

Beyond The Deepwater Horizon Explosion: What Shaped The Social And Political
Engagement Of The BP Oil Spill?

by

Andreas Hoffbauer

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
August 2011

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DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Date August 15, 2011

Supervisor: _____

Readers: _____

DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

DATE: August 15, 2011

AUTHOR: Andreas Hoffbauer

TITLE: Beyond The Deepwater Horizon Explosion: What Shaped The Social And Political Engagement Of The BP Oil Spill?

DEPARTMENT OR SCHOOL: Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

DEGREE: MA CONVOCATION: October YEAR: 2011

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Abstract

Drawing on social movement literature, my thesis examines if news media, NGO, business and government engagement of the BP Oil Spill in the Gulf of Mexico is affected by issue or event complexity, visuality, or issue build-up. To engage this, data from English language newspaper articles in the US, Canada, and the UK, press releases by Greenpeace and Sierra Club, press releases by BP, ExxonMobil, and Shell as well as press releases by the White House are analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. I find that as an issue or event's casual narrative becomes less complicated and as it becomes easier to portray visually its engagement by social and political actors increases. I also find that issue engagement is influenced by whether or not social and political actors signal an issue or an event's importance to others.

List of Abbreviations Used:

WK#: Week Number in the year 2010

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

CEO: Chief Executive Officer

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank my supervisor, Howard Ramos, for challenging me to pursue this research. His ongoing support and guidance has proved invaluable in the production of my thesis. I would also like to thank Mark Stoddard, who has provided new perspectives and sources that have greatly contributed to the development of my thesis. I am also very appreciative of the support that Yoko Yoshida has given me through classes and stimulating conversations.

Chapter 1: Introduction

On the evening of April 20, 2010, the *Deepwater Horizon* offshore drilling platform located in the Gulf of Mexico, about 40 miles off the US coast, was rocked by a series of explosions. The ensuing fire that engulfed the platform leased by BP, claimed the lives of 11 workers and after burning uncontrollably for two days sank to the ocean floor, 5000 feet below the surface. This dramatic series of events ultimately led to what has become known as “the BP oil spill” and it quickly turned into one of the largest environmental disasters in American history, not to mention the largest accidental marine oil spill to date (Robertson and Krauss 2010). To put the disaster into perspective, over 200 million gallons of oil were estimated to have flowed into the Gulf, which is equivalent to 20 *Exxon Valdez* spills (Steffy 2011). Yet, at first the issue was not widely picked up by news media, nor fully engaged by environmental NGOs, BP and other oil companies, or the White House. Unfortunately, this would be of little surprise to those tracking the frequency of oil spills.

In fact, oil spills are far more common than one might think and most spills gain little attention. In 2010 alone, the same year of the BP oil spill, the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration responded to 54 different “oil spill incidents” (Office of Response and Restoration 2010). In the year before, it responded to 41. In both years the spills largely occurred in the Gulf of Mexico and although many did not materialize into significant environmental disasters, all caused some sort of ecological damage. Most of the spills, however, were not the focus of media scrutiny, environmental advocacy, or political intervention. What was different about the BP oil spill?

One might quickly point to the scale of the oil spill, but that would miss revealing subtle differences in what parts of the disaster and what issues and events gained attention and which ones have largely gone unheralded. For instance, the initial explosion on the *Deepwater Horizon* did not spark widespread social and political engagement. In fact, it did not elicit major concern until after it sunk two days later. In part this is understandable given that until its sinking most of the oil from the well was burnt off and considered to pose little environmental risk. Nevertheless, on the day the rig sank President Obama failed to mention the unfolding crisis in the Gulf of Mexico during his Rose Garden address celebrating the 40th anniversary of earth day (White House 2010). Even after the rig sunk, and oil began to leak unabated into the Gulf, engagement of the emerging environmental disaster paled in comparison to when BP was forced to publically disclose a live feed of oil (the spill cam) or when oil began to cover pelicans and tar balls were found among marshland and beaches of coastal states. The surge of attention and issue engagement had largely subsided by early October, two months after the well was finally capped. Worse, just a year later it seems as though the disaster has been largely forgotten –BP’s profits increased 16% despite the oil spill (Associated Press 2011), scientists are still uncertain about the long term effects of the dispersant chemical used to fight it (Quinlan 2011), and 69% of Americans favour increased offshore drilling, the highest rate since the summer of 2008 (Walsh 2011). Clearly the scale of the disaster alone cannot account for what differs in its social and political engagement.

Each of the brief examples cited, however, points to other possible explanations. The initial explosion could easily be accounted for as anomalous and the potential for disaster was initially too complex and difficult to explain to an average person. As the

social movement framing literature would suggest (Snow 2004; Snow and Bedford 1988), perhaps the event and issue were too difficult to frame and too difficult to bridge concerns to broader publics? Keck and Sikkink (1998) highlight the importance for advocacy groups to develop tight causal narratives in order to gain attention and one did not emerge until weeks later. By that time, the spill cam was operational, wildlife was covered by thick sludge, and pristine tourist beaches were marred by tar balls, and thus the issues became rather straightforward, easy to frame, and visuals that people could relate to were abundant. As others would suggest (Gans 1979; Gitlin 2003; Mayer 2006; Rohlinger 2011), perhaps the visuality of the issue accounts for the attention it received? As the old news adage goes, “if it bleeds it leads” and certainly environmental attention has largely been linked to emotional visuals such as clubbed seals over less visually spectacular but more damaging issues like food contamination by pesticides. Yet others, who look at discursive opportunities, agenda-setting, and public arenas might note that attention by one social and political actor likely signals importance of an issue or event and in turn generates interest by others to engage it (see Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Ferree et al. 2002; Koopmans 2004; Koopmans and Olzak 2004; Rohlinger 2007; 2006; 2002). This was certainly the case with the BP oil spill, which gained international attention over the summer of 2010.

For these reasons I will look at whether or not narrative complexity of issues related to the spill, visuality of issues, and the build-up of engagement around issues or events influence how different social and political actors cover, advocate upon, or speak about the BP oil spill. To do this news media coverage, NGO advocacy, oil business and government statements over the course of 2010 are examined. By looking at the entire

year, the analysis sheds light on how the BP oil spill became a social and political problem. This is done by dividing the year into four distinct periods and analyzing the amount of engagement different social and political actors had with the oil spill by week. The analysis uses descriptive tables and graphs and draws upon interpretive analysis of discourse of social and political actors engaging the BP oil spill. The aim is to understand what leads to the issue's adoption as a social problem and whether or not the complexity and visibility of issues or events affect how they will be engaged.

Chapter 2: Narrative Complexity, Visuality, and Issue Build-up –A Brief Review of Literature

Before engaging the analysis, I will look at how dominant theories pertaining to issue complexity, visuality, and issue build-up would explain the attention that the BP oil spill received from social and political actors. These bodies of literature inform the three hypotheses that I will test in the analysis to determine what made the BP oil spill stand out from all the other oil spill incidents reported in 2010 and for that matter since the iconic Santa Barbara offshore oil spill in 1969.

Many contend that the general public does not have the knowledge or time needed to understand and interpret issues with complex definitions. William Gamson (1992), however, challenges such beliefs by arguing that audiences are not passive or ignorant. He finds that through exposure to issues, personal experience and popular wisdom, individuals can gain an understanding of complex problems (p. 179; see also Graber 1988:93). Thus, when a social problem directly affects a person's daily routine or wellbeing, they are more likely to be engaged with the issues or events that contribute to it and in turn they have experiential knowledge needed to understand it and pay attention to it (Castells 2004:173).

As Phil Macnaughten and John Urry (1998) theorize, with respect to environmental issues, a person's ability to interpret an environmental problem is likewise limited by their ability to interact with it (see also Molotch and Lester 1974, 1975, Mazur 1981). As a result, when a person is not directly affected by an environmental disaster she will be more dependent on third party information, such as newspaper coverage, press releases by environmental advocacy groups, or statements by companies involved in the problem or political organization that are tasked with managing the environmental

problems. Nevertheless, others argue that sustained exposure to complex problems via media builds a general familiarity of scientific scenarios, thus providing lay individuals with the ability to understand the issues at hand (Weingart 1998:876). As a result, media discourse on social problems play an important role in how people engage social and political issues.

The historical shift in US environmental news from reporting on issues of conservation and preservation prior to the 1970's to those emphasizing the human causes and consequences of ecological degradation might explain the public's growing consciousness and engagement on ecological problems (Brulle 1996, Dalton 1994, Rootes 2004). The shift towards focusing on the personal repercussions of a host of new environmental issues resonates more broadly with cultural narratives of health and wellbeing (Johnson 2006, Rohlinger 2002). In effect, this draw links between rapid industrialization and frivolous consumption habits and previously unexplained causes of health problems (see Carson 1962). However, not all issues become prominent social and political problems. Why is that the case?

Looking at transnational advocacy, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998: 27) argue that in order for social problems to gain significant attention, they must be converted into "causal stories" that explicitly establish who and what is responsible for the problem. They emphasize that causal narratives need to be clear and direct before they make a convincing case warranting support. Therefore, presenting shorter, less technical and detailed representations of complex issues is considered a necessary step for the broader circulation of a problem (Hilgartner 1990:529; Star 1983). In examining efforts to preserve the old growth forests of British Columbia, Jeffrey Cormier and David

Tindall (2005:9) find that it is easier to sell solutions to a problem once the causality of the issue can be fully comprehended. As a result, issue engagement, by media and other social and political actors, is very much related to the tightness of an issue or event's causal narrative.

Complex issues such as climate change, which have causal narratives with numerous elements and often require technical knowledge, lead to highly speculative scientific accounts that are fraught with uncertainty (Boykoff and Mansfield 2008, Anderson 2009). Robert Futrell states that scientific rhetoric and expert opinion often provide ambiguous and conflicting information, making it difficult to initially define a problem (2003:379). This partially accounts, for instance, for why news media coverage pays relatively little attention to environmental issues and why issues such as climate change tends to receive increased attention only when international climate policies are discussed (Leggett 2001). At those moments the environmental problems are translated into political debates that are easier for publics and social and political actors to engage. In contrast, issues with shorter causal narratives, those that are less complex, are easier to portray and generate more intense reactions by news media, NGOs, publics and political elites (Bennie 1995, Dale 1995, Tsoukas 1999). In fact, the scale of an issue or event's coverage is increased if the actions of specific individuals, businesses, or governments can be clearly identified (Weyler 2004; Bennie 1995). When that is done, it allows publics to focus attention on specific targets and easy solutions. In this vein, William Gamson asserts that targeting and humiliating CEO's is the single most important tactic available to a movement lacking resources or routine access to the media (2004:238). As a result, the manner in which an issue or event is packaged or framed, its narrative or

causal complexity, affects its resonance with audiences and whether or not social and political actors will engage them.

This is an insight made long ago by social movement framing theorists (Snow 2004; Snow and Bedford 2000; 1988). They found that in order for movements to be successful they needed to tap into the dominant master frames of a society and bridge their interests to bystander publics that support their advocacy demands. Similarly, political scientists find that an issue's packaging must also be congruent with the political context in which it will be received to increase the likelihood of being adopted as an issue for debate (Bob 2005). In the case of the BP oil spill, once the affects of the accident were visible, the causal narrative that linked the accident to environmental consequences was simplified. With recent decisions to launch new offshore oil leases in US waters, the issue of offshore drilling resonates with prevailing political debates on energy independence, which has been a focus of every president since the 1970's (Freudenburg and Gramling 2011:5).

Therefore, packaging is important, not only for movements, but for all social and political actors. Thus, when issues or events are directly linked to a particular set of outcomes, they form an effective causal narrative and will be more widely engaged by a full range of social and political actors. This leads to the first hypothesis:

H1: as an issue or event's causal story becomes more direct and simplified, it will receive more coverage by news media, advocacy by environmental organizations, and engagement by business and government.

Others find that visually spectacular issues receive more intense coverage in mainstream news reports than problems that are mundane or difficult to portray (Gitlin

2003; Gans 2003; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993, Ungar 1998, Hutchins and Lester 2006, Hansen 2009). Many argue that this reflects selection biases of dominant news media, which disproportionately values issues that are dramatic, evoke large social impacts, and are culturally recognizable (Tuchman 1978; Schudson 1989, Oliver and Maney 2000; Gans 1979). Moreover, communications scholars find that once an issue is covered by newspapers, readers tends to gravitate towards stories with visuals (Holsanova, Rahm, and Holmqvist 2006). As a result, issues and events that can be visually portrayed have a greater chance of gaining attention, coverage, and later engagement more broadly by a wide range of social and political actors.

When an environmental issue or event can be visually represented through striking and simplistic images, people quickly see the importance and severity of its effects and can be assured of its existence (Dale 1995; Ungar 1998; Castells 2004:187; Weingart et al. 2000; DeLuca 1999). This in turn increases both advocacy upon it and the attention it receives. There is widespread agreement that the image of the famed Cologne cathedral submerged in water on the cover of the national news weekly *Der Spiegel* sparked climate change discourse in Germany by clearly identifying the potential consequences of the problem (Weingart 1998). In the case of the Gulf coast, the detrimental effects of coastal oil spills on birds struggling to breathe or fly, for example, is easy to see and has similar effects. Such images are emotionally charged and solutions are easy to perceive –wash the birds!

By contrast, issues that rely on dense written descriptions are perceived as highly speculative. They are difficult to understand and thus their visuals are technical or difficult to portray. The long term repercussions, for instance, of the widespread use of

toxic chemical dispersants to fight the BP oil spill on the algae and micro-organisms that maintain the Gulf's ecosystem are debated but difficult to see (Quinlan 2011). Similar difficulty was found in trying to convince North Americans that global warming is a real threat (Brossard et al. 2004).

Some scholars contend that higher levels of education among North Americans and Western Europeans contributes to a general awareness and understanding of environmental problems (Rootes 2004:613; Freudenburg and Gramling 2011:136). Yet, despite these findings, a recent Pew Research Center for the People and the Press report revealed that 46 percent of American adults still find visually based stories easier to interpret and understand (Kohut 2008). As a result, visuality is quite important.

Because activist organizations rely on news media to project their messages to bystander publics, successful campaigning depends on adopting issues that resonate with established news values and frames (Koopmans 2004; Gamson and Modigliani 1989) and are geographically within the reach of journalists (Andrews and Caren 2010, Mazur 1981; 1990). The use of images that simplistically link an action that will have a discernable environmental impact increases the prominence of environmental campaigns and projects environmental messages to broader audiences (Hajer 1995, Anderson 1997, Macaghten and Urry 1998). It also increases the chances of being covered by news media and in turn other social and political actors. In fact, the strategy of allowing images to speak for themselves has been attributed to the relative success of Greenpeace's campaigns (Weyler 2004; Hansen 1993; Dale 1992) compared to other environmental organizations.

As a result, the visibility of an issue should increase news media coverage, activist organization engagement and in turn the need for business and government to also respond to an issue. As a result, the second hypothesis is:

H2: Issues and events that have easily accessible visual representations are more likely to be engaged by news media, advocacy organizations, business, and government.

Yet other researchers find that the engagement of an issue, event or social problem by one social or political actor will signal an opportunity or need to engage it by others. For example, Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) argue that claims-makers cluster around high profile issues, borrowing each other's ideas and information and driving increased rates of public attention through multiple feedback loops (see also Dalton et al., 1998; Ungar, 1998; Wood and Peake, 1998). This in turn also demands engagement by political elites and other social and political actors and creates discursive opportunities for all to engage (Ferree et al. 2002; Koopmans 2004; Koopmans and Olzak 2004; Rohlinger 2007; 2006). It also means that bystander publics are more likely to be exposed to debate and potentially act upon it.

As a result, when an issue's coverage surpasses a certain threshold of attention, it transforms into a social problem and political matter that should be engaged (Neuman 1990). In this context, agenda-setting scholars also recognized that when prized news outlets, such as the *New York Times* or *Guardian*, adopt an issue it signals to other media and political actors its significance and the need to engage the issue (Ferree et al. 2002; Rohlinger 2007). The process in turn contributes to an information feedback loop, as noted above. Furthermore, the clustering of engagement around an issue or event also

contributes its amplification, particularly as news media increasingly rely on fewer sources to report on breaking news (Klinenberg 2007; Gans 2003; Bennett 1990). Similarly, when larger and more established activist organizations take on an issue or prominently campaign on a specific event, other organizations follow their lead. Early risers that respond to issues and events thus hold a prized position in how social problems are negotiated and resolved (McAdam 1983). Late comers, moreover, that engage issues or events after they've already been defined have less return for their advocacy efforts (Ramos et al. 2007). This has led some looking at environmental advocacy to conclude that the intensity and volume of an environmental problem's engagement is more influential on its development in the public sphere than the problem itself or how it is portrayed (Mazur 1990).

In examining the case of climate change and its consequences in North America, studies find that social and political engagement of the issue varies greatly. When responding to the risks of adverse climate change, environmental advocacy groups and scientists are more proactive in advocating actions to prevent environmental degradation. By contrast, the oil industry and institutional political engagement is found to be more reactive, casting into doubt scientific data on the risks posed by fluctuations in the earth's temperature (Sonnett 2010; Weingart 2000). The intense opposition waged by conservative movements over the environmental community's definition of climate change as a social problem in the mass media is attributed to bolstering the visibility of the issue and its engagement by the US Congress (McCright and Dunlap 2003).

As a result, when an issue or event is prominently adopted by few key actors, it signals the importance and need for other news media and social and political actors to engage it. Thus, the third hypothesis is:

H3: as an issue or event's engagement increases more social and political actors will be drawn to it

In sum, it is expected that coverage of the BP oil spill is dependent upon the complexity of casual narratives of issues and events. Less complicated issues and events should have greater engagement by a wider range of social and political actors. In this respect it is held that the visuality of issues and events also influences their engagement. Issues and events that are easier to portray visually gain more engagement by social and political actors. Last, it is expected that issue or event engagement is influenced by whether or not social and political actors signal its importance to others leading to a clustering around specific issues and events.

