BP and President Obama on the Deepwater Horizon oil spill

- interplay between government and corporate communications

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MENTIONED INDIVIDUALS, COMPANIES AND INSTITUTIONS

INTERVIEWED INDIVIDUALS
Paul. A. Argenti – Professor of Corporate Communication, Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth. Awarded the 2006 Pathfinder Award, the highest academic award in the field of communications. Extensive experience consulting corporations and non-profit organisations. Relevant because: Expert in corporate communication strategies.

Gerald Baron – Founder and former CEO of PIER Systems, Inc. (now part of O’Brien’s Response Management), President of G. R. Baron & Company (Public Relations company). Relevant because: PIER System is the primary communication management system for oil industry responses and exercises in the US, and was used for the Deepwater Horizon event.

Neil Chapman – Head of Refining and Marketing Communications, BP (left December 2010). Founder of crisis communications firm Alpha Voice Communications Ltd. Relevant because: A spokesperson for BP at the Unified Command during the Deepwater Horizon incident.

Dave Hoppe – President of Quinn Gillespie & Associates (Washington-based Public Affairs company). Former Chief of Staff to then Senate Majority Leader, U.S. Senator Trent Lott. Relevant because: Deep political understanding of Capitol Hill.

INVOLVED COMPANIES AND MENTIONED BP EMPLOYEES
BP – Global oil and gas company headquartered in London.
Transocean – Global offshore drilling contractor.
Bob Dudley – BP executive in charge of the Gulf Coast Restoration Organisation responding to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill (as of 18 June 2010). CEO, BP (1 October 2010).
Tony Hayward – CEO, BP (1 May 2007 – 1 October 2010).
Darryl Willis – BP Vice President of Resources, Head of Deepwater Horizon oil spill claims and a spokesperson during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.
Doug Suttles – Chief Operating Officer of BP’s Exploration and Production (left January 2011).
Carl-Henric Svanberg – Chairman of BP (since 2010).

US ADMINISTRATION AND FEDERAL AGENCIES
Admiral Thad Allen – National Incident Commander of the Unified Command for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.
President Barack Obama – President of the United States.
Ken Salazar – United States Secretary of the Interior.
Sean Smith –Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs at the Department of Homeland Security (left April 2011).
Minerals Management Service (MMS), part of the US Department of the Interior in charge of managing the ocean energy and mineral resources. Restructured in May 2010.
1 INTRODUCTION

The 2010 Deepwater Horizon blowout and subsequent oil spill is a rare example of a major event where the top tiers of the political and corporate world were communicating on the same issue over a prolonged period of time. A case study of the communications of BP and the US President on the event makes it possible to understand and evaluate the interplay between communication strategies of government and corporate actors in a situation where they are interlinked and mutually dependent.

The relatively long duration of the event and exceptional level of media coverage created a dynamic that lead both parties to intensify and change their communications. This was not only due to the magnitude of the event but also because of the potential losses (for BP, financial, for the President, the upcoming midterm elections just months away) that increased with time.

Analysing the messages employed and identifying patterns of strategies can provide lessons for both academics and practitioners of public relations and corporate communications in terms of the effectiveness of image repair discourse as well as political strategy, reputation and crisis communications.

1.1 Thesis statement and research questions

The thesis is a case study of BP and President Obama’s image repair discourses on the Deepwater Horizon blowout and oil spill. The case study lends support to the thesis that President Obama undermined the credibility of BP and largely inoculated his administration from blame for the event.

The research questions of this thesis are:

- RQ1: What image repair strategies did BP and President Obama use in dealing with the Deepwater Horizon explosion and oil spill?
- RQ2: How did BP and President Obama’s image repair discourses affect the other?
- RQ3: How effective was BP and the President’s respective image repair discourse in repairing their reputations?
1.2 Thesis structure

Following a short description of the background of the crisis in Chapter One, Chapter Two summarises the central points of William L. Benoit’s *Image Repair Theory*,¹ which serves as the main framework for analysis. Chapter Two also demonstrates how Benoit’s framework is expanded in this thesis to incorporate a unique factor of the incident – that both actors were working in parallel to persuade their respective audiences but were affected by the other’s communications.

The analysis begins in Chapter Three, which shows the reputational challenges for the President and BP and thus the context in which the different strategies were chosen. In Chapter Four, BP and the President’s use of image repair discourse are analysed separately in order to clearly demonstrate their strategies.

The findings of Chapters Three and Four are discussed in the evaluation of the discourses in Chapter Five in terms of how their credibility was affected by the others’ rhetoric. Chapter Five includes quotes from interviews with certain key people working on sector-related issues as well as polling data to substantiate the rhetorical evaluations of the image repair discourses. Lastly, Chapter Six gives a short conclusion including implications of this analysis for crisis communications.

1.3 Background of the crisis

On 20 April 2010, an explosion and fire killed 11 employees on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico. The rig was extracting oil from a field under the seabed approximately a mile under water. The incident on the rig caused an ‘oil gusher’ (an uncontrolled leak of oil), which was only plugged on 15 July after having released 4.9 million barrels of crude oil into the ocean with severe consequences for the environment and economy in the Gulf Coast region.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter presents the thesis’ theoretical framework. First, the contribution of this thesis to *Image Repair Theory* is argued. Second, the typology of image repair strategies that will be used in the analysis is presented. Third, the need to take into account the reputational threats along with BP and the President’s interdependency is discussed. Lastly, the chapter presents the data used for this study and sets the necessary delimitations in scope.

2.1 Contribution to Image Repair Theory

The primary theoretical framework for this case study is Benoit’s image repair typology. Drawing on theories of image repair that deal with accounts and apologia, Benoit developed an integrated typology of image repair strategies along with recommendations on how to use them. 2

Benoit’s *Image Repair Theory* has played an important role within the field of crisis communication research. 3 Of the typologies that extend Ware and Linkugel’s work on strategies for apologetic discourse, Benoit’s is the one most widely used by researchers. 4 The theory has nevertheless room for further development, as Benoit himself notes. 5 Following from Benoit’s comments on the potential of developing a typology of different methods for bolstering an image, 6 this thesis subdivides the category of bolstering.

Any analysis of crisis communication efforts in the oil industry requires a consideration of the interplay between government and corporate crisis communications. To evaluate the crisis communication efforts of BP and the President, the messaging used by each must be seen in the context of the other's communications. In addition, the different reputational challenges for BP and the President will be taken into account, and the crisis communication efforts will be seen in context of the relevant political setting and shifting public opinion on the spill response.

2.2 Image Repair Theory – typology of strategies

Image Repair Theory 7 relies on two assumptions: communication is a goal-driven activity; and, restoring or protecting a reputation or image is an important goal of communication. 8 Image is the perception of a person, organisation or government held by a third party. 9

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5 Benoit, *Accounts, excuses, and apologies*, 164.
9 Zhang and Benoit, "Former Minister Zhang’s discourse on SARS", 240.
Image repair strategies are used to repair a tarnished image when people believe a salient audience holds them responsible for a perceived offensive act. Focused on message options, the theory presents a typology of 14 strategies organised into five broad categories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing the offensiveness, corrective action and mortification.

There are two versions of the strategy of denial: simple denial and shifting the blame. In simple denial, the accused denies committing the offensive act or that the act occurred at all. Shifting blame goes a step further and directs attention to a scapegoat. The audience is given an answer to the question of ‘if not you, then who?’.

The strategy of evading responsibility includes four tactics: provocation, good intentions, defeasibility, and accident. Those that are unable to deny they performed the act may use this strategy in order to diminish their perceived responsibility. Provocation asserts that the act should be seen as a reasonable response to another prior wrongful act. Good intentions claims that the accused meant well. Defeasibility pleads a lack of information or control over the offensive act. Accident argues that the wrongful act was an unforeseen event.

The third general category is the strategy of reducing the offensiveness, which includes six tactics: minimisation, differentiation, transcendence, attacking one’s accuser, compensation, and bolstering. The aim of these strategies is to lessen the audience’s negative feelings towards the actor. Minimisation aims to lessen the seriousness of the act. Differentiation works by comparing the act to similar, but less desirable actions. Transcendence is an attempt to justify the act by placing it in a more favourable context. Attacking one’s accuser seeks to reduce the credibility of the source of the accusations. Compensation to the victims is meant to help offset the negative feelings stemming from the wrongful act. Bolstering tries to counterbalance the current negative act by emphasizing positive qualities or previous past actions of the accused.

The strategy of bolstering is sub-divided into (regular) bolstering and appeal to social identity. The strategy of appeal to social identity functions by leveraging the audience’s perceived social identity. This strategy draws on the concepts of in-group and out-groups, meaning that the accused seeks to emphasise the shared in-group identity with the audience.

