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"Smoke on the Water": Reactions to Media Coverage and Government Actions around the 2010 BP Oil Spill

Mahir Faisal Haque
University of Colorado Boulder

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Mahir Faisal Haque
University of Colorado, Boulder
Sociology Department

"Smoke on the Water"
Reactions to Media Coverage and
Government Actions around the 2010 BP
Oil Spill

April 5, 2013

Honors Committee Members:

Kathleen Tierney, PhD,
Sociology (Chair)

Liam Downey, PhD, Sociology

Max Boykoff, PhD,
Environmental Studies

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the public's reactions to media coverage and government actions in light of the BP oil spill of 2010. As part of this study, a set of ancillary questions regarding how the media frame news stories and the dynamics behind media influence on government actions are also explored. An analysis was performed, which consisted of analysing comments on the internet, letters to the editor and opinion pieces to see what they had to say about the media coverage and government response. Four codes were established in order of frequency: exposing worse realities, moderating messages, effects mitigation and humorous diffusion. The findings show that exposing worse realities was the most common code, and suggest that those closer to environmental disasters are better aware of the magnitude of such a disaster, and that these disasters are often tied to institutional causes. Media framing of disasters plays a role, albeit a small one, in how the public and government come to see a disaster, and media's interactions with the government show that they can be a key figure in shaping government responses to an environmental calamity.

Over the Mississippi Canyon, a massive underwater geological feature off the coast of Louisiana and Mississippi, stood the Deepwater Horizon/Macando Oil Rig, a behemoth rising 320 feet from the water's surface. On April 20, 2010, a methane explosion set fire to the rig, and by the following morning, eleven men were missing, and the rig was beginning to sink. After three days of searching hundreds of square miles, authorities presumed the eleven workers were dead and began funeral arrangements for the deceased.

The story caught fire in the national media landscape. Early on, major outlets such as MSNBC, CNN, the New York Times and the Washington Post began reporting on the oil rig disaster extensively, mostly accounting for the details of the explosion, the sunken rig's whereabouts on the ocean floor and immediate human impacts such as lost jobs and lives. By the time that coverage of the subsequent underwater oil spill began, the broken riser was already spewing thousands of barrels of oil a day--to get an idea of the magnitude, BP's official estimate increased from 1000 barrels/day immediately following the start of the spill, to 5000 barrels/day, while independent sources suggested the range may lie around 70 000 barrels/day (Alexander 2010). The highest flow estimate would reach an estimated 210 000 gallons of oil/day. Soon after, people on the water and on shore were doing their best to break the oil apart and save wildlife affected by the spill. The Gulf fishing industry expressed concern at the sightings of dead fish now occurring up and down the coast, and public discourse soon turned to finger pointing towards who was ultimately responsible for the disaster.

British Petroleum sent probes and robotic submarines underwater to track how the Spill was progressing while media professionals threw petroleum drilling jargon at the public to prepare them for the operations that BP officials were intending to carry out. These included

placing a containment dome over the well and collecting oil. When the pipe for uptaking oil was blocked by methane crystals, BP attempted to plug the dome using a process called "top kill" which involved pumping drilling mud to plug the intake. Remotely operated vehicles were also used to try and close the blowout preventer, a mechanism designed to control the volume of oil safely extracted from deep-sea high pressure wells. Capping the actual riser, which was 1500 m below sea level, and collecting oil from there was also an option that was set into motion (CBC News 2010; BBC News 2010; CNBC 2010). While these methods were ultimately not very successful, a plan to drill two relief wells to alleviate the Macando well of some pressure and then pumping drilling fluid into the hole was reported to be successful, even though there has been evidence to suggest that the well continued emitting oil in subsequent years.

From the beginning of this disaster, it was clear that the spill would have a massive effect on marine life near the spill and on the coast, where the oil was heading. Concerns soon arose about fish stocks being affected, a major dilemma since seafood is something the Gulf is celebrated for, and it also bolsters other industries, such as tourism. Tourism itself was also extensively harmed, with tourism declining in the years following the spill--2011 saw an estimated 24.7 million visitors to Louisiana, down from 25.1 million in 2010 (Anderson "Louisiana tourism trending upwards despite setbacks" 2012). Live-cams of the gushing riser haunted the public's imagination as it pondered how much oil was actually escaping. Soon, the government and even BP itself would refer to it as the worst oil disaster in US history.

As can be seen in the short summary above, the main institutions that have been present throughout all the developments of the BP oil disaster of 2010 have been the news media. They not only covered the initial explosion and spill, but also served as the primary conduit through

which BP told the public of its plans to contain the spill. Of course, at first glance this seems quite obvious and nothing special worth noting about. The majority of Americans logically doesn't live in the Gulf, and must rely on news media for information about environmental disasters from the region. However, not everything in the media is reported equally--some facts are accentuated to draw attention to an aspect of the story or trigger reactions from viewers. By framing their stories, the news media have the potential to influence the public to view an issue differently to how they would see and interpret it if they witnessed the event first hand. For example, reporters on sources such as CNN would depict the responses that BP took as highly complex operations where responders knew what was going on. This "no frills" seriousness suggests to the viewer that BP is dealing with a large incident in the best way it can using already established, high quality industry response protocols. In contrast, an Uptight Citizens Brigade comedy troupe's video depicts BP officials attempting to clean a coffee spill in a boardroom, using garbage, hands as makeshift pontoons and a crane to remove the "cup riser," ending with disastrous results. This is a farce suggesting that, behind the veneer of technical know-how, BP may have tried to create the image of it working intensively to clean up the spill, when in reality, it's just as unsure as the public on how to stop it. Moreover, it is done through satire, inviting audiences to view the ridiculousness of BP's responses (UCBCComedy 2010).

My primary focus on creating this honor's thesis has been on how people and government have reacted to the media's coverage of the BP oil spill, and what factors in the media and government have helped shape this. My question was focused around how citizens have understood their relationship to the oil industry in light of media and governmental actions, that is, media coverage of the spill and subsequent governmental actions attempting to help rectify

the situation and work with BP to compensate Gulf residents. As part of my main question, I asked a set of ancillary questions:

- a. How have people felt about media reporting on the oil spill?
- b. How have they felt about the decisions made by government officials?
- c. How have the media reported on the spill and the related environmental conditions?
- d. How has pollution from oil production affected environmental justice and public perception of the spill in the region?
- e. And, as a connecting factor between the media and government interactions, how does the media affect political decision-making in environmental issues?

I decided to focus on "people" as those being declared as private citizens in data gathering, not whole organizations. I believe that people's roles in groups and causes is related to how they interpret information as individuals, and then how this interpretation is applied to group decisions, since not everyone in a group is likely to have the same interpretation.

My study summarily fits quite well into the existing literature. It focuses on the mass media's role in public opinion making, especially in light of technological disasters such as the BP oil spill. I found analyses in my research of public attitudes toward controversial energy sources such as nuclear power, but found very little substantive material on more non-renewable common energy sources, such as oil. Granted, this may be because not all oil is used in power generation, but especially in southern Louisiana, power generation from oil is very common, with crude oil being the second most abundant source of energy production in the state, after natural gas (EIA 2010). Hence, oil should be studied in this context as the energy source to

which people react. There is some literature on how politicians use media information to craft policy solutions, but this literature is quite sparse. While this is only a minor part of my study, mainly to examine where the media can interface with the political process in environmental decision-making, it is important nonetheless as it allows us to see how government officials attempt to ease the public and perform damage control on an environmental disaster, especially as environmental issues are gradually starting to take a more prominent role in political decision-making. I am also hoping to contribute something to the literature here.

