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Chester and CRCQL: Systematic Exploitation and Digitized Communities

Abstract

De-industrialism after World War II forced previously industrial towns and cities to fundamentally change the way that they functioned. Politicians exploited this period of transition through the implementation of systems of exploitation – namely political machines and patronage. This systematic exploitation perpetuated racial and environmental injustice in many communities. The city of Chester is widely regarded as a quintessential victim of this political exploitation. However, in Chester, motivated community members organized against the abuse, forming coalitions of local citizens to rehabilitate their hometown and bring it back to its former glory. One of these organizations is the Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living (CRCQL), well-known for its focus on grassroots environmental justice. This paper attempts to address the struggles local organizations such as CRCQL have faced repairing structural damage to their communities, as well as interpret how their challenges and solutions will continue to evolve into the digital age, post COVID-19.

Keywords: systematic exploitation, waste management, urban communities, environmental justice, community organization, digital platforms, cybersecurity

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Executive Summary

After World War II, the city of Chester found itself in a difficult position. As a former hub of manufacturing, the city had been heavily dependent on the industry for its economic growth and prosperity. However, the end of the war had brought about significant changes to the global economy, and Chester was forced to look for new ways to sustain itself.

Among other questionable ventures, the city began to attract a number of waste management (WM) companies. They saw the potential for profit in the large amount of waste that was produced in neighboring cities and states. The problem for Chester was that the antiquated treatment, storage, and disposal facilities (TSDFs) that these companies were building produced devastating pollutants that have long-term consequences for the health and wellness of local citizens. While CRCQL found initial success in pushing WM companies back, they continued to arrive in Chester, exploiting the lax governmental administration of environmental policy. Chester thus found itself facing a recurring WM problem — a problem that has continued up until the present day, with the current controversy surrounding the Covanta incinerator. For CRCQL, this is a major source of frustration because its members are fighting a never-ending war to *survive*.

This paper presents a thorough analysis of the various threats that have plagued the city of Chester over the years, from immediate challenges — such as the aforementioned devastating pollutants produced by TSDFs — to more modern challenges, such as digital cyberattacks. It examines the historical context of systematic exploitation allowing for the introduction of these antiquated TSDFs, as well as the recurrence of WM companies and the ways their introductions to Chester have evolved over time. Then, it addresses the digital threats, explaining what they are and how they occurred. Finally, the paper presents solutions to these challenges, offering concrete steps that organizations like CRCQL can take to mitigate current issues and sustain itself into the future.

Historical Challenges

A. The Multifaceted, Systematic Exploitation of Chester

John McClure is an infamous political figure in the history of Chester. In 1907, he found his roots in moonshining (the illegal production and distribution of liquor), and established his reign over the city through a feedback loop that included elected officials, bar owners, and voters; Judges issued liquor licenses, bar owners spread the good word, and voters voted (Mele 19–20). This rudimentary system evolved and established the basis for a deeply corrupt political machine controlled by patronage: local officials provided favors like jobs and housing benefits to their voters, and left the unfaithful to rot.

To strengthen his vise-like grip, McClure exploited the racial divide in Chester. After the Great Migration, tensions between the existing white working class and recently immigrated blacks turned into racial hatred. Philadelphia's ban on enlisted men from visiting brothels spiked visitation to Chester, in which mobs of drunks, insufferable noise, and crime ensued (27–29). McClure made sure to attribute the blame to the black workers whom he employed operating these illicit businesses. Increased interactions between blacks and whites swelled into a "highly

charged atmosphere," and race riots ensued (30). Suddenly, the once tame social dynamics between blacks and whites became "the defining factor in reshaping the geography and social life of the city" (42).

These dynamics were intentionally exploited over future decades to racially divide Chester (71–72). McClure's reign finally ended in 1965, but the machine's grasp continued well up until 1992. The antagonistic relationship between blacks and whites fueled by racism and McClure's malice now ran deep into Chester's systems, and the Republican machine's nearly century-long gross manipulation had relegated the common citizen into a role of voiceless submission. This is the context in which WM companies were arriving into Chester — ready to serve its tired, exploited citizens another round of detriment.