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10 Benoit, Accounts, excuses, and apologies, 72.
11 Benoit, Accounts, excuses, and apologies, 75-76.
12 Benoit, Accounts, excuses, and apologies, 76.
14 Benoit, Accounts, excuses, and apologies, 77.
In the **strategy of corrective action**, the accused promises to repair the situation and/or prevent recurrence of the problem.\(^{15}\)

In the **strategy of mortification**, the accused admits committing the offensive act and asks for forgiveness. However, to capture the important nuances in the defence of the President and BP, Timothy W. Coombs’ distinction between full and partial apology is used. Whereas a full apology must acknowledge the crisis, accept responsibility, include a promise not to repeat the crisis and express concern and regret, a partial apology is only an expression of concern and regret.\(^{16}\)

### 2.3 Assessing the reputational threat

To assess the effectiveness of a defensive discourse, it is necessary to identify factors that contribute to a discourse’s success or failure.\(^{17}\) Each actor needs to be placed within their specific context, as this gives them different agendas and different choices in terms of how to best respond to reputational threats. Benoit notes that a reputation is likely to be damaged in proportion to the degree to which the person is held responsible for the undesirable act, including to what extent she or he is believed to have intended what happened and its consequences. Where multiple players are jointly perceived as having committed the act, blame might be apportioned among them in proportion to the extent to which they are held responsible.\(^{18}\)

The shaping of the reputational threat is, however, more explicit in Coombs’ *Situational Crisis Communication Theory*, which draws on Benoit’s work and more widely on attribution theory.\(^{19}\) In Coombs’ framework, as in Benoit’s, reputation is the evaluation stakeholders make about an organisation.\(^{20}\) The reputational threat is assessed in two stages.\(^{21}\) First, the crisis type is determined. Coombs groups his typology of crises in three clusters: victim crises, accident crises and preventable crises. The reputational threat increases as the perceived responsibility for an act increases.\(^{22}\) Second, a review of two intensifying factors serves to either modify or confirm the initial assessment: prior history of crises and/or a

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\(^{15}\) Benoit, *Accounts, excuses, and apologies*, 79.


\(^{17}\) Benoit, *Accounts, excuses, and apologies*, 160.


\(^{19}\) Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis Communication*, 141.


\(^{21}\) Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis Communication*, 141.

\(^{22}\) Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis Communication*, 142.
negative prior reputation.\textsuperscript{23} A negative reputation and failure to handle a previous crisis brings about additional reputational damage.\textsuperscript{24} To illustrate, if stakeholders already question a company’s commitment to the protection of worker safety or the environment, a crisis that could have been interpreted within the accident frame may shift towards a preventable crisis frame.

2.4 The image repair discourses as interrelated

Support for seeing BP and the President’s communication efforts as mutually dependent is found in Halford R. Ryan’s argument that the repair work should be seen in the context of the specific attack.\textsuperscript{25} Ryan’s argument is that an understanding of the communicative response only emerges when the accusation and apology are seen as interlinked. The President’s rhetoric sometimes took the shape of persuasive attacks against BP. However, and as Benoit points out, in a series of communications exchanges – which in this case lasted a few months – labelling one discourse as the attack and the other defence may not be the best method as elements of both may be found in all discourses.\textsuperscript{26} Consequently, the discourses will be seen as interrelated but categorising the discourses as ‘either or’ would be of limited added value to this study.

2.5 Empirical material

The perceived handling of the crisis by BP and the President were largely shaped by the media and were as such communicative creations. However, given that the media put their own frames on the story and of possibly biased interview techniques, press releases rather than media coverage are used as the basis for the analysis. Press releases are explicitly aimed at framing an issue or event and have the media reflect that position or re-positioning.

The empirical material consists of statements issued by BP and the President in the period 20 April to 31 July 2010. For BP, 87 press releases tagged with ‘Gulf of Mexico response’ on www.bp.com are used.\textsuperscript{27} For the President, the empirical data consists of 42 remarks, statements, speeches and read-out of calls by President Obama tagged with ‘Deepwater BP Oil Spill’ in the ‘Briefing room’ section on www.whitehouse.gov.\textsuperscript{28} The time period covers

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{24} Coombs, Ongoing Crisis Communication, 142.
\bibitem{25} Benoit, Accounts, excuses, and apologies, 20.
\bibitem{26} Benoit, Accounts, excuses, and apologies, 85.
\bibitem{27} One press release of 20 July 2010 tagged similarly is excluded, as it concerns a deal in Egypt.
\bibitem{28} 17 remarks, statements or read-out of calls in Spanish that are similarly tagged are excluded, as well as 11 remarks that do not focus on the oil spill, are issued by the First Lady, or concern other people than the President (Carol Browner, Assistant to the President for Energy and Climate Change, and Vice
\end{thebibliography}
the crisis stage, defined as what begins with a trigger event and ends when the crisis is considered to be resolved. For this analysis, that is the period from the explosion on 20 April, through the peak of the response in late May to mid-June until two weeks after the leak was plugged on 15 July. In addition to this being the end of the oil spill, Pew Research Centre reported that coverage on the spill diminished in August, making end-July the logical end-point for both the crisis stage and this analysis. To measure the effectiveness of the applied image repair strategies, the thesis will use polls on American public opinion to substantiate the rhetorical evaluations of the image repair discourses.

2.6 Thesis delimitation

Given the scope of this thesis there are several delimitations. First, the thesis would have benefited from analysing the press releases issued by the Unified Command. From the outset, the government and BP communicated as one through the ‘Joint Information Centre’ (JIC) set up within this structure in order to convey a unified message to the public on the oil spill. As part of the National Contingency Plan, the designated ‘Responsible Party’ takes part both in coordinating the response and communications. Originally the US Coast Guard was in charge of both the operational response and all communications, but at the end of May the President assumed direct control through the Department of Homeland Security. In practice this meant the White House controlled the strategy, information flows and messages issuing from the JIC and BP was ‘uninvited’ from collaborating in this system. An analysis of the press releases issued by the Unified Command could have contributed to modifying the findings of the analyses of the separate image repair discourses of BP and the President by demonstrating changes or consistency in messaging before and after BP was removed from the communications hub. Additionally, using press releases as the main empirical data means that other channels used for reaching the public are excluded. The extensive use of incident-specific websites and social media by

President Biden).

29 Coombs, Ongoing Crisis Communication, 19.
33 Gerald Baron, "Re: Interview for MA thesis on crisis comms?", private email to Kari Ertresvåg, 15 June 2011.
34 Baron, "Unending Flow", 49.
Unified Command and BP throughout the event is likely to set the standard for future large-scale responses. However, this thesis sets out to analyse the intended messages and thus the press releases are considered to be sufficient in capturing this.

3 ANALYSIS OF THE CRISIS

This chapter provides a brief assessment of the applicability of Image Repair Theory to the defensive discourses of BP and the President and analyses next the reputational threats. The analysis and definition of the relevant cluster of crisis type for each actor takes into account the intensifying factors of prior crisis history and reputation.

3.1 Applicability of Image Repair Theory to this crisis

Image Repair Theory holds that an organisation in crisis should attempt to adopt the crisis frame of its stakeholders. If the situation is ambiguous, it may attempt to shape which frame is selected in order to avoid reputational damage. In the case of the incident analysed here, several parties were responsible to a certain degree.

First, the blowout gave rise to questions whether the energy companies involved and the federal agencies in charge had done enough to enforce and respect regulations and safeguards. Second, the many failed attempts in plugging the well sparked speculation whether the industry or government could have been better prepared to deal with such an incident.

3.2 Crisis type for BP

From the start it was not known whether the blowout was due to a technical or human error. In Coombs’ typology of crisis, technical-error accidents fall within the accidental crisis cluster. Human-error accidents are within the scope of the preventable crisis cluster and have a higher attribution of responsibility, thus require more accommodative crisis response strategies. For BP, there were several factors that brought Coomb’s intensifying factors into play and contributed to the perception of a preventable crisis.

First, BP is part of an industry with very low public trust. In a 2010 assessment of the reputation of the largest companies in the US, the lowest rankings were all in the energy and

37 Benoit, *Accounts, excuses, and apologies*, 47.
38 Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis Communication*, 142.
39 Baron, "Unending Flow", 59.
finance sectors. Additionally, oil spills are emotional events. As the New Yorker pointed out, 
“[…] oil spills are saturated in blame and political confusion – and opportunity. There is a 
sense that they are not accidents but accidents waiting to happen, and thus acts of greed. As a 
result, oil-soaked birds and fish come to symbolize a reviled industry’s heedless behaviour.”

Second, BP faced a number of accidents in recent history and a record of safety violations. 
For example, the company was given the largest fine in the history of the US Occupational 
Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) after an explosion at the Amoco Texas City 
refinery in 2005 that killed 15 workers and injured 170. BP broke this record in 2009, when 
the company was fined for not having made the agreed safety upgrades after a corroded 
pipeline broke upon and caused an oil spill in Alaska in 2006. As OSHA’s Jordan Barab 
said: “Record fines of that size coming out of OSHA does send a message to BP. It does affect 
BP’s reputation”.

Third, BP’s previous rebranding aimed at making the company a shining example of how an 
oil company can become green is likely to have exacerbated the reputational threat. Critics 
had previously called into question BP’s commitment to change and its desired green 
profile. The oil spill appeared contradictory to the slogan of ‘Beyond Petroleum’ and BP 
became an even ‘lower-hanging fruit’ for activists, journalists and regulators.

3.3 Crisis type for President Obama

While the crisis type might have been straightforward for BP, the President was faced with 
more of an ambiguous crisis type. While the crisis responsibility was likely to be attributed to 
BP, leaving the President within the ‘victim cluster’, the lack of federal oversight could shift 
the crisis type. A discontented public might claim the government acted inappropriately, 
shifting the crisis type to ‘challenges’ within the ‘accident cluster’. Three features of the 
incident were relevant for a possible shift in crisis type for the President.