In terms of theoretical and substantive importance, it is essential to know the exchanges that occur between the media and the public, as well as the government's involvement. As will be covered in more detail, the way the mass media frame how a disaster is seen is an important force behind driving public reactions to the disaster and what the public believes should be done. It is also helpful to know the already established extent of environmental dilemmas for residents in southern Louisiana so that we have a context in which to assess their reactions to the spill. At least some of the public learn about scientific phenomena mainly from news and related coverage on television and in newspapers, and this can lead them to view not just the current environmental issue differently, but also affect how they see future environmental dilemmas (Boykoff and Roberts 2007).

I mainly chose to focus on this subject for my study as I am interested in how oil companies function in a society where environmental awareness is increasing, and I have a significant interest in how the media help people see the world and interpret information about the environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As the media have a core position in this thesis, owing to them using framing to communicate information efficiently, logically it followed that the theoretical framework most suitable to be used in my thesis was framing theory. Frames guide our perception of reality using cognitive structures and ideas we may already be familiar with, and we adopt these structures in explaining the realities we experience (König 2007). In *Frame Analysis*, Erving Goffman stated that he believed how a situation is framed is built on cues and principles which "govern these events--at least social ones--and our subjective involvement in them" (Goffman 1974). For example, a couple kissing can range from a husband greeting his wife to a man being careful with his date's makeup before the "main event" (Goffman 1974).

In the media, an environmental disaster follows a narrative: normalcy is interrupted, an investigation is launched and actions taken, and then everything is restored back to normal. This narrative is often molded by news values, cornerstones by which media professionals guide their reporting. In a seminal 1965 study of Norwegian newspapers, Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge identified eight values that shape news coverage of an event. These are frequency, amplitude, ambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity and composition. Frequency describes how a news item can fit into a news cycle, with more immediate items receiving more attention than those that gradually develop. Amplitude refers to how significant or large a disaster must be before it is deemed as newsworthy. Ambiguity gauges how clear-cut an issue must be to be reported on—stories that have distinguishable sides are more likely to be reported than those that are more complicated. Meaningfulness dictates the increased noteworthiness of news that is more relatable and closer in proximity to the audience rather than news that is

neither readily observable nor close. Interestingly, consonance alludes to the fact that news that reinforces pre-existing notions of social phenomena and groups is more often reported. An unexpected and timely story also attracts media attention—repeated claims of climate change over a number of months are less frequently reported than a disaster that happens overnight. Once a large-scale issue has captured the media's attention, according to Anderson, it is likely to be deemed newsworthy for some time to come, even in the context of 24-hour news, where older news is constantly replaced. Composition states that reporting on items depends on the significance of other issues in the news (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Anderson 2002).

In covering large scale disasters that affect a wide cross-section of society, the media occasionally step outside their role as narrators in a social drama and come to see themselves in a privileged-enough position to make societal judgments, often assigning blame to various bodies and individuals. Expert opinions are used to create and justify these decisions, and the terms employed in this process assist members of the public in deciding how this event would impact them. In an analysis of news articles from the *New York Times* and New Orleans's *Times-Picayune* focusing on Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent emergency response, it was found that officials' self descriptions of their actions were covered by those newspapers in a more positive light, while other authorities' descriptions of these bodies were more critical, suggesting that different authorities saw the effects of each other's actions inconsistently (Littlefield and Quenette 2007).

Political scientists use the concept of "problem definition" to describe how government action is driven by institutional factors and decision-making that is dependent on how an issue is defined in the public sphere. When a public issue is defined in a certain manner, it implies an

argument about what the government should do next. Social constructionism argues that claim-makers typify social problems through characterizations based on different rhetorical orientations (moral, logical, political), and by exaggerating certain aspects of a problem over others. For example, US politicians have, in modern times, characterized invasions into other countries through the political rhetoric that they bring democracy to those countries, citing how people seem to have more freedom of expression and movement after these events are deemed successful. A number of sources agree that expanded political participation and characteristics of the issue that are friendly to the media and social sphere are determinants of whether the issue will gain access to the socio-political agenda. Furthermore, issue definition is based on the concept of a level of analysis, wherein an issue can be viewed in ways ranging from very simplistic frames to complex ones, and in which aspects can be exaggerated liberally (Rochefort and Cobb 1994). Problem definition perspective is necessary here, as it provides a theoretical background to understanding political responses, one of framing's main effects.

There are also opposing beliefs on exactly what effect media framing has on shaping or changing people's perceptions towards different issues. Cass Sunstein (2009), a prominent legal scholar and Harvard professor, believes that framing really serves to reinforce people's attitudes on different subjects--people tend to listen and view messages that are aligned with their pre-existing beliefs, and after viewing messages framed in certain ways, viewers become more resolute in their beliefs. Sunstein cites three studies that reinforce his reasoning, all of which he has helped conduct. In a focus group of Democrats and Republicans who watched a political debate, most participants were moderate party members before watching. After the debate, they strongly leaned towards whatever candidate represented their political party affiliation, even if

the candidates themselves weren't moderates. Another study involved sixty people from Boulder and Colorado Springs, two of the most politically polarised cities in Colorado, being split into ten groups of six people who had similar political beliefs. They discussed their stances on social issues, for which they had no prior screening. The researchers found that people were more extreme in their views following these discussions: there was much less internal diversity within groups following discussion, and the rifts between groups only grew.

Results that resemble Sunstein's findings were also obtained in a study performed by researchers from the University of Wisconsin Madison. Their data were based on previous mass media studies using simulated stories on stem cell research, which used electronic news sources, and immigration, which used newspaper articles and electronic sources. The team used two types of framing in their analysis--value framing, in which sides to an issue are presented as fundamentally moral conflicts, such as when abortions should occur for cells to be used in stem cell research, and political framing, where issues are seen as a means to a political end, such as creating legislation to gain favorable votes before an election. Overall, media framing didn't affect participants' opinions on issues to a strong degree, but in value framing it had the effect of creating alternate but relevant ways of thinking about their stances, since participants suppressed their partisanship as much as possible, and in political framing partisanship was neither promoted nor discouraged, meaning that participants' opinions could be based on partisanship, but not necessarily. Political framing induced the idea that politicians involved themselves for their own interests. The researchers concluded that due to the generalizability of their results, their findings could be applied to other social issues (Lee et al. 2008).

Supporting many other researchers' findings, Alison Anderson (2002), a British sociological researcher, observes that environmental news is often reported as "bad news," in an authoritative and expert manner. However, she says that often attributing a direct relationship between media coverage of disasters such as oil spills and changes in public opinion is made difficult by the fact that many media professionals don't have scientific training, and this makes understanding and reporting impartially on an oil spill an ordeal. Rather, she attributes media coverage on environmental disasters to the result of various news sources vying to capture the media's attention and provide their perspectives on what matters in a disaster. This is also tied to the resources that news sources possess—official sources such as an oil company or a governmental agency are more likely to be able to get their definitions across to the public than someone whose livelihood has been affected by the disaster. Because environmental calamities are unpredictable, at the beginning of a disaster's progression, news outlets may gather perspectives from those traditionally less likely to have their messages heard, but in the long term, official sources and those that have the most resources are more likely to prevail. This is due to three key factors: the continuous 24 hour cycle of mainstream US news media, including television and outlets with a significant online presence, allows the production process to be highly structured on a constant basis; having political and economic resources allows sources to package their messages in more media-friendly methods; and interests of sources and news organisations may converge where there is more mutual interest, particularly in appealing to large audiences.