B. Recurrence of WM Companies

i. Introduction

Despite Chester's history of exploitation, a strong core of individuals have chosen to stay in the community. Zulene Mayfield is one of them, founder of CRCQL and an instrumental force protecting Chester from the onslaught of WM companies. Her work started in the 1990s, with the creation of CRCQL itself in 1992 (*EJ Action Timeline*). Its first action as an organization was blockading residential streets used to transport waste to the Westinghouse incinerator (Rigell). While they were successful in forcing the company to build a new access road, the incinerator has continued operating, and is now owned by Covanta. As of 2022, it is responsible for over 1.2 million tons of waste per year, less than 2 percent of which is from the city of Chester (*Delaware Valley*; *Chester Environmental Justice*).

Fortunately, the Covanta incinerator is one of the only remaining TSDFs from that era. WM companies have come, and a majority of them have gone. The most notable are Thermal Pure Systems, Soil Remediation Services, Cherokee Biotechnology, DELCORA, and Covanta (*EJ Action Timeline*); these companies will be the focus of this section of the analysis as they provide crucial context that can be used to develop Recommendations.

ii. Thermal Pure Systems

In 1992, Thermal Pure Systems (TPS) opened "the nation's largest infectious medical waste treatment facility" through a permit from the Pennsylvania (PA) Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) in spite of an opposition of over 500 residents. This permit was illegally assigned without a hearing, and allowed the processing of ten times the amount of waste permitted by state law. In February 1995, CRCQL appealed the decision for a permit to the Commonwealth Court, and the Court revoked TPS's permit (*EJ Action Timeline*). However, the PA Supreme Court used its King's Bench jurisdiction — a rarely discussed, sparingly used power that allows the high court to intervene in a lower court hearing at any stage in the process to "cure injustice" (Schwab 678). In November 1995, the high court used its plenary jurisdiction to render the Commonwealth Court's decision moot, leaving the TPS facility open because the Commonwealth Court lacked jurisdiction to invalidate TPS's plan outside of the initial thirty-day notice required by PA's Infectious and Chemotherapeutic Waste Disposal Act (*Chester Residents v. Dept. of Envir. Res.*).

However, in July 1995, just four months prior, TPS failed to report that it had been unable to process nineteen truckloads of medical waste to the DEP. In August, Zulene was brought before the House Judiciary to testify about TPS on behalf of CRCQL. She ended her testimony stating "as the representative for Chester, I can tell you its [*sic*] just killing us" (Testimony of Zulene Mayfield). Mysteriously, after CRCQL's exposure of TPS, the facility closed down at the end of 1995.

iii. Soil Remediation Services & Cherokee Biotechnology

While all of the litigation was occurring between CRCQL and TPS, a new problem was already on the horizon. Fortunately, in 1994, CRCQL seemed to have a massive victory: the city passed a novel zoning ordinance prohibiting waste facilities from entering the city unless it could be proven that they would not increase net emissions of pollutants (*EJ Action Timeline*). However, the hope was short-lived — over the span of a year, the ordinance was watered down, and remained unenforced. In fact, the DEP violated the ordinance through a permit to Soil Remediation Services (SRS) in 1995 (Ewall, *Environmental Racism*). In 1996, fed up with WM companies, CRCQL went again to the courts, this time suing the DEP for environmental racism under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The suit claimed that the DEP's permits for TSDFs in Chester was intentionally discriminatory based on race because of the city's racial composition (*Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living v. Seif*). While the suit did not result in any direct action against SRS, the company ultimately withdrew their permit application, and the DEP's behavior shifted; in 1997, for the first time, the agency denied WM company Cherokee Biotechnology access to a permit (*EJ Action Timeline*).

iv. DELCORA

In the background of these battlegrounds, the DELCORA sewage treatment facility operated alongside the Westinghouse/Covanta incinerator. It burned highly toxic sludge, releasing dangerous pollutants like arsenic into the community (Ewall). In 1997, CRCQL made a breakthrough case against DELCORA, requiring that the TSDF install new pollution controls to ensure community safety. However, CRCQL still wants the company to move from incineration to anaerobic digestion, a different approach where bacteria break down biodegradables that is much less dangerous than burning the material.