Chapter 3: Methods

To examine how news media, environmental activist organizations, oil companies and the government engaged the BP oil spill, the number of news articles and press releases issued by each were counted and aggregated by week for the year of 2010. This timeframe was selected in order to capture social and political engagement before the explosion on the *Deepwater Horizon* as well as how the BP oil spill unfolded over the following eight months.

Following many scholars looking at social movements and agenda-setting the analysis examines news media by counting articles in a number of newspapers. These include *The Times-Picayune*, *The New York Times*, *The Globe and Mail*, and *The Guardian*. These venues were selected because they represent a range of local, national and international news coverage. *The Times-Picayune* is based in New Orleans and was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for its breaking news coverage of Hurricane Katrina (Pulitzer 2011). Because it is a trusted local source, it makes the publication an ideal proxy for local news coverage. *The New York Times* was selected because it captures national attention and elite audiences in both the US and the rest of the world. The analysis also looks at the *Globe and Mail* and *Guardian*, which are influential national papers in Canada and the UK. These two sources were examined because many argue that in an increasingly transnational world, information networks span borders and can in turn lead to international pressure and focus on an issue. Canada, as one of the US's closest neighbours and as its biggest trading partner is worth examining, as is the UK which is home to BP's headquarters and is likewise an influential friend of the US.

Newspaper engagement was tracked by counting articles, by publication, which mention the keywords “BP” or “oil spill.”¹ Searches were conducted using Factiva and results for each keyword search were entered by day into a time-series database. This was then aggregated by week to determine fluctuations and peaks in news media engagement of the BP oil spill. Overall, during the year 2010, the keyword “BP” was mentioned in 4,160 articles, with the *Times-Picayune* accounting for 1,819, the *New York Times* 961, the *Globe and Mail* 367 and the *Guardian* 1,013 articles. The keyword “Oil Spill” was mentioned in 3,305 articles, with the *Times-Picayune* contributing 1,890, the *New York Times* 812, the *Globe and Mail* 258, and the *Guardian* 345 articles. In each case, save for the local coverage by the *Times-Picayune*, the “BP” keyword yielded more articles. In the local news media “oil spill” yielded just 71 more articles, which largely appeared in the aftermath of the disaster.

In order to examine how NGOs engaged the BP oil spill I looked at the online press releases of two leading environmental organizations: The Sierra Club and Greenpeace International. Both organizations are household names and for years have been strong advocates on environmental issues. In fact, prior to the BP oil spill, both organizations had vigorously campaigned against offshore oil exploration and drilling. However, they employed distinctly different tactics, which makes them ideal organizations to compare.

I also look at the online press releases of oil companies involved in the spill and offshore drilling. These include: BP, Shell, and ExxonMobil. All three companies have extensive offshore oilfield leases in the Gulf of Mexico and are the leading companies in the industry. Additionally, all three companies testified before a House Subcommittee on

Energy and the Environment regarding their deepwater drilling safety protocols during the BP oil spill.² I decided to look at how companies engaged the incident to offer a fuller picture of social and political engagement.

Last, I examine how the White House responded to the incident by examining their press briefings. The decision to focus on the federal government rather than local or state governments was made because of the scale of the accident and the pressure placed on the White House to coordinate the management of the disaster. Although at some points it was difficult to tell who was actually in charge, BP or the US Government.

Using the same keywords, as for the news media, press releases were obtained from online archives of each organization, oil company, and the White House. In the case of BP, all of their press releases for 2010 were captured instead of using keywords. Like with newspapers, counts of the keywords were entered by day into the same time-series database and then aggregated by week. The Sierra Club and Greenpeace International issued 65 and 18 press releases, respectively, with the keyword “BP”, from a total of 209 and 117 press releases issued in 2010. BP, itself, issued a total of 171 press releases, Shell issued 2 and ExxonMobil 3, and the White House issued 60 press briefings mentioning “BP” that year from a total of 64, 139 and 204 issued respectively. For the keyword “oil spill” the Sierra Club and Greenpeace International issues 15 and 11 press releases, respectively, in 2010. BP issues 73 press releases, which were examined separately from the total number issued by the company to determine if this keyword’s engagement was similar to BP’s overall trends. Shell and ExxonMobil issued 1 each, and the White House issued 40 press briefings mentioning “oil spill”. As was the case with news articles, more press releases mentioned “BP” than “oil spill,” which leads to perhaps the first finding –

the oil spill was largely framed by social and political actors as a business problem, not an environmental disaster.

Aggregated weekly data from newspapers, environmental NGOs, oil companies, and the White house were then plotted on a series of line graphs and tables reporting frequency of issue engagement by keyword and both were used to rank the weeks that received the most intense coverage. From this I deduced four distinct periods of engagement, which are discussed in the next chapter, and I qualitatively explored articles and press releases in those weeks to better understand how different social and political actors engaged the oil spill. In the next chapter I expand upon this by offering an overview of the BP oil spill, introducing and justifying the periods of engagement, and then follow this with a detailed examination of each social and political actor.

Chapter 4: A Brief Timeline of the BP Oil Spill

When examining the data from different social and political actors, four distinct periods of engagement become apparent. These include: a *pre-accident* phase, which occurred between January 1 and April 18, an *oil disaster* period that lasted between April 19 and June 20, a *capping the well* phase, between June 21 and August 15, and a *normalizing* period beginning on August 16 to the end of the year. Within each phase 28 issues and events were identified. For the analysis of this thesis I will focus on 14 of the most prominent ones.

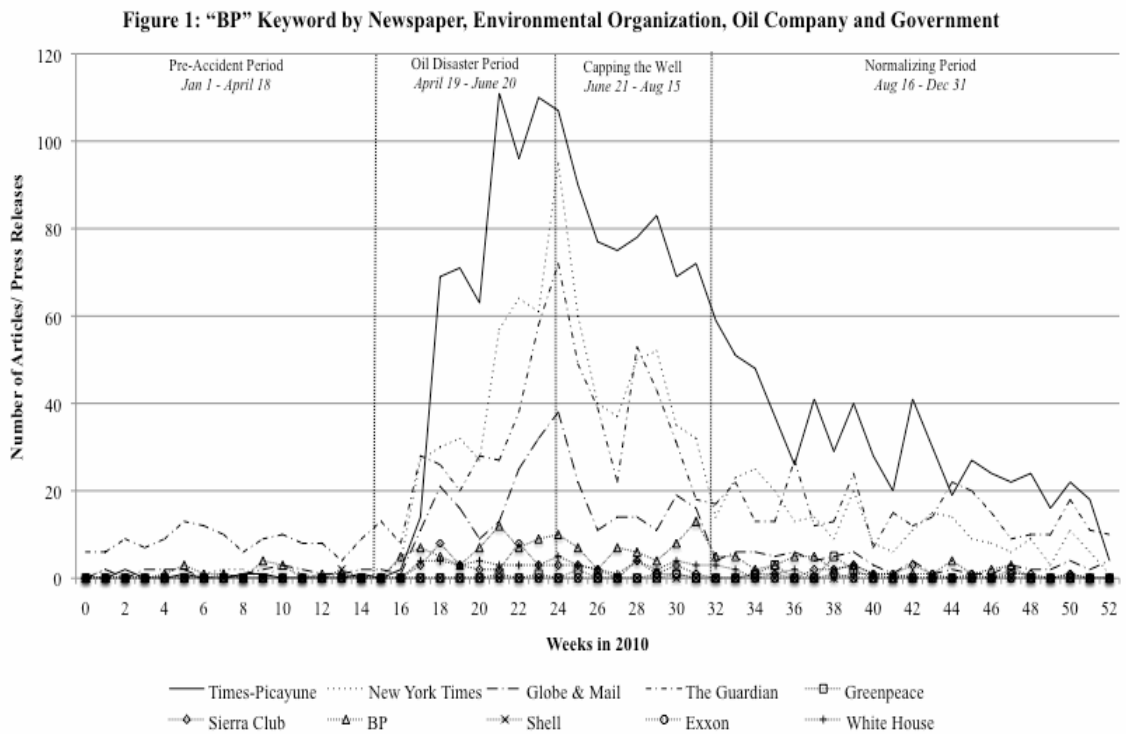
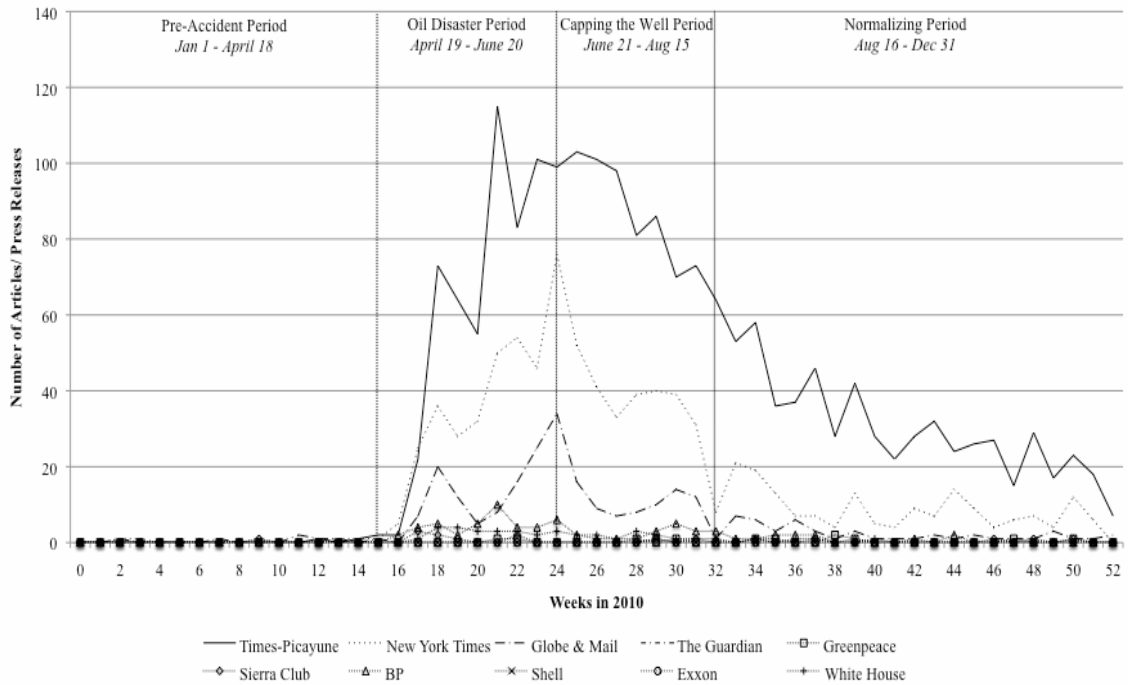


Figure 1, Figure 2 and Table 1 offer an overview of how different social and political actors engaged the BP oil spill and which issues and events framed the four periods we identify. I will examine each in more detail.

Figure 2: "Oil Spill" by Newspaper, Environmental Organization, Oil Company and Government



Pre-Accident

The ill fate of the Macondo well began in October 2009, when BP hired the Swiss-based drilling company Transocean to drill the well in the Mississippi Canyon Block 252 in the Gulf of Mexico. From the outset, drilling was plagued with problems, beginning when Hurricane Ida decommissioned the first drilling rig the *Marianas*. When drilling resumed in early February 2010, using the massive semi-submersible drilling rig the *Deepwater Horizon*, the crew experienced four major well control events and in mid-March the drilling pipe got stuck in the borehole, forcing the drillers to back out and then drill around the obstruction (Cavnar 2010:25). To recover the more than half-million dollars a day that BP was losing due to delays, decisions were made that ultimately jeopardized the integrity and safety of the Macondo well. In haste to get the well online, BP cut corners by neglecting to install a lockdown sleeve at the wellhead and failed to

ensure that the cement around the wellhead had properly cured (Bourne 2010:45; Cavnar 2010:27; Freudenburg and Gramling 2011:40). In addition, the blowout preventer that is designed to hydraulically shear the drilling pipe in the event of a powerful surge from the seafloor before it erupts onto the drilling platform above was troubled with maintenance issues. As a result of hydraulic fluid leaks, technical modifications, and overdue recertification, the blowout preventer was not in an ideal operational state when the *Deepwater Horizon* exploded (Deepwater Horizon Joint Investigation 2010).

The lack of attention in the pre-accident phase might be accounted for by the fact that these issues were both technical and complex. They did not lend themselves to succinct and meaningful causal narratives that would resonate with the general public. Without an understanding of drilling technology and well engineering, conveying the potential consequences of BP's time and money saving decisions would require the scouring of densely written reports that do not resonate with broader audiences. Moreover, at a depth of 5,000 feet, providing visual imagery of the problems was difficult because of the lack of light at such extreme depths and the costs associated with such endeavours. This is not to mention the incomprehensible imagery of piping and wellhead fixtures that are only discernable to a specialist. An alternative explanation is that in a highly competitive industry that is marred with technical incidents, the events leading up to the explosion on the *Deepwater Horizon* were not considered out of the ordinary (Cavnar 2010). Overall, the events that occurred in the pre-accident period did not lend themselves to dramatization and thus were not widely engaged by media on a large scale, nor by other social and political actors.

Table 1: Brief Time line of Periods and Events During the BP Oil Spill

Pre-Accident	Events
<i>Period 1: Week 0 to Week 15 (January 1 to April 18)</i>	February -Macondo Oil Field is Being Drilled with Problems
Oil Disaster	Events
<i>Period 2: Week 16 to Week 24 (April 19 to June 20)</i>	<p>April 20 -Explosion on Deep Water Horizon</p> <p>April 22 -Sinking of Deep Water Horizon -Oil Leak Begins</p> <p>May 1 -Wetlands of Louisiana hit by oil and a fishing Ban imposed</p> <p>May 2 -Obama visits region for first time</p> <p> May 7 -Oil Hits Chaundeleurs Islands, LA</p> <p> May 11 -Oil Hits Whisky Islands, LA</p> <p>May 12 -Oil Hits Pascagoula, MS</p> <p> May 14 -Oil Hits Fouchon Beach, Trinity Islands, LA</p> <p> May 18 -Oil Hits Port Eads, LA</p> <p>May 19 -Live Feed Camera of Oil (Spill Cam) Goes Public</p> <p> May 20 -Oil Hits Pass A Loutre, LA</p> <p>May 24 -Spread of oil in Louisiana is now widespread</p> <p>May 26 -Governor of Louisiana raises issue to media and Anderson Cooper CNN begins coverage from Louisiana</p> <p> May 25 -Oil Hits Horn Island, MS</p> <p> May 27 -Oil Hit Bois Islands, MS</p> <p>June 2 -Oil Hits Dauphin Island and Fort Morgan, AL</p> <p>June 3 -Oil Hit Biloxi and Pass Christian, MS</p> <p>June 4 -Spread of oil in Florida is now widespread</p> <p>June 5 -Spread of oil in Alabama is now widespread</p> <p>June 15 -Oil Executives of BP, Shell, and ExxonMobil go before House Sub Committee on Energy and the Environment</p>
Capping the Well	Events
<i>Period 3: Week 25 to Week 32 (June 21 to August 15)</i>	<p>July -Multiple capping attempts to stop oil spill</p> <p>July 15 -First partial success in slowing oil spill</p> <p>July 22 -Threat of Tropical Storm Bonnie</p> <p>July 27 -BP announces replacement of Tony Hayward as CEO</p> <p>August 2 -Official Estimates call the spill the largest in history</p> <p>August 9 -BP claims success in "static kill" of oil well</p>
Normalizing	Events
<i>Period 4: Week 33 to Week 53 (Aug 16 to Dec 31)</i>	<p>September 29 -Andy Inglis steps down from Deep Water Operations</p> <p>October 1 -Bob Dudley becomes CEO of BP</p>

Oil Disaster

Investigators believe that on the evening of April 20, a large gas bubble entered the well's pipe casing through gaps in the cement around the wellhead and shot up to the *Deepwater Horizon* platform above (Bourne 2010:46). The blowout preventer should have stopped the burst of gas at the seabed, however, because of maintenance problems the safety system was not activated and did not block the powerful surge (Steffy 2011). All subsequent attempts to manually activate the blowout preventer failed, causing a series of explosion to erupt on the rig ultimately killing 11 workers. The ensuing inferno, fed by crude oil and natural gas from the Macondo well, engulfed the rig for two days. On April 22, the rig sank after a flotilla of boats unsuccessfully attempted to battle the flames and remotely activate the troubled blowout preventer. Without the presence of a fire marshal, it is speculated that the millions of gallons of seawater poured onto the rig's decks in an uncoordinated manner may have actually caused it to sink due to the excessive weight (Cavnar 2010:82). Had the rig stayed afloat longer, Transocean might have had a better chance to separate the rig from the riser that connected it to the well, which broke when the platform sank, allowing oil to flow unabated into the Gulf of Mexico (ibid).

The effects of the blowout could not be immediately surveyed due to the sediment that was stirred up on the ocean floor when the rig sank, followed by days of bad weather (Khatchadourian 2011:41). Without live data, response experts were dependent on flow estimates provided by BP, which proved to be grossly inaccurate (ibid). A week after the accident, oil began to wash up on the Chandeleurs Island's wetlands in Louisiana and federal fishing bans were imposed (Aigner et al. 2010). President Obama responded to

the emerging disaster with his first trip to the Gulf region on May 2, a day after the oil made landfall. During this trip he spoke with response coordinators at BP's Houma Incident Command Post in Louisiana (Khatchadourian 2011:42). Throughout May there were widespread incidents of oil making landfall along the Louisiana coast. As the oil continued to flow uninhibitedly, the Mississippi coastline was affected and in early June beaches in Alabama and Florida were being inundated with drifting oil ribbons and tar balls. Despite the best efforts of the response crews to protect the beaches with oil absorbing booms, the magnitude of the spill surpassed their relentless efforts to defend the coasts.