While Gamson and Modigliani's research on media and public opinion is based around public opinion on nuclear power, they believe their model is comprehensive enough to be

applied to other issues involving controversial power sources, and I found it useful in understanding framing in this project. They state that the messages we receive from the media are not disseminated piecemeal, but rather understood through packages, which are modified to account for new information. Individuals approach these packages with pre-conceived schemas, similarly related to in Sunstein's book, that can be amenable to change, and while media discourse and the general culture of the issue—involving all viewpoints on the issue—share a complicated relationship, the researchers found that media content can be the most important indicator of the issue culture. The model attributes frames as being the core of these packages, and these frames contain different viewpoints, but in the packaging dissemination process viewpoints are reduced to mainly two dialectic, opposing views. There are three determinants that affect how packages develop in society—cultural resonances that make a package seem familiar to the audience and occur early in the package's career, sponsors that advocate for the package and can communicate with news media effectively using catchphrases, and codes of practice and conduct followed by journalists, in that they start reporting from official sources and packages. Packages appear and disappear due to changing external events and policy priorities, and even though the Gamson-Modigliani model doesn't argue that media discourse causes changes in public opinion, the presence of certain packages certainly acts on public thinking (1989).

The literature focused around interpretive approaches to media framing of socio-political issues shares many common characteristics, but is also useful in comprehending our understanding of coverage around the spill, as many outlets' coverage relied on official statements. These statements' salience comes from organisations that have the resources to

commit those packages to the public agenda. However, rather than just telling us how issues are framed during normal, "non-disaster" times, framing around the spill is tied to coverage during these "non-disaster" times which serves as a foundation for media reporting during the actual disaster.

What this literature reveals to us is that the media are more likely to base reporting of public issues, specifically unpredictable energy-related issues and disasters, on official sources and powerful claims-makers, and that where opposing views or non-official sources are covered, their frames are not relied upon for as much information as an official source. In network television coverage of anti-nuclear protestors who opposed a proposed nuclear plant being built in Seabrook, New Hampshire (Gamson and Modigliani 1989), protestors were portrayed as laid-back individuals with little chance of enacting actual change, and in interviews with fishermen in the Gulf, the interviewees were seen as downtrodden with little chance to change their situation, although their perspectives may be more thoroughly covered in non-traditional media sources.

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Background

I decided to approach my questions through a qualitative lens because what I am measuring involves gauging people's reactions and perceptions to the oil spill response and media coverage, something that can only be fully explained through words, not just raw statistics. Qualitative research studies how individuals and groups interact with and define their place within the social structure. If we form opinions about the data we receive, as it occurs in all social interactions, we have created subjective opinions, which can then be researched by sociologists (Rossman and Rallis 2012). In using a qualitative approach to analysing literature, I have examined what ten Have calls "natural documents." Natural documents are those materials that have been published as part of societal processes, among these books, articles, photographs, blogs and internet comments. Because my work revolves around a societal process, the response to a major environmental disaster, I have used natural documents in my research (2004). My study can also be called a "cultural analysis," as it handles textual data concerned with representations that surround us (Warren and Karner 2010).

There are two lenses through which natural documents are analysed--the factist approach and the specimen approach. The factist approach examines natural documents as materials that are a means for cataloguing viewpoints and information on an external reality. The specimen lens views the document in its actual form, analyzing only for what the document is presenting and how it is presenting it, and treating the document as a form of narrative. These lenses aren't mutually exclusive and have been combined in prior research, in which the researcher discusses the content of a document and the external influences surrounding its creation.

An important theoretical justification for examining natural sources on the internet arises through the way the internet is used—as a cultural repository of representations, useful for qualitative analysis (Warren and Karner 2010). Additionally, the internet has also aided in making data collection simpler and more efficient in all areas of social scientific research.

Qualitative research has certain advantages, such as its versatility in explaining social phenomena using subjective data (England 1994). Personal biases researchers bring with them to the field do not have to be disadvantageous as long as researchers don't let these consume their work. These personal biases can affect the extent to which the research is an accurate reflection of conditions in the field.

Data Collection Methods

As the scope of this project evolved, so too did my research methods. Initially when considering my topic, I intended to conduct interviews with people who were originally from the Gulf of Mexico. However, this was soon abandoned after it was decided that an analytical approach involving prior research and sources would be more prudent, due to time and logistical constraints. In narrowing down my topic, I spent a couple of weeks in the winter of 2011 at Denver Public Library's Genealogy and Environmental Justice Department, examining what sources it contained and how they could help in my rudimentary investigations.

I kept a running inventory of my articles and sources on my PC, initially bookmarking web pages and saving articles to my computer in a separate "honor's thesis" folder. In my second semester, I found that the research tools website *Zotero* was a useful resource in helping me manage a small library of varied sources. It also helped me create a “works cited” section for my

thesis through its available ASA formatting options, allowing me to tackle two birds with one stone and even keep track of non-electronic sources such as books.

After beginning the spring semester of my junior year, I was able to narrow my topic down further thanks to Dr. Lori Hunter, a sociology professor in the Institute of Behavioral Sciences. Soon after, I met with Dr. Kathleen Tierney, and she agreed to be my honors advisor. Over the summer, I was focused on other matters, so couldn't do much more work with my honors project.

When I entered my final year as a University of Colorado student, Tierney and I agreed to meet more frequently and "hammer out" some crucial parts of the thesis. I collected more evidence and results, but maintaining a steady pace of data collection became more difficult as the amount of schoolwork began to increase. When I decided to work on my literature review, I decided to put my data collection on hold momentarily. While I conducted a search for literature and found some acceptable pieces I could analyze as part of my literature review, Wanda Headley from the Natural Hazards Library at IBS was kind enough to send a prospective reading list concerned with media reporting and disasters. I also met with Max Boykoff, the third member of my committee, and he sent me a list of eight sources he used in his graduate class dealing with media analysis and disasters.

I did not require special approval for research on human subjects because this project was mainly based around the literature available. Because many of the comments I refer to were made under different usernames on a website, I therefore didn't know the true identities of these commenters and it was unnecessary to apply for human subjects review. Most of the data that I analysed were published in the period ending in 2012, with the majority of these being around 2010, just after the spill, so I wasn't able to account for data emerging during the time of writing.

I hope, however, that future research may be able to cover such material. The following section describes my experiences with a few selected materials used as data sources and as tools for gathering such data. They are classified into distinct source types.

Newspapers

I was introduced to the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* during my search for sources in the Denver Public Library. I accessed this New Orleans regional newspaper mainly through NOLA.com, a web portal functioning as information on New Orleans's places and events, as well as the online home of the *Times-Picayune*. The paper had a dedicated section on the Deepwater Horizon spill, and articles could be browsed by date. In the first couple of weeks from April 20, the paper reported the disaster in short news articles and briefs fewer than 300 words, as they were understandably limited by the amount of information available at this time. After this time, however, the length of the articles grew and opinion pieces were written as more information was obtained regarding the extent of this calamity on not just human society, but also on dozens of animal species and the wetlands of the Gulf. I was also pleased when I saw that the paper preserved reader's comments, as these would be crucial in my data collection. Moreover, the comments did not seem homogenous and reflected a variety of opinions, which would make discerning trends in readers' views easier to do. I used an online random number generator to sample comments for analysis.

Liam Downey suggested the *New York Times* to me as a great resource since it is known for its environmental reporting and good investigative approaches to domestic issues. I found this to certainly be the case, but I focused my work with the *Times* to focus on opinion and letters to the editor, since the renowned paper receives hundreds of letters on a daily basis from a global

audience and thus has widely varied viewpoints, great for garnering data on one element of public opinion, that of *Times* readers. From this sample, I chose to focus on US readers since this practice would help me keep the readership constant with my other sources, such as *Times-Picayune* readers, who are also from the US. Thankfully, most of the letters published in the *Times* were from Americans.

Google alerts

Google can be set up to deliver links of interest to an email address at regular intervals. I created a Google Scholar alert and a Google News alert using general queries on the oil spill, and I received links roughly every three days. I knew how to set up alerts before, since Google easily explained the process, but this was the first time I set one up for myself. Occasionally, the Scholar alerts were somewhat helpful, as I found some articles that were beneficial to my research, but other times they included irrelevant results about other oil spills, and some results' contexts were unclear. About a third of these alerts were relevant. The news alerts contained more relevant links and more links overall, which isn't surprising considering how many more news articles are written than scholarly articles on a daily basis. About 50% of these were relevant.

