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**Maeve McClenaghan:** If you're a regular listener of The Tip Off you'll know by now that inspiration can come from any number of places: a news story, a leaked document—or from less obvious locations.

**Robert Cribb:** And this one falls under the category of just personal lived experience. So I was the father of a young daughter. I was hyper-conscious of her protection, and I was reading about all the various things that can pose threats to young children. And so I stumbled on an article about this in one of these parenting magazines that I was reading.

**Maeve:** I'm Maeve McClenaghan. This is The Tip Off.

**Rob:** My name is Rob Cribb. I'm an investigative reporter at the *Toronto Star*.

**Maeve:** Rob is also the founder and director of the Investigative Journalism Bureau based at the University of Toronto. He's worked on incredible investigations in his time, and he's used to immersing himself in long, complex reports. But it was in a parenting magazine that he came across a worrying detail that would set him off on a years-long investigation.

You see, that article was all about...

**Rob:** lead in water, which continues to be a nagging problem. Certainly here in North America, and I think around the world. And we are talking about the knowing poisoning of children with a substance that can diminish your IQ, lead to lifelong behavioral issues, hypertension, prenatal issues. I mean the list of symptoms is breathtaking and horrifying.

**Maeve:** The negative impact extended to adults, too, with high lead levels being linked to miscarriage, preterm birth, hypertension, and premature deaths from cardiovascular disease. Like many people, Robert heard about the dangerous levels of lead in water in places like Flint, Michigan, in the USA.

He started wondering whether it was an issue elsewhere, too—perhaps in Toronto, Canada, where he lived. Perhaps in the very pipes used to bring drinking water to his young daughter.

**Rob:** And the journalistic instinct kind of kicked in. And so I started doing some other reading about and thought, here's something I haven't read in the newspaper. Okay. So let me take a look at Toronto.

And just the more that I read and reported on it, it struck me as this incredibly important public health issue that nobody was talking about. I knew nothing about it and I report on public health issues.

**Maeve:** This was a story about something people hardly gave a second thought to: the pipes underground. The unquestioned assumption that we turn on a tap and clean, safe water comes out.

Plus, the more Rob looked into it, the more he realized any possible solution to replacing old pipes was so monumentally expensive as to make it almost beyond possibility.

**Rob:** It would require so much work, time, money, effort to fix it. It's not a attractive political issue for politicians, because you're not going to win votes on ripping up the streets and tearing up front lawns.

So why talk about it, right? When you can talk about keeping swimming pools open and hockey rinks open, why would you be talking about an issue that's literally buried under the ground for the last hundred years.

**Maeve:** Rather than put him off, that just spurred Rob on. The first thing to do was to find out what data was available.

**Rob:** What I was able to get is test results from the city of Toronto for a five-year period. So I was able to see which areas had the highest levels of lead and predictably, they were in the old city.

So the older the infrastructure, of course, the greater the likelihood that it's going to have old lead pipes.

**Maeve:** He was able to identify small areas of Toronto, which were most likely to have issues. Then it was a case of getting out and—

**Rob:** actually knocking on doors. So that's where I sort of started, with people I knew who lived in the neighborhood and I'd go to them and I did some door knocking.

And what I quickly realized is, I'm talking to people about a problem that they've never heard of and asking if they have experienced any issues. And of course the response is, I don't know what you're talking about. So that didn't go very far. And then I started talking to sort of the local politicians who represented these wards, and I was able to find through them people, sort of the needles in the haystack, [who] had their houses tested. So these are the people that consciously sought out tests from the city and received high levels of lead. They're very concerned. They had young kids. But the fact is in many cases, they weren't able to do anything about it because it is so expensive to address it. So here they are living in houses where they know that they have unsafe levels of lead. So what do they do? They go out and buy huge jugs of water every week and bring them to the house. So they basically didn't use tap water for anything that they would be consuming.

**Maeve:** Rob started publishing stories about his home city, Toronto.

**Rob:** But at some point you realize this is not a story about a few houses or one city; this is an example of a sweeping issue that is national and international in scope and requires, to do it right, to really tell this story and convey the potential public health implications, you really got to go big on it. And that's hard to do: the resources. the money, the time that it would take was beyond the scope of any one reporter or any one newsroom, really. And so it kind of got stalled there.

So I think as journalists we all have these stories that are kind of sitting on the side of our desk, staring at us, and we know that we want to tell them, but it is so daunting in scope and breadth that they just sort of sit there.

**Maeve:** So there we go. A good local story, some interesting anecdotal case studies uncovered. But that's it—except, of course, it wasn't.

Now Rob Cribb is perhaps in the ideal place to take on a challenge, like how to report on lead in the water across an entire country. That's because he's been working for

years on developing models of collaborative journalism. He teaches journalism at two universities and has links to many others.

**Rob:** And I've gradually been experimenting with ways to actually integrate student reporters and academics into the work that I was doing. So instead of just giving them assignments that I mark and throw away and call it a day, we would actually work on real-world investigations that I'd bring from my desk at the *Toronto Star*. It just struck me that what this model gives us is terrific resources. So we have this small army of young, hungry reporters, which can do things that I could never do on my own.