First, the spill focused scrutiny on the oversight of offshore drilling. The federal regulator
responsible for offshore oil operations, the Interior Department’s Minerals Management Service (MMS), had a track record of incompetence and mismanagement.48

Second, a failure to stop the oil spill could shift the attention from the blowout that caused the loss of lives to the potential environmental and economic impact. The Oil Pollution Act places responsibility of protecting shorelines and containing the spill on the President.49 Additionally, BP’s response plan for a possible spill was approved by the MMS after President Obama took office.50

Third, in March 2010 the President had announced his intention to lift some of the long-standing bans on offshore drilling. Defending drilling in federal waters in the eastern Gulf of Mexico and in Alaska, he reassured the public by saying: “It turns out, by the way, that oil rigs today generally don’t cause spills”.51

3.4 Audiences for BP and President Obama
To evaluate the President and BP’s image repair discourse, their key audiences and agendas must be assessed.

As the majority lease owner, BP was named the ‘responsible party’ making it financially responsible for the clean-up. The company would also be held liable for environmental damage and face fines partly based on the amount of oil released.52 Faced with huge costs, BP prioritised avoiding legal action and further complications out of fear of additional spending.53 The company also faced the risk of loosing access to the oil-rich Gulf of Mexico as the government could deny its drilling permits or even ban the company from operating in US waters.54,55 Given these factors, the Obama administration emerges as one of BP’s primary audiences. Nevertheless, in a crisis, everyone, especially the outraged American

48 Steffy, Drowning in Oil, 198-199.
49 Steffy, Drowning in Oil, 185.
52 Stanley Reed and Allison Fitzgerald, In too deep: BP and the drilling race that took it down. (US: Bloomberg Press, 2009) 184, 182.
53 Ertresvåg. Phone interview with Paul A. Argenti.
54 Steffy, Drowning in Oil, 198-199.
55 The White House, "Remarks by the President in a Discussion on Jobs and the Economy in Charlotte, North Carolina".
public, becomes a stakeholder, thus success for BP would be that the President would not think it necessary to penalise BP further to appease the electorate.

Given the ambiguous crisis type for President Obama, success would first and foremost be that the American public approved of his handling of the oil spill. Perception of competence could help him neutralise criticism for past regulatory failure and keep the crisis type within the victim cluster for the blowout and spill. As a crisis of national significance, the federal government and the President’s handling of the oil spill would potentially have an effect on approval ratings and thus the Democrat’s electoral support in the upcoming mid-term elections. According to Sean Smith, the then Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs at the Department of Homeland Security, “we knew that the public's perception of a disaster response would never earn Obama re-election, but it could prevent it.” Given this, the objective for the President would be to build party support and therefore his key audience would be potential voters in the forthcoming elections.

4 ANALYSIS OF THE IMAGE REPAIR DISCOURSES

This chapter uses the typology of image repair strategies to critically analyse BP and the President’s defensive discourses. The image repair discourses of BP and the President are treated separately to provide clarity as regards their defences. Summaries of the distinct phases are provided ahead of the detailed analysis for both BP and the President to ease the understanding of the overall changes in strategies during this crisis.

4.1 BP’s image repair discourse

BP’s defence can be divided into three parts:

**Phase one: 21 April – 28 April**

The first phase of BP’s image repair discourse began with four strategies: shifting the blame, corrective action, minimisation and bolstering. In the first days after the incident, BP shifted the blame for the incident to drilling rig contractor Transocean and portrayed itself as providing voluntary ‘assistance’ to a partner ‘in need’. BP also tried to reduce the

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57 Steffy, *Drowning in Oil*, 163.
58 Baron, "Re: Interview for MA thesis on crisis comms?".
59 Kari Ertresvåg, Phone interview with Dave Hoppe, 10 May 2011.
61 Benoit, *Accounts, excuses, and apologies*, 162, 164
offensiveness of the spill through minimisation and overconfident over-reassurance. Lastly, BP expressed sorrow over the loss of lives.

**Phase two: 29 April – 27 May**
In the second phase, BP relied on three strategies: defeasibility, corrective action, and compensation. With no end to the oil spill in sight, BP stepped up the strategy of defeasibility and toned down the rhetoric on the confidence to deal with the situation. Attempts to reduce the offensiveness of the spill continued, now through corrective action and compensation. There was a clear shift to pro-actively communicate technical details to communicate the scope of the challenge. BP said it was responsible for the response operation, but did not assume responsibility for the blowout and fire. Finally, BP started to communicate the operational framework it was working in.

**Phase three 28 May – 30 July**
In the final phase, BP used four strategies: defeasibility, corrective action, compensation and bolstering. With increased political messaging, BP made another change of strategy although some of the previous patterns remained. BP continued to issue fact-heavy press releases in which possible successes to deal with the spill were qualified with neutral terminology, though with an increase of defeasibility. There was also a trend for any actions to be presented as ‘pre-approved’ by the Coast Guard or the Unified Command. Attempts to reduce offensiveness were further stepped up through references to specific financial compensation. Finally, BP increased the emphasis on bolstering.

**4.1.1 Phase one: 21 April – 1 May**
**Shifting the blame combined with corrective action and bolstering**
The day after the explosion, BP released two statements; a press release and a ‘confirmation’ that the company leasing the rig, Transocean Ltd, had also released a statement. The BP press release “BP Offers Full Support to Transocean After Drilling Rig Fire” can be seen as the initial attempt to shift the blame and focus onto Transocean and distance BP from blame for the loss of life.\(^{61}\) The reiteration of the word ‘drilling’ reinforces the message that this was the contractor’s fault, not BP’s. References are made to “support to drilling contractor” after a “drilling rig fire” which caused “Transocean’s semisubmersible drilling rig” to be evacuated.\(^{62}\) BP portrays itself as offering voluntary support to the entity operating the equipment that caused an accident. BP offers “its full support”, “help” and “every possible


\(^{62}\) BP, "BP Offers Full Support to Transocean After Drilling Rig Fire" 21 April 2010.
assistance” to both Transocean and the US Coastguard.⁶³ As Benoit notes, guilty parties give compensation, innocent parties volunteer aid.⁶⁴ The first statement also includes a quote by CEO Tony Hayward saying, “Our concern and thoughts are with the rig personnel and their families.”⁶² This statement serves to bolster BP’s image by depicting its concern and empathy.

The second statement released on 21 April is a copy-paste of the official press release of Transocean with the headline “BP confirms that Transocean Ltd issued the following statement today”.⁶⁵ Transocean’s release only gives a brief acknowledgement of the fire, details on the personnel and that the company would be working with both the US Coastguard and “lease operator BP Exploration & Production”.⁶⁶ Publication of the statement serves to shift the blame by demonstrating that Transocean was taking the same line and, perhaps most importantly, implying that Transocean was taking responsibility. Transocean was at this stage making no counter-offensive against BP regarding blame.

This pattern of shifting the blame combined with corrective action portrayed as voluntary ‘assistance’ to a partner ‘in need’ is repeated until the end of the month. On 21 April, BP issued the press release “BP Initiates Response to Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill”⁶⁷ and gives details on the resources BP is providing to help counter any after-effects of the “fire and subsequent sinking of the Transocean Deepwater Horizon” rig. The press release includes a quote from Hayward on his commitment to “limit the escape of oil and protect the marine and coastal environments from its effects”.⁶⁸

Two days later, on 24 April, BP goes further in bolstering its image with a press release entitled “BP Offers Sympathy To The Families Of Those Lost In The US Oil Rig Fire”⁶⁹ in which Hayward is quoted expressing his “deepest sympathies” with the families and friends of the victims. Three out of the four paragraphs are messages of sympathy and the last paragraph is how BP will be “working closely with Transocean and the authorities to find out exactly what happened so lessons can be learnt to prevent something like this from happening

⁶³ BP, "BP Offers Full Support to Transocean After Drilling Rig Fire” 21 April 2010.
⁶⁴ Benoit, Accounts, excuses, and apologies, 137.
anywhere again.” This is an untypical example of corrective action in this phase, as promises of prevention are concentrated in phase three.

On 25 April BP refers to its engagement with Transocean in the following terms: “BP continues to assist Transocean’s work” and lists the support provided. In the next press release the following day the rig is referred to as belonging to Transocean and on 28 April it is again “the sinking of the Transocean drilling rig” that is the topic of the press release. This is repeated in press releases on 29 April and 30 April with every opportunity taken to remind readers that this is Transocean’s problem and BP is ‘supporting’ them. On 29 April, BP also appears to attempt to shift the blame to Transocean for not only the blowout but also the failed response to the oil spill. In the explanation of its efforts to contain the oil, BP states that the company “continues to work around-the-clock on Transocean’s subsea equipment”.

Minimisation and over-reassurance
Another trend in early press releases is that of over-reassurance or minimisation. On 25 April Hayward is quoted: “Given the current conditions and the massive size of our response, we are confident in our ability to tackle this spill offshore”. This is repeated the following day. Experts of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration are quoted as saying that “the spill is ‘very thin’ and consists of ‘97 per cent sheen’”. In the same release Hayward comments on safety and the good weather at the time and says “this, combined with the light, thin oil we are dealing with has further increased our confidence that we can tackle this spill offshore”.