Reddit

Reddit is an online message-board like site, except its content is open to anyone for viewing, and one only needs to go through a simple registration to gain complete access to all sub-areas. While the self-proclaimed "front page of the internet" isn't always regarded as a scholarly hub of knowledge, its function as an online repository of news, links, and stories also

applies to articles on the oil spill. I've been a "Redditor" since early 2012, so I had easy access to the site and was already familiar with many aspects of its use. I found subreddits (collections inside the main website) on the oil spill ([/r/oilspill](#)) and on environmental issues ([/r/environment](#)) that contained threads with user comments referring to the articles and links posted, and occasionally unprovoked "self" posts also, in which Redditors would begin threads with their opinions and not necessarily post links. I refer to Redditors by their usernames to distinguish among commenters and to protect their rights and privacy. Reddit has a good reputation among media circles, and news outlets have occasionally used information from the site to construct stories.

Blogs

I found blogs to be a good resource, as people could discuss their perspectives on environmental issues and provide links to content and evidence. Blogs are cultural resources that allow for creative expression, and thus are a good source for qualitative data (Warren and Karner 2010). Of note was one blog run by an environmentalist who conducted deep research into the BP oil spill. I didn't have the opportunity to analyze a significant number of blogs mainly due to time constraints, as collecting a large number of blog entries in addition to material from newspapers and internet comments wouldn't have been feasible alongside coursework and prior commitments. I chose the blogs I wanted to focus on by seeing whether they mentioned or based some of their articles on media actions during the spill. Additionally, comments appeared more frequently in my research, so it was more pragmatic to focus on these instead of blogs.

This study was not intensively focused on field methods, but the analyses I ran involved creating codes and analyzing the data according to those codes. I found the main arguments in

my sources and compared them to see where differences and similarities arose, and then linked them back to the literature review and to other analyses for the different questions. To avoid the pitfalls that can come with encountering potentially unverified internet content, I treated it as opinion and data to be analysed (Warren and Karner 2010).

Methodological Issues

There are some issues with my methodology that I have tried to address as much as possible. The very nature of this project naturally excludes opinions and analyses on the Oil spill that haven't been published. The opinions analysed as part of this thesis are meant to be representative of some aspects of the public's reaction to the disaster and aren't meant to be taken as complete reviews of public opinion on the disaster and its subsequent relation to media, government, spill victims, or the general public. My sources are also not that exhaustive, owing to the limited time I have had to complete this project and my limited experience with some sources. The opinions analysed range from assessments that this disaster is less likely in companies that abide by safety standards to opinions stating that these disasters will be even more common in the future as the public's thirst for oil grows and the capitalist system continues to operate. Finally, my own biases in where I sought data have an effect on my research, as I may be prone to analyzing limited views expressed in my sources. For that reason, I tried to look at a variety of sources and in areas where I knew dissenting opinions were expressed.

RESULTS

A wide variety of opinions and media stories were found in the course of this research. I decided to code opinions, such as letters to the editor and comments, because most of these, while recognizably different from one another, followed similar patterns of thinking and shared message content. I take a factist perspective on the postings, treating these natural documents as reflections of the attitudes and beliefs of posters of these natural documents.

I decided to code my data based on content and style of communication in remarks made by commenters. Using Coffey and Atkinson's ideas on coding, as well as Johnny Saldana's coding manual, I learned that I should code in a way that reduces the data to patterns and categories of response, which I could then use to glean more information about my data sample and see where contradictions and similarities lie in the data (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). The coding manual helped me understand what exactly I should be coding for, such as roles and social types, and also that my interpretations of the data should be based on the constructs and theories that structured my study at the beginning, specifically media framing and public opinion (Saldana 2009). My coding revealed that the opinions among people who have voiced their thoughts on the state of media coverage and government actions surrounding the spill can be divided into a set of four categories: exposing worse realities, moderating messages, effects mitigation, and humorous diffusion. For the most part, people seemed critical of the media's coverage of the spill, perceiving that the media focused heavily on the "official" accounts and ignored other concerns arising out of the Gulf Coast related to the spill.

Exposing Worse Realities

This category was the most common form of discourse in the data. In exposing worse realities, commenters take a "it's much worse than what is being said about it" approach, and respond by attempting to fill in certain details that weren't covered or acknowledged by the organisation they are responding to, whether it's a political or media institution, or trying to correct already published details. Individuals who discussed the future under our current fossil-fuel paradigm and those who proposed more comprehensive solutions to problems were also put into this code, as they discussed how the future would be worse for us and how we could achieve better outcomes by changing who we appoint to create solutions to environmental problems. In the examination of responses to governmental action, some individuals used conservative language reminiscent of anti-government phrases in giving us a "worse reality," even if they claimed to be non-conservatives.

I am tired of watching the useless squabble between "democrats" and "republicans". Making people hate each other only makes the people weak. Obama is no more our hero than Bush was. He is just another corporately fed puppet. Republicans are not your enemy. The people who let things like the BP Oil Spill slide are your enemy. Monsanto is your enemy. Corruption is your enemy. The government forcibly imposing it's will over the people, that is what you should be worried about (zoidberg_MD 2010).

Many individuals claimed that what they saw on the Gulf would not match the material on the news. On the popular forum and link repository Reddit, "alexcarson" believed the media and the government were downplaying the disaster in referring to it as a spill. "A 'spill' is what happens with milk," (2010) he stated in a self-post, continuing on that the incident in which millions of gallons were escaping from the well was too big to compare to other, much smaller oil spills (alexcarson 2010). In response to an article in the *Atlantic Wire* talking about how

dispersed oil has sunk to the sea floor, "slaterhearst" claimed that this would hardly justify the argument that the leak was "fixed" (2011).

A few readers of the *New York Times* also responded to the coverage on oil spill-related issues in this way. The chairman of the Sierra Club, a very prominent environmental advocacy organization in the US, said that the *Times* failed to account for the fact that one of the key factors driving US oil dependency is its subsidization of foreign oil supplying countries, which only feeds the system of oil dependence and increases the risk for oil-related disasters to occur (Pope 2010). Others spoke poetically about our dystopian future if our current oil addiction continues:

The flawed and fragile deepwater well is like the dirty needle in the arm of an addict, an uncomfortable reminder of America's ever more desperate dependence on oil... We are reminded what poor stewards of the planet humans are, from corporate executive suites to the world's humblest farms... a case study of unchecked market forces at work, and a harrowing preview of life in an overpopulated world (Miller 2010).

Another reader mentioned that an oil spill response organization was criticised unfairly by the paper for using outdated technology, as it did not receive sufficient funds to upgrade its equipment (deGruy 2010). An Arizonan who was suspicious of the federal government's investigations believed that a task force of well-trained professionals should investigate the spill:

...To find out "what went wrong," an independent, investigative committee like those that looked into the shuttle disasters should be convened. Politicians, bureaucrats, pundits and top management of the companies involved will always put their own spin on what happened... (Weninger 2010).

Times-Picayune readers termed USA Today's report that the spill had ceased as "BUNK," as they described seeing globs of oil continuing to wash up on their beaches (windyvegas 2010). Ron Thibodeaux of the Louisiana Endowment for the Arts demanded the media leave the lives of

Gulf residents alone due to their inaccurate reporting, which was based on federal government accounts that differed little from BP's press releases:

As if the actual damage isn't bad enough, we also have had to endure condescending reactions from BP's chief executive officer, who declared, "Almost nothing has escaped," and another BP executive, who was widely quoted this week with this contemptible assessment of the spill's impact on our fisheries: "Louisiana isn't the only place that has shrimp."... We don't need your photo-ops. We needed our president and congressional leaders on both sides of the aisle to be vigilant months ago, and years ago, when we thought you had our backs, when we trusted you to enact laws and enforce policies to protect us and our wetlands and our pelicans and our fisheries while the oil giants drilled off our coastline (Thibodeaux 2010).