And I was starting to team up with journalism, investigative programs in other cities. So in Ottawa and Halifax and Montreal and Vancouver. And so we're starting to do this kind of cross-border stuff.

**Maeve:** So Rob had a brainwave: on the one hand, he had this almost impossibly large issue he wanted to investigate that stretched across the country, and for which there was no clean dataset.

And then, he had this army of young reporters, ready and waiting for investigative tasks. When you put it like that, the solution seemed obvious.

**Rob:** To do a national look, incorporating students, leading academic researchers who would guide us in our methodology and our testing methods, and to knock on doors, collect actual samples from cities and towns across the country.

**Maeve:** It was a wildly ambitious idea, and one which took a great deal of organizing. The plan was to send students out to residential properties across various cities in Canada, 11 in total. There they would collect water samples from people's taps, but even something as seemingly simple as that, was complicated. It turned out, across Canada, there was no one method used to collect water samples for testing

**Rob:** Even from city to city, from province to province, they all do it differently.

**Maeve:** Some places advocated running the tap for five minutes before to flush out impurities.

**Rob:** Totally contrary to what the scientists say is appropriate, because of course, what are you doing? Why are you running the tap for five minutes? You're allowing of course

the lead buildup to flow out, to create a fresher supply of source tap water. Which of course is going to skew the results, favorably. So there was a lot of complexity in figuring this out and making sure that we were using the highest possible standards and the most reflective of the water that Canadians consume.

**Maeve:** Then there was the job of convincing others, including funders, to get on board. But once all that was done, Rob and his small army of journalism students were ready to hit the streets.

But it was a nerve-wracking moment. What if after all this, it didn't work? Could it all just be a huge waste of time?

**Rob:** We've never done anything like this in Canada, ever before, of this size and scope, with this many people. And so we launched with no real sense of security as to where we would end up.

**Maeve:** Luckily, the students took the task seriously. They fanned out across the country.

**Rob:** Much like any task where you're forced to knock on doors, the reactions are mixed for sure. There's definitely doors slammed. There was one day that I don't think we got a single test. In other cases, of course, we were very successful.

So you also refine your patter at the door, right? You get better at understanding the things that you need to say in the first 20 seconds, in order to establish both credibility and intrigue, right? So you want them to understand that we're not door-to-door salesmen, we're not selling you anything. We're journalists, we're conducting research. It will cost you nothing. And we're happy to share with you the results.

**Maeve:** The student reporters collected the water in small tubes,

**Rob:** There were little plastic containers,

**Maeve:** carefully labeling each. They were sent off—

**Rob:** to a national lab.

**Maeve:** Day by day, the dataset grew, but these weren't just figures.

**Rob:** We would return physically and speak to them and lay out on the kitchen table the paperwork showing the results, which in some cases were stratospherically beyond safe levels. And you know, you'd be sitting there across from a mother with three children who has been unwittingly giving her kids, on a daily basis, tap water she believed to be safe, but which clearly posed a risk.

**Maeve:** In one case, a First Nations woman, Leona Peterson, told the team of reporters that she and her son always drank from the tap. She'd given him tap water from the time he was a tiny baby. But the team's analysis of the water from her pipes showed lead levels at three times the guidelines. She said, "I was drinking from the tap, directly from the tap, without any knowledge that there was lead in the water." She told the reporters that finding out about the problem caused [quote] "hurt, real hurt" [end quote].

Alongside the shoe-leather reporting and water testing, the team also fired off dozens of Freedom of Information requests, finding out what each region, city, borough knew about water contamination in their area.

**Rob:** Some of the most vital information that we got came out of those FOIs. We were able to show very clearly that governments in cities like Halifax and Toronto and small towns across the country were totally, totally unprepared on this issue and internally aware of the fact that they were using inappropriate testing protocols. So we were able to get examples of communications, where they basically said to each other, why are we doing this? We're like literally using a system that gives false results. We're giving a false sense of security to people who get their houses tested. Why, why would we do this?

**Maeve:** But if all of this sounds like it's falling into place, it wasn't that simple. Coordinating so many journalists at once was a huge challenge.

**Rob:** So that became a mess. You can imagine what a Google drive starts to look like when you have a hundred people reporting into it. It did become an absolute beast. And I became a convert to the rules of document organization really for the first time, like I realized it's fine for all of us to have our own kind of brain patterns on how we organize things. But when you're working collectively like this, you really do need a regimented and highly strict system for categorization.

**Maeve:** Rob had experienced working on massive collaborations with places like the ICIJ who did the Panama Papers. So he'd learned tricks of the trade to make things work, including getting everyone to sign on to an agreed publication date. But the biggest challenge was convincing people to openly share their findings.

**Rob:** That's a leap that most journalists have not made. Our brains are not traditionally wired that way—we get good stuff, we keep the stuff, we write the story with our byline on it, right? So this kind of existential change of brain patterns to think constantly about the contribution to the whole. It's a big leap, I think. And it's not the way most of us have been raised in this profession.

**Maeve:** The story was building, test result by test result, human story, by human story. Rob sat at his desk and stared at it all, overwhelmed.