4.1.2 Phase two: 29 April – 27 May
On 2 May President Obama visited the Gulf Coast area for the first time since the beginning of the oil spill. In a keynote address, he described the spill as “a massive and potentially
unprecedented environmental disaster”. In contrast to the tone of BP’s initial press releases, President Obama underlined that it was the federal government “from day one” that was at the forefront of the “relentless response”. The reaction of BP to this speech is relayed in a press release with a one-paragraph quote of Hayward praising the government’s leadership. Although Hayward refers to the oil spill as an ‘accident’ and not, as the President said, “a massive and potentially unprecedented environmental disaster”, from now on there is a clear shift of tone, style and content of the communications of BP into a second phase of communications.

**Communicating the framework of the response operation**

Among the noted changes is an additional emphasis on the work undertaken in conjunction with the federal government as well as the other government actors involved. In April, other parties are only briefly mentioned after listing what BP has done. The norm is a reference to ‘coordination’ or ‘support’ of government organisations after detailed lists of what BP has committed. In May, BP repeatedly uses terms to explain that the company is working with governmental agencies. For example in May BP regularly uses the terms ‘in conjunction’, ‘together with’, ‘working with’, ‘working hand in hand’ and ‘working closely with’, ‘support the government’s work’ to describe the collaboration. Between 17 May and 28 May, the following sentence is included in each first paragraph of every press release concerning actions taken to stop the spill: “These efforts are being carried out in conjunction with industry experts and governmental authorities.”

**Corrective action**

Another change from the initial press releases is the dominant use of corrective action as the main strategy. A large majority of the press releases are now simply called ‘Update on Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill Response’ and divided into ‘Subsea Source Control and Containment’ and ‘Surface Spill Response, Containment and Shoreline Protection’ sections. The information is fact-heavy: explaining the techniques and technology, providing updated statistics on the amount of oil recovered or removed, the sums of compensation promised or available, and the numbers of people involved.

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83 The White House, "Remarks by the President on Oil Spill" 2 May 2010.
Although there are changes in tone and further changes in strategy (see ‘phase three’), BP sticks to this method until the well has been plugged in mid-July. All other press releases in phase two are on ‘single issues’, for example, the launching of a website, the internal investigation, appointment of a mediator, and specific comments by Hayward reacting to the President’s statements.

**Defeasibility**

Faced with a continued oil spill and mounting anger, BP had stepped up the strategy of defeasibility and toned down the rhetoric on the ability to stop the spill even before the President’s 2 May speech. Statements of possible successes are juxtaposed with neutral and modest terms to ensure that expectations are managed. In the regular ‘Update on Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill’ press releases, new systems or technological innovations that may help stop the spill are qualified by saying that positive results are ‘uncertain’, success ‘remains uncertain’, ‘involve significant uncertainties’, ‘individual options cannot be assured’, or ‘ultimate success is uncertain’.

Additionally, instead of statements of confidence, the releases from 29 April onwards are detail-heavy with more information on the scale of the spill and what it will take to stop it. For example on 29 April, in the lengthiest press release so far, Hayward states “the scale of the surface response is truly unprecedented, both for BP and for the oil industry”. 85 Hayward continues to say that it is a “complex problem” and that BP is “applying all the resources available to us and also developing and adapting advanced technology”. 86

From 29 April onwards the tone also becomes more pro-active and aggressive. Between 21 April and 28 April the spill is mainly referred to as an ‘incident’ and the tone is relatively positive and confident. On 29 April Hayward is quoted “we are attacking this spill”, 87 the next day the press release starts with “BP today continued to ramp up its response” and later says that “BP continues to attack the spill on many fronts”. 88 A second press release on 30 April states that BP is “ramping up preparations” and Hayward is quoted as saying that “we are determined to fight this spill on all fronts”. 89

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Denial for blowout alongside responsibility for clean-up operation
The previous strategy of shifting the blame is now dropped. To illustrate, in the 10 press releases published in April, the word ‘Transocean’ is used 34 times. In May, ‘Transocean’ is referred to only once. Still, while BP now communicates its responsibility for the response operation, the company does not assume responsibility for the blowout and fire.

In a press release on 25 May on BP’s internal investigation, the “accident” is attributed to “the failure of a number of processes, systems and equipment”. In a quote Hayward says he “understand[s] that people want a simple answer about why this happened and who is to blame. The honest truth is that this is a complex accident, caused by an unprecedented combination of failures”. In three of the four paragraphs, the blowout and fire are referred to as an “accident”, “complex accident” and “tragic accident”. Hayward also stresses that blame should not be assigned yet: “A number of companies are involved, including BP, and it is simply too early – and not up to us – to say who is at fault”.

4.1.3 Phase three: 28 May – 30 July
On 27 May President Obama held a speech that reinforced the image that the ‘government is in charge’ and that the response, rather than being the ill-fated efforts of BP, was being done under the specific orders of the government. Following this, the communications of BP took another turn of strategy – with increased emphasis on the operational response structure of the spill, compensation and the reappearance of bolstering.

Corrective action juxtaposed with the operational framework of the spill response
While the May press releases mention cooperation with government agencies, statements on operational actions to deal with the spill are as of mid-June until end-July specifically presented as either approved, directed or requested by either the Coast Guard or the Unified Command. For example, on 10 July the press release is simply entitled “National Incident Commander Approves Plan to Replace MC252 Well Cap”. The much-used terms in May to describe a cooperative approach, such as ‘in conjunction’, ‘together with’ and ‘working closely with’ are used only four times in June and not once in July.

91 BP, "BP Briefs US Government on Initial Perspectives of Deepwater Horizon Investigation - Focus is on Seven Control Mechanisms” 25 May 2010.
The first shift in how the industry-government cooperation is presented is on 29 May. BP and the US administration had invested heavily in the top kill procedure in which injecting heavy drilling fluids into the well would stop the leak.\(^93\) The failed operation is neutrally stated in one of the regular ‘Update on Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill’ press releases, but the follow-up is said to have been decided by the US administration: “The Government, together with BP, have therefore decided to […]”.\(^94\) In the next press release, two days later, BP says it has made plans “after extensive consultation with National Incident Commander Admiral Thad Allen and other members of the Federal government”.\(^95\)

**Spokespersons**

In the last phase, there is also a diversification of quoted senior BP executives. In the months of April and May the only person mentioned and quoted is Hayward but in June and July BP Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg and BP Managing Director Bob Dudley are introduced as well as Darryl Willis, Head of BP’s Claims Team and Doug Suttles, BP’s Chief Operating Officer for Exploration and Production. Although references to these other people total less than the references to Hayward it is still significant due to their previous omission.

**Compensation**

The most visible change in phase three is the clear increase in direct references to specific financial compensation. For example in May out of a total of 28 press releases, three are on grants or direct financial compensation. In June 15 out of the 31 press releases concern compensation. These are not just about the overall sum of money available or what BP have spent, but specific stories on the different directions BP is targeting its compensation as well as supporting messages from senior company executives.

BP continuously promised to pay for the clean-up and all legitimate damage claims. Nevertheless, speculation about BP’s eventual liabilities had a negative effect on its share price and the US Congress went as far as discussing barring BP from bidding on new leases in the Gulf.\(^96\) The turnaround for BP appears to have come with a promise of $20 billion in an escrow account agreed with the US administration on 16 June.\(^97\) In the press release that day, quotes by both Svanberg and Hayward are included and it is implied the company now has a

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\(^93\) Reed and Fitzgerald, *In too deep*, 178.
\(^96\) Reed and Fitzgerald, *In too deep*, 180.
\(^97\) Reed and Fitzgerald, *In too deep*, 183.
better relationship with the government. Svanberg calls the meeting “constructive” and that the agreement provides “greater clarity to BP and its shareholders”. He also emphasises the US administration’s acknowledgements that BP is a “strong company” and that the “administration has no interest in undermining the financial stability of BP”.

In its last press release in this period, on 30 July, BP announced a $100 million fund to oil workers made unemployed because of the government’s moratorium on drilling. Secretary of State for the Interior Salazar requested BP compensate these workers although BP had taken the position that it was not liable for the results of the administration’s actions. Nevertheless, BP agreed to contribute, though the press release on this appears to convey the tension; emphasis is made that this is a voluntary act, with descriptions such as “charitable fund”, “voluntary donation”, and “gesture of good will”. In contrast to previous factual press releases on compensation, terms are included to explain the difficulties for rig workers of what BP underlines is an “imposed” moratorium by the federal government: the unemployed workers are “experiencing economic hardship” and “struggling to make ends meet”.

Contrition in combination with strategy of corrective action

Although BP made clear efforts to underline how it accepts and will fulfil its legal obligations for the oil spill clean-up as the ‘responsible party’, it does not at any point in the analysed material assume responsibility for the blowout.

While BP does not engage in mortification in terms of offering a ‘full apology’ for the blowout, expressions of concern and regret make for a partial apology in press releases on 4 June and 16 June. On 4 June, Svanberg and Hayward “expressed their deep regret and

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101 Reed and Fitzgerald, *In too deep*, 179,182.
102 BP, "BP Fulfills Commitment to Assist Displaced Rig Workers, Establishes $100 Million Fund Through Baton Rouge Foundation" 30 July 2010.
103 BP, "BP Fulfills Commitment to Assist Displaced Rig Workers, Establishes $100 Million Fund Through Baton Rouge Foundation" 30 July 2010.
sorrow for the tragedy” and Hayward is quoted as saying “Everyone at BP is heartbroken by this event, by the loss of life and by the damage to the environment and to the livelihoods of the people of the Gulf Coast. It should not have happened and we are bound and determined to learn every lesson to try and ensure it never happens again.” In another press release on 4 June, concerning the determination of BP to ensure quick compensation, Suttes says, “We deeply regret the impact the oil spill has had on individuals and businesses”. In other press releases corrective action is placed within a narrative of BP ’putting things right’, which again brings the company close to the strategy of mortification. For example, Hayward is quoted on 4 June, saying that BP will “halt this spill and put right the damage that has been done” and he remains “personally committed to making this right”. On 16 June, Hayward reiterates the “commitment to do the right thing”.