Many commenters attempted to expose worsening realities in arguing that the Obama administration hadn't done enough to combat the spill, and its words didn't help much either. In a study conducted from June 3-6 of 2010 by ABC News and the Washington Post, the federal government's spill response was rated negatively by 69% of respondents, a higher figure than in a poll conducted two weeks after Hurricane Katrina, in which 62% of respondents had a negative view of the Bush Administration's response. However, 81% blamed BP as the worst responder overall. This article is useful in that it gives a big-picture insight into people's responses to the government's actions, and these responses were quite negative. Since a large segment of these responses are in this category, it gives us a sense of how pervasive this code is among the general population (Langer 2010).

In a letter from the *Times*, John Waldes responded to an article focusing on BP's blunders during the containment process, arguing that rather than relying on the president to convene a team of mostly BP officials, as the problem is too important and too large to be left to an inefficient oil company who will only fulfill so much of the President's demands, a presidential

task force of scientific professionals should be convened with all the resources it needs to stop the leak (2010). His message suggests that this event is too big and too complicated to allow the administration to choose people from oil companies to respond to this disaster. This comment was similar to another made by a Redditor.

Cricketdiane, Diane C Phillips in real life, is an artist who has a deep interest in social issues and blogs about them on a weekly basis. In referring to the spill as a corporate disaster, she believed that the oil disaster was man-made, tracing its organizational roots back to how the oil industry functioned. She presents a series of articles from various sources, showing how the well's design was preventing an effective shutoff and how NOAA used old water samples to judge the continuing situation in the Gulf, bringing in the larger context to show that the spill wasn't an isolated incident (2010). She also comments on how government officials dismiss alternative energies in contexts other than where they directly intend to use it:

...it is very interesting and something I've noted the other day when I was looking up the earmarks pushed and received by Representative Barton, (R) Texas that apologized to BP and I notice here again in the entry above about The Solaire project in New York – these people are all against the alternative energy systems until it comes time to get some for themselves, as Rep. Barton did for Texas – even while voting down and pushing against anyone else having alternative energy, natural gas buses, natural gas operating trucks, solar power project moneys, and others – he was garnering those things for Texas and Texas companies... And, it looks like some nasty business has been on-going especially deeply and dramatically with devastating consequences in the solar cell industry especially in the last year and possibly more so every day it comes closer to offering reasonably priced choices (cricketdiane 2010).

Moderating Messages

People who moderated their messages made their points by accounting for and rebutting some of their counterparts' arguments in a reasonable manner, so their communication wasn't

entirely one-sided. In some cases the messages' content wasn't moderate, but the commenters would attempt to cast their arguments in a moderate manner. People could also expand the scope of the point they are arguing for while accounting for their opponent's point of view. The comments in this code weren't as widespread as the "worse realities" discourse, but they were more common than humor diffusion and effects mitigation.

Message moderation was seen mainly in the *Times*. Among the more prominent commenters, KC Golden, the policy director for the non-profit organization Climate Solutions, criticized an article that claimed that affordable renewable energy was “decades away,” arguing that numerous advances are currently being made, and declared that emphasizing a need for oil is comforting but delusory (2010). Another reader said that essentially, "we are all BP" (Brown 2010) because while BP is to blame for the disaster, our reliance on fossil fuels definitely fuels the motives of such companies to seek out oil:

Undoubtedly BP is responsible, but so are all of us who drive cars, travel by plane or consume goods produced and shipped with oil. If we didn't use it, BP wouldn't drill for it. Until we recognize that demand for oil is as much the problem as supply, and start to change the way we live to reduce it, environmental destruction is inevitable.

We are all BP (Brown 2010).

Moderating messages also show up elsewhere. In *New York Times* letters to the editor, Jack Nargundkar, a Germantown, MD resident, urged the president to lead in a calm and collected manner and noted that this would become a learning moment where his actions would speak louder than words, even though the public's anger was developing against him. Richard Clark from Lake Tahoe stressed that Obama's first two years will define his presidency. Both of

these messages were an attempt to introduce a balanced context to how the president should act amidst public anger:

...Every president has one of these learning moments that can propel him from routine governing to decisive leadership. Even as President Obama gets ready to address the nation on Tuesday night, he must remember that ultimately his actions will speak louder than forced sound bites like “whose ass to kick.” Don’t take the media bait and fake the anger, Mr. President. This is an environmental catastrophe that can be overcome only by cool and competent leadership, which is what we elected you for (Nargundkar 2010).

President Obama has had a year and a half to put his stamp on the White House. Because he had so little track record in politics, everyone waited with bated breath to see who he was and what he believed in...the president will be defined by his first two years. Unless something miraculous happens in the coming months, he will fall short of what the country deserves and needs at this time (Clark 2010).

Native New Yorker Bruce Ellerstein believed Obama's immediate ban on offshore drilling was a little drastic, although he agreed that drilling can be performed safely, and companies who have flagrant safety violations should be disqualified from obtaining such permits in the future, presumably including BP (2010).

In the *Times-Picayune*, columnist Stephanie Grace contended that while Obama and Bush have used similar rhetoric in addressing Deepwater Horizon and Hurricane Katrina responses, respectively, Obama has a lot more to offer when it comes to delivering on what he aimed to do. She shows how, amidst the public outrage, Obama's actions weren't so negatively motivated and that he was limited to certain responses given his situation. After a speech in July 2010 on how the administration intended to fix the disaster and correct long-standing problems that became visible after the spill, the President secured arrangements with BP to create a \$20 billion compensation fund for Gulf victims and a \$100 million fund for oil workers who lost their jobs

as a result of the reestablishment of the offshore oil drilling ban. However, since Obama follows a philosophy of extending help to anyone who needs it, and people expect him to follow through, the main perception the public receives of an incomplete response, Grace argues, is traceable to the public's high expectations in combating this spill (2010).

Reddit wasn't totally devoid of moderating messages, although the comments on the site were more reflective of other codes. In one instance, a Redditor tried to caution other users about their optimism in hearing that BP would pay boats that clean the spill, introducing context behind its action. "futureslave" replied to a message from another Redditor who asked if BP would pay the costs associated with cleaning up oil using civilian and military vessels, saying, "That's the idea and that's what everyone is saying now but I think it would be naive for any of us to believe BP won't try to get out of paying every possible cent they can (2010)." Another Redditor discussed why they believed BP would be restricting media access, even though media access was regarded as important:

They admitted to it claiming safety concerns. I can see both sides here. Obviously BP have an incentive not to allow pictures of the beaches, damage etc. But they also want the media out of the way so they can clean up and they also want to avoid getting too many people exposed to what is a pretty toxic mix of chemicals (mapoftasmania 2010).

Effects Mitigation

In this discourse, the commenter attempts to mitigate the severity of consequences certain actions will have by downplaying their seriousness, or by downplaying the significance of certain situations and events that have affected the public eye. This can occur through trying to correct others on important facts and technicalities, to make the situation seem not as dire as the original attributer would claim it is. Another method of mitigation can also be seen in how the

commenter redefines a situation to construct the image of its reduced importance or effect, and create less concern around the issue.

Effects mitigation, although not that common, was still present in reactions to coverage. During a 2011 House Oversight Committee Hearing, Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour remarked that the media's coverage was too intense and contributed to the massive public outrage on the spill, as they were repeatedly using an image of a pelican coated in oil.

So people saw on TV the same brown pelican coated with looked like 3 inches of oil, I mean, looked like a chocolate pelican. And they showed it every hour, every day, 24 hours a day for weeks and weeks and weeks... [it] gave citizens the impression the whole Gulf Coast was coated in oil...the president came to Mississippi, Alabama and Florida and held news conferences on the beach to say, look, the beaches are clean, the water is clear, it's beautiful down here, come on down here. But that one news day can't compete with what was being seen every day, every hour for weeks (Bartoloni 2011).

