

# Damage Control: Rhetoric and New Media Technologies in the Aftermath of the BP Oil Spill

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## Recommended Citation

Hall, Z.; Kice, Brent; and Choi, Jinbong. "Damage Control: Rhetoric and New Media Technologies in the Aftermath of the BP Oil Spill." *Poroi* 8, Iss. 1 (2012): Article 8. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2151-2957.1116>

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# **Damage Control: Rhetoric and New Media Technologies in the Aftermath of the BP Oil Spill**

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*Poroi 8,1 (April 2012)*

*Keywords: BP Oil Spill, Rhetoric, Twitter, Web Site, Food Safety*

The BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is widely recognized as the worst oil spill in international history (Oceana: Protecting the World's Oceans, n.d.). Within days of the April 20, 2010 explosion and sinking of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig that had killed 11 people, remote underwater cameras revealed the BP pipe was leaking oil and gas on the ocean floor about 42 miles off the coast of Louisiana (Ocean Portal: Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, n.d.). Since the explosion, teams of researchers and scientists have begun studying the disaster and its impacts.

Communication coming from BP following the 2010 oil spill presents rhetoric of science and technology scholars with opportunities to interrogate how crisis communication functions in a digitally-connected world. Traditionally, crisis communication has been unidirectional. This is the case particularly in scientific fields. One reason unidirectional communication was possible is that scientific discourse renders itself incomprehensible to non-scientific audiences. Schwartzmann, Ross, and Berube (2011) indicate that this happens in at least three ways:

1. Prevalence of scientific jargon restricts public access to the terminology needed for engagement in meaningful discussion with researchers.
2. Much research deals with unobservable phenomena. Lacking proper technological tools to observe and interpret relevant

images (for example, the visual configurations of nanoparticles visible only through enhanced images from electron microscopy), non-specialists may have to defer to renditions produced by researchers, illustrators, and computer graphics artists (Landau *et al.*, 2009; Lösch, 2006; Ruivenkamp & Rip, 2010). Those who control the imagery may unduly influence how phenomena are perceived even if they are unaware they are doing so.

3. Many phenomena operate counter-intuitively, as when nanoparticles behave quite differently in their quantum-mechanically governed worlds than macroparticles of the identical substance. If basic laws of the macro-world (e.g., toxicity levels, conductivity, and gravitational attraction) no longer operate in customary ways, and they do not in the nano-world, then fundamental assumptions such as the properties of chemical substances qualify as contestable.... Such counterintuitive points further distance scientific discourse from non-scientific discursive realms. (p. 2)

This means of inquiry is affected by the fact that unidirectional communication is rapidly being altered by the digital channels available to non-scientists and scientists alike. Communication flows, instead, in several directions. The ability for target audiences to “respond” to crisis communication through digital channels is encouraging what Schwartzmann, Ross, & Berube have called multi-directional communication, that is, translation of scientific discourse into more accessible terms (2011). New and social media present opportunities for individuals in target audiences to create like-minded communities that offer support and reinforcement to one another through information empowerment (Roundtree, Dorsten, & Reif, 2011). The prevalence of new and social media channels, language parameters enforced by these technologies, and the public voice and community supported through new media technologies are changing how crisis communication functions in a digitally-connected world.

In what follows, we offer a brief and general report on the post-catastrophe rhetoric of BP. We then collectively call for further research in which rhetoricians examine crisis communication that can be challenged and changed by the communicative power of target audiences made possible through the availability of new media technologies.