4.2 President Obama’s image repair discourse
The President’s rhetoric can be divided into two parts:

**Phase One: 30 April – 14 May**
In the first phase, there was a clear sign of shifting blame to BP, declarations of compensation combined with corrective action both short-term (clean up the spill, plug the well) and long-term (regulatory changes, investigations into past wrong-doings), defeasibility combined with a partial apology, and bolstering via appeals to social identity (positioning himself with the ‘us’ of the victims of the spill against the ‘them’ of BP).

**Phase Two: 14 May – onwards**
In the second phase, the President in general used the same strategies as he did in the first phase, but with a marked difference in tone and emphasis to address the perception that the government was not doing enough. He took a much harder line with BP and expressed the growing frustration by the public through greater denunciations of the company.

In order to show the change in emphasis by the President, the analysis will first present the consistent messaging divided by strategy and then cover the changes in tone.

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106 BP, “Chairman and CEO Give Assurance that BP will Meet its Obligations in Gulf Of Mexico” 4 June 2010.
108 BP, "Chairman and CEO Give Assurance that BP will Meet its Obligations in Gulf Of Mexico" 4 June 2010.
4.2.1 Consistent messaging throughout both phases

Shifting of blame

The President shifted the blame to BP for both the blowout and the failed clean-up operation. While the official spill communications varied between using the names ‘Deepwater Horizon Incident’ and ‘BP Oil Spill’, the President shows a clear preference for referring to the incident as the ‘BP Oil Spill’. In the 42 press releases, statements and remarks by the President used for this study, the term ‘BP oil spill’ is used 27 times. One of the most prominent speeches on this issue, the President’s televised Oval Office ‘address to the nation’, is entitled “Remarks by the President to the Nation on the BP Oil Spill [emphasis added].” While BP made sure to distinguish between its responsibility for the clean-up of the oil spill and not the blowout, the President only initially makes this distinction.

In the 12 May Congressional hearing on the oil spill, BP argued that its contract with Transocean made the latter responsible for the safety of the crew workers on the rig. Transocean pointed out that BP was the client with the overall responsibility for all decisions on-board the rig. In response, the President gave a firm statement demonstrating he would take charge and force the companies to resolve the issue: “I know BP has committed to pay for the response effort, and we will hold them to their obligation. I have to say, though, I did not appreciate what I considered to be a ridiculous spectacle during the congressional hearings into this matter. You had executives of BP and Transocean and Halliburton falling over each other to point the finger of blame at somebody else.”

Later the same month, the President blurrs the two issues of responsibility and points to BP as the company responsible for both the blowout and the clean-up. On 22 May, the President says: “what led to this disaster was a breakdown of responsibility on the part of BP and perhaps others, including Transocean and Halliburton”. On 27 May the President makes the issue of responsibility quite clear: “As far as I’m concerned, BP is responsible for this horrific disaster, and we will hold them fully accountable on behalf of the United States as well as the

110 Baron, "Unending Flow", 39.
people and communities victimized by this tragedy”.\textsuperscript{114} On 28 May, the President expands the pool of responsible parties for the explosion: “As I’ve said before, BP is the responsible party for this disaster. What that means is they’re legally responsible for stopping the leak and they’re financially responsible for the enormous damage they’ve created. And we’re going to hold them accountable, along with any other party responsible for the initial explosion and loss of life on that platform [emphasis added].”\textsuperscript{115}

**Corrective action and the operational framework of the response**

The President uses corrective action in both senses – repairing the damage and preventing recurrence. On 30 April, the President emphasises that “we continue to do everything necessary to respond to this event” and provides details on the clean-up operation. But he also refers to actions taken to “address safety concerns”, such as a review to see if “any additional precautions and technologies should be required to prevent accidents like this from happening again.”\textsuperscript{116}

From the outset, the President communicates the clean-up operation as efforts “between state and local officials and the federal government in response to this situation”.\textsuperscript{117} While BP communicated the work they jointly carried out, the President often omitted references to the company. This created a situation where the initial statements of the President excluded any mentioning of BP, except when referring to the oil spill as BP’s or to the company’s financial responsibility.

Throughout the period, the President appears to want to demonstrate that the government is ‘policing’ rather than ‘in partnership’ with BP. On 25 May, the plans of BP are being “scrutinized” at the request of the President.\textsuperscript{118} Two days later, on 27 May, as the President stresses that the company is “operating at our direction”, he provides an example to illustrate why policing may be needed: “So, for example, when they said they would drill one relief

well to stem this leak we demanded a backup and ordered them to drill two. And they are in the process of drilling two” 119

Compensation and mistrust
The third trend is the emphasis on compensation and firm government oversight. At the outset of the crisis, the President refers to BP as being financially responsible, but this message is reinforced as the weeks and months go by. From a relatively neutral but firm “BP is ultimately responsible under the law for paying the costs of response and clean-up operations” 120 the message is beefed up by creating an impression, or implying, that the company is not willing to pay the full bill and so the Government has to ‘keep a close eye’ on how financial compensation is being provided.

Implicit criticism of the way BP deals with or is providing financial compensation can be found in many instances. On 27 May the President says in a ‘remark’ on the issue, “At our insistence BP is paying economic injury claims, and we’ll make sure that when all is said and done, the victims of this disaster will get the relief that they are owed.” 121 In the questions and answers session with the media afterwards the President is asked whether “BP can be trusted” as the oil spill estimates kept on increasing to which the President replies “I think it is a legitimate concern to question whether BP’s interests in being full forthcoming about the extent of the damage is aligned with the public interest […]. So my attitude is we have to verify whatever it is they say about the damage”. 122

The next day on 28 May the President reiterates this message by saying, “We have ordered BP to pay economic injury claims, and we will make sure they deliver […]”. 123 On 4 June the President goes even further and says on the issue of compensation claims “we’ve assigned federal folks to look over BP’s shoulder” and to make sure that BP “is not lawyering up”. 124

In a reference to compensation claims on 7 June the President says “and I want to repeat – I

121 The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Gulf Oil Spill" 27 May 2010.
122 The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Gulf Oil Spill" 27 May 2010.
do not want to see BP nickel-and-diming these businesses that are having a very tough time”.  

**Appeals to social identity**

As mentioned in the sections on corrective action and compensation, the President appears to have sought to distance himself and the government’s efforts from that of BP as well as playing on the inherent mistrust of oil companies. There are several ways the President positions himself as part of the social group affected by the spill – the victims in the Gulf Coast region and more broadly the American nation – and BP as ‘the other’.

First, the use of the word ‘we’ comes out strongly in the President’s rhetoric creating a strong image of ‘everyone in it together’ and an ‘inclusive’ attitude. In addition to using the word ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ the President regularly refers to members of his team by name and states their specific responsibility. BP is omitted in such overviews of who is working ‘together’ on the response efforts, though references are made to Admiral Thad Allen who led the Unified Command.

Second, the President appeals to social identity through the use and identification with the stories of local small businesses as well as through the use of the word ‘folks’ instead of ‘people’. In the statements covered in this analysis, the President refers to the people of the Gulf Coast as ‘people’ 70 times but also uses the word ‘folks’ 48 times. Folks is a word that has a very specific connotations of a warm familiar tone and can also denote membership of a group or a nation, or at the very least, a common identity or allegiance.

Rather than expressing his personal rage, the President instead voices his emotions through the feelings of the victim or ‘little guy’. For example, on 5 June in his televised ‘weekly address’ the President says “and the fury people feel is not just about the money they’ve lost. […] It’s about the wrenching recognition that this time their lives may never be the same.” On 15 June the President says “I’ve talked to owners of shops and hotels who wonder when the tourists might start coming back. The sadness and the anger they feel is not

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just about the money they’ve lost. It’s about a wrenching anxiety that their way of life may be lost.”

At times, the President plays more directly on the issue of the ‘national self’ (embodying the nation and speaking on their behalf). On 14 May, the President positions himself in the same social group as the victims of the oil spill and notes how he agrees with their pain: “I saw firsthand the anger and frustration felt by our neighbors in the Gulf. And let me tell you, it is an anger and frustration that I share as President [emphasis added].”

Another illustrative example is how the President juxtaposes his concern for the local people of the Gulf with the implied lack of concern of BP. In a statement on 16 June after a meeting with the BP Chairman, the President says “and so I emphasized to the chairman [of BP] that when he’s talking to shareholders, when he is in meetings in his boardroom, to keep in mind those individuals; that they are desperate; that some of them, if they don’t get relief quickly, may lose businesses that have been in their families for two or three generations. And the chairman assured me that he would keep them in mind.”

Another related trend that points to a strategy of social identity is how the messages of the ‘government is in charge’ and ‘BP cannot be trusted’ are interlinked and self-reinforcing; ‘the government (us) is in charge because BP (them) can’t be trusted’ and ‘BP (them) can’t plug the well thus the government (us) should be in charge’.