While he isn't a Louisiana government official, it is notable that the governor's state was also hit by the spill and that he said this in an official capacity, perhaps to try and put residents' minds at ease (Bartoloni 2011).

When *Times-Picayune* readers were discussing BP's restrictions on media presence on public beaches, and yet the mainstream media's reliance on the company for spill information, "Imaaq" commented that BP has a right to do so when it comes to public safety, to the displeasure of other readers who claimed that this doesn't apply when those lands are being destroyed (2010).

Like the media coverage responses, only a small number of individuals attempted to mitigate effects and highlight people's responses at the level of assistance they received as

unfounded. A *Times-Picayune* reader was annoyed at the attitudes of commenters on some of the news articles and stated that the government was one of the only organizations that could provide real assistance to struggling families (DreamsAmelia 2010). The upstream director of the American Petroleum Institute, Erik Milito, also responded to the *New York Times*. His work involves regulatory and legislative negotiation and compliance in terms of oil exploration and production. While he argued against the offshore drilling ban Obama reintroduced after the spill, he conceded that many Gulf residents were already hurt by the spill:

Access to affordable energy affects every sector of our economy, every state and every American family...Halting domestic development won't reduce our need for oil and natural gas; it will only outsource it. And it will place thousands of jobs, both offshore and onshore, at risk and would particularly hurt residents of the Gulf Coast, who are already facing serious economic consequences as a result of the spill. (Milito 2010).

Humorous Diffusion

People who used humorous diffusion talked seriously without sounding serious. They made responses through satire and ridicule, and although such comments were relatively uncommon, humorous diffusers' actions made them stand out in the data and served as a useful source for understanding public opinion. This was the least frequent category in the data.

Diffusion through humor appeared in a few places, particularly on Reddit. Shortly after the spill occurred, the international news network Al-Jazeera comprehensively explained the oil spill and the strategies being considered to stop the flow of oil, in one minute (Al-Jazeera 2010). The explanation was posted, and Redditors compared the video to mainstream US news media by satirising US news coverage, complaining about the lack of "experts" and recaps of details

presented a short while before, strategies readily observable on CNN and Fox News, in the explanation:

Lame, I really wish they would have gone to Twitter midway through that to check if anyone had anything new to say...

I was disappointed by the lack of recaps after every two sentences as well, made it really hard to follow...

When Fox News called this Obama's Katrina, it made a lot more sense. Now I'm just confused (ldsgems 2010).

Al Jazeera has been praised by academics and former politicians, such as Al Gore, in providing excellent coverage on environmental issues. In response to an oil spill meter measuring the amount of oil released into the Gulf, "Tourguy" quoted Bill Maher, who said, "This is the worst thing to happen to beaches since the Speedo (2010)."

When it came to humorous diffusion, Reddit delivered yet again. "dkramer73" poked fun at the spreading perception that the President was helping the oil companies rather than punishing them, commenting that Halliburton wasn't included as one of the companies the US justice department would sue alongside BP because it served as a "parent" to the US government--"But I guess you can't expect the US government to sue it's [sic] own parent corporation (2010)." In a libertarian subreddit, "Fisherofmen" claimed that Libertarianism itself was a preventive medicine to the trouble in the Gulf, suggesting that people's complaints about lack of government actions in addressing the spill would never have to occur with a libertarian approach to governance (2010), since there would hardly be any government in the first place, and spills wouldn't be covered by legislation, instead being left to the forces of the free market.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Gulf is an interesting region for studying disaster, in that residents recovering from one difficulty may have to face another before fully recovering from the prior event. Residents faced Ike after facing Katrina in 2005, and many people reported a “not again”-type attitude resurfacing when word spread of the BP spill. In weathering through repeated calamities, one would expect that these residents develop strong resilience in the face of adversity, to use an oft-quoted phrase, or be worn down from repeated exposure to disasters. However, recovering from an oil-related disaster is difficult due to oil's longevity in a non-soluble, tar state, which persists in the water and coats wetland soils, slowing the recovery of fisheries and endangering economic activities that are based around these fisheries. Over 20 years after the Exxon Valdez spill oil keeps resurfacing in Prince William Sound (Begley 2010).

As my analysis reveals, it is understandable that Gulf residents were extremely distressed with the spill when we consider the historical context of the Gulf's interactions with the oil industry. The oil spill isn't the only fossil fuel related disaster to hit Gulf residents in recent years—major petroleum companies have operated collection facilities and refineries for oil they collect from the Gulf. A stretch of land between Baton Rouge and New Orleans in southern Louisiana is known as "Cancer Alley" due to the high rate of cancers that occur in the region. In 2002, it had the second highest rate of cancer deaths in the US, and the EPA ranked it second for onsite releases of chemicals and pollutants (Cernansky 2011). One of the towns along this stretch of land, Mossville, founded by slaves, contains contaminated groundwater as a result of petrochemical production that releases benzene and vinyl chloride as its byproducts (Sriskandarajah 2010). While it is understandable that oil needs to be refined to generate profits,

the plants are situated close enough to people's homes to affect residents very negatively. For example, one such way is through a significant release of hydrofluoric acid; in Louisiana, over 1.4 million are at risk from such a release (Purvis and Herman 2005). A US Commission on Civil Rights Report found that many of the companies that operate industrial facilities in this area pick the path of least resistance and situate their plants in politically powerless communities, where there are lots of residents but little regulation present, and in areas where resistance is harder to organize (1993).

From July 2011, the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences has been conducting the "GuLF" (Gulf Long-term Follow up) study on health effects of the BP spill on oil spill cleanup workers. The study also includes avenues to research reproduction and birth rates, cardiorespiratory system function and mental health among those affected, and researchers put out a "last call" for potential subjects in late 2012 (NIEHS 2012).

It seemed that the opinions I was able to gather were indicative of broader public opinions about the disaster. Although there were dissenting opinions in how we should react to the disaster and what steps should be taken to remedy the situation, the majority of people in my sample voiced strong opposition to BP and the United States' reliance on fossil fuel, and this was repeated across many places where data were gathered. Below I summarise statements associated with different codes. I also discuss the extent to which those posting comments were associated with powerful interests and whether comments differed depending on poster's locations.

Comments related to exposing worse realities show that people reacted very strongly to this disaster, but they tended to believe that the spill wasn't an isolated case, and similar events

like this spill would continue having similar effects for people and the environment well into the future. Most of the commentators did not seem to be in positions of apparent power, especially in contexts that could potentially benefit from offshore oil exploration. Writing to the *Times* during the spill, the chairman of the Sierra Club at the time, Carl Pope, did not exercise any decision-making power related to offshore drilling, as his organization is known for supporting environmental causes. There was no correlation with how this discourse appeared according to geographical location, and it appeared frequently both outside Louisiana and among *Times-Picayune* readers, suggesting that developing such a discourse doesn't require direct exposure to a technological disaster, and the frequency with which this code appeared overall tells us this was definitely a widespread, dominant form of discourse used to describe reactions to the spill, held by people in Arizona, Louisiana and Washington DC.

Before analysing my data, I expected that message moderation would be the most common way that people communicated in the sample. It was actually the second most common discourse, appearing much less frequently than explaining worse realities. People in this category commented on a variety of arguments discussing oil's influence on our lives and how we as a society must transition from an oil-based economy, even though oil for the moment is comforting as an energy source. Other messages focused on how President Obama, under high expectations, created compensation funds sponsored by BP, as promised to Gulf residents. Concurrently, Obama also had to rely on BP to act on the spill and provide information to the administration and public, thereby possibly affecting how he responded. Yet others commented on how BP had to block media access off to certain sections of the oil spill while recognising that there should be a need for open media access. Most of the commentators here also didn't hold

apparent power--KC Golden, policy director of the Climate Solutions organization in Seattle, heads a non-profit, in a similar situation to Carl Pope. From the data that were available on location, there was a slight correlation with geography and how this discourse was practiced, as most of the moderators were based outside Louisiana. This could suggest that it would be easier to moderate messages outside Louisiana based on exposure to the spill, that is, the people who seek to balance or moderate messages are more likely to live outside the disaster zone and receive less exposure to the spill.