On May 19, BP gave into congressional pressure and publically released high-definition video images of the wellhead (Khatchadourian 2011:41). Visuals were provided by webcam footage, dubbed the spill cam, which provided both the public and independent researches with images of the oils leaking into the Gulf. One month later on June 15, executives from BP, Shell, and ExxonMobil testified before a House Subcommittee on Energy and the Environment regarding their coastal drilling safety protocols and incident response procedures. During the proceedings BP executives admitted that they were aware of technical problems associated with the well, such as hydraulic fluid leaks, extensive modifications, the blowout preventer's inability to cut all types of pipe used in the drilling operation, and the failure of the emergency controls. Despite this information, the investigation revealed that Transocean continued drilling operations under the direction of BP, which directly violated the United States Mineral Management Services regulations (Deepwater Horizon Joint Investigation 2010; Mufson and Fahrenholdt 2010; Hilzenrath 2010). Ironically, on the evening of the explosion, BP

and Transocean Executives were aboard the *Deepwater Horizon* to present its crew with an award for their record of operating seven years without time lost due to incident (Cavnar 2010:31).

The oil disaster phase's initial delay in coverage, at the time of the explosion, may reflect a variety of factors. Most notably, the accident's remote location made it difficult for reporters to gather information and provide breaking images of the *Deepwater Horizon* engulfed in flames. Likewise, a causal narrative of widespread disaster and danger was far from certain and in the early days the extent of the problem was not self-apparent. Similarly, response efforts, such as controlled burns of oil while the platform was still afloat and the application of chemical dispersant were largely conducted out of sight. Moreover, Louisiana's unique coastal environment of impenetrable marsh land makes it virtually impossible to access the Gulf from land, which significantly decreased the ease of assessing the spill's ecological effects in the early stages of the disaster (Freudenburg and Gramling 2011:134). Without accurate information, the severity of the accident remained scarcely known and its effects on the Gulf's ecology and economy were speculative at best.

One week after the accident, however, coverage of the BP oil spill intensified and continued to increase over the following eight weeks. During this time, oil made its first landfall, coating coastal wildlife and discolouring beaches, providing easy to interpret images of the oil spill's effects on the Gulf region. Combined with a live high-definition feed of the wellhead, the severity of the accident could no longer be disputed or underplayed by BP. The increase in coverage, moreover, may also be attributed to the attention that President Obama and his administration gave to the issue. His visit to the

Gulf coast one week after the accident and commitment to the response effort signalled to other social and political actors that this was an issue of national, if not international, concern. As seen in Figure 1 and 2, this was the period that received the most intense engagement by all of the social and political actors observed.

Capping the Well

After repeated efforts to repair the blow out preventer failed during the initial stages of the accident, BP engineers attempted a variety of techniques to stem the flow of oil. Despite seemingly promising procedures, BP's first success in stopping the flow of oil occurred only on July 15, when a new capping assembly was fixed to the wellhead (Corum et al. 2010). Yet, to quell the government and American public's growing impatience and dissatisfaction with BP's CEO Tony Hayward, and the failed efforts of the company, BP's board of directors announced on July 27, that Bob Dudley would take over his role effective October 1 (BP 2010). Days later, federal scientists using more precise data announced that the BP oil spill was by far the world's largest release of oil into marine waters (Robertson and Krauss 2010). With the integrity of the mid-July cap verified for the eventual complete capping, engineers began their second attempt at sealing the well. In a procedure similar to a failed "top kill" of late May, mud was pumped into the well's metal casing through a valve on the blowout preventer. Using dense drilling mud the oil and gas spewing into the Gulf was forced back into the reservoir, at which point cement was added to seal the well. On August 9, BP announced that its "static kill" operation and cementing procedure were successful and that the Macondo well was finally plugged (Corum et al. 2010).

During this phase of the oil spill, engagement with the issue declined steadily, despite the simplification of the causal narrative. This may reflect the fact that the initial excitement aroused by the spill had dissipated and was now replaced with the monumental and less visually stunning task of remedying the problem and mitigating its long-term consequences. With response efforts concentrated on capping the well capturing dramatic images became increasingly more difficult. Moreover, procedures to stem the oil flow were highly technical and very complex to portray.³ Apart from saving oil-coated wildlife, response efforts during this period did not lend themselves to flashy or succinct reporting, advocacy or politicking. This period could have also marked the start of the issue's saturation point. With the previous eight weeks of intense engagement, bystander publics, as well as social and political actors, may have lost their interest in the problem and were ready to move on to new emerging issues.

Normalizing

With the Macondo well successfully capped, BP focused all its public relations attention on compensating the victims of the *Deepwater Horizon* well blowout and mending its tarnished image. The first step in rebuilding trust in its operations came on September 29, when the incoming CEO, Bob Dudley, ousted the head of exploration and production, Andy Inglis (BP 2010b). Following this move, Bob Dudley announced sweeping plans to restructure BP in an effort to increase corporate oversight and safety standards.⁴

The levelling off of attention, save for local news media, during this final period may be accounted for by the fact that the disaster was now being discussed in relation to

BP's long-term corporate responsibilities. Although compensating the victims of the oil spill's aftermath was a major issue, it was primarily a concern for residents of the Gulf region and not national and international audiences. This was also the case for the corporate restructuring of the company, which was primarily of interest to BP shareholders and federal regulatory bodies and not broader national and international publics. Moreover, business news of this nature is considered less flashy and attention grabbing, and thus receives less coverage –not to mention response by advocacy groups. Consequently, the accident's national prominence continued to subside to the point where after a year it seems as though it may have almost been forgotten.

Using the *pre-accident*, *oil disaster*, *capping the well*, and *normalizing* distinctions, the next three chapters will look into the BP oil spill in greater detail to understand how each social and political actor engaged the disaster and to test my three hypotheses.

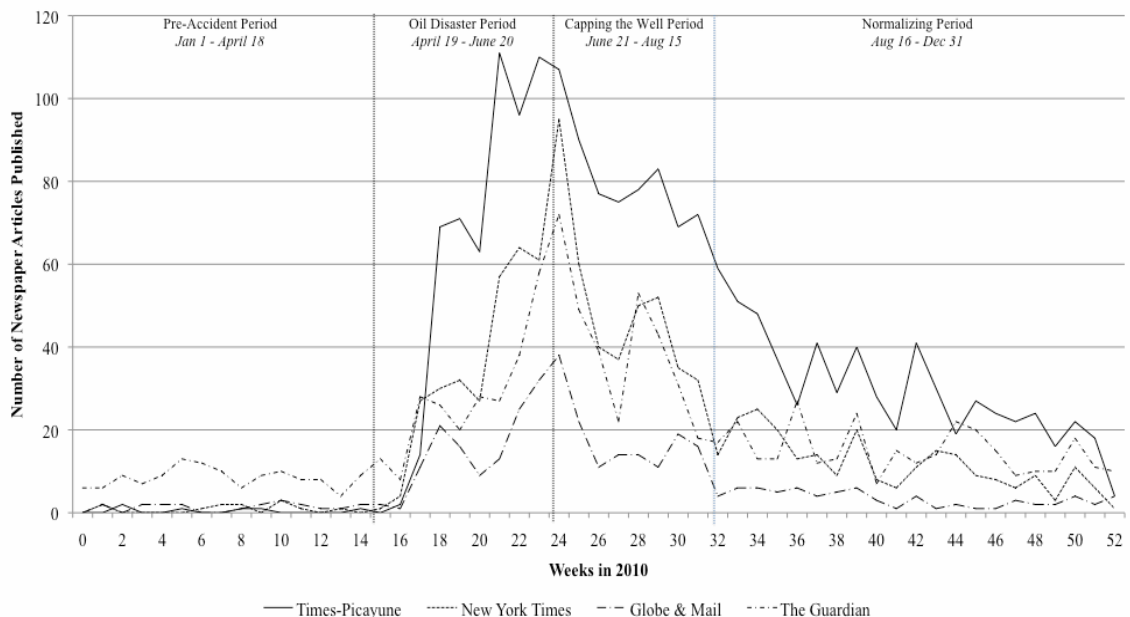
Chapter 5: Engagement of the term “BP”

To examine if changes in the narrative complexity and visuality of the issues and events of the BP oil spill influenced the spill’s engagement I will assess when different social and political actors engaged it the most. I will do this by looking at a series of line graphs and top-ten weeks of coverage tables for each social and political actor. If the intensity of engagement increases around weeks framed by issues and events that have simplistic causal narratives and are more visually comprehensible there will be evidence to support the first two hypotheses. If social and political actors cluster their engagement during the same weeks or spark engagement of one another closely there will also be support for the third hypothesis. I will first look at newspapers.

Overall, as one might expect the *Times-Picayune*, the local news source, had the most engagement of the BP oil spill, with 1,819 articles published mentioning the keyword “BP”. This was almost twice the amount of the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, which published 961 and 1,013 articles respectively. By contrast, *The Globe and Mail* published only 367 articles, which is about a fifth of the coverage allotted by the leading publication.

Despite varying levels of coverage, as Figure 3 and Table 2 illustrate, all four publications’ top three weeks of reporting on the BP oil spill occurred during the *oil disaster* phase of the accident. The only exception was seen with the *Guardian*’s third most intense week of engagement, which occurred during the *capping the well* period.

Figure 3: "BP" Keyword by Newspaper



This difference is somewhat expected given that the *Guardian* covered more issues and events with respect to BP that were linked to the UK and that were not directly related to the oil spill in the Gulf. Such coverage included BP's role in lobbying for the release of the Lockerbie bomber and a former executives' prominent new role in the British government. In total, the number of articles published in the top two weeks of each newspaper combined accounted for 14 percent of the total number of news articles mentioning "BP".

Engagement during the *oil disaster* period primarily focused on the increasing scale of the disaster and its effects on the Gulf's coastal ecology and wildlife. With little success in capping the well fear of the lasting consequences of the accident were becoming more and more prominent. This is evident, for example, in an article published by the *Guardian* which notes:

Table 2: Top Weeks of Coverage by Newspaper in 2010
with the Keyword "BP"

Rank	Times-Picayune			New York Times			Globe & Mail			The Guardian		
	WK#	Week	Freq.	WK#	Week	Freq.	WK#	Week	Freq.	WK#	Week	Freq.
1	21	(24 May - 30 May)	111	24	(14 June - 20 June)	95	24	(14 June - 20 June)	38	24	(14 June - 20 June)	72
2	23	(7 June - 13 June)	110	22	(31 May - 6 June)	64	23	(7 June - 13 June)	32	23	(7 June - 13 June)	58
3	24	(14 June - 20 June)	107	23	(7 June - 13 June)	61	22	(31 May - 6 June)	25	28	(12 July - 18 July)	53
4	22	(31 May - 6 June)	96	25	(21 June - 27 June)	60	25	(21 June - 27 June)	22	25	(21 June - 27 June)	49
5	25	(21 June - 27 June)	90	21	(24 May - 30 May)	57	18	(3 May - 9 May)	21	29	(19 July - 25 July)	43
6	29	(19 July - 25 July)	83	29	(19 July - 25 July)	52	6	(26 July - 1 Aug)	19	26	(28 June - 4 July)	39
7	28	(12 July - 18 July)	78	28	(12 July - 18 July)	50	19	(10 May - 16 May)	16	22	(31 May - 6 June)	38
8	26	(28 June - 4 July)	77	26	(28 June - 4 July)	40	7	(2 Aug - 8 Aug)	16	30	(26 July - 1 Aug)	31
9	27	(5 July - 11 July)	75	27	(5 July - 11 July)	37	31	(5 July - 11 July)	14	17	(26 April - 2 May)	28
10	31	(2 Aug - 8 Aug)	72	30	(26 July - 1 Aug)	35	28	(12 July - 18 July)	14	20	(17 May - 23 May)	28
							21	(24 May - 30 May)	13	21	(24 May - 30 May)	27
							17	(26 April - 2 May)	11	36	(6 Sep - 12 Sep)	
							26	(28 June - 4 July)	11			
							29	(19 July - 25 July)	11			

The futures of BP and of wildlife around the Gulf of Mexico are largely dependent on the rapid success of two "relief" wells that are being drilled in an attempt to halt anywhere between 20,000 and 40,000 barrels of oil a day that is flowing out of the stricken Macondo subsea hole. (Macalister and Wachman 2010)

When all news coverage mentioning “BP” during the oil disaster phase is counted, the period accounts for 36 percent of the total news coverage with this keyword. This suggests that newspapers increased their engagement of the issue when the effects of the oil spill were most evident and its impacts on the coast’s ecology and wildlife easiest to see and understand. As the capping attempts were more successful and the spread of the oil partially stemmed, engagement subsided due to the decreasing visual severity of the accident. Moreover, the capping of the Macondo wellhead was a highly technical issue that was more difficult to portray than oil stricken pelicans struggling for life in mid-May.

While engagement was subsiding during the *normalization* phase for national and international publications, the local newspaper the *Times-Picayune* had three notable spikes in coverage that bucked the trends in the other three publications. Articles published during these heightened weeks of the *normalizing* period were primarily concerned with recovery efforts to restore the ecological integrity of the region and massive financial commitments required to achieve it. For instance, as one article reported:

BP and others responsible for the spill face between \$5 billion and \$19 billion in civil penalties. Dedicating most of it to our region would provide much-needed money to prop up our economy and to reverse decades of coastal erosion in Louisiana's wetlands and barrier islands. That should be a national priority. (“Paying to restore the Gulf” 2010)

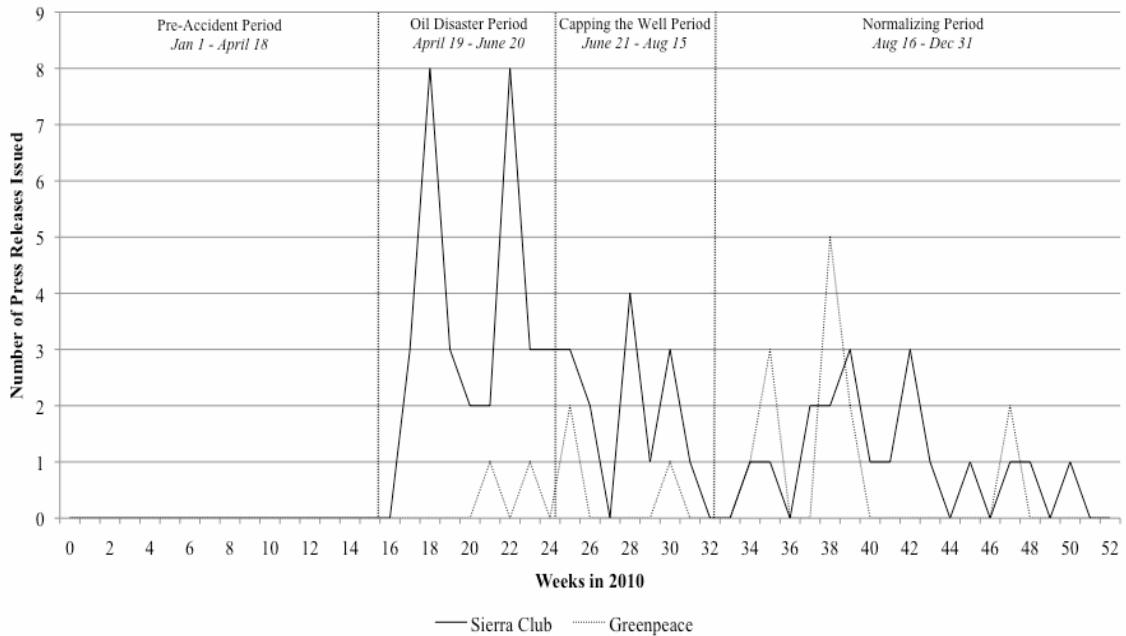
Thus, although such issues were of great concern to Gulf residents, they likely would not have had simple causal narratives, issues were complex and ambiguous, and visual images were increasingly lacking thus making them a difficult sell to national and international audiences.

When we look at engagement of the BP oil spill, with the keyword “BP,” by environmental NGOs in Figure 4 and Table 3, we see that the Sierra Club issued a total of 65 press releases mentioning “BP”. Interestingly, Greenpeace International issued only 18 press releases mentioning the term despite their previous campaigning against offshore oil drilling.

Like newspapers, the Sierra Club’s most intense two weeks of coverage occurred during the *oil disaster* phase of the accident, which accounts for 25 percent of the organization’s total response mentioning “BP.” During these weeks, the Sierra Club used powerful examples of how the oil spill had affected the gulf’s ecology and demanded that BP be held fully responsible for the response efforts and the ecological recovery of the region. This is illustrated in a press release issued two weeks after the well blowout, which stated:

We are already watching wildlife like sea turtles and birds washing up on beaches and we can expect things to get much worse. Recovery and rescue of marine life and habitat will likely take decades. (Sierra Club 2010)

Figure 4: “BP” Keyword by Environmental Organization



Six weeks after the accident, during the organization’s second period of peak engagement of the oil spill, the Sierra Club’s executive director, Michael Brune, advocated against all offshore oil production. As he observed:

What I have seen in the Gulf is shocking. It's horrifying. It's heartbreaking. One bird, covered in oil, struggled again and again to take off from the water. Other pelicans would approach and then move away. (Sierra Club 2010b)

Table 3: Top Weeks of Coverage by Environmental Organization in 2010
with the Keyword "BP"

Sierra Club				Greenpeace			
Rank	Wk#	Week	Freq.	Rank	Wk#	Week	Freq.
1	18	(3 May - 9 May)	8	1	38	(20 Sep - 26 Sep)	5
1	22	(31 May - 6 June)	8	2	35	(30 Aug - 5 Sep)	3
2	28	(12 July - 18 July)	4	3	25	(21 June - 27 June)	2
3	17	(26 April - 2 May)	3	3	39	(27 Sep - 3 Oct)	2
3	19	(10 May - 16 May)	3	3	47	(22 Nov - 28 Nov)	2
3	23	(7 June - 13 June)	3	4	21	(24 May - 30 May)	1
3	24	(14 June - 20 June)	3	4	23	(7 June - 13 June)	1
3	25	(21 June - 27 June)	3	4	30	(26 July - 1 Aug)	1
3	30	(26 July - 1 Aug)	3	4	34	(23 Aug - 29 Aug)	1
3	39	(27 Sep - 3 Oct)	3				
3	42	(18 Oct - 24 Oct)	3				
4	20	(17 May - 23 May)	2				
4	21	(24 May - 30 May)	2				
4	26	(28 June - 4 July)	2				
4	37	(13 Sep - 19 Sep)	2				
4	38	(20 Sep - 26 Sep)	2				
5	29	(19 July - 25 July)	1				
5	31	(2 Aug - 8 Aug)	1				
5	34	(23 Aug - 29 Aug)	1				
5	35	(30 Aug - 5 Sep)	1				
5	40	(4 Oct - 10 Oct)	1				
5	41	(11 Oct - 17 Oct)	1				
5	43	(25 Oct - 31 Oct)	1				
5	45	(8 Nov - 14 Nov)	1				
5	47	(22 Nov - 28 Nov)	1				
5	48	(29 Nov - 5 Dec)	1				
5	50	(13 Dec - 19 Dec)	1				

In contrast, Greenpeace International's top two weeks for issuing press releases occurred during the *normalizing* period after the well was capped. Interestingly, during these weeks the organization did not directly focus on the BP oil spill, but rather used it as an example of the danger of offshore drilling in other countries. They did this in attempt to stop drilling along the coast of Greenland and to encourage the British parliament to pass a bill that would ban deep sea drilling in its waters. As one Greenpeace press release notes:

An oil disaster in the Atlantic Frontier could be even harder to stop than it was for BP in the Gulf of Mexico. But so far the UK Government refuses to face reality and stop issuing permits for ships like this to drill. (Greenpeace 2010)

This suggests that both activist organizations focused on the period of the accident with the most salient images to comprehensibly link coastal drilling to severe environmental destruction, even though the period in which they engaged them was different.