**Defeasibility**

The President often juxtaposes his message that the Government ‘is in charge’ with a strategy of defeasibility, that might have helped him neutralise claims that the Federal Government was not doing enough. In several statements, he goes into details on how the ‘oil lobby’ had weakened regulations to such an extent that the spill was more likely to have occurred. For example, on 27 May the President says, “in this instance, the oil industry’s cozy and sometimes corrupt relationship with government regulators meant little or no regulation at all […] What’s also been made clear from this disaster is that for years the oil and gas industry has leveraged such power that they have effectively been allowed to regulate themselves.”

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131 The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Gulf Oil Spill" 27 May 2010.
On 14 May the President engages in what at first seems like a strategy of mortification, saying that “and all parties should be willing to accept [responsibility] […]. That includes, by the way, the federal government.” Then immediately, the President switches strategies to defeasibility: “For too long, for a decade or more, there has been a cozy relationship between the oil companies and the federal agency that permits them to drill. It seems as if permits were too often issued based on little more than assurances of safety from the oil companies.”

Again, in a weekly address on 22 May the President combines the two strategies.

The President engages in highly ‘qualified mortification’ or partial apology as admissions of responsibility come directly after detailed explanation of the weaknesses of the regulatory bodies. For example on 27 May the President first uses the strategy of defeasibility “[Ken Salazar, Secretary of the Interior] came in and started cleaning house, but the culture had not fully changed in MMS” and then juxtaposes it with admission of responsibility, “And absolutely I take responsibility for that. There wasn’t sufficient urgency in terms of the pace of how those changes needed to take place.”

4.2.2 Comparisons of phase one and phase two

At the outset, the extent of the oil leak was unknown. The official estimates were relatively low. According to the US Coast Guard report on the incident published in 2011, by 28 April the highest estimations of the oil flow were between 5,000 and 10,000 barrels per day (BPD). But, by 12 May independent scientists were questioning this and providing estimates (which were picked up by the media) as high as 100,000 BPD.

These differences in the scale of the incident appear to be reflected in the tone and emphasis of the President’s remarks. On 2 May, the President made a keynote speech on the oil spill from Louisiana, which was, in comparison to later speeches, markedly restrained. The speech includes all the responses one would expect from the government after a ‘normal’ environmental incident. For example, the President talks about “efforts to stop the BP oil spill and mitigate the damage” and although “we’re dealing with a massive and potentially

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132 The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Ongoing Oil Spill Response" 14 May 2010.
133 The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Ongoing Oil Spill Response" 14 May 2010.
135 The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Gulf Oil Spill" 27 May 2010.
136 United States Coast Guard, "BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill", 33.
137 United States Coast Guard, "BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill", 33.
unprecedented environmental disaster” which “could extend for a long time” and “jeopardize the livelihoods of thousands of Americans who call this place home” all that he offers in response is a “coordinated and all-hands-on-deck, relentless response to this crisis” but this is not the style that we see later in same month.  

In the statements, press releases and remarks following this speech, the messages are similar with an emphasis on ‘BP must pay’ and ‘we are doing all that we can’. Although the spill is clearly presented as an environmental problem, the statements do not have the tone of this being an ‘extraordinary’ incident that demanded a different strategy.

However, on 14 May the President significantly turns up the volume and changes both the tone and style of his rhetoric to demonstrate how he is not happy with the progress and to communicate to the public that the federal government is in charge and was always in charge.

In the speech on 14 May trends that will be used later are already visible. First, the President gives a stronger message on his personal commitment and emotions are expressed in a much clearer way than in previous statements. For example, the President says he will not “rest or be satisfied until the leak is stopped at the source, the oil in the Gulf is contained and cleared up, and the people of the Gulf are able to go back to their lives and their livelihoods”.

Similarly, he has “firsthand [seen] the anger and frustration felt by our neighbours in the Gulf. And let me tell you, it is an anger and frustration that I share as President”. Second, the incident is presented at a new level of severity, with the President referring to it as a possible “catastrophic event”. Third, the President also ‘turns up the volume’ of his already established criticism and the seriousness to which he holds the regulatory bodies to account. On the regulatory reform, the President says, “we’re also closing the loophole that has allowed some oil companies to bypass some critical environmental reviews”.

Responsibility is extended to the federal level, but as before, juxtaposed with a strategy of defeasibility: “it is pretty clear that the system failed, and it failed badly. And for that, there is enough responsibility to go around. And all parties should be willing to accept it. That

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139 The White House, "Remarks by the President on Oil Spill" 2 May 2010.
141 The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Ongoing Oil Spill Response" 14 May 2010.
142 The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Ongoing Oil Spill Response" 14 May 2010.
143 The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Ongoing Oil Spill Response" 14 May 2010.
144 The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Ongoing Oil Spill Response" 14 May 2010.
includes, by the way, the federal government”. The President then talked about the “cozy relationship” as quoted before – thus juxtaposing the two strategies.

5 EVALUATION OF THE DISCOURSES
This chapter evaluates the image repair strategies of BP and the President in view of the reputational challenges they were facing. The evaluation takes into account how the defensive discourse of each is likely to have affected the other’s defence. Polling data is used to substantiate the rhetorical evaluations of the image repair discourses.

5.1 Evaluation of BP’s image repair discourse
More accommodative image repair strategies should be used as the reputational threat increases. Benoit notes that it may be strategic to couple mortification – admitting responsibility and asking for forgiveness – with a firm commitment to correct the problem. Coombs echoes Benoit’s prescriptions, and suggests using ‘rebuilding strategies’ for any preventable crisis: compensation and full apology. The latter is mortification in Benoit’s typology.

The analysis revealed that BP primarily relied on the strategies of corrective action and compensation. Initially the company set the tone with shifting the blame and minimisation. The company sparsely engaged in bolstering in terms of expressions of sympathy and sorrow and eventually made use of partial apology. But, given that stakeholders saw BP as the guilty party the main strategies of corrective action and compensation were not sufficiently accommodative to repair BP’s image. In fairness to BP, faced with a substantial oil spill there was not much they could have said to make the situation better. For BP, the best communications strategy was to repair the leak.

Shifting the blame and partial apology
BP’s initial strategies of shifting the blame and minimisation appeared contradictory to later communications and thus triggered greater scepticism of BP’s subsequent communications. The tone of a crisis is usually established in the first few days and the perception of early

145 The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Ongoing Oil Spill Response" 14 May 2010.
146 The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Ongoing Oil Spill Response" 14 May 2010.
147 Coombs, "Crisis Management and Communications".
148 Coombs, Ongoing Crisis Communication, 142.
149 Benoit, Accounts, excuses, and apologies, 160, 162.
150 Coombs, Ongoing Crisis Communication, 143.
151 Kari Ertresvåg, Phone interview with Neil Chapman, 14 March 2011.
handling normally remains the prism through which stakeholders view future communications.\textsuperscript{153,154} Benoit notes that it is important for a company (at fault) to immediately admit this and accept responsibility. Denying and then reversing the message in order to accept responsibility and apologize can damage credibility.\textsuperscript{155}

In the analysed materials, BP did not take full responsibility for the blowout nor apologized unquestionably for the deaths and injuries. Instead they offered a ‘partial apology’.\textsuperscript{156} But while BP did not accept responsibility for the blowout, their use of the term ‘responsible party’ for the spill response is likely to have had a confusing effect. In addition, statements referring to how they were going to ‘make things right’ stand in contrast to the initial strategy of shifting the blame to Transocean. Combined, they give an impression of ‘caving in’ to the pressure and acknowledging its role only after denial had failed. Although BP separated the two (blowout and oil spill), stakeholders did not and thus BP appeared to only assume half of the responsibility. This weakened the messages of compassion for the blowout.\textsuperscript{157} It must also be noted that the President’s strategy of shifting the blame to BP for both the spill and the blowout, is likely to have increased the attribution of guilt to BP as they did not ‘fight back’ to ‘clear their name’ thus adding to the perception that they were the ‘guilty party’.

However, taking full responsibility in public for the blowout may have appeared unwise for BP, as not all the facts about the incident were available. Nevertheless, the shifting of blame and apparent lack of contrition affected BP’s image negatively. BP would have been better off communicating to a greater extent the uncertainty of the origins of the accident and who was to blame rather than just ignoring the issue.

\textbf{Minimisation}

BP’s attempt to downplay the seriousness of the event and the overconfident statements on its ability to deal with the situation backfired. In crisis communication, over-reassurance is the cardinal sin. When harm is obvious, minimisation may create negative feelings.\textsuperscript{158} The issue that most undermined both BP (besides the inability to plug the well) and the President’s

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{153} Coombs, \textit{Ongoing Crisis Communication}, 128.
  \item \textsuperscript{155} Benoit, \textit{Accounts, excuses, and apologies}, 160-161.
  \item \textsuperscript{156} Coombs, \textit{Ongoing Crisis Communication}, 141.
  \item \textsuperscript{158} Benoit, \textit{Accounts, excuses, and apologies}, 164.
\end{itemize}
credibility was the issue of the inaccurate, conflicting and continually escalating oil spill flow rate estimates.\textsuperscript{159,160}

The flow rates received constant press coverage for several months and severely undermined public confidence in the response.\textsuperscript{161} The coverage either suggested that the official figures were lower estimates or that the changing estimates demonstrated incompetence.\textsuperscript{162} The 2011 US Coast Guard report revealed that the ‘Worst Case Discharge’ found in BP’s response plans, were not communicated by the Unified Command in order “to avoid an adverse public reaction”.\textsuperscript{163} This backfired when Congressman Markey later released the documents demonstrating the lack of transparency and undermining the credibility of all involved.\textsuperscript{164}

Perhaps a more strategic approach would have been to put out the worst-case scenario or ‘upper bracket’ of expectations. Thus when the exact figures could be communicated, the response organisation would have been able to say the situation was ‘not as bad as previously estimated’. Few can understand the impact of 5,000, 50,000 or 5 million barrels of oil in the ocean but they can easily begrudge a company or government that first says 1,000 barrels of oil have been released but then increases this figure several-fold a day later.\textsuperscript{165}

\textbf{Bolstering}

BP’s attempts at bolstering through expressions of compassion for the victims were ineffective next to the company’s strategies of deflecting the blame, minimisation and initial lack of contrition. Two of the first press releases focused on BP’s concern and sympathy with the families of the workers that died, but expressions of sympathy only re-appeared in June and July when also contrition was introduced. At this later stage, corrective action, in terms of repairing the damage of the spill, was increasingly presented within a narrative of ‘putting things right’. This phrase could be seen as demonstrating responsibility also for the blowout; ‘I did wrong and I shall put this right’. However, the statements were issued alongside the President’s counteracting messages of mistrust and scapegoating. Thus they were more likely to have reinforced the negative perceptions of the company and diluting BP’s strategy thus proving the interconnectedness of the campaigns.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{159} United States Coast Guard, "BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill", 32.
\bibitem{161} United States Coast Guard, "BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill", 32, 38.
\bibitem{162} United States Coast Guard, "BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill", 37.
\bibitem{163} United States Coast Guard, "BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill", 32.
\bibitem{164} United States Coast Guard, "BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill", 34, 38.
\end{thebibliography}
Corrective action

BP focused its communications on corrective action. Neil Chapman, who worked with communications for BP at the Unified Command, says their role was to try to get good and accurate information quickly to the people who needed it and were impacted by the spill.

“All people really wanted to hear was ‘its fixed!’ […] it doesn’t matter what you say or what you do until you can say it’s fixed. They don’t really want to hear anything else. They don’t want to hear ‘I’m sorry’, just that it has been fixed.”

BP focused its energy on the immediate task at hand. Again, as Chapman put it:

“There were so many politicians visiting the scene who wanted to see what was happening, demanding action and investigations. There is a point at which you have to say, in what order do you do things? Do you fix the leak now and find out what went wrong later and learn from that. Or, whilst you are fixing the problem, do you try and understand what went wrong knowing you are without all the facts. There is an argument that says, why don’t you fix the problem first and then find out what went wrong, when you have recovered equipment that could tell you more details.”

According to Chapman, BP promised to fully investigate what had gone wrong so that lessons could be learned. In the analysed material, promises of corrective action to prevent future problems are nevertheless sparse. Looking at the press releases alone, BP’s credibility would have perhaps increased had they coupled their clean-up operation with stronger reassurances that they would work to make sure such an incident would never happen again – even with the caveat that they would work with the contractors.

Compensation

As the crisis progressed, BP put more emphasis on financial compensation. Initially, BP’s message of compensation did not do what it sought to achieve. This was firstly because no one knew the amount of compensation needed. Secondly, as the share price kept dropping, the market, the public, and the shareholders, were increasingly fearful that the company would go bankrupt. BP pledged on several occasions that it would pay for the clean-up and damage claims. They even went as far as to waiver the limitation of the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, which capped liability at $75 million. But praise for this proved limited when seen in

166 Ertresvåg, Phone interview with Neil Chapman.
167 Ertresvåg, Phone interview with Neil Chapman.
168 Ertresvåg, Phone interview with Neil Chapman.
169 Steffy, Drowning in Oil, 186.
context of the President’s message of mistrust of BP. Commentators ‘hooked onto’ BP’s wording of pledging to pay “all legitimate claims”, complaining that the word ‘legitimate’ could be a loophole for the company.\(^{170}\) However, the moment the escrow fund was set up, claimants were reassured as they knew how much would be available and the market responded positively as the share price stabilised. Yet, although this could be interpreted as a ‘government win’ in terms of communications, it also put the ball back in the court of the government as it had proposed an independent authority to oversee the paying out of compensation. This meant that for any problems the government would be blamed as much as BP. Gerald Baron, a crisis communications consultant (also on the Deepwater Horizon event) said:

“In retrospect, this shifted the terribly difficult and no-win claims situation from BP's mess to the government's mess. That turned out to be in BP's best interest – even though the amount of the fund was far in excess of anything reasonable and BP agreed to it out of duress in my opinion.”\(^{171}\)

**Defeasibility**

BP increased its strategy of defeasibility as its efforts to contain the spill continued to fail. The inclusion of ‘expectation management’ in BP’s communications reduced the potential negative impact of a sudden increase in spill flow or of failed attempts to cap the well. In addition, BP made it clear that it had consulted other industry players. This helped to dismiss the image that this was solely BP’s fault rather than being an ‘industry-wide’ problem as BP demonstrated it wasn’t the only one that didn’t know what to do. This was reinforced by the enormity of the technological feat required – even the President remarked on this.\(^{172}\)

**Spokesperson and social identity**

The focus of the reputational damage for BP was initially on Hayward.\(^{173}\) As his credibility declined (and number of media gaffes grew), BP diversified their executive spokespersons and eventually replaced Hayward with Dudley. Baron advised BP to engage an outside third party with international credibility to serve as a sort of ‘public ombudsman’, but this advice was not taken up.\(^{174}\) If BP had chosen to do this, perhaps it would have suffered less as the media increasingly focused its attention on Hayward gaffes which reinforced the image of a company that didn’t care about what had happened.

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\(^{170}\) Sandman, "Risk Communication Lessons from the BP Spill".

\(^{171}\) Baron, "Re: Interview for MA thesis on crisis comms?".

\(^{172}\) The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Gulf Oil Spill" 27 May 2010.

\(^{173}\) Baron, "Unending Flow", 37.

\(^{174}\) Baron, "Re: Interview for MA thesis on crisis comms?".
Communicating the framework for the operation

BP’s role within Unified Command and its joint work with the government became a matter of public confusion. Chapman believes that BP was victim to the fact that there was a failure to clearly explain the operational structure of the response effort. 175 “Quite often we were explaining what we were doing technically but, over time, we understood that we had to constantly reinforce, and perhaps we didn’t reinforce early enough, that we were only able to do things technically because these were being approved by the Government”. 176

An example of this confusion is the issue of dispersants. BP used dispersants under the direction of the Unified Command. But it was presented as ‘BP uses dispersants’ rather than explaining the chain of command and thus created the impression that BP had simply unilaterally decided to act. 177 As Chapman explained: “what worried us was the perception that people thought we were just doing things without oversight from the government.” 178 Baron agrees with this:

“I advised that they be much more aggressive early on with their communication after they were uninvited from collaborating in the government communications. I also advised they be far more aggressive in responding to false, malicious media reports. They responded by saying as long as the spill was not contained they would take a very reserved approach to communications. A big mistake in my mind.” 179

Even when the President stepped up his rhetoric, BP continued to focus on communicating what they were doing to plug the well and clean-up the spill. 180 With the President as one of BP’s key audiences, taking a reserved approach in relation to his attacks was perhaps wise as to fight back would have only made the relations with the President worse. According to Chapman, it was only right that the President had to clearly demonstrate that ultimately the government was in charge and there were times when the government had to reinforce that very strongly. 181

5.2 Evaluation of President Obama’s image repair discourse

The President faced a more ambiguous situation and could seek to influence the audience’s perceived crisis type. The analysis revealed that the President used the strategies of shifting

175 Ertresvåg, Phone interview with Neil Chapman.
176 Ertresvåg, Phone interview with Neil Chapman.
177 Ertresvåg, Phone interview with Neil Chapman.
178 Ertresvåg, Phone interview with Neil Chapman.
179 Baron, “Re: Interview for MA thesis on crisis comms?”.
180 Baron, “Re: Interview for MA thesis on crisis comms?”.
181 Ertresvåg, Phone interview with Neil Chapman.
the blame, appeals to social identity, partial apology and defeasibility, corrective action and compensation. The President increased the emphasis on administration oversight and the pressure on BP as the crisis wore on.

As the crisis dragged on with no end in sight the administration was increasingly blamed and was expected to do more and press BP harder. As Baron points out, “A case can be made that it worked because a number of analysts commented as the event began to wind down that Obama was largely inoculated from blame for the event and for the highly publicized failings of the response”.

**Shifting the blame and partial apology**

The clearest strategy was shifting the blame to BP. Although the President took responsibility, due to the lack of regulatory oversight, he always did so ‘partially’ by juxtaposing it against the wrongdoings of the oil companies that had corrupted the regulatory body monitoring the industry. The President also sought to underline that this largely occurred before his administration.

The President relied on a strategy of convincing the public that his administration was drastically different to his predecessor’s, and that the ‘fox no longer was in control of the henhouse’. The attacks on BP can be seen as over-compensation for the previous inadequacies of the regulatory body MMS. Unfortunately for BP, the President’s message of improved government oversight came at the company’s expense. Dave Hoppe, a Washington-based public affairs consultant, says it was clear that the administration’s strategy was to blame BP and they had to accept that. As Hoppe put it:

“…the way I saw the administration’s approach to this in terms of how they tried to use BP, was a ‘cover your tail’ operation. Lots of people were not happy that the problem was not being solved and the administration had to have something to blame.”

A July 2011 blog post by Sean Smith, one of the lead communicators for President Obama, demonstrates how the administration found the joint work with BP politically volatile. Increasing awareness of the political risk for the President as criticism of the administration

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182 Baron, "Unending Flow", 41.
183 Baron, "Unending Flow", 59.
184 Gerald Baron, "Re: Interview for MA thesis on crisis comms?".
185 Ertresvåg, Phone interview with Dave Hoppe.
grew led to a strong desire to distance the President from BP.\textsuperscript{186} For the strategy of shifting the blame to be effective, Benoit notes that it is important to place blame on someone clearly dissociated from the rhetor and onto a plausible scapegoat.\textsuperscript{187} Commenting on the involvement of BP in communications through the Unified Command, Smith says the joint briefings made them “nervous for weeks”.\textsuperscript{188} According to Smith, the “troubling narrative” of whether BP or the federal government was in charge changed substantially after the administration ended the daily press briefings with BP and “double[d] down on our efforts to show the response”.\textsuperscript{189}

**Corrective action and compensation**

In line with the strategy of scapegoating BP, the President’s communications on corrective action and compensation evolved around policing the company in the response efforts. While BP made sure to emphasise corrective action taken ‘in conjunction with the government’, the President separated the government’s efforts from that of BP. The initial exclusion of any references to BP in the response operation, while BP simultaneously issued press releases on what they were doing in response to the spill spurred questions by the public, media and some politicians on ‘who’s in charge here?’\textsuperscript{190}

The initial exclusion of BP in references to the operational response is likely to have undermined the perception of a President in control. Moreover, the failure to communicate that Unified Command approved BP’s actions from the beginning contributed to the perception of an administration that was “always a step behind what was going on”.\textsuperscript{191} A better explanation of the structure could have helped the President communicate he was ‘part of the story’ from the start.

The President also made sure to emphasise that BP would pay for the environmental damage and compensate those affected by the spill. The emphasis on government oversight over payments by the President communicated a sense of competence given the inherent mistrust towards BP.

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{Smith, "Ink Spill".}
\footnote{Benoit, *Accounts, excuses, and apologies*, 162, 164.}
\footnote{Smith, "Ink Spill".}
\footnote{Smith, "Ink Spill".}
\footnote{Ertresvåg, Phone interview with Neil Chapman.}
\footnote{Ertresvåg, Phone interview with Dave Hoppe.}
\end{footnotesize}
Bolstering and social identity

The President validated the concerns and expressed compassion for the people affected by the spill to a greater extent than BP. The President bolstered his image by playing on the strategy of appeal to social identity. According to crisis communications consultant Peter Sandman, “The conventional wisdom is that an American president must be not just Chief Executive but also Emoter-in-Chief – that he (and eventually she) must voice the public’s feelings.”192

While the President has been criticised for not being sufficiently visible and personally involved,193 the analysed material demonstrates that the President was determined to voice both Americans’ sadness over the incident and their anger at those responsible.

The President’s attempts to bolster his image by positively differentiating his belonging to the ‘in-group’ of the American nation from that of the ‘out-group’ of BP should also be seen against the simultaneous emphasis on BP as a foreign company in the President’s oral statements to the press.194,195

5.3 Public reactions to the image repair discourses

The oil spill is among the top ten most followed news stories Gallup has measured since 1991.196 Thus a large percentage of the American public was aware of the reputational threats to both the President and BP due to the exceptionally high level of media coverage.197

As expected, neither of the image repair discourses was well received. BP appears to have been penalized for shifting the blame, initial minimisation and over-reassurance. Polls also corroborate that the best communications strategy for BP was to stop the leak, given that as soon as it did, its approval ratings improved. The view that the President’s political standing and the midterm elections were drivers of the President’s communication efforts appears consistent with public polls as increased media coverage coincided with a firmer presidential hand in communications activities. Polls also corroborate that the President was able to largely inoculate his administration from blame.

192 Sandman, "President Obama’s handling of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill".
193 Ertresvåg, Phone interview with Dave Hoppe.
Shifting the blame: unsuccessful for BP, more successful for the President

BP’s shifting of blame to Transocean and separating responsibility for the spill response from the blowout were unsuccessful. A Gallup poll from mid-June showed that 92% considered BP guilty of causing the spill and a majority believed they should pay for all resulting financial losses, even if this meant bankruptcy.198 Asked after the spill, in mid-August, if BP should be allowed to drill for oil in the same area of the Gulf in which the spill occurred, close to half of the respondents (46%) said no.199 But, Americans also held the federal government responsible. Gallup reported that nearly eight of ten also blamed federal agencies that regulate drilling compared to 7% who said they should not be blamed at all.200 Public opinion is consistent with the tone in media articles, as according to the Pew Research Centre, BP was seen as far more responsible than the President.201

Although the President received low marks for his oil spill response (elaborated below), his overall approval ratings were not that different after the spill than before the crisis. Even the low 46% weekly average in end-May was only slightly lower than what it had been during spring 2010, with averages at or below 50%.202

Minimisation and reassurances backfired; best strategy to stop the leak

BP initially experienced higher approval ratings than its average for the crisis, which could be ascribed to its overconfident reassurances and minimisation. In early May, close to half of Americans said they disapproved of BP’s handling of the spill, while one in three approved.203

But when the company failed to deliver on its promises, the ratings rapidly worsened. Contrary to BP’s messages of the spill as ‘a minor problem’, seven out of ten Americans called the spill a “disaster” in late May.204 Nearly four out of ten thought the impact would

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201 Baron, "Unending Flow", 28.
204 Morales, Gallup, "Americans Critical of Oil Spill Response; Keeping Close Tabs".
make it the “worst disaster in 100 years”. The President’s rhetoric of “a massive and potentially unprecedented environmental disaster” was closer to the public opinion, and no doubt lessened the credibility of BP’s minimisation strategy. In end-May, seven out of ten Americans disapproved of the company’s oil spill response. In mid-June, nearly eight out of ten Americans disapproved.

Increased toughness on BP due to the President’s standing and midterm elections

The oil spill had initially limited negative effect on the President. Three weeks into the spill, a poll showed ratings on the handling of the oil spill varying from good to neutral for the President. But as the crisis continued throughout May, Americans expressed clearer dissatisfaction with the President’s efforts. In a 24-25 May Gallup poll, the President’s disapproval rating had increased by 20 points from two weeks before, to 53%. Perhaps most concerning for the President was the view of the voting bloc credited most for the victory in 2008: 59% of independent voters described the President’s handling of the spill as “poor”.

In addition to increased disapproval with the President’s handling, findings of the Pew Research Centre on the blame game that played out in the media show that while the focus on 10 May was on BP, one week later it had shifted to the role of the government. While it remains speculative to see the President’s political standing and the upcoming midterm elections as the drivers of the communications, the shifts in public opinion ran in parallel with the mounting administration pressure on BP as of mid-May through June and July.

But, as of mid-May until the spill was stopped, the President received negative ratings from the American public. For example, for the week ending 30 May, the President set several poor records. Americans gave the administration its lowest weekly average job rating at 46%. This included a new all-time low from independents at 41%, while the 81% rating from Democrat

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205 Morales, Gallup, "Americans Critical of Oil Spill Response; Keeping Close Tabs".
207 Morales, "Americans Critical of Oil Spill Response; Keeping Close Tabs".
208 Newport, "Americans Want BP to Pay All Losses, No Matter the Cost".
210 Morales, "Americans Critical of Oil Spill Response; Keeping Close Tabs".
voters meant a tie with the previous lowest score from this group. The same week, shifts in congressional voter preferences among independent voters gave the Republicans a clear lead over Democrats for the upcoming midterm election, 49% to 43%.

While ratings expectedly improved for BP after the oil flow stopped, it is noteworthy that the President was not rewarded for the plugged oil leak. In the Gallup polls of 19-20 June and 14-15 August, figures remained identical: 44% approved of the President’s handling of the spill while 48% disapproved. One positive increase was, however, noted in an Associated Press poll. Americans did look more mildly on the government’s actions after the spill. On 11-16 August, 32% thought the situation had become better following the government’s actions, compared to only 18% in June. Nevertheless, 25% still thought the government had made matters worse, while 41% (down from 56% in June) thought they had not had a real impact on the situation.

6 CONCLUSION

This thesis was motivated by the desire to analyse the interplay between a political and economic actor and the interdependence of the communications of both actors.

On the interdependence of their communications, one of the clearest examples of this was how when the President ‘stepped up’ the messaging, BP simply did not fight back. Enhancing a good reputation and lessening a bad one come, as evident in the chosen strategies of BP and President Obama, with very different agendas. Crisis communication expert Sandman uses the metaphor of winning and ending battles to sketch the difference. When faced with an incident like the oil spill, if the aim is to bolster your already positive reputation, such as of the President, the aim becomes building support that helps you win battles. But, if your reputation is already in the