Mitigators mainly criticized media coverage and government actions following the spill, particularly on the nearly immediate drilling moratorium that was implemented right after the spill began. Although people posting messages aimed at mitigating effects appeared to be more powerful individuals than those whose posts were coded in other categories, particularly those who potentially benefitted from the oil industry, not all the individuals here were in positions of apparent power. Those with power included Erik Militio, the API upstream director, and Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour, whose state also includes offshore oil rigs, suggesting that he has an interest in offshore drilling for economic reasons. Their opinions went against residents and people who claimed to have an understanding of conditions in the Gulf and believed an offshore drilling ban was necessary. There was no correlation with this code's prevalence with specific locations, suggesting that such a discourse could be developed in separate geographical areas. Some *Picayune* readers told their counterparts on the site to let BP restrict media coverage to ensure public safety, while a *Times* reader based in NYC said that it was necessary to have drilling because we need to develop our own energy supplies.

Although it wasn't especially prominent as a category by which many commenters proclaimed their views, humor diffusion's presence in the data tells us about how subjects try to cope with a disaster. Humor has been gaining recognition in social science literature as a form of coping and dealing with stressful situations. In a study of emergency workers by Carmen Moran and Margaret Massam, they found that humor is also useful in establishing bonds among participants in a common experience for social support and enhancing subjects' communication in emergency and disaster situations. Humor is used to diffuse danger, degrade outside individuals and groups, and discuss sensitive topics and information that would be more difficult to converse about using a more serious discourse (1997). Furthermore, those who use humor can often assess a situation in more positive terms (Abel 2002). Many of the commenters in this study who used humor used it to discuss their views that government, the media and BP were all interrelated or shared common interests, thus degrading these groups, who seemed to be, according to these subjects, outside the experiences of Gulf residents. Humor was also useful in these commenters' coping with feelings that the federal government had effectively abandoned addressing the oil cleanup properly. Most of the responses in this code could be found on Reddit, and because the location of a Redditor isn't shown, it is harder to see how this code was distributed geographically. One local reader of the *Times-Picayune* used humor to lash out at William Reilly, a former EPA administrator under George W. Bush, and who was part of a commission to gain insight into local residents' opinions, saying, "YOU SUCK!" (carlos1967 2010).

People reacted positively to the presence of those who used humorous diffusion, and they were rarely attacked for their views by other commenters. On Reddit, a system of "upvotes"

and "downvotes" determine which comments are seen as most popular, with those having the highest upvotes deemed more agreeable or useful to Redditors than other comments. In the al-Jazeera explanation of the oil spill responses, the commenters responsible for satirically criticizing the international news network received 182 upvotes between them, and were the top rated comments in the thread (Idsgems 2010).

Sunstein, Gamson and Modigliani, and a large portion of the literature, have found that individuals tend to approach issues with preconceived notions and agendas. Many of the comments found in the research seemed to echo this finding, especially those that expounded on worse realities. Some of the worse realities discourse participants believed the oil disaster had prior causes. These commenters believed that, if these causes were rectified before the spill, the spill could have been prevented or had its damage lessened. These prior causes were viewed as being institutional, in which the very nature of our fossil fuel-dependent society and organisation of the oil industry made spills like the BP disaster almost inevitable. Furthermore, prior causes also arose in other codes such as humor diffusion, though they didn't necessarily attribute the causes of the disaster to institutional dysfunction. "Fisherofmen" from Reddit, for example, claimed that a lack of government would have prevented the spill (2010). Preconceived notions also arose from people's experiences with past disaster events, and they would apply them to the current situation to argue for their beliefs. In a Reddit thread asking why the US doesn't fine polluters, "wwabc" argued that they would, but BP would never pay (2010). When the BP spill occurred, Exxon-Mobil was in court still appealing the \$500 million payment it was charged with paying since the late 1980s (Romm 2010).

In most of the news articles and opinion pieces from which I gathered my data, the spill was reported in non-political terms. Attention was mainly focused on BP and its actions, and as Pew found as well, towards the beginning of the spill there was also discussion on the President's role in the disaster, as he expanded offshore drilling just three weeks before the spill (AlJazeeraEnglish 2010; Pew Research 2010a). Reporting, however, was soon mainly centered on BP's actions, giving the sense that it was "its spill," and federal officials began using the term "BP oil spill" even though BP wasn't the sole owner of the rig (Pew Research 2010a). Similarly to Lee et al., who discussed how value framing and political framing in media elicit different responses, we see that in places where the spill was described through value framing (eg. Spill's effects on families, fishermen not being able to work, environmental destruction) commenters concentrate less on political content and people communicate in terms of a shared need for resilience. In the documentary "Crude Justice," we don't know whether the fishermen and locals interviewed for their reactions to BP and participation in local town halls belong to any particular political orientation, but viewers are able to sympathise with them because an external corporate force destroyed access to their livelihoods, reflecting the value placed on access to and the right to work. In places such as the *New York Times* article "Drilling for Certainty," which made a claim that liberals' desire for more control over the oil industry is a partisan response, New Yorker Seth Trueger, who cited the article in his letter, wrote to the editor that government oversight is needed where there is a volatile disaster and industry. Although others may disagree with his contentions, because the editorial article used political framing, Trueger does not suppress his political views (2010).

Media coverage seemed to really revolve around actions of authority figures, as the battle for blame came down to President Obama against BP CEO Tony Hayward. Al Jazeera reported on “Listening Post” that the mainstream media were ready to "draw their knives" against Hayward, focusing on his mistakes and gaffes, such as his sailing trip back in the UK. The Obama administration was attempting to shield itself by deflecting blame back onto BP, since it suffered damage to its reputation from people who criticised the federal government for complying with BP's requests to provide it with privacy in its cleanup, and seemed "weak" towards the beginning of the response. On MSNBC, Ed Schultz remarked, “I want to see the boot on the neck of BP” (AlJazeeraEnglish 2010), while Obama wanted to know "whose ass to kick," a quote that caught fire in the media landscape. It seems that the media were influencing Obama in how he showed he was responding to the disaster, and while they were more critical of the administration before, by June and July their tone shifted to being more critical of BP. In Thibodeaux's *Picayune* article, published in May, he urged the media to stop making the Gulf a circus and criticised the government for an incomprehensive response, while Grace's editorial blamed the government less and treated it as demanding more action from BP, with mixed results. Interestingly, amidst some of the criticism of media coverage from different commentators in my sample, a June 2010 Pew Research Poll of 1000 people found that most respondents (two thirds) were pleased with the coverage from news organisations regarding the well blowout (Pew Research 2010b).