## **BP’s Website Communication Reversal: Kiddies to Catastrophe**

Even after a year following the spill, argues Brent Kice, BP’s website shows a definite lack of aesthetic appeal. The Gulf of Mexico Restoration section of bp.com made up of 30 pages and 59 static images, contains nonetheless several noteworthy themes: Its use of ethos relies on internal, technical testimony; its use of logos draws attention to technical aspects of the cleanup; its use of pictures are often too small to view and, when

inspected closely, show faces of predominantly white males; and its reliance on text-heavy web pages instead of on a more dynamic visual approach. Long ago, Farrell and Goodnight pointed out the lack of visuals regarding the Three Mile Island incident in terms of journalists hoping for pictures due to a radiation leak's lack of visualization; similarly BP also fails its own visualization strategy by providing pictures that are too small to see and that lack links to larger versions of the pictures (Farrell and Goodnight, 1981). Where Mechling and Mechling discuss Disney's use of an expert to assist Disney in delivering its message on atomic power, BP's website fails to improve its ethos by relying predominantly on self-report (1995). As a result, these pages fail to produce a persuasive narrative and chronicle. Rather, they reveals a matter-of-fact, chronicle-like approach to events that happened relating to the spill. This is in direct contrast to BP's 2007 cartoonish Helios campaign, which Smerecnik and Renegar identify as relying on capitalist agency to push BP's pro-environmental message (Smerecnik & Renegar, 2010).

We conclude on the basis of a website analysis that BP's target audience does not appear to be the general U.S. public. Rather, BP's target audience appears to be a mirror of itself. This means that BP has tailored its message as a form of internal self justification instead of an argument to de-vilify itself in the eyes of the general public. Similarly, BP's press releases even weeks after the spill avoided a strategy of accepting blame (Harlow et al., 2011). This fact goes a long way toward explaining dynamic narrative. As a science-driven and technology organization, BP uses the message strategy of drab technoscience with which it feels most comfortable.

We know that BP has the ability to craft a narrative that depicts itself as befalling an accident. But instead of rising above adversity to perform its duty to save the Gulf Coast; BP dodges this opportunity in favor of delivering a message with a robotic, human-less feel. The organization ignores effective communication in an effort to appease itself, not a public audience.

## **The Deepwater Horizon Disaster and the Twitter Effect**

Jinbong Choi's study aims to analyze how BP used social media (specifically, Twitter) as a crisis communication tool to address the oil spill crisis. Since Twitter's appearance in 2006, public relations practitioners have used it for public relations campaigns because of its ability to maintain constant two-way flow of communication with publics. To explore how BP used Twitter in the aftermath of the oil spill, the study identifies frames and keywords used in BP's official Twitter account (@BP\_America). Empirical analysis of the tweets BP posted reveals that BP used five frames (information, update, social responsibility, attribution of responsibility, and all that can be done) and 11 keywords (response, update, latest, effort, claims, information, operation, BP CEO, picture/photo, volunteer, and shoreline).

The results of Jinbong Choi's analysis are as follows. Dissemination of information, including updates, appeared to be a higher priority for BP in the 40 days following the initial explosion than acknowledging its social responsibility, attributing individual responsibility, or defending its responsive actions. Specifically, BP's use of "information" and "update" frames 90% of the time revealed a focus on getting the latest information to the public in a timely manner. This aligns with literature discussing the importance of enacting such a strategy (e.g., Coombs, 2012; Millner, Veil, & Sellnow, 2011; Taylor, 2007). But it also shows the effect of a public engaged through social media on BP's strategy. Schultz et al. (2011) reported that crisis communication via social media (e.g., Twitter and blogs) resulted in fewer secondary crisis reactions because social media allow "immediate reactions to crisis situations" (p. 22). In line with this previous study, BP may have been able to reduce the number of secondary reactions by disseminating informational tweets, though such a claim is beyond the scope of this study. Of the 11 keywords, "response" was used most frequently, indicating BP aimed to communicate and promote its efforts to control damage and, presumably, its worldwide reputation. Use of other keywords such as "update," "latest," "effort," and "claims," supports this assumption.

There is no doubt that Twitter is an effective medium for getting information out quickly. However, although BP was able to use Twitter to distribute basic information and updates about the spill, it was limited in its ability to provide a detailed explanation of its efforts because of Twitter's 140 character limit. The rhetorical effect is, in this case, media dependent.