v. Covanta

Similar to DELCORA's case, the battle against Covanta's incinerator has been waged on for nearly three decades now without much movement. Why? There are several variables that make it especially difficult to end the Covanta incinerator. As it is the largest incinerator in the U.S. by total waste processed, other states and regions have no well-established alternative to send the sheer waste volume (*Commercial Trash Incinerators in the U.S.*). Covanta provides a significant sum to the city in exchange for being the 'host' of the TSDF — in 2020, it was five million dollars, or nearly nine percent of Chester's annual revenues (Doweary). Furthermore, Covanta has actively participated in misinformation campaigns, especially about the waste-to-energy process and the pollution control technology used in their Chester TSDF. While they claim it uses advanced technology, the technology simply is not up to par compared to similarly sized incinerators (Ewall, *Covanta's Responses*; *Covanta's Chester*). Finally, from an environmental justice perspective, another concern is that shutting down the Covanta incinerator would displace the waste into another exploited community. Incinerators — especially larger ones — are

disproportionately located in low-income communities and communities of color, just like Chester (Baptista and Perovich). Affected communities — the ones that no longer have Chester as an out-of-sight, out-of-mind destination for their waste — would have to correctly implement point source WM in tandem with alternative sites such as landfills to avoid this problem.

vi. Summary

After compiling an in-depth review of Chester's relevant history and CRCQL's WM challenges, I have developed a core question to address: how can the Covanta and DELCORA TSDFs best be addressed, and how can CRCQL prevent the entry of polluting WM companies? This will be addressed in the Recommendations portion of this paper.

Case Study

A. When Digital Disaster Strikes

i. Preface

Now, the paper will transition to discuss a different type of exploitation: that of computers, networks, and websites. As a student studying computer science, I have had a wide-ranging interest in technology ever since I was young. I had hoped that I would be able to use my technical knowledge of computers in some capacity during my internship with CRCQL — because in my experience, computer science often finds a way to be interdisciplinary in the most unexpected circumstances. In short, I was not disappointed, but the circumstances were nonetheless shocking.

ii. Redirect Hack

With the rise of the digital age, organizations like CRCQL have grown online communities as a major source for organizing information and support. While largely left to its own devices, what happens when — let's say — a malicious attacker can prevent others from accessing your site and services? While the major focus of the Challenges has been on immediate physical issues facing Chester, this is a new opportunity for exploitation, and it's on the rise. This threat may not be as direct as pollutants that hospitalize children, cause cancer and asthma, and lower air quality (Roots); though, in practice, its effects have wide-ranging, detrimental implications for organizations like CRCQL.

On Sep 30, 2022, CRCQL's website was brought offline by a redirect hack, and I was contacted in order to help remediate the problem. I performed a basic analysis of the issue, and it appeared a core component of their website, the .htaccess file, had been modified in such a way that it now redirected users trying to visit CRCQL's website to another completely unrelated website that sells miscellaneous products — for security reasons, this website remains unnamed.

According to an unpublished email correspondence, the issue was indeed caused by modifications to core components of the website. According to Sucuri, a website protection platform, this threat was not uncommon. Out of the nearly six million infected websites they detected, 61.65% contained a malicious attack with a similar pattern to the one that had infected CRCQL's website ("Hacked Websites Trend Report 2021" 15). In fact, the organization who had provided the tools for the hack, named AnonymousFox — was "[o]ne of the most commonly identified website hack kits" (26).

iii. Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) Attack

Fortunately, the website was able to be repaired over the next two weeks. But, this was not the end of the digital disaster. On Oct 22, 2022, another attack struck. This time, it was a barrage of millions of bogus login requests from all around the world, better known in cybersecurity terms as a distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack. To fully understand this problem, I have to explain the networking structure of the website. The website is run by a server, which is essentially a powerful computer rented by a company with a hosting agreement for a monthly fee. As a customer, you receive different features and quantities of services depending on how much you pay. A common limit to web hosting services is the amount of traffic it can handle monthly. Similar to its vehicular definition, traffic is a metric based on the number of people that visit your website. Except, in this case, it was not people visiting — it was a network of bots, which are essentially a bunch of computers programmed to do the same thing, like attempt to login to CRCQL's website with incorrect credentials.

Now, you may think that because the attacker lacks the correct credentials, they would not be able to cause any damage — however, the sheer number of malicious bots, of which there would have had to have been tens of if not hundreds of thousands, overwhelmed the server with requests. An overwhelmed server means that it cannot serve legitimate, human website visitors, which is a quintessential DDoS attack.

iv. Intent

After both of these attacks, Zulene posed two questions. Were those attacks maliciously targeted against CRCQL's mission? Were they by the same person/group? While no concrete answer can be reached, a strong case can be made that this attack was both intentional and by the same individual/group.