Some people in their assertions didn't differentiate between the government and media, instead lumping them together because of how similarly they acted. These cases suggest that commentators perceive the two institutions as essentially one body, as the media seemed to base

their reporting on official reports that were available at the time. During the beginning of the spill, both the *Times* and the *Picayune* reported BP's estimates of initial leakage at 1000 barrels/day, later shifted to 5000 barrels/day and then 25 000 barrels/day, and continued reporting as the estimates for the spill increased. With the increasing figures, BP executives and federal officials adapted their rhetoric with the media to articulate that they were doing the best they could to tackle this disaster, and also to manage the perceptions of damage to the environment and to the livelihoods of Gulf residents through redefining the event, a strategy also used by Exxon executives during the *Valdez* oil spill (Tierney and Webb 1994). For example, Tony Hayward, then the CEO of BP, told the Guardian that the oil spill was very small compared to the vast ocean (Webb 2010). People responded by denouncing the spin that was seen from both the government and media, as seen in Weninger's response earlier in this paper, telling the government and media to stop peddling their agendas to Gulf residents. The media's reliance on such reports can be explained by reporters who want access to exclusive stories and information, and they will tend to avoid reporting on information that contradicts official government accounts, as posited by Australian academic Sharon Beder (2004). However, perhaps it may have been difficult to verify non-official sources and ensure accurate reporting on the spill to avoid libelous lawsuits from BP. Furthermore, BP convinced government officials to implement a no-fly zone over the spill to restrict media coverage, so the media may have been trying to work with what they were given.

As the "problem definition" paradigm suggests, the way that an issue may have been defined in the media affects how people believe government should act on it (Rochefort and Cobb 1994). Most of the major 24 hour television cable news networks covered the spill for

significant amounts of time during the day, often snapping back to live feed cameras BP installed at the leak site a few weeks after the spill began. Coupled with multiple articles a day that the *Times-Picayune* was publishing and frequent spill reporting in other nationwide sources like the *New York Times*, this may help explain why high expectations of Obama's response arose particularly among lower Louisiana residents and, to a lesser degree, nationwide.

I also investigated how the media can affect political decision-making on issues, because this has an effect on public reactions to government actions. I have used some of these studies to analyze how the media might have affected the government's decision-making behind the BP spill. In some stages of the legislative process, lawmakers use language from information sources that most share their professional interests and experience, and these sources include those organizations that use plenty of resources to communicate their messages in the media. However, lawmakers' responses towards media vary throughout the decision-making process, as they predominantly account for other information in different stages of creating and voting on bills. This information can consist of what positions their colleagues are taking on certain legislation and what particular things representatives of executive agencies would like to see in new bills (Mooney 1991). Similarly, another study found that politicians are likely to use newspapers as a means of deciding on which legislative issues to focus on. However, they reported that they wouldn't rely on them in helping them make many of their decisions. When asked if they thought newspaper reporting was accurate, around half the legislators agreed and the remaining half disagreed (Kral 2003).

The probability of action on these issues, however, can be increased by them fulfilling certain criteria. Other researchers have found that how the media can persuade politicians to act

on certain issues and events is dependent on a number of factors. These include a media agenda, referring to what mass media platforms an issue is covered in and how it's covered across multiple media outlets, an issue agenda, which is associated with how serious the media reports an issue to be and implies that action must be taken on it, a political agenda, dictating whether action on the issue must be substantial or symbolic, the former treated more seriously than the latter, and a time agenda, whether an issue is covered during an election year or not. Typically, newspapers are regarded by decision-makers as quite trustworthy for information, and issues attract the most attention when covered in a range of media outlets. The BP spill was covered in a range of outlets including national newspapers. The spill was also covered extensively by the media as a serious disaster that the government can act on, especially by supplying material resources to substantively combat the spill, and 2010 was an election year, meaning that the government would have to show that it was responding seriously to the disaster to maintain the electoral gains it had made in 2008 (Walgrave and Aelst 2006). From looking at these categories, we can say that the government was affected by the media in enacting legislation and responding to the spill. As Al-Jazeera stated, the President was influenced by the media to show that he was serious about acting on this spill, and shifted the blame onto BP in the process (2010).

Numerous limitations have affected my study. Perhaps the biggest complicating factor, the relatively short time span in which I was required to complete this thesis, prevented me from exploring media-public interfacing further. I had to work with the material that was immediately available to me, and had to use sources that I could easily find and trust to have accurate data. Additionally, I believe I would have been able to gain a more accurate picture of people's reactions to media coverage if I had a larger sample size. The internet is a massive resource for

conducting social research, but practically, samples have to be limited to a certain size so that trends can be drawn and patterns observed while respecting time and resource constraints. Ideally, however, larger sample sizes would be used in order to yield a deeper insight into public opinion. A third complication, uncommon in the wider social research field but common across projects that involve data collection using technology, is the unequal availability of technology among the public, which affects whose views are included for. Even in a technologically advanced country such as the United States, not all individuals and potential online commentators have access to a computer, let alone internet access. This acts as a technological filter, shaping who is able to communicate with the online community and how researchers understand public reactions to environmental disasters and unexpected events, influencing political, social and economic actions in solving similar dilemmas in the future.

There are various implications for the future in studying data like those that were analysed for this thesis. Future oil spills are still likely as the economy remains tied to oil, and these disasters will affect different stakeholders in the Gulf in significant ways. Oil company rig employees who are not in top management positions will continue to have their work interrupted as drilling moratoriums are abolished and reestablished following these spills. People whose livelihoods are dependent on the environment, such as those involved in the seafood and tourism industries, also pay a high price when a spill occurs. Oil's damaging effects on sea life hamper angler's efforts to meet their catch quotas and earn a sufficient income, while the tourism industry is stigmatized as beaches and seafood are perceived as tainted. This perception can continue even after a well is sealed and stops leaking, turning potential tourists away from the affected area and depriving the state of tourism.

Knowing how people react and what they want to see an oil company do to address both accidents and concerns about routine operation are important for oil companies to understand, so that good relations can exist between these businesses and people who live near their facilities. It is also important to understand that many accidents don't occur spontaneously, but rather, have deep roots from how fossil fuel companies treat the surrounding natural resources, such as aquatic ecosystems, to the increasing services and products that society demands that arise from crude oil. Addressing these issues will lessen the institutional concerns people have with oil production and will also likely lessen the chance for severe spills to occur in the future. It is also pertinent to understand how the media are likely to report corporate environmental disasters in the future so that citizens can develop a sense of media literacy as to what type of information to expect from journalists when an event such as an oil spill occurs in the future. By understanding that inaccurate information and overreliance on certain sources can influence how the media report on an oil spill, we can attempt to equip journalists with the proper tools and knowledge in understanding these events, such as increasing their knowledge of science and being able to rely on more varied sources of information than purely official sources--the former approach is also supported by Anderson (2002). Recognising the need for at least some free access opportunities for journalists while respecting companies' rights to carry out required operations will also help in delivering accurate information to viewers.

In summary, this study has helped to answer some important questions regarding people's reactions to the oil spill in the context of media coverage, and how this is affected by some of their external conditions, such as oil production facilities located near residents of lower Louisiana. I've found that an overwhelming majority of commenters and newspaper readers, in

print format and online, believe and explain that what the media say about the oil spill is incredibly abbreviated and sticks to the official line, which doesn't always match the actual conditions and hazards residents experience. Others may respond that environmental disasters like oil spills have no long-lasting consequences on the environment and are overly spun by the media, people living away from a disaster zone may moderate their opinions on such issues and some people will attempt to diffuse tension through laughter and sarcasm. Factors such as how the media report on these disasters and how government is influenced through their reporting also affect how people react to these disasters.

Researching and writing this thesis has also allowed me to preliminarily examine the field of research that's currently available regarding media and the oil spill. I would like to see literature developing in how different segments of society based around socio-cultural organisation are likely to interpret the severity of a disaster or event in relation to media, such as gatekeepers to public issues and political power-holders, and how reacting to disasters is based upon location, since information about location is limited in my sample. I would also like to see more work on why the media are likely to follow official sources' interpretations, including ways to remedy this to some degree so that people are brought more relevant information and are generally more aware of what actions are being taken during environmental disasters. Since I have also only cursorily covered the interchange between the media and the government in decision-making and information management, I would also like to see more information on how they acted with each other during the spill, as it is a very interesting topic and it seems like a lot more literature on their exchanges would help us to more fully explain the data collected in this study.

With the data I've collected, I would like to perhaps apply this to my legal writing in pursuing a JD in environmental law.

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