**Rob:** It's very powerful as the stuff is coming in, but it's hard to describe because it's an ambivalent feeling, right? Because on the one hand you're like, oh my God, this is far worse than I'd imagined, you know? A third of the tests were showing up in exceedance of the national standard. A third! Some of them were so high, like it was unimaginable that this many people are living in places with levels this high, without any awareness of it.

So it was emotional and terrifying, but also incredibly powerful, of course, because when you're able to convey to people, something which they didn't previously know, and which empowers them to really hold power to account and have an ability to improve and address something so crucial in their own lives, that's as good a day as you can have in this job.

**Maeve:** So, two years after he first came up with the idea, it was almost time to publish.

**Rob:** The night before you actually hit the send button and you're going through your 412th edit, making the final little changes and tweaks and fact checks. And you can see it, the mock-up of what's about to land, what the front page is going to look like tomorrow, I felt tremendous, tremendous relief. Because it's very clear to me that it was rock solid. We went to every city in town and mayor and water utility with our findings. None of them questioned it. In some cases, I think we were telling them things they didn't know. In other cases, we were telling them things they knew, but for which they had no ability to address.

**Maeve:** More than 120 journalists from nine universities and 10 media organizations had come together to find hundreds of thousands of Canadians consuming tap water laced with high levels of lead, leaching from aging and deteriorating pipes. The team found huge percentages of daycares and schools with tainted water flowing from their taps.

It was a monumental revelation. But with investigations like this, there can be a fear that, despite presenting all this, the topic will get swept under the rug, will become old news and forgotten about. Rob had a feeling *this* story had to be different.

**Rob:** I just knew it in my bones. This is not going to be a one-day story that gets relegated to page 20. There's no way that this runs and that there isn't sufficient public outrage to trigger the kind of political capital that they require to actually address it.

**Maeve:** And he was right. There was an outcry.

**Rob:** It was overwhelming. It was a true tsunami of public reaction. Outrage from readers of course, demands for more information, more specific information, which we tried to meet as best we could. But then on the official side, there was strong, strong political reaction across the country, and every community that we explicitly featured.

And then that of course leads pretty quickly to discussions about, okay, so what are we going to do? And the only real answer on this particular issue is money. You got to remove the lead.

**Maeve:** Remarkably, and thanks to the inescapable truths laid out by the project, officials were actually compelled into action.

**Rob:** Hundreds of millions of dollars in cities and towns across the country were devoted to this. Some cities in Canada became international leaders. Halifax, which is my hometown, Halifax, Nova Scotia, went above and beyond, I think any place in the world. So they committed not only to removing all of the lead pipes on city property, but they actually committed to paying for the removal of lead pipes on private property. And the head of the water system there, who I'd met with several times over the previous year, had said, you know, we've been complaining and asking for money for 10 years for this, and this does not sell. You don't go to a city council meeting and get \$200 million to dig up lawns. And then he said, basically, the minute that story ran,



the entire tone of the conversation changed. We showed up at the next city council meeting with our pitch. I think it was unanimously approved.

**Maeve:** It was an incredible impact. Looking back, Rob can see this really was the only way to properly do the story justice.

**Rob:** You sort of go where the story demands. And in this case, it was just screaming out for this kind of big, national treatment. Because so often in journalism, we treat things anecdotally or locally that really aren't, but we stop there, and it's always been a frustration of mine, to sort of look at these big, sweeping issues in such a narrow way.

But when you realize that it's so much bigger, of course your instinct is: so let's figure out how to do it the *right* way. If what you're actually trying to do is serve the story and tell better stories and have more impactful journalism, if *that's* your goal—as opposed to getting an exclusive with your byline on it—then there's no question.

If you actually want to serve the public interest with an elevated form of journalism, then collaboration is absolutely without question, the way to do that. The best work I've ever done and will ever do is work I've done collectively with other journalists and academics and students.

**Maeve:** And now, years later, people across the country know just what is going into their water. They can make informed decisions. In some places, the problem has been fixed. And Rob, who started out as a concerned father, worrying about the health of his child, feels safe, walking to the tap and pouring his daughter a glass of water.

**Rob:** We do drink from our tap here now. And the reality is it will never be over until every piece of lead is removed, of course. And that's not the case. But I mean, overwhelmingly there is both heightened awareness, heightened vigilance, and ultimately actual removal on large scales of high-dense population areas and towns.

**Maeve:** That's all for this episode of The Tip Off. I'll include links to this incredible investigation, "Tainted Water," in the show notes.

Thanks so much to Rob Cribb for talking us through it.

This is the final episode in this series of The Tip Off. Thanks so much for listening. We'll be back with more episodes later in the year.

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This show is a co-production of Studiotobe. Our co-executive producers are Joaquin Alvarado and Ken Ikeda.

Maeve McClenaghan — that's me — created this podcast.

Olivia Aylmer produces the show. Chloe Behrens handles audio editing. Claudia Meza does our audio mixing, sound design and original music. Thanks to her for editorial consultation, too. Thanks also to Soobin Kim and Rushana Miller for transcription support. Dice Muse composed our theme music.

As always, stay tuned for more stories behind the headlines.