When we look at the oil companies, we find notable differences. Prior to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, BP issued no more than four press releases in a given week. Immediately after the explosion and sinking of the *Deepwater Horizon*, however, BP began to issue an increasing number of press releases for a total of 171. This trend is shown in Figure 5 and Table 4.

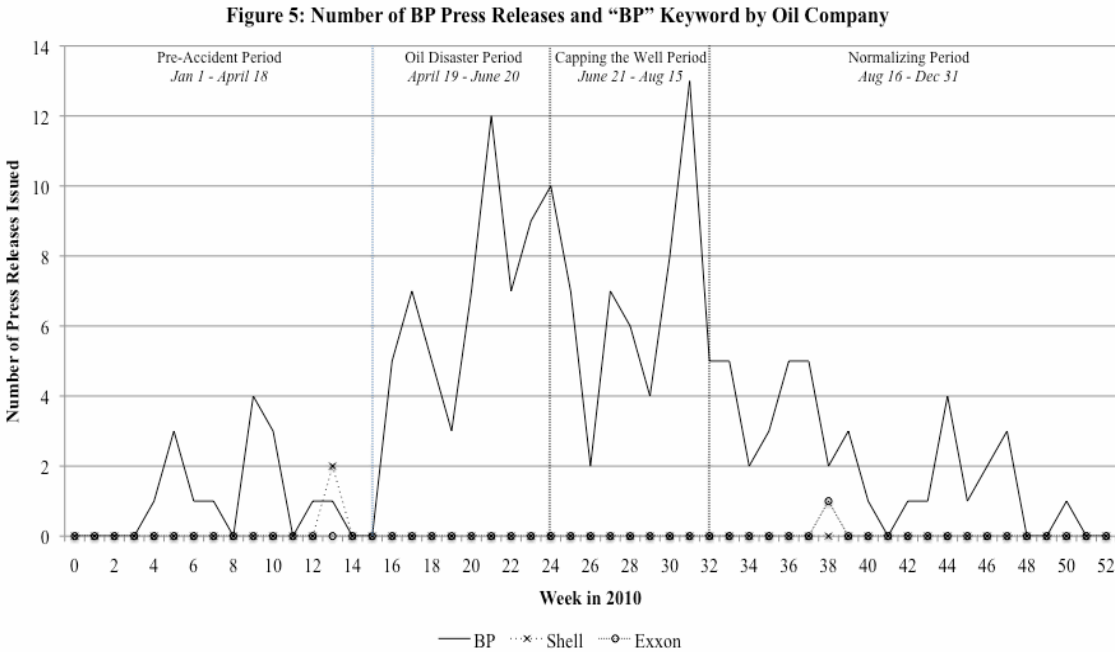


Table 4: Top Weeks of Coverage by Oil Company in 2010
with the Keyword "BP"

BP				Shell				Exxon			
Rank	Wk#	Week	Freq.	Rank	Wk#	Week	Freq.	Rank	Wk#	Week	Freq.
1	31	(2 Aug - 8 Aug)	13	1	13	(29 Mar - 4 April)	2	1	38	(20 Sep - 26 Sep)	1
2	21	(24 May - 30 May)	12								
3	24	(14 June - 20 June)	10								
4	23	(7 June - 13 June)	9								
5	30	(26 July - 1 Aug)	8								
6	17	(26 April - 2 May)	7								
6	20	(17 May - 23 May)	7								
6	22	(31 May - 6 June)	7								
6	25	(21 June - 27 June)	7								
6	27	(5 July - 11 July)	7								
7	28	(12 July - 18 July)	6								
8	16	(19 April - 25 April)	5								
8	18	(3 May - 9 May)	5								
8	32	(9 Aug - 15 Aug)	5								
8	33	(16 Aug - 22 Aug)	5								
8	36	(6 Sep - 12 Sep)	5								
8	37	(13 Sep - 19 Sep)	5								
9	9	(1 Mar - 7 Mar)	4								
9	29	(19 July - 25 July)	4								
9	44	(1 Nov - 7 Nov)	4								
10	5	(1 Feb - 7 Feb)	3								
10	10	(8 Mar - 14 Mar)	3								
10	19	(10 May - 16 May)	3								
10	35	(30 Aug - 5 Sep)	3								
10	39	(27 Sep - 3 Oct)	3								
10	47	(22 Nov - 28 Nov)	3								

BP's first peak in issuing press releases occurred after the live feed of the wellhead, the spill cam, was made public and widespread incidents of oil making landfall along the Louisiana coast were reported. To address these developments, BP's press releases were primarily reactive in nature - highlighting their various efforts to stem the flow of oil through the top kill procedure. As one noted:

The first planned intervention is the so-called "top kill" operation where heavy drilling fluids would be injected into the well to stem the flow of oil and gas and, ultimately, kill the well. Most of the equipment is on site and preparations for this operation continue, with a view to deployment within a few days. (BP 2010c)

At this point, the spill's consequences became very visible and easy to understand, thus requiring BP to react in a manner that would give both the public and the White House

assurances that BP would soon remedy the problem. The first peak of engagement follows that of other social and political actors.

The number of BP's press releases then fluctuated until early August when the company announced that it had successfully capped the Macondo well and federal government scientists stated that the spill was the largest on record. This second peak marked the period in which BP issued the most press releases. But, as seen in Table 4, the second peak week of engagement only surpassed the previous peak by one press release. During the second peak BP's engagement of the oil spill was largely focused on the final steps leading up to the capping of the wellhead. For example, as one press release from that week stated:

BP announced today that the [Macondo] well appears to have reached a static condition – a significant milestone. The well pressure is now being controlled by the hydrostatic pressure of the drilling mud, which is the desired outcome of the static kill procedure carried out yesterday. (BP 2010d)

Overall, the capping the well phase of the oil spill accounted for 30 percent of the press releases issued by BP in 2010. During that period, procedures used to stem the well were no longer speculative and could be discussed in a more comprehensible manner, lending themselves to easier causal narratives for the company. Thus, although BP's overall engagement looks different than newspapers and environmental NGOs, the reasoning behind their engagement is similar. After announcing their successful capping of the well, BP's coverage decreased steadily with minor fluctuations occurring during the *normalization* period.

When we look at the other two major oil companies with interests in the Gulf, we find they were relatively mute. As Table 4 shows, Shell only issued two press releases that mentioned BP, which appeared during the pre-accident period. This is particularly striking when you consider that in 2010 Shell issued 64 press releases in total. Of the two that did mention the term, both discussed a new record breaking ultra-deepwater offshore drilling venture that BP was a partner in, and therefore were not related to the oil spill. During the *normalizing* period, ExxonMobil issued its only press release mentioning BP from a total of 139 issued in 2010. The release discussed new technology that ExxonMobil was developing in partnership with BP and other companies to contain well blowouts and respond to oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico. This appears to have been a strategic manoeuvre by ExxonMobil to project a more positive image of offshore oil production. A statement in the press release by the system's project executive, Lloyd Guillory, aptly illustrates this rebranding effort:

“We are working quickly and effectively in an unprecedented effort to improve incident preparedness. Our progress since we announced the system demonstrates the commitment of our companies to make equipment immediately available for incident response.” (ExxonMobil 2010)

As a result, it looks like all of the oil companies tended to focus on the business, technical and positive ends of capping the oil spill and promoting Gulf drilling. BP differs, in part as a reaction, to the engagement by other social and political actors.

When we look at the White House's engagement of the BP oil spill in Figure 6 and Table 5, we see that during the *pre-accident* phase, the White House only mentioned

BP in one press briefing. It succinctly noted the company’s withdrawal from the US Climate Action Partnership –ironic given what was to come later that spring. In the first week of the disaster the White House did not issue any press briefings mentioning BP and did not immediately responded to the *Deepwater Horizon* explosion or sinking with this keyword. As the issue evolved, however, over the following week the White House’s engagement increased and would remain consistent throughout the *oil disaster* period.

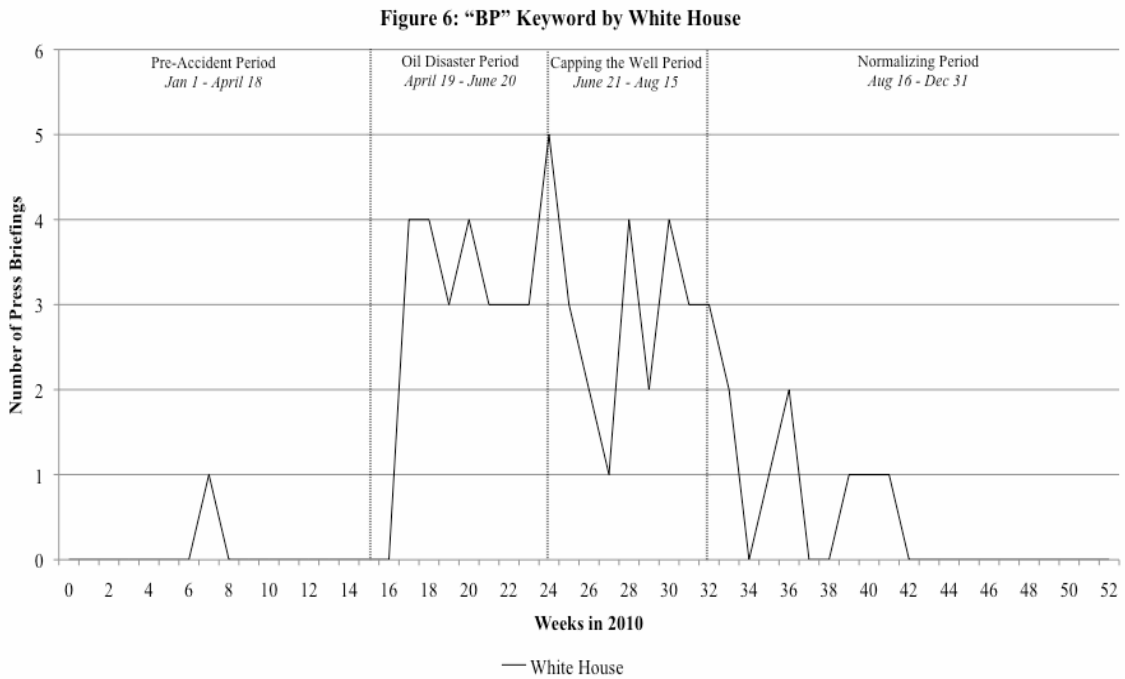


Table 5: Top Weeks of Coverage by the White House in 2010

with the Keyword "BP"

Rank	Wk#	<u>White House</u>	Freq.
		Week	
1	24	(14 June - 20 June)	5
2	17	(26 April - 2 May)	4
2	18	(3 May - 9 May)	4
2	20	(17 May - 23 May)	4
2	28	(12 July - 18 July)	4
2	30	(26 July - 1 Aug)	4
3	19	(10 May - 16 May)	3
3	21	(24 May - 30 May)	3
3	22	(31 May - 6 June)	3
3	23	(7 June - 13 June)	3
3	25	(21 June - 27 June)	3
3	31	(2 Aug - 8 Aug)	3
3	32	(9 Aug- 15 Aug)	3
4	26	(28 June - 4 July)	2
4	29	(19 July - 25 July)	2
4	33	(16 Aug - 22 Aug)	2
4	36	(6 Sep - 12 Sep)	2
5	7	(15 Feb - 21 Feb)	1
5	27	(5 July - 11 July)	1
5	35	(30 Aug - 26 Sep)	1
5	39	(27 Sep - 3 Oct)	1
5	40	(4 Oct - 10 Oct)	1
5	41	(11 Oct - 17 Oct)	1

Over the eight week timeframe of the oil disaster period, the White House issued between three and five press briefings mentioning BP each week, accounting for almost half (48 percent) of their briefings mentioning BP. As Table 5 shows, the White House's peak engagement occurred during the week of June 14-20, which is a month later than the peak focus of the newspapers, Sierra Club, and is earlier than for Greenpeace or the oil companies. During that week, it is important to recall that the oil executives from BP, Shell and ExxonMobil were all testifying before the House Sub-Committee on Energy and the Environment. Once that is accounted for and we look at the weeks with the next

most coverage, we see that the White House also spent much of its engagement in early and mid-May.

During the White House's peak engagement, its press briefings predominantly focused on what steps the federal government was taking to hold BP liable for the spill and establish funds to compensate residents of the Gulf Region. This was evident in a response elicited by the White House's Press Secretary, Robert Gibbs, to a reporter's question pertaining to the size of BP's escrow account:

“What's important to the President as it relates to the claims process is that they're handled fairly, promptly, and that BP has enough money to make these folks whole who have been hurt so much by the spill.” (White House 2010b)

Prior to the partial capping of the wellhead in mid-July there was a decline in the White House's engagement. This was followed by fluctuating engagement of between two and four press briefings a week leading up to the successful capping of the well. After mid-October, BP was not mentioned in any further press briefings, which coincides with the overall decline in coverage during the *normalization* phase.

The scale of engagement during the oil disaster phase of the accident illustrates that the White House increased coverage when the severity of the accident was most evident and easy to understand. Once beaches were being tarnished with tar balls and coastal wildlife was in a visible state of peril, the federal government was compelled to respond and detail how they would hold BP accountable and prevent future accidents of this nature. This might explain why the federal government was slow to engage the issue before its effects were evident and then scaled back its engagement when attempts to contain the well were of a highly technical nature.

These findings suggest that when the causal narrative linking the well blowout to its effects was more direct and the visuality of the accident easier to comprehend, engagement of the incident increased as is predicted by media and framing literatures. Even after the issue's overall engagement declined, the environmental organizations continued to use the simple narrative and striking images of the *oil disaster* period to emphasize the legitimacy of their respective campaigns. Therefore, we have support for the first and second hypotheses. I will now turn to our third hypothesis and see if engagement of issues and events of the BP oil spill by one social and political actor influenced whether or not others also engage it.

Recall, from Figure 2 and Table 2 which report on the keyword "BP", that in the first week of the BP oil spill, the *New York Times* immediately reacted and published four articles about the wellhead explosion. Although the *Guardian* published eight articles that mentioned BP, when one looks at what they covered only two discussed the accident. Similarly, the *Times-Picayune* published only two articles that discussed the incident. Interestingly, the *Globe and Mail* published just one article and it discussed BP's ventures in the Alberta tar sands and did not make any reference to the accident and emerging disaster. Of those articles that did engage the well blowout, reporting primarily focused on the 11 missing works and speculated at the potential consequences of the oil spill. The brevity and lack of information is evident in an initial article published by the *New York Times*:

An oil rig burning out of control in the Gulf of Mexico sank Thursday morning, with 11 workers still missing and the authorities fearing a potential environmental disaster. (Robertson and Krauss 2010)

During the second week of the oil spill, engagement by newspapers increased substantially. Despite the issue's development and emerging effects on the Gulf region, the *New York Times* continued to lead all news sources with 23 out of 27 articles published that week mentioning "BP" discussing the oil spill. Again, the *Guardian* published a large number of articles mentioning "BP", however, only 11 of the 28 actually made reference to the wellhead explosion. A week after the accident, the *Globe and Mail* finally adopted the issue with nine of the 11 articles published mentioning "BP" also discussing the accident. As can be expected, all 14 articles published by the *Times-Picayune*, the local news source, focused on the oil spill and its potential effects to the Gulf region.

By the third week of the accident the *Times-Picayune* became the leading newspaper, publishing twice the number of articles of the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, with 69 articles that mentioning "BP." This was more than three times the scale of engagement of the *Globe and Mail*, which published only 21 articles. For the rest of 2010, the local publication continued to lead in coverage over the national and international publications.

Overall, this indicates that the leading national newspaper the *New York Times* broke the story with the local newspaper only providing limited coverage in the early stages of the disaster. As engagement increased in the leading publication both local and international publications began to follow their lead and published an increasing number of articles. It appears that once the issue built-up, gained momentum, and was signalled

as a significant issue, the local newspaper allotted more resources to covering the story and eventually surpassed the other publications' coverage. During the initial week of the accident, newspapers were the only social and political actor that engaged the issues and events of the spill, apart from BP which gave limited updates on the incident.