The redirect hacker did not need to know very much about CRCQL in order to exploit the software vulnerability — just the existence of a vulnerability. Usually, if the hacking is done as a targeted effort, the hacker leaves some sort of messaging on the victim's site. The redirect hack lacked any of these signs. However, the fact that it was immediately followed by another more primitive attack garners some suspicion, as it could be characterized as retaliation. In fact, the server that was running CRCQL's site in tandem with several other environmental justice sites for other regions reported after the DDoS attack that 75 percent of the monthly traffic was to CRCQL's site, implying an attack on CRCQL itself.

Further analysis revealed that the attack used *specific* login information associated with administrators on the site — these incorrect credentials contain context like Zulene's initials, which would be highly unlikely to have been obtained without a basic profile on the site and its purpose. Finally, it is important to consider the purpose of the two attacks. While the first redirect hack could be a completely neutral exploitation of a vulnerability in order to promote scam content, the second attack serves no purpose other than to deny service to legitimate users. Thus, the second attack was most likely a targeted attack against CRCQL specifically, and the temporal proximity of the first attack suggests that it is likely to have been related to the second attacker.

v. Summary

In effect, CRCQL's site was offline for nearly a month. But, the worst part was not the attack itself — it was how simple it was to conduct. I have failed to mention that both of these attacks were, for lack of a better word, fairly primitive. DDoS attacks require no special access or privileges — just a large network of computers. Software vulnerabilities, while more complex, can be contained in a large majority of circumstances. Thus, this attack exposed how vulnerable CRCQL's site was. And therein lies the boon and bane of a digital presence: it will help you grow a community, but can be easily compromised and disrupt your organization's workflow if handled improperly. Of course, hindsight is 20/20. Proper protections should have been implemented, and I will discuss the process for implementing such safeguards in the Recommendations.

B. Personal Perspective on Current-Day Chester

I would like to briefly discuss my personal experience with Chester as a physical place before I move into the Recommendations. I came into Chester expecting it to be more dilapidated than it really was. All of the reading about how politicians and corporations had abused the city gave me the (wrong) impression that Chester wasn't beautiful in its own right. And like the locals, I can see the appeal. Chester, though battered and wearing its years, was once clearly a place full of life and love. The new businesses on the waterway seemed so out of place, and it kind of seemed jarring to see a worn but loved development parted by a highway to shiny buildings exuding productivity and modern industry. I thought to myself, "You can see where the effort is going [in reference to the new buildings]." In all honesty, compared to the other cities I've been to before, Chester kind of seemed like a ghost town. And as a foreigner to Philadelphian prejudices, I could tell even before stepping foot in Chester that it was marked for something — though it became increasingly obvious as the tour van went around for what reason it was.

Chester as a city has faced an incredible amount of exploitation, and it is a testament to the residents' love of the city that they have continued fighting for their rights for all of these decades. However, in order for the city to truly recover from a social perspective, it has to (unsurprisingly) rid itself of these large polluting TSDFs that have quite literally turned the city into a ghost town. With childhood asthma rates five times the national average, general higher rates of cancer, and 23.7 percent higher hospitalization rates for chronic lower respiratory diseases, it is a tough argument to move to Chester (Roots; *Delaware County Health Profiles*).

Recommendations

A. Breaking the WM Cycle

The history of WM companies and the struggles that CRCQL has faced informs the following proposal, which is a radical yet simple change in approach.

After contextualizing the organization's past and present approaches to preventing pollution, I have noticed a pattern: CRCQL's greatest successes were caused by circumventing local government bodies (that are entrenched in collaboration with the WM companies) and appealing to higher bodies of power. This was evident in the case of Thermal Pure Systems, Soil Remediation Services, and Cherokee Biotechnology; TPS was shut down proceeding the testimony in the House Judiciary Committee, SRS after the federal courts, and Cherokee

Biotechnology arguably because of the SRS suit. If CRCQL had the means to appeal to higher bodies of power, perhaps it would finally be able to reform or remove Covanta and DELCORA.

But, in order to appeal, there must be a case, and a strong one at that. In order to form a convincing environmental pollution case in the current day and age, one needs a convincing story — which Chester certainly has — and damning evidence — which CRCQL consistently lacked in my review and analysis of their cases; in their back and forth arguments with Covanta and across the documents filed to government bodies, CRCQL usually had a clear, powerful message, but lacked the concrete pollutant data to complete the argument.

