 2024. Therefore, the water companies felt free to discharge their sewage on the false pretence that the law allowed them to do so. (570)

I hope that the new Labour government will stop those practices and change the situation. (584 words)