A week after the *Deepwater Horizon* oil platform sank and the leading national newspaper signalled the importance of the incident, the Sierra Club issued three press releases that made reference to the accident and emerging disaster. As the issue gained more attention in the third week, engagement by the Sierra Club also increased for a total of eight press releases that discussed the accident. This indicates that the Sierra Club was reacting to the issues' engagement by the newspapers, and perhaps by BP, to garner the maximum amount of attention for their longstanding campaign against offshore oil production. These initial press releases primarily focused on assigning blame to BP and identifying the possible consequences of the oil spill on the Gulf's coastal ecology as they became more apparent. Unlike the newspapers, the Sierra Club placed more attention on the environmental damage that was to come. This is evident in the first press release they issued to respond to the BP oil spill:

On the same day oil giant BP reported that its quarterly profit jumped an astounding 135 percent to some \$5.6 billion, a massive oil spill from a BP well continues unabated in the Gulf of Mexico, drawing nearer to crucial fishing areas, sensitive coastal wetlands, and beaches. (Sierra Club 2010e)

Four weeks after the Sierra Club issued its first press release Greenpeace International finally engaged the issue and events of the BP oil spill in its press advocacy. In their press

release, Greenpeace emulated the Sierra Club's ongoing response by using the incident to pressure President Obama to end all offshore oil drilling. The first paragraph of the press release demonstrates the similarity of their initial campaigning:

Greenpeace today welcomed President Obama's sensible and encouraging first step in ensuring that the BP oil spill disaster can never happen again - but the "never" will only last for the next six months while his commission reaches a conclusion. (Greenpeace 2010b)

Greenpeace International's delayed engagement of the issue may be explained by the fact that the Sierra Club is the more established environmental activist organization of the two in the United States. With years of previous campaigning against offshore oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, the Sierra Club was the early riser organization and able to respond quickly. Interestingly, by the time Greenpeace issued its first press release mentioning the BP oil spill in 2010, not only had the leading US newspaper adopted the issues, but the White House was now also prominently engaging the oil spill. This suggests that when significant issue and event build-up occurred, Greenpeace was compelled to respond.

The day after the explosion on the *Deepwater Horizon*, BP issued two press releases that noted that there was an incident on the offshore drilling platform. These first two press releases were vague, which is apparent in the company's first official statement about the well blowout:

BP today offered its full support to drilling contractor Transocean Ltd. and its employees after fire caused Transocean's semisubmersible drilling rig Deepwater Horizon to be evacuated overnight, saying it stood ready to assist in any way in responding to the incident. (BP 2010e)

As the first week of the accident drew to a close, BP issued three more releases that provided greater detail of what happened on the night of April 20, and how the incident was developing. In the following week, BP increased its response to the issue and consistently issued two or more press releases a week until midway through the *normalization* period. BP's consistent engagement of the accident during the *oil disaster* and *capping the well* periods may in part be accounted for by the response elicited from other social and political actors. With the level of public attention that the oil spill generated, BP was forced to continually assure the government and public that they were doing everything in their capacity to cap the Macondo well and mitigate its damages.

Despite vast oil leases in the Gulf of Mexico, Shell did not discuss BP in relation to the oil spill in any capacity. Although ExxonMobil issued one press releases that discussed the oil spill, it appeared during the *normalization* phase of the accident – well after the incident's attention was subsiding. In both cases, the oil companies were not prompted by the issue's build-up or engagement by social and political actors to make statements on the oil spill and BP's role. This could very well be accounted for by the fact that neither company wanted to draw attention to their own potential downfalls in relation to the accident. Especially Shell, who during the *pre-accident* period announced a new record breaking ultra-deep offshore oil installation operating in partnership with BP.

As the effects of the damaged Macondo wellhead were developing in the week following the *Deepwater Horizon* accident, the White House issued its first press briefing

mentioning “BP.” This happened a week after the explosion when the White House’s press briefing specifically dealt with the oil spill and the government’s involvement in the initial response. A week later, the White House significantly increased its engagement of the issue, which would continue throughout the oil disaster phase. By this point, the accident was receiving increasing engagement by the newspapers, and Sierra Club, and was therefore gaining traction in the public’s consciousness. The build-up of the issue in the public sphere may account for the level of attention that the White House allocated to the oil spill in its press briefings.

It appears that as engagement of the BP oil spill increased by prized social and political actors, such as the *New York Times*, Sierra Club, or the White House, the issue built-up and other social and political actors followed. Most notably, when the leading US newspaper prominently adopted the issue it signalled the importance of the accident to regional and international publications. Similarly, after the Sierra Club began to engage the issue, Greenpeace International adopted the oil spill as a problem. Interestingly, Greenpeace International did not employ their usual tactics of bearing witness to the disaster, but rather emulated the response elicited by the Sierra Club. Moreover, as attention in the newspapers and advocacy by environmental NGOs increased so did the level of engagement by BP and the Whitehouse, which supports previous findings that governments and oil companies are primarily reactive in their response to environmental issues (Sonnnett 2010; Weingart 2000). Therefore, there is partial evidence to support the third hypothesis on issue build-up. The next chapter will

examine if social and political engagement that mentioned the term “oil spill” followed similar trends.

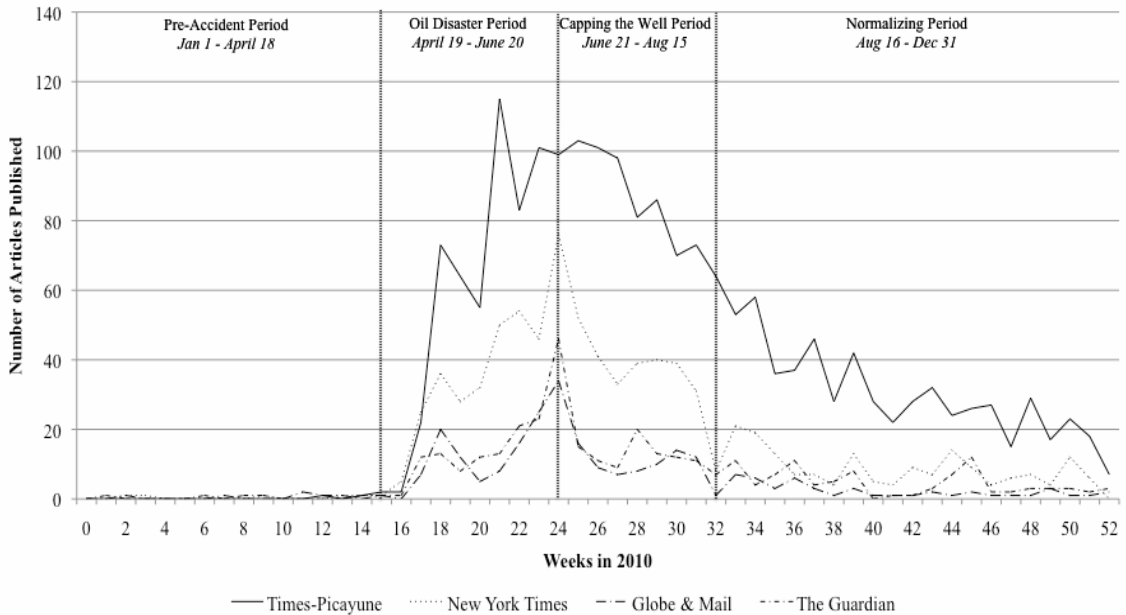
Chapter 6: Engagement of the term “Oil Spill”

When looking at Figure 1 and Figure 2 in chapter 4, engagement of the keyword “BP” and “Oil Spill” exhibit similar trends; nonetheless, there are important differences that distinguish engagement of the two keywords. Discerning these differences is important to establish if social and political actors were more inclined to assign blame to the company responsible for the accident or if their engagement primarily focused on the ecological calamity at hand.

As shown with the keyword “BP,” the *Times-Picayune* engaged the BP oil spill the most, with 1,890 articles published that mentioned the keyword “oil spill”. This was more than twice the amount of the *New York Times* and more than five times the coverage allotted by the *Guardian*, which published 812 and 345 articles respectively. The *Globe and Mail’s* coverage paled in comparison to the local newspaper’s engagement with only 258 articles published that mentioned the term “oil spill”.

In spite of the difference in coverage, as Figure 7 and Table 6 illustrate, all four publications’ top three weeks of reporting on the BP oil spill took place during the *oil disaster* phase of the accident. This is the same as findings with the keyword “BP.” The only exceptions were seen with the *New York Times’* third most intense week of engagement and the *Times-Picayune’s* second and third most intense weeks of engagement, which occurred during the first two weeks of the *capping the well* period.

Figure 7: "Oil Spill" by Newspaper



These differences are in part expected given that local and national news sources were equally interested in reporting on efforts to stem the flow of oil emanating from the broken well and the environmental destruction it was causing. Coverage during these two weeks primarily discussed the oil spill’s impacts on the region’s seafood industry and the lack of regulations that allowed the accident to occur in the first place. In total, the number of articles published in the top two weeks of each newspaper’s coverage accounted for 14 percent of the total number of news articles that mentioned the term “oil spill”. Recall that this was the same for the term “BP.”

During the *oil disaster* period, engagement primarily focused on the rising estimates of oil entering the Gulf of Mexico and its adverse impacts on the region’s coastal habitats and sea life. With little hope of stemming the well’s flow in the near future and BP’s use of toxic dispersants, fears of the long-term impacts on the seafood and tourism industries were mounting. Speculation of the spill’s unprecedented damage is evident in an article published by the *New York Times*, which notes:

The Obama administration Monday declared a commercial fisheries failure in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama as a result of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill... "We are taking this action today because of the potentially significant economic hardship this spill may cause fishermen and the businesses and communities that depend on those fisheries," Commerce Secretary Gary Locke (Alpert 2010).

Table 6: Top Weeks of Coverage by Newspaper in 2010
with the Keyword "Oil Spill"

Rank	Times-Picayune			New York Times			Globe & Mail			The Guardian		
	WK #	Week	Freq.	Rank	WK #	Week	Freq.	Rank	WK #	Week	Freq.	
1	21	(24 May - 30 May)	115	1	24	(14 June - 20 June)	76	1	24	(14 June - 20 June)	46	
2	25	(21 June - 27 June)	103	2	22	(31 May - 6 June)	54	2	23	(7 June - 13 June)	23	
3	23	(7 June - 13 June)	101	3	25	(21 June - 27 June)	52	3	18	(31 May - 9 May)	21	
4	24	(14 June - 20 June)	99	4	21	(24 May - 30 May)	50	4	22	(12 July - 18 July)	20	
5	27	(5 July - 11 July)	98	5	23	(7 June - 13 June)	46	5	25	(21 June - 27 June)	15	
6	29	(19 July - 25 July)	86	6	26	(28 June - 4 July)	41	6	18	(3 May - 9 May)	13	
7	22	(31 May - 6 June)	83	7	28	(12 July - 18 July)	39	7	19	(19 July - 25 July)	13	
8	28	(12 July - 18 July)	81	8	30	(26 July - 1 Aug)	39	8	29	(19 July - 25 July)	13	
9	18	(3 May - 9 May)	73	9	18	(3 May - 9 May)	36	9	20	(17 May - 23 May)	12	
9	31	(2 Aug - 8 Aug)	73	10	27	(5 July - 11 July)	33	9	30	(26 July - 1 Aug)	12	
10	30	(26 July - 1 Aug)	70					10	28	(12 July - 18 July)	12	
								10	21	(24 May - 30 May)	11	
								10	17	(8 Nov - 14 Nov)	11	
								10	27	(2 Aug - 8 Aug)	11	
								10	33	(16 Aug - 22 Aug)	11	
								10	27	(5 July - 11 July)	11	
								10	7	(6 Sep - 12 Sep)	11	
								10	36	(16 Aug - 22 Aug)	11	
								10	19	(10 May - 16 May)	9	
								10	39	(27 Sep - 3 Oct)	8	

Reporting also covered the extensive finger pointing between BP and its sub-contractors and the US government's response to the spill. When all the news coverage during the *oil disaster* phase is counted, it accounts for 38 percent of the total news coverage with this keyword, which is two percent more than coverage during the same period for the term "BP". This suggests that the newspaper publications increased their engagement of the issue when the impacts of the oil spill on the Gulf coast were easiest to understand and provided the most dramatic images of ecological destruction. As BP began executing partially successfully capping procedures and the flow of oil began to subside, engagement declined suggesting a link to the reduction of visually striking images of the accident. Moreover, containment procedures were highly technical operations that were difficult to portray in a succinct and comprehensible manner.

Throughout the *normalization* phase, engagement of the BP oil spill in national and international publications subsided, with the exception of the local newspaper, the *Times-Picayune*, which had three pronounced spikes in coverage. Articles published during these elevated weeks of the *normalizing* period focused on community building activities, fundraising for those most impacted by the oil spill, and resources available for Gulf coast citizens to speed up their claims requests. One article reported, for instance:

When you consider all that St. Bernard has been through since 2005 we've come a long way but we still have so far to go. Along with Katrina we've had to deal with the impact of the oil spill and the economy. "Lots of things have come against our families and sometimes the harshness of life makes it hard to have hope. Through counseling we want to help people see that there is hope and things will get better." (Hodges 2010)

A large number of articles published during these three peaks of engagement also discussed local legal proceedings that BP was involved in and attempts to restore the region’s devastated ecology. These issues were primarily of interest to local audiences rather than national or international ones. In addition, many of the issues had complex causal narratives and were thus not easily explainable because of the multiple levels of government involved and convoluted regulations that were imposed.

When examining engagement of the BP oil spill by environmental NGOs in Figure 8 and Table 7, we see that the Sierra Club and Greenpeace International issued a total of 15 and 11 press releases respectively that mentioned the term “oil spill”.

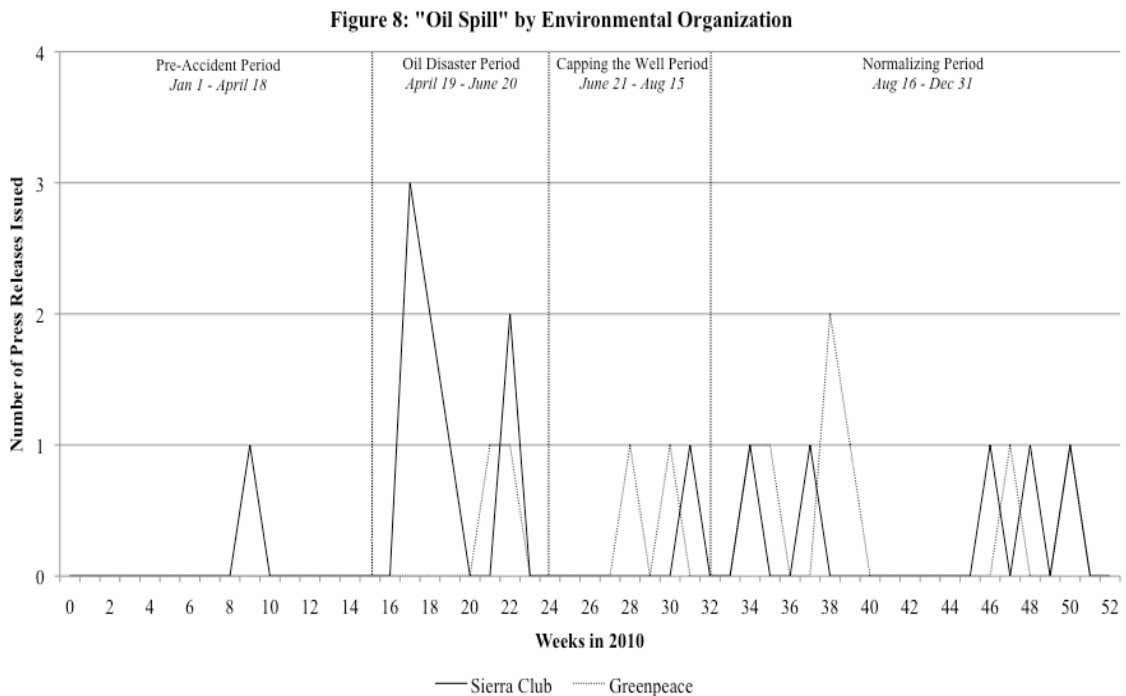


Table 7: Top Weeks of Coverage by Environmental Organization in 2010
with the Keyword "Oil Spill"

<u>Sierra Club</u>			<u>Greenpeace</u>				
Rank	Wk #		Freq.	Rank	Wk #	Week	Freq.
1	17	(26 April - 2 May)	3	1	38	(20 Sep - 26 Sep)	2
2	18	(3 May - 9 May)	2	2	21	(24 May - 30 May)	1
2	22	(31 May - 6 June)	2	2	22	(31 May - 6 June)	1
3	9	(1 Mar - 7 Mar)	1	2	28	(12 July - 18 July)	1
3	19	(10 May - 16 May)	1	2	30	(26 July - 1 Aug)	1
3	31	(2 Aug - 8 Aug)	1	2	34	(23 Aug - 29 Aug)	1
3	34	(23 Aug - 29 Aug)	1	2	35	(30 Aug - 5 Sep)	1
3	37	(13 Sep - 19 Sep)	1	2	39	(27 Sep - 3 Oct)	1
3	46	(15 Nov - 21 Nov)	1	2	47	(22 Nov - 28 Nov)	1
3	48	(29 Nov - 5 Dec)	1	2	50	(13 Dec - 19 Dec)	1
3	50	(13 Dec - 19 Dec)	1				

Similar to the newspapers, the Sierra Club’s most intense week of coverage occurred during the *oil disaster* phase of the accident, which accounted for 20 percent of the organization’s total response with the keyword “oil spill”. Throughout this week, which occurred one week after the accident, the Sierra Club used evocative imagery of the oil spill’s devastating effects on the Gulf’s pristine coastline and wildlife to persuade President Obama to put an end to offshore oil production in US waters. This powerful use of visual imagery is illustrated in a press release issued a week after the *Deepwater Horizon* sank, which stated:

...there should be no doubt left that drilling is too dirty and dangerous for our coasts and the people who live there. This offshore facility was supposed to be state-of-the-art... Now, we've seen workers tragically killed. We've seen our ocean lit on fire, and now we're watching hundreds of thousands of gallons of toxic oil seep towards wetlands and wildlife habitat. (Sierra Club 2010f)

Conversely, Greenpeace International’s most intense week for issuing press releases occurred during the *normalizing* phase long after the well was capped. This week of

heightened engagement represented 18 percent of the organization's overall response with this keyword. Rather than focusing directly on the BP oil spill, though, the organization used the incident to campaign against offshore oil production around the Shetland Islands in the United Kingdom. By drawing on the oil spill in the Gulf Coast, Greenpeace was able to clearly illustrate the ecological threats that deep sea drilling poses. This is shown, for example, in a statement that succinctly draws the link between offshore oil production and destructive consequences that audiences were familiar with:

David Cameron said his government would be the greenest ever, but he won't even support a plan to protect our seas from a BP-style disaster. Instead of drilling for the last drops in fragile environments like this, oil companies should be developing the clean energy technologies we need to fight climate change and reduce our dependence on oil. We need a global ban on deep water drilling... (Greenpeace 2010c)

This suggests that although the two activist organizations engaged the BP oil spill at different times, both focused on the period of the accident with the most striking images that vividly linked offshore oil production to severe ecological destruction. Thus, the organizations used the incident to bridge information gaps in their campaigns to make them more comprehensible to a broader audience. Overall, engagement by the environmental NGOs reacted to the same easy to interpret and striking images that the newspapers and White House were responding to in their articles and press briefings.

When examining the oil companies' engagement of the oil spill, there are predictable differences in their responses. Prior to the accident in the Gulf of Mexico, neither BP, Shell, or ExxonMobil issued any press releases mentioning oil spills, which is

similar to the White House. As noted in the previous chapter, immediately after the explosion and sinking of the *Deepwater Horizon*, BP began to issue an increasing number of press releases that mentioned the term “oil spill” for a total of 73 statements. This is illustrated in Figure 9 and Table 8.

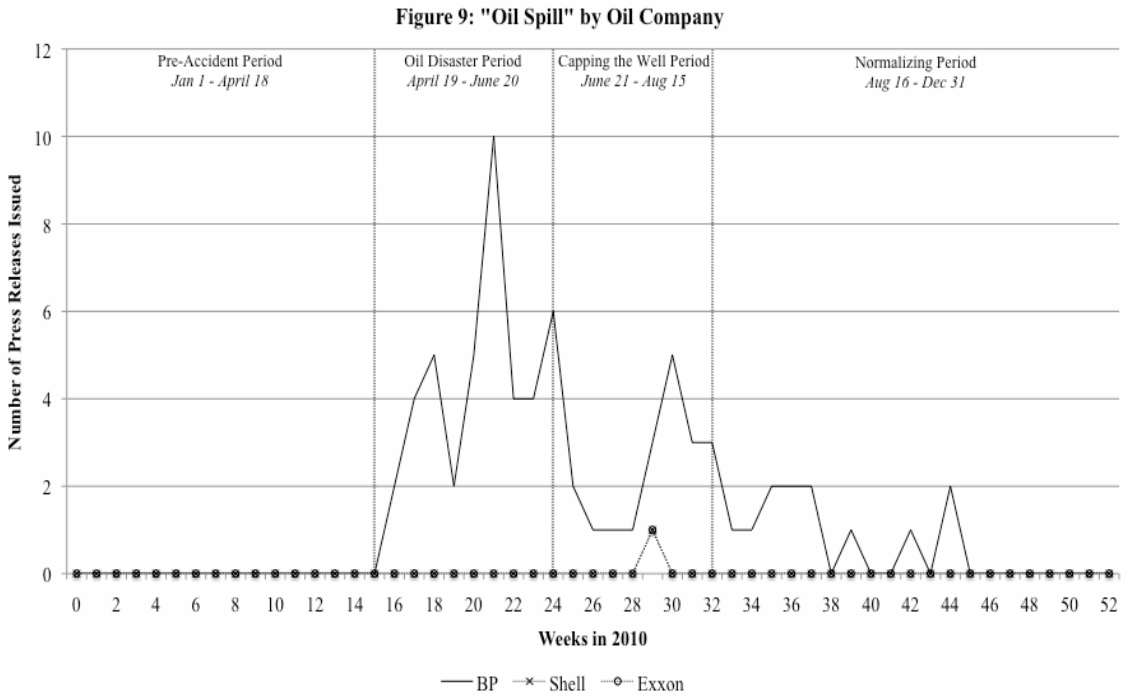


Table 8: Top Weeks of Coverage by Oil Company in 2010
with the Keyword "Oil Spill"

BP				Shell				Exxon			
Rank	Wk #	Week	Freq.	Rank	Wk #	Week	Freq.	Rank	Wk #	Week	Freq.
1	21	(24 May - 30 May)	10	1	29	(19 July - 25 July)	1	1	29	(19 July - 25 July)	1
2	24	(14 June - 20 June)	6								
3	18	(3 May - 9 May)	5								
3	20	(17 May - 23 May)	5								
3	30	(26 July - 1 Aug)	5								
4	17	(26 April - 2 May)	4								
4	22	(31 May - 6 June)	4								
4	23	(7 June - 13 June)	4								
5	29	(19 July - 25 July)	3								
5	31	(2 Aug - 8 Aug)	3								
5	32	(9 Aug - 15 Aug)	3								
6	16	(19 April - 25 April)	2								
6	19	(10 May - 16 May)	2								
6	25	(21 June - 27 June)	2								
6	35	(30 Aug - 5 Sep)	2								
6	36	(6 Sep - 12 Sep)	2								
6	37	(13 Sep - 19 Sep)	2								
6	44	(1 Nov - 7 Nov)	2								
7	26	(28 June - 4 July)	1								
7	27	(5 July - 11 July)	1								
7	28	(12 July - 18 July)	1								
7	33	(16 Aug - 22 Aug)	1								
7	34	(23 Aug - 29 Aug)	1								
7	39	(27 Sep - 3 Oct)	1								
7	42	(18 Oct - 24 Oct)	1								

BP's first peak in issuing press releases occurred shortly after the live feed of the wellhead, the spill cam, was made public and widespread incidents of oil covered beaches along the Louisiana coast were reported. To respond to the growing visual presence of the spill, BP's press releases were primarily reactive in nature – emphasizing their various measures to stem the flow of oil through the much anticipated top kill procedure. Interestingly, BP clearly identified the US government's involvement in the decision making process of the top kill procedure, which in effect deferred blame if the operation was not successful. As one BP press release notes:

The Government, together with BP, have therefore decided to move to the next step in the subsea operations, the deployment of the Lower Marine Riser Package (LMRP) Cap Containment System... This operation has not been previously

carried out in 5,000 feet of water and the successful deployment of the containment system cannot be assured. (BP 2010f)

At this time, the unabated flow from the broken well was too difficult to downplay, as a result of the visible and easy to understand toll it was taking on the Gulf's ecology. Thus, BP had to react in a manner that would give both the public and the White House the assurance that the flow of oil would stop in the immediate future.

For the next two weeks, BP's engagement subsided until mid June when its executives appeared before a House Subcommittee on Energy and the Environment to testify about their poor safety standards. During this second peak, BP's engagement of the oil spill was largely focused on its financial contributions to claims payments and supporting costal recovery research. This is shown, for instance, in a press release that stated:

BP said today that it has paid \$104 million to residents along the Gulf Coast for claims filed as a result of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. BP has issued more than 31,000 checks in the past seven weeks. "Our focus has been on getting money into the hands of fishermen, shrimpers, condo owners and others who have not been able to earn income due to the spill," said Darryl Willis, of the BP claims team. (BP 2010g)

Overall, the *oil disaster* phase of the accident accounted for 58 percent of the press releases issued that mentioned the keyword "oil spill". During this period, the effects of the spill on the coast were highly visible, simplifying the causal narrative that linked the accident to its consequences. Moreover, there was significant political engagement of the events leading up to the accident during the federal government's investigation, which required BP to respond in a manner that neutralized the damming

information that was revealed to the public during the proceedings. Thus, although BP's engagement was reactive in nature, the company was responding to similar events as those reported by the newspapers and the issues advocated upon by environmental NGOs. After BP announced that the static kill operation was a success, the number of press releases that mentioned the keyword "oil spill" subsided substantially. This was in line with other actors' engagement of the term.

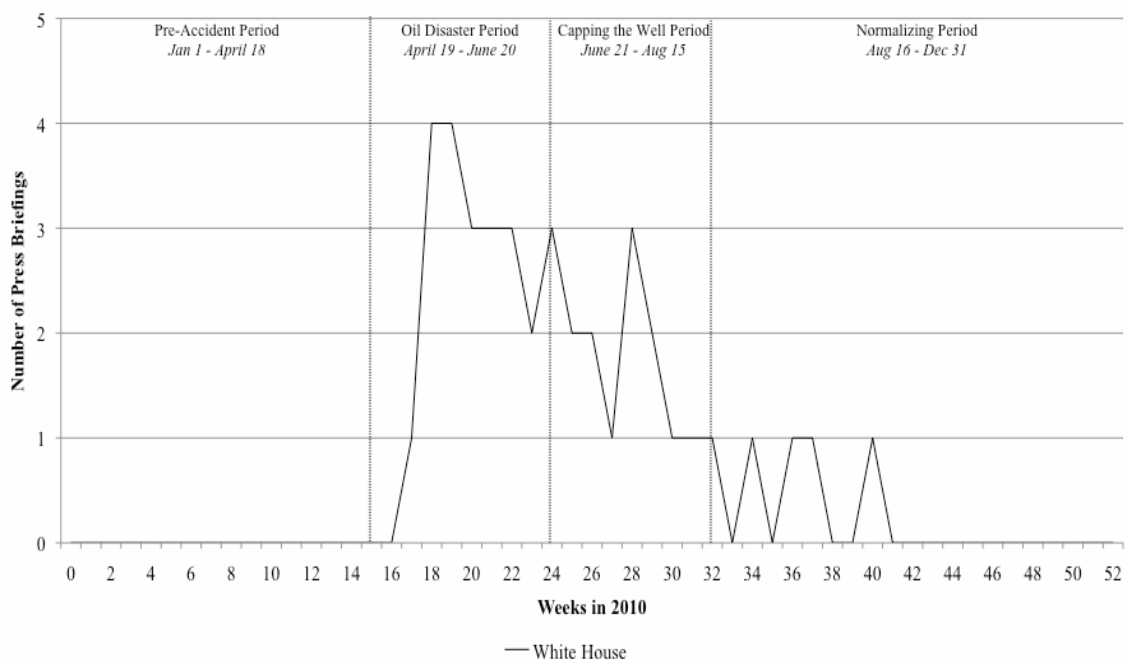
When looking at the two other oil companies with significant oil and natural gas interests in the Gulf, it appears that they distanced themselves from the incident. As Table 8 shows, Shell and ExxonMobil issued only one press release each that mentioned the keyword "oil spill", both of which appeared during the *capping the well* period. In fact, the two press releases were issued within a day of each other and focused on the same issue. The releases discussed the implementation of a plan to build and deploy a new rapid response system to more effectively react to underwater well blowouts in the Gulf of Mexico. The announcement of the plan appears to have been a strategic maneuver by the two companies to rebuild trust in the public and gain their support to continue offshore oil production in the Gulf. This tone of a more attentive and responsible industry is apparent in Shell's press release, which noted:

The new system will be flexible, adaptable and able to begin mobilization within 24 hours and can be used on a wide range of well designs and equipment, oil and natural gas flow rates and weather conditions... This system offers key advantages to the current response equipment in that it will be pre-engineered, constructed, tested and ready for rapid deployment in the deepwater Gulf of Mexico. (Shell 2010)

This suggests that all the oil companies tended to focus on mending their tarnished images as a result of the oil spill. In the case of BP, their engagement was primarily reactive to the increasing visual severity of the spill and the simplification of the causal narrative that linked the company's lax drilling practices to the accident. Similarly, Shell and ExxonMobil attempted to rebuild the public's trust in the industry after the well was capped by highlighting news containment plans. Thus, suggesting that if a wellhead blew out again, it would not be as tragic.

When examining the White House's engagement of the BP oil spill in Figure 10 and Table 9, it is interesting that during the *pre-accident* phase, there was not a single mention of the keyword "oil spill" in any of its press briefings. This is particularly unsettling when you consider that during this time President Obama opened up new areas for offshore oil production and it was a period filled with emerging problems in the Gulf of Mexico. Throughout the first week of the accident, the White House did not immediately respond to the explosion on the *Deepwater Horizon*. A week later, though, as the issue evolved their engagement increased for a total of 40 press briefings mentioning "oil spill".

Figure 10: "Oil Spill" by White House



In the week following the accident, the White House issued its first press briefing that engaged the accident, which was titled “Press Briefing on the BP Oil Spill in the Gulf Coast”. Over the next seven weeks of the *oil disaster* period, the White House’s engagement increased substantially, issuing between two and four press briefings a week that mentioned the term “oil spill”. In total, engagement during the eight week timeframe of the *oil disaster* period accounted for 58 percent of the White House’s briefings mentioning “oil spill”. As table 9 shows, the White House’s two weeks of peak engagement occurred consecutively from May 3-16, which is before the peak focus of the newspapers, oil companies, and Greenpeace International, and is shortly after/during the Sierra Clubs peak focus. The following three weeks, May 17 – June 6, also show heightened engagement, however, there is one less press briefing issued mentioning the term “oil spill”.

Table 9: Top Weeks of Coverage by the White House in 2010
with the Keyword "Oil Spill"

Rank	Wk #	<u>White House</u> Week	Freq.
1	18	<i>(3 May - 9 May)</i>	4
1	19	<i>(10 May - 16 May)</i>	4
2	20	<i>(17 May - 23 May)</i>	3
2	21	<i>(24 May - 30 May)</i>	3
2	22	<i>(31 May - 6 June)</i>	3
2	24	<i>(14 June - 20 June)</i>	3
2	28	<i>(12 July - 18 July)</i>	3
3	23	<i>(7 June - 13 June)</i>	2
3	25	<i>(21 June - 27 June)</i>	2
3	26	<i>(28 June - 4 July)</i>	2
3	29	<i>(19 July - 25 July)</i>	2
4	17	<i>(26 April - 2 May)</i>	1
4	27	<i>(5 July - 11 July)</i>	1
4	30	<i>(26 July - 1 Aug)</i>	1
4	31	<i>(2 Aug - 8 Aug)</i>	1
4	32	<i>(9 Aug- 15 Aug)</i>	1
4	34	<i>(23 Aug - 29 Aug)</i>	1
4	36	<i>(6 Sep - 12 Sep)</i>	1
4	37	<i>(13 Sep - 19 Sep)</i>	1
4	40	<i>(4 Oct - 10 Oct)</i>	1

During the White House’s first peak week of engagement, its press briefings predominantly focused on establishing the facts on what was happening in the Gulf of Mexico and how the government was responding. This initial phase of defining the issue and determining the best course of action to remediate its effects is illustrated in a statement made by the White House’s press secretary, Robert Gibbs:

...I think we, first and foremost, are focused on the efforts that I discussed on capping this well and ensuring what escapes from that well doesn’t do damage to the environment or to the local economy, and ensuring that we’ve got mechanisms in place to deal with the possible spread. (White House 2010c)

In the following week, as the severity of the accident became more apparent, the focus of the White House's press briefings shifted notably. During this second week of peak engagement, the White House discussed BP's financial liabilities, the implementation of legislation to speed up response efforts, and the environmental consequences of the spill. The growing realization of the magnitude of the accident, for example, is illustrated in the opening statements of a press briefing:

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is a massive and potentially unprecedented environmental disaster, which can seriously damage the economy and environment of our Gulf states and jeopardize the livelihoods of thousands of Americans who live throughout the Gulf region. (White House 2010d)

After the White House's peak weeks of engagement, response declined, until a notable spike in coverage in mid-July when the wellhead was partially capped. This was followed by fluctuating engagement of between one and two press briefings a week. Interestingly, there was no significant fluctuation in engagement during the week in which BP announced that it had successfully capped the well. After the first week of October, the term "oil spill" was not mentioned in any further press briefings, which coincides with the overall decline in coverage during the *normalization* phase.

The intensity of engagement throughout the *oil disaster* phase of the oil spill illustrates that the White House increased its response when the severity of the accident was most evident and easy to understand. Once coastlines were inundated with tar and the Gulf's wildlife was in a visible state of peril, the White House had to respond and explain how it would mitigate the accident's consequences in the region. This might explain why the federal government's initial responses were understated while the effects

were difficult to see and then scaled back again when actions to cap the well were of a complex nature and difficult to explain or visually portray in a meaningful manner. Even the commander in charged of the response, Admiral Thad Allen, had difficulty comprehensibly explaining what was going on throughout the *capping the well* phase. Recall that BP responded to the incident in a similar fashion, initially providing only minimal information and then increasing engagement when it could not be avoided. It is conceivable that had the Sierra Club and the newspapers not widely distributed images and information about the accident that the White House and BP would not have been compelled to respond in the same manner.

Overall, these findings suggest that when the causal narrative linking the *Deepwater Horizon* accident to its effects was more direct and the visual manifestations of the accident easier to comprehend, engagement of the incident increased. As a result, we have support for the first and second hypotheses. Next I will explore the third hypothesis and see if engagement of issues and events of the BP oil spill by one social or political actor influenced whether or not others also engage it.

When examining Figure 7 and Table 6, looking at news coverage with the keyword “oil spill”, the *New York Times* immediately reacted and published five articles about the *Deepwater Horizon* explosion during the first week of the accident. Although the *Times-Picayune* is a prized local newspaper it printed only two articles that discussed the accident. Similarly, the *Guardian* published just one article about the incident. Interestingly, the *Globe and Mail* did not immediately respond to the explosion at all. Of

those articles that did engage the well blowout, coverage primarily focused on the 11 missing workers, injuries caused by the explosion, and the potential consequences of an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The lack of information and speculative nature of the reports is evident in an article published a day after the explosion in the *New York Times*:

The explosion occurred Tuesday night, and on Wednesday afternoon crews were still fighting the fire, which was largely contained to the rig but in photographs provided by the Coast Guard appeared to be shooting enormous plumes of flame into the air. Admiral Landry estimated that 13,000 gallons of crude were pouring out per hour. (Robertson 2010)

In contrast, local coverage of the accident was more focused on the personal side of the tragedy than was national and international engagement. This was largely expressed by incorporating quotes from family members who were related to injured or missing workers. A quote from a missing worker's wife after the Coast guard called off its search illustrates the attention paid to stories about individual workers:

As the hours and days passed, Kleppinger began coming to grips with the reality of losing her high school sweetheart and husband of 18 years... "He wasn't just mine," she said, recalling how she had told her mother that she felt like she had lost her entire life. "She said, 'Honey, that's wrong, he was everybody's life.'" (Rioux and Kirkham 2010)

A week after the explosion, engagement by newspapers increased significantly. Despite the growing visibility of the accident's effects on the Gulf region, the *New York Times* continued to lead all news sources with 25 articles published that week discussing the oil spill. The *Time-Picayune*, however, narrowed the gap in engagement by publishing 22 articles that mentioned the term "oil spill". The *Guardian's* coverage also

increased significantly, with a total of 12 articles published that mentioned “oil spill.” At this point, a week after the accident, the *Globe and Mail* finally engaged the issue by publishing seven articles that mentioned the oil spill.

During the third week of the accident, the *Times-Picayune* surpassed the *New York Times* coverage with twice the number of articles published mentioning “oil spill” for a total of 73 and 36 articles respectively. Thus, the *Times-Picayune* became the leading newspaper. By contrast, the *Globe and Mail* published only 20 articles and the *Guardian* 13. For the rest of 2010, the local publication continued to lead in coverage over the national and international publications.

This suggests that the leading national newspaper, the *New York Times*, initially broke the story with the local newspaper only providing limited coverage during the first two weeks of the accident. As engagement increased in the leading publication, both local and to a somewhat lesser extent international publications began to follow their lead and publish an increasing number of articles. It appears that once the issue built-up, gained momentum, and was signalled as a significant event, the local newspaper allotted more resources to cover the story and eventually surpassed the other publication’s coverage. During the first week of the accident, newspapers were the only venue to engage the accident and those accountable, save for the limited updates offered by BP.

A week after the *Deepwater Horizon* oil platform exploded and the *New York Times* signalled the importance of the incident, the Sierra Club issued three press releases mentioning “oil spill” and discussing the accident and its potential ecological effects. Despite the issue’s significant increase in momentum in the third week, engagement by

the Sierra Club decreased slightly for a total of two press releases that mentioned “oil spill.” In the following week, the Sierra Club’s engagement subsided again with only one press release issued mentioning the keyword. This indicates that the Sierra Club reacted to the issue after it was engaged by the newspapers and BP. However, it did not sustain the momentum of engagement of these social and political actors over the course of the *oil disaster* phase. Sierra Club’s press releases primarily focused on condemning offshore oil production and identifying the adverse consequences of the BP oil spill. Unlike the newspapers, emphasis was placed on rallying support against deep sea drilling in an attempt to preserve fragile ecosystems. This focus on preventing future environmental devastation is apparent, for example, in a statement made by the Sierra Club’s executive director, Michael Brune, who noted in a press release:

"The oil industry uses our oceans to ratchet up their profits, and then they leave us to clean up their mess. They leave us to comb the beaches looking for oil slicked birds. They leave us to worry about the small fisheries and coastal businesses that are now completely shut down. They leave us to worry about what their oil and toxic chemicals will do to our drinking water and health. We are tired of the oil industry polluting our air and water and standing in the way of clean energy jobs. “Enough is enough.” (Sierra Club 2010g)

Five weeks after the explosion on the *Deepwater Horizon*, Greenpeace International finally engaged the BP oil spill by issuing its first press release that mentioned the keyword “oil spill.” Their formal adoption of the issue came one month after the Sierra Club first engaged it. In their initial press release, Greenpeace echoed the Sierra Club’s ongoing response by using known effects on the Gulf region to petition President Obama to permanently ban all new offshore oil exploration and production. An excerpt from

Greenpeace's press release illustrates the similarity of the two organizations' press advocacy:

The President's six month suspensions of new drilling are a welcome reprieve for the communities and animals that rely on those pristine waters, but we need a permanent ban on all new offshore drilling, not just in the Arctic but in all US waters. A ban on all new oil drilling is the only way to avoid another spill disaster. (Greenpeace 2010b)

Greenpeace International's delayed engagement of the issue may be explained by the fact that the Sierra Club is the more established environmental activist organization of the two in the United States. With years of previous campaigning against offshore oil production in the Gulf of Mexico and campaigners on hand, the Sierra Club was able to respond quickly. By contrast, Greenpeace's use of direct action to draw attention to the oil spill by painting the side of an oil rig supply ship may have taken longer to coordinate.

Interestingly, by the time Greenpeace issued its first press release, not only had local, national, and international newspapers adopted the issue, but the White House was also prominently responding to the spill. This suggests that when the issue gained significant attention by other prominent actors, Greenpeace saw the incident as an opportunity to increase its exposure by using direct action tactics in concert with issuing press releases.

Immediately following the sinking of the *Deepwater Horizon*, BP, like the *New York Times*, issued its first press release that mentioned that the accident had resulted in an oil spill. This initial press release lacked any detail on the severity of the spill and predominantly focused on the company's efforts to contain it. This is illustrated, for instance, in an excerpt from the release:

BP today activated an extensive oil spill response in the US Gulf of Mexico following the fire and subsequent sinking of the Transocean Deepwater Horizon drilling rig 130 miles south-east of New Orleans... "We are determined to do everything in our power to contain this oil spill and resolve the situation as rapidly, safely and effectively as possible," said Group Chief Executive Tony Hayward. (BP 2010h)

As the first week of the accident drew to an end, BP issued only one more press release mentioning "oil spill" and it again provided scant information on the severity of the spill and focused more on the company's extensive response efforts. The week following the accident, BP increased its response significantly, issuing two or more press releases a week throughout the *oil disaster* phase. During the initial weeks of the *capping the well* phase, engagement decreased but then picked up towards the end of the period when BP's capping efforts were more promising. After announcing the successful capping of the wellhead, engagement subsided again. BP's fluctuating engagement of the accident may in part be accounted for by the response from the other social and political actors. With the strong political reaction that the oil spill generated and public attention via the newspaper, BP was forced to reassure the White House and public that they were doing everything possible to cap the broken wellhead and mitigate its damages. During the initial capping attempts, BP remained largely mute until they were more confident of their ability to cap the well, which accounts for the fluctuation during this phase of the accident.

Despite the vast number of oil leases held in the Gulf of Mexico by Shell nor ExxonMobil, neither responded to the oil spill during the *oil disaster* phase of the accident. It was only after BP had announced the successful capping of the well that the

two oil companies engaged the issue. In both cases, the oil companies were responding to the successful capping of the well and the response elicited to this monumental event by the newspapers and White House. This could very well be accounted for by the potential fact that neither company wanted to draw attention to their drilling practices and waited until there was a positive turn of events to present their proposed oil spill response plans. Had they revealed them too early, people might have questioned why they weren't aiding the response efforts and mitigating the spill's environmental effects. Thus, there was no way of demonstrating their ability to do anything more than provide lip service to a public that was demanding change.

As the severity of the damaged Macondo wellhead was becoming more evident in the week following the explosion on the *Deepwater Horizon*, the White House issued its first press briefing mentioning the keyword "oil spill". In its initial response, a week after the drilling rig sank and two days after the Sierra Club's first response, the White House highlighted how various governmental departments were responding to the BP oil spill and attempting to mitigate its effects on the Gulf region. A week later, the White House substantially increased its engagement of the accident, which would remain consistent throughout the *oil disaster* period. At this stage of the accident, the oil spill was receiving increasing engagement by the newspapers, and the Sierra Club, and was thus gaining public prominence. The build-up of the issue in the public sphere may account for the level of attention that the White House allocated to the oil spill in its press briefings. As the issue's engagement subsided by other social and political actors, so did the

government's response to the oil spill – even though its effects continue to haunt the region.

Overall, it appears that as engagement of the BP oil spill increased in prized social and political venues, for instance the *New York Times*, the Sierra Club, or the White House, the issue built-up and consequently other social and political actors followed. This was evident when the leading national US newspaper prominently engaged the issue, signalling the importance of the incident to regional and international publications. Similarly, when the Sierra Club began to engage the issue, Greenpeace International adopted the oil spill as a problem. Interestingly, Greenpeace International closely emulated the response elicited by the Sierra Club and only once used direct action tactics to draw attention to the issue by using oil from the BP spill to paint the message “Arctic Next” on a supply boat headed for a Shell oil platform. This stands in contrast to their usual practice of bearing witness and interfering with offshore oil production operations. Moreover, as attention in the newspapers and advocacy by environmental NGOs increased so did the level of engagement by BP and the White House. Therefore, there is partial evidence to support the third hypotheses on issue build-up.

In sum this suggests that engagement of the term “oil spill” followed similar patterns to those observed for the term “BP”. The next chapter will look more closely at the differences between to two keywords to discern how the focus of engagement varied between the two terms.

Chapter 7: “BP” vs. “Oil Spill” Comparing Engagement

In the following section, I will draw out the differences in engagement of the two keywords. This provides important insight into how the focus and framing of the issue changed in relation to the complexity and visuality of the events that occurred as the incident unfolded.

When comparing newspaper coverage of the keywords “BP” and “Oil Spill” it would appear that the accident was framed as a corporate responsibility issue, with 26 percent more articles mentioning the term “BP”⁵. The only exception was seen with the local newspaper, the *Times-Picayune*, which published 4 percent more articles mentioning the keyword “Oil Spill”. This alternative focus may reflect the fact that the effects of the oil spill had the greatest impact on Gulf residents and thus was the focus of a greater number of articles. As anticipated, the *Guardian* published significantly more articles mentioning “BP” than “oil spill”, but this reflects the fact that the newspaper covered more issues and events with respect to BP as a company that were not directly related to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Despite varying levels of coverage between the two keywords, all four publications’ top two weeks of reporting on the BP oil spill took place during the *oil disaster* phase of the accident. In fact, the top two weeks of heightened engagement were the same for each news publication, with the exception of the *Times-Picayune*’s second most intense week for the keyword “oil spill” which occurred during the first week of the *capping the well* phase. Articles published during the most intense week of engagement that only mentioned the term “BP” primarily focused on the company’s negligence in the Gulf and the detrimental ecological consequences that their lax drilling standards were

having on the Gulf. Contempt for BP and the consequences of their actions for instance, is illustrated in an article published in the *New York Times*:

Like Goldman Sachs, oil companies are not benign economic agents, serving a need and taking a cut. They are, in Theodore Roosevelt's words, "malefactors of great wealth." But our cynicism dulled our response to truly criminal behavior... It is one thing to watch while Goldman Sachs pillages the economy, quite another to be invited to stand aside while BP violates the Gulf Coast. Yes, we should be a lot angrier than we are. (Judt and Judt 2010)

By contrast, articles that discussed the oil spill but did not assign blame to BP, predominantly focused directly on the ecological impacts of the accident. A statement in the *Times-Picayune*, for example, covering fishing bans illustrates this type of reporting:

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries said recreational and commercial fishing activities in portions of the state territorial seas south of Marsh Island in Iberia and Vermilion parishes could be resumed Monday. This area was originally closed on May 18 due to a confirmed report of oil on a small section of the southern shoreline of Marsh Island. ("The Oil Spill In Brief" 2010)

Although the two keywords were largely engaged in different contexts, they were deployed in reaction to similar issues and events during the oil spill. In both cases, their coverage was greatest when the effects of the accident were easiest to interpret and visually stunning. Although much reporting emphasized corporate responsibility for the accident, it still relied on the easy-to-follow narrative and striking images during these weeks to convey what was happening in the Gulf.

When examining engagement of the BP oil spill by environmental NGOs it appears that press advocacy focused more intensively on the keyword "BP" than "oil

spill”, with over three times the number of releases issued that mention the keyword “BP.” Interestingly, the Sierra Club issued over four times the number of press releases mentioning the keyword “BP” compared to those that mentioned “oil spill”. By contrast, Greenpeace International’s advocacy was more uniform, with only one and a half times the number of press releases issued mentioning “BP” compared to “oil spill”.

Looking at the Sierra Club’s considerable number of press releases mentioning “BP” reveals that the company was largely drawn upon to support the organization’s various clean energy campaigns. Using the example of the BP oil spill, press releases could succinctly explain to readers the consequences associated with dependencies on “dirty energy sources”. This is illustrated, for examples, in a press release that discusses the passage of the Home Star Energy Retrofit Act:

As America reels from the BP oil disaster, we applaud the passage of the Home Star Energy Efficiency Retrofit Program. Reducing energy use in our homes is an important way to reduce our dependence on oil, coal and other dirty fuels. This critical bipartisan legislation will create clean energy jobs and save consumers money. (Sierra Club 2010h)

Thus, the Sierra Club employed “BP” as a symbol of the potential consequences associated with superfluous energy demands and environmentally destructive production methods, including coal and other fuels. With multiple campaigns advocating for cleaner energy sources, it might explain the large number of press releases that mentioned BP. By contrast, when the organization mentioned the keyword “oil spill” its advocacy was more directly focused on the Gulf of Mexico oil spill and offshore drilling in US waters. This is shown in a statement issued by the Sierra Club’s executive director, Michael Brune:

BP needs to be held fully accountable for the disaster in the Gulf. The company pursued drilling without having adequate response plans, putting lives and livelihoods at risk. The company should be fully prosecuted for its negligence and for any attempts to mislead the government about its disaster response plans or the seriousness of the oil spill. (Sierra Club 2010h)

Similarly, Greenpeace International made reference to BP in its press advocacy to emphasize the ecological threats that the production of non-reusable energy poses. The term “oil spill” was also used in the same manner to validate the organization’s campaigns against offshore drilling in various locations around the world, climate change, and transitioning to reusable energy sources. In fact, Greenpeace International did not issue a single press release that exclusively dealt with the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. The keywords “BP and “oil spill” were most commonly referred to very briefly, as is illustrated in a statement made in a press release issued during the height of the Gulf oil spill’s engagement by other social and political actors:

Our Energy Revolution scenario shows how to eliminate unpredictable fossil fuel costs, destructive mining and oil exploration and with it catastrophes such as the current BP Gulf oil spill... Investing in people, rather than dirty and dangerous fossil fuels not only boosts global economic development but stems catastrophic climate change. (Greenpeace 2010d)

Therefore, this suggests that the environmental NGOs used the accident as a strategic opportunity to lend legitimacy to their claims. By using catch phrases, such as “BP oil spill” and “BP disaster,” the organizations could evoke images of severe ecological damage. Thus, the extensive reference to BP in the Sierra Club’s press advocacy can be accounted for by the large number of campaigns they run that focus on environmentally destructive energy sources.

As can be expected, the oil companies did not frequently mention the term “oil spill” in their public relations. Of the 171 press releases issued by BP in 2010, only 73 mentioned the term “oil spill”, similarly Shell and ExxonMobil issued only one press release each that mentioned the term.

When examining BP’s most intense week of engagement of the oil spill, which occurred during the *capping the well* phase, 13 press releases were issued, however, only three mentioned the term “oil spill”. Press releases that did not mention the term “oil spill” primarily provided updates on the capping procedure and information on business divestitures to generate cash flows to pay for the response. It appears that these press releases were written in a manner that minimized the link between BP and the oil spill. This is illustrated, for example, in a statement made by BP’s CEO, Tony Hayward, regarding reasons for divesting in Colombia:

"I am delighted with the price we have achieved for these assets. BP has been involved in Colombia for more than 20 years and played a major role in finding and developing the country's major oilfields. These have contributed significantly to BP's global production over the years. But it now makes sense for the assets to go to owners more willing than BP to invest in their future development." (BP 2010i)

Minimizing public exposure that directly linked BP to the consequences of the *Deepwater Horizon* accident can be expected, particularly during the later stages of the *capping the well* phase when the company was trying to mend its tarnished image.

By contrast, during BP’s most intense week of coverage mentioning “oil spill”, the effects of the accident were wide spread and could not be downplayed. During this

week, which was BP's second most intense week of engagement overall, 12 press releases were issued and only two failed to mention the term "oil spill". These press releases clearly linked the company to the oil spill and its adverse effects on the Gulf region, as is illustrated in the following statement:

BP today announced the availability of four informational Web sites designed to offer state-specific oil spill information to residents of communities affected by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. (BP 2010j)

This suggests that BP primarily mentioned the term "oil spill" when the effects were most obvious and the company could not downplay the consequences of the Macondo well blowout. Once the well was capped, however, and there was no more oil entering the Gulf, BP significantly reduced the amount of press releases issued that mentioned the term "oil spill". Thus, press releases that contained the term "oil spill" were more likely to appear during the *oil disaster* phase of the accident, whereas, those that did not mention the term appeared more frequently throughout the *capping the well* and *normalization* phase. This is similar to the Sierra Club's engagement of the two keywords.

When looking at the other two major oil companies with interests in the Gulf, they showed similar tendencies of strategically wording press releases to avoid mentioning the oil spill directly. In the single press release issued by ExxonMobil that mentioned BP, they discussed new underwater well containment technologies, however, never directly mentioned the term "oil spill". This tactic of not discussing offshore oil production in relation to oil spills is illustrated in a quote regarding a new underwater well containment project:

Existing BP equipment is being assessed for use in near-term response capability. The sponsor companies' project team will utilize full time BP technical personnel with experience from the Gulf of Mexico response. (ExxonMobil 2010)

What were these technical personnel responding to in the Gulf of Mexico? Although Shell issued only two press releases that mentioned BP, which appeared during the *pre-accident* phase, they too skirted the issue of oil spills. In discussing a new record breaking ultra-deepwater offshore drilling venture that BP was a partner in the company never mentioned the threat of an oil spill despite constantly referring to the risks of drilling in such conditions. Again, this is to be expected, drawing attention to the potential risks associated with drilling at such depth would not be in the best interest of Shell or its partners.

Similarly, when examining the two press releases issued by Shell and ExxonMobil that contained the keyword “oil spill” they too were carefully worded to avoid directly linking the Macondo well blowout with BP. In fact, when discussing a new oil spill containment plan, both Shell and ExxonMobil use identical wording to refer to a well blowout incident without directly referring to the Macondo accident. This is illustrated in the opening statement of both press releases:

A plan to build and deploy a rapid response system that will be available to capture and contain oil in the event of a potential future underwater well blowout in the deepwater Gulf of Mexico was announced today by Chevron, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil and Shell. (Shell 2010; ExxonMobil 2010b)

Although the keyword searches yielded different press releases for the oil companies, both companies were similar in consciously avoiding linking oil spills and offshore oil

production. It will be interesting to see if Shell continues to issue press releases that boast about the riskiness of their ultra-deepwater offshore oil production operations. The over-confidence of the two companies' technical abilities might have been a bad omen for the events that were transpire just one month after it was issued.

When looking at the White House's engagement of the BP oil spill it is apparent that it focused more on "BP" in its press briefings than the term "oil spill", with a total of 60 press briefings compared to 40. Despite these differences, mentions of the two keywords were relatively similar throughout the *oil disaster* and beginning of the *capping the well* phase of the accident. Once BP partially capped the wellhead in mid-July, the White House's focus appears to have shifted away from the actual oil spill towards BP's corporate responsibility to fund costal restoration and make claims payments. Thus, engagement looked more at the business end of the accident rather than the uninhibited flow of crude oil entering the Gulf.

Throughout the *oil disaster* period, press briefings issued not mentioning the term "oil spill" primarily focused on BP's financial viability in light of the massive payments they were making to reclaim the Gulf coast. In other instances, the BP oil spill was only briefly discussed, but again focused on claims and liabilities. The emphasis on BP's abilities to honor its legal responsibilities to pay for the accident and its adverse affects is illustrated in a statement made by the White House's press secretary:

...I think everybody -- as the President said, everybody in the country, everybody in the Gulf, has as interest in a company that's able to uphold its responsibilities... (White House 2010e)

By contrast, one press briefing issued during the *oil disaster* and another in the *capping the well* period discussed the oil spill, but did not mention BP. Both focused on the issue of offshore drilling moratoriums. Throughout the *normalizing* period two more press briefings issued mentioned the term “oil spill” but did not mention BP. At that point, the oil spill was mentioned in passing along with numerous other events in discussions pertaining to regional development and congressional activities.

From mid-July until mid-October, there were up to three more press briefings issued a week that mention BP but did not bring up the term “oil spill” at all. These press briefings largely focused on the corporate restructuring of BP, personnel changes, and new US offshore drilling regulations. Recall, that after mid-October, the White House stopped issuing press briefings that mention either keyword.

Therefore, throughout the early stages of the accident, engagement of the two keywords was relatively similar. Once the well was capped, however, the White House’s focus shifted from responding to the unabated flow of oil into the Gulf, to legislative changes that would prevent another accident of this nature happening again in US waters.

Overall, these findings suggest that social and political engagement of the BP oil spill primarily focused on the keyword “BP” and corporate responsibility. Although the term “oil spill” appeared frequently in newspaper articles and press releases, it was largely confined to coverage during the *oil disaster* and beginning of the *capping the well* phase of the accident. This indicates that discourse around the “oil spill” appeared when the effects of the accident were easiest to understand and were blatantly obvious. Once the well was capped and there were fewer striking visual images, engagement of the

accident focused more directly on BP and its liabilities. The technical and less flashy nature of this shift may explain declining coverage during the later half of the *capping the well* and *normalization* periods. Thus, the comparison between the keywords lends even more evidence to support the first and second hypothesis.

During the initial week of the *Deepwater Horizon* accident, newspaper articles almost equally mentioned the keywords “BP” and “oil spill”. As the issue developed over the following week, the *Times-Picayune* mentioned the keyword “oil spill” in 22 articles, which was eight more articles than the term “BP”. Despite growing evidence of a massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the *New York Times*, *Globe and Mail*, and the *Guardian* did not follow local reporting and published more articles that mentioned “BP” than “oil spill”.

After three weeks of oil flowing unabated into the Gulf of Mexico, the *New York Times* followed the *Times-Picayune* reporting and published more articles that mentioned the term “oil spill” than “BP”. The *Globe and Mail* also increased the number of articles that mentioned the term “oil spill”, however, it still published one more article that mentioned the keyword BP. In contrast, the *Guardian* continued to publish significantly more articles that mentioned the term BP, which may be explained by their reporting on other issues pertaining to the company in the UK that were not related to the Gulf incident. Until the first week of August, when BP announced the well was successfully capped, mentions of the keywords remained generally similar with an emphasis on the term “BP”.

After the well was plugged in the first week of August, international engagement of the term “oil spill” subsided substantially whereas the term “BP” had a much more gradual decline over the following five months, recall Figures 1 and 2 in chapter 4. One month later, the leading national publication’s engagement of the two terms followed a similar pattern. By contrast, the *Times-Picayune* continued to engage both terms fairly equally until the end of 2010.

This suggests that after the well was capped, the focus of international publications shifted immediately from the environmental repercussions of the accident to its corporate and financial consequences. Similarly, with drilling moratoriums and the destruction of beloved vacation destinations in the US, the *New York Times* engagement of the term “oil spill” subsided one month later. However, for Gulf residents, the oil spill will continue to haunt them for years to come and thus was consistently referred to until the end of 2010.

In the week following the explosion on the *Deepwater Horizon*, the Sierra Club issued its first press releases that engaged the tragic explosion. During the initial week of engagement, press advocacy focused equally on the two keywords. In the following week, however, the Sierra Club issued eight press releases that mentioned “BP” compared to only two that mentioned the term “oil spill”. As the accident unfolded over the following eight months, the Sierra Club consistently issued more press releases that mentioned “BP” than “oil spill”. There was a pronounced decline, however, in the mentioning of “oil spill” in mid-July –after BP announced that it had partially stemmed the flow of oil from the broken wellhead. The Sierra Club’s focus on the keyword BP in

its press advocacy may be explained by the fact that the organization used terms, for instance a “BP disaster”, to rally support against various environmentally destructive energy sources. By immediately employing this symbol, the Sierra Club was likely trying to draw on the outrage that was evoked by the accident to maximize its returns on campaigning.

Four weeks after the Sierra Club first adopted the issue, Greenpeace International issued its first press release, which mentioned both keywords. In the following week, Greenpeace issued its second press release, in which it only mentioned the term “oil spill”. Greenpeace’s subsequent engagement of the BP oil spill followed a similar pattern to the Sierra Club. This may be explained by the fact that the organization used the events in the Gulf of Mexico to supplement its direct action campaigning in other countries. As a result, it was drawn upon less frequently and not in the same fashion as the Sierra Club’s use of events. Therefore, this may suggest that the environmental NGOs responded to the newspapers’ coverage of the accident. At the time when the Sierra Club adopted the issue, newspapers engaged both keywords more equally and then as the events unfolded both actors shifted their focus. Although Greenpeace international picked up the issue much later, it too followed this manner of reporting the accident.

During the first week of the accident, BP issued five press releases that dealt with the accident, of which only two mentioned the term “oil spill”. As the magnitude of the accident became apparent over the course of the following week, BP’s engagement increased significantly, nonetheless, it continued to issue fewer press releases mentioning “oil spill”. It was only in the third week of the accident, when the effects of the oil spill

were indisputable and could not be downplayed that BP mentioned the term “oil spill” in every press release it issued. Without knowing or wanting to publically disclose the consequences of the broken wellhead, it appears that BP tried to downplay this aspect of the accident. Likely, BP did this to focus attention elsewhere in an attempt to remedy the problem before it got out of hand and they were compelled to admit that there was a serious oil spill. After the well was capped in early August, BP issued few press releases that mentioned the term “oil spill”. This is similar to the newspapers and Sierra Club’s engagement of the term.

Interestingly, Shell and ExxonMobil’s first response to the accident mentioned the term “oil spill” but remained mute on the company responsible for the incident. Recall, that nearly identical press releases were issued in mid-July when the newspapers and Sierra Club were largely shifting their focus away from the oil spill itself and focusing more directly on BP as a company. Similarly, ExxonMobil’s second press release, issued during the *normalizing* phase, mentioned BP but did not discuss the oil spill directly. This suggests that the other oil companies with interests in the Gulf of Mexico may have been reacting to shifts in the leading national newspaper and Sierra Club’s engagement of the BP oil spill. During both periods, however, the companies never attributed blame that would link BP to the Gulf of Mexico oil spill.

When the White House initially engaged the BP oil spill a week after the explosion on the *Deepwater Horizon*, it issued a total of four press briefings. Of the four briefings that engaged the accident, only one mentioned the term “oil spill”. That press briefing was issued a week after the drilling rig sank and a day after the White House

made its first statement regarding the incident in the Gulf. In the following week, when government officials confirmed that the accident had caused an uncontrollable oil spill, all four of the White House's press briefings mentioned both keywords. For the next two months, throughout the *oil disaster* and beginning of the *capping the well* phase, the White House's engagement of the issue largely included both keywords.

By the end of August, the White House began to issue less press briefings mentioning, "oil spill" compared to "BP". The shift in attention coincided with BP's announcement that the Macondo well was in the final stages of being completely capped. This suggests that once the well was successfully contained, the White House focused less on the consequences of the accident and directed its attention more specifically at BP and its legal obligations. Although this transition in focus was two weeks later than the Sierra Club, there is a similar pattern of engagement, which was also seen in the *New York Times* coverage. The lag of engagement among social and political actors may be explained by the fact that the White House was directly involved in the capping procedure and therefore needed to publically account for its actions.

It appears that as engagement of the two keywords increased by prized social and political actors, for instance the *New York Times*, Sierra Club, or White House, other actors followed in their coverage and discussed the terms in similar manners. The only exception to this was seen by international publications that followed local and national reporting during the initial stages of the accident. Similarly, the Sierra Club's press advocacy and the *Times-Picayune* reporting of an oil spill likely compelled BP to more prominently acknowledge that oil was escaping the broken wellhead. Therefore, when

comparing when the keywords were engaged, more evidence is found to support the third hypothesis of issue build-up and theories that suggest that prized venues influence how other actors engage and frame an issue (see Ferree et al. 2002; Rohlinger 2007).

Chapter 8: Conclusion

On the evening of April 20, 2010, the *Deepwater Horizon* accident set in motion a series of events that would capture the attention of media outlets, environmental NGOs, oil companies and the White House for more than five months. My thesis examined this to understand what shaped attention and what accounted for shifts in engagement of the oil spill by different social and political actors. To investigate this, I proposed that engagement of the BP oil spill was dependent upon the complexity of the causal narratives of different issues and events, their visuality, and issue or event build-up. I anticipated that issues and events that were less complex, more visual, and that were engaged by prominent actors would likely garner more attention and social and political engagement.

Overall, the data analyzed in my thesis suggests that social and political actors' engagement of the BP oil spill was influenced by the narrative complexity of issues and events, as well as their visuality. Newspaper coverage appears to be the most influenced by this. As narrative causal complexity of the disaster decreased and as the ability to visually portray its detrimental effects increased, newspaper engagement with the BP oil spill also increased. Likewise, varying levels of narrative complexity and visuality was also linked to environmental NGO engagement during the four stages of the accident. Evidence suggests, however, that oil companies' engagement was somewhat different. BP's engagement of the disaster was partially influenced by narrative complexity and the visible impacts of the oil spill on the Gulf region. However, Shell and ExxonMobil were not compelled to respond to the disaster and their press releases did not appear to follow the other actor's trends. Interestingly, Shell and ExxonMobil focused on the capping of

the well and rebuilding of public trust in offshore drilling and its safety. The White House's response appears to follow the patterns of newspapers and environmental NGOs. These findings support the first and second hypotheses and offer new data on how the potential to frame issues and events affects how social and political actors engage social problems. As a result, engagement with the BP oil spill confirms the expectations of social movement framing literature, which finds that when links can be drawn more directly between an issue, event, or act and their consequences, they will be more accessible to a broader audience and therefore more likely to be engaged (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Hilgartner 1990; Cormier and Tindall 2005). Moreover, the findings also lend support to media and social movement theories that contend that visually striking images, which are easy to interpret, will generate significant attention (Gitlin 2003; Gans 2003; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993, Ungar 1998, Hutchins and Lester 2006, Hansen 2009). This was aptly displayed in the environmental organizations' use of the accident and its easy to interpret consequences during the *oil disaster* phase to bridge information gaps in their campaigns on other sites to increase resonance among broader audiences. This technique, which employed "the BP oil spill" as a symbol of the potential consequences associated with environmentally destructive energy production was not only used in the United States but internationally to call for new directions in energy production.

The analysis also revealed that initial issues and events during the disaster did not receive immediate or widespread attention until they could be explained in a simple and convincing manner. Once this happened and the BP oil spill was engaged by prized social and political actors, it signalled to other social and political actors the need to engage the

issue. This supports the third hypothesis on issue or event build-up and is in line with observations from the agenda-setting and discursive opportunities literature (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Ferree et al. 2002; Koopmans 2004; Koopmans and Olzak 2004; Rholinger 2007; 2006).

My findings suggests that newspapers and environmental NGOs may have played a crucial role in influencing the responses to the accident by the oil companies and the White House. With the newspapers and Sierra Club prominently engaging the issue by the second week of the accident, BP and the White House could not downplay the oil spill without risking severe public scrutiny. As the accident unfolded, the newspapers' engagement continued to increase over the following eight weeks, which kept the issue in the public's consciousness and thus did not allow BP or the White House to stop engaging the incident. This likely came as a shock to both BP and the White House due to the short attention cycles of BP's oil refinery explosion in Texas City that killed 15 in 2005 and the 2006 Prudhoe Bay spill in Alaska whose public attention quickly dissipated.

When comparing the two keywords, there is evidence that BP and the White House were reactive to the discourse in the newspapers and press advocacy of the environmental NGOs, which supports previous findings (Sonnnett 2010; Weingart 2000). For instance, when newspapers and environmental NGOs stopped mentioning the term "oil spill" both BP and the White House quickly stopped mentioning this aspect of the accident in their engagement of it. This suggests that once news reporting and environmental advocacy had shifted its focus to different aspects of the accident, BP and the White House could also follow suit without risking public criticism. The shift in focus from the environmental repercussions of the accident to corporate responsibility lends

further support to the three hypotheses, by suggesting that even when the incident is approached from different angles, engagement is affected by its comprehensibility, visuality, and signalling from prized venues.

Therefore, narrative complexity, visuality, and issue build-up are all factors in the engagement of the BP oil spill. All likely account for the reasons why the BP oil spill has largely been forgotten just one year later. This research provides insight into why many environmental issues, despite posing substantial threats to the earth's ecology and human wellbeing, largely do not evoke significant media attention, environmental advocacy, or political intervention.

Endnotes

1. The BP oil spill is also known as “the BP oil disaster,” “the Gulf of Mexico oil spill,” and the “Macondo blowout.” The latter referring to the oil field that the platform was tapping into. By far, the most common reference to the event is “BP oil spill.” A hard quote Google search conducted on May 5, 2011 found that it returned 13,300,000 results, compared to 6,560,000, 3,170,000, and 25,900 results for the other terms respectively. For this reason this is how we refer to the overall events related to the Deepwater Horizon explosion and ensuing oil spill. The resulting analysis would have likely been different had other keywords been used, such as those mentioned above, however to illustrate the most common trends my thesis focused only on “BP” and “Oil Spill.”

2. On June 15, 2010, The Subcommittee on Energy and Environment held a hearing entitled “Drilling Down on America’s Energy Future: Safety, Security, and Clean Energy.” The executives of the five largest oil companies that addressed the safety of drilling operations included: Rex Tillerson (ExxonMobil), John Watson (Chevron), James Mulva (ConocoPhillips), Lamar McKay (BP America), Marvin Odum (Shell). For full transcripts of the proceedings, see: (<http://energycommerce.house.gov/hearings/hearingdetail.aspx?NewsID=7933>).

3. The complexity of the operations occurring during the *capping the well* period is vividly illustrated in a press briefing held on August 11, 2010, during which the National Incident Commander, Admiral Thad Allen, almost incomprehensibly discusses the joint response efforts:

“Sure, there’s a very low probability that we might have actually sealed the annulus with the cement that came down the pipe casing and came back up around it. What we want to do is understand whether or not there’s what we call free communication. In other words whether there, the hydrocarbons in the reservoir can actually come up through the annulus outside the casing, if that’s the case when we go in and we drill in we put the mud and cement we’re just going to drive that down and seal the well. OK? If there’s cement there and there’s no communication that means we have what we call stagnate oil trapped around that casing up to the well head. If you go in and you start pumping mud and cement in there the chances are you could raise the pressure and push that up into the blow out preventer. And that’s a very low possibility, low probability event but we want to, we want to test the pressure in the blow out preventer and see if we actually have pressure coming up that would indicate that we have free communication with the reservoir. If not that would change our tactics and how we do the final kill” (Deepwater Horizon Incident Joint Information Center 2010).

4. Bob Dudley’s vocal call for the restructuring of BP to increase its safety in light of the events that transpired on the evening of April 20, 2010, are ironic when you consider that

Tony Hayward took the place of the companies previous CEO, John Browne, after the Texas City oil refinery explosion that killed 15 workers and injured 100. At the time, Tony Hayward also called for sweeping changes to BP's corporate structure to prevent accidents of this scale from occurring.

5. The articles were not mutually exclusive; therefore, many articles mentioned both keywords, however, the search yielded 855 more articles that mentioned BP and did not mention the term "oil spill".

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