Thus, I propose the following evidence-based approach: establish detailed independent or audited air quality monitoring in Chester. As of December 2022, the only continuously monitored independent air quality measurement is provided by the PA DEP in the form of ozone and PM2.5 measurements (*Chester Air Quality*). As Chester is the host of two large incinerators — one being the largest in the United States — it is a gross oversight if not blatant negligence that there are no other measured air quality indicators. Furthermore, the fact that Chester relies on air quality data produced by the WM companies themselves is irresponsible, especially since Covanta has a history of misrepresenting data (Ewall, *Covanta's Responses*). The existence of specific, accurate, and audited data would provide unequivocal proof of Covanta and/or DELCORA's wrongdoing, would clear their names and Chester's as a pollution center, and would prevent other WM companies from preying on Chester without repercussions.

The only perceived weaknesses of this method are cost and maintenance. As a student who performed research on cheap environmental sensors used to measure airborne pollutants, I understand there are many costs associated with accurate, precise data collection. Thus, further research or a professional opinion is necessary on whether this process can be accomplished without an undue financial burden to Chester or CRCQL.

B. Recovering from Systematic Exploitation

After facing a breach of trust such as the exploitation that has occurred in Chester, it is important to recognize that the community must heal and learn from the process. This process is so context-dependent and requires future knowledge of the landscape of Chester without these pressing issues, so no specific recommendations should be made.

C. Avoiding Digital Disasters in the Future

As mentioned in the Case Study, the cybersecurity issues that CRCQL faced could have been prevented using best practices for software and the installation of proper website protection. The following list is best practices to prevent hacks in order of importance, any of which could have prevented unnecessary downtime. Relevant explanations of domain-specific software or security terms are explained in footnotes.

1. Regularly updating WordPress[1] to prevent general security vulnerabilities
2. Installing a comprehensive, regular backup system to easily restore damaged data

[1] WordPress is a common software that runs CRCQL's website.

3. Storing backups locally and also in an off-site, code-safe[2] location to prevent hackers from making changes to backups
4. Using plugins[3] that are consistently updated and allowing them to automatically update to prevent security vulnerabilities
5. Performing security audits of existing plugins to ensure that they do not allow remote access[4]
6. Enforcing two-factor authentication[5] on all authorized accounts to reduce password vulnerabilities
7. Forcing administrators to change passwords after a set time interval to again reduce password vulnerabilities
8. Using security services such as Cloudflare to ensure that bot accounts cannot access to site contents

To prevent denial of service vulnerabilities like the DDoS attack, it is highly recommended that websites like CRCQL use a DDoS mitigation service[6] such as Cloudflare. These services are highly regarded and provide a free-to-use website protection service that filters traffic exiting and entering a server using a powerful internet connection and an even larger network of computers to detect bot attacks and malicious access attempts. They often increase your site's loading speed, decrease traffic consumption, and prevent downtime by serving your site's content across their many worldwide servers.[7] These technologies would have easily prevented the attack on CRCQL's site, even considering the volume of bot traffic that the attacker used.

It is also important to have mindful administrators and to use a transparent, security-aware domain registrar[8] and website host. The people with access to the website should understand basic personal security practices such as installing antivirus software,[9] and not clicking on malicious phishing links[10]. A secure registrar will prevent the domain from being hijacked,[11] and a secure host may offer DDoS mitigation services with the website subscription.

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[2] Off-site means that the backup is stored on a separate computer that is isolated from most web traffic. Code-safe means that code from the website cannot execute to modify/destroy the backup.
[3] Plugins are software add-ons that WordPress website owners can install to add functionality to their website (e.g. add a shopping cart, add a Twitter widget, change the look of the website)
[4] Remote access in this context means that the plugin can be used to give an unauthorized user administrator-level access to the site.
[5] Two-factor authentication is a common security confirmation where a user has to approve a request or enter a code sent to their phone, email, or authentication app (think Duo Mobile).
[6] DDoS mitigation is an advanced technology that identifies threats such as bots and prevents them from interfering with a normal visitor's traffic.
[7] This system whereby servers are placed around the world to distribute information is called a content delivery network (CDN).
[8] Domain registrars are services that allow you to purchase website domain names, such as *google.com*, *swarthmore.edu*, or *chesterresidents.org*.
[9] Antivirus software is used to prevent malicious software attacks from running on computers.
[10] Phishing is a practice where attackers pose as a reputable source and request that users give them sensitive information (think of a scammer posing as a rich person and requesting that you give them your bank account information so they can 'send you money').
[11] Domain hijacking occurs when an attacker gains full ownership of another person's domain.

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