## **The Rhetoric of Food Safety, the Gulf Oil Spill, and Social Media**

In her study, Z. Hall argues that there are multiple competing narratives mark the rhetoric surrounding the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill of April 20, 2011. Questions are still being raised about BP's 206-million gallons of oil and nearly 2-million gallons of chemical dispersants contaminating some of the world's most productive fisheries. The adverse effects of the oil slick include threats to aquatic life, seafood industries, and consumer confidence. The field of risk management or crisis communication concentrates on how to present phenomena in ways that accomplish a rhetor's intent (e.g., Venette, 2006). The goal is to steer perception of a crisis in a specific direction. With the focus on how sources craft messages, risk management communication functions as a compliance-gaining paradigm, emphasizing how risk is presented rather than constructed (Sellnow, Ulmer, Seeger, & Littlefield, 2009).

In the case of rhetoric and the BP oil spill effect on food safety, Hall argues that one has to explore rhetoric created by government entities, retailers, the fishing industry, environmentalists, and the public in order to understand the conflicting communication about the disaster. This broader approach, rather than a rhetorical analysis of single stakeholder's communication, is needed since some experts argue that the oil slick spanning over 3,000 square miles did not compromise the safety of food

from the waters. For example, Mike Voisin, past president of the National Fisheries Institute, a nonprofit organization that tracks the fishing industry, told CNN that “No one should be worrying about whether the shrimp they’re having for dinner is going to have oil on it” (Frantz, A., 2010). However, fishermen report that they have “started catching fish with sores, fin rot, and infections at a greater frequency than ever before” (WKRG.com News, 2011). Although a professor of oceanography at Louisiana State University can not say with certainty he believes the conditions are “from chronic exposure to some environmental stressor, and...[thinks] that it has something to do with the [BP oil] spill” (2011). A yet alternative rhetoric has been produced by experts and public health officials from the Institute of Medicine. In June 2010, they discussed a wide variety of topics at a workshop with one emerging theme: “scientists cannot predict the full range of health consequences” of the spill (Bottlemiller, 2010). Competing rhetoric from numerous sources delivered to the public at rapid speed complicates food safety choices for the average consumer.

These examples of competing rhetorics about seafood safety are further complicated by the speed with which target audiences are able to present alternative rhetoric of their own, in many cases challenging BP claims of safety. Further research should address how risk and damage are presented, constructed, and challenged by competing rhetors in different media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, blogging, and organizational web sites. Research must explore a broader conception of who the stakeholders are in light of technological capability which allows target audiences to construct and widely disseminate competing rhetoric quickly and convincingly.

## **Conclusion: Damage Control in Our Digital World**

Given crisis communication’s suasive capacity, rhetoric of science and technology scholars are well-positioned to contribute to the understanding of how crisis communication functions in a digitally-connected world. Rhetorical investigations of mobile text messaging, blogging, interactive web sites, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and emerging technologies will produce useful insights for communication scholars. Also, new research should investigate the implications of the effect new media is having on communication from scientists and other experts who communicate via new technologies which essentially force non-scientific language strategies on rhetors. A better understanding of the implications of crisis communication that is no longer unidirectional in that it now flows through numerous channels and in multiple directions must be developed. Fresh investigations will lead to a useful understanding of target-audience voice and power developed in the communities built using new media technologies.

“[The Gulf oil spill] is so complicated and has so many dimensions. It will take a lot of science to figure out what is happening from a biological point of view, from an oceanographic point of view and from an economic point of view,” said W. Ross Ellington, Associate Vice President for Research at Florida State University where the Oil Spill Academic Task

Force is based (Berkowitz & Stein, 2010). The authors submit that collaborations between scientists and rhetoric of science and technology scholars are promising endeavors which will produce robust knowledge and insight about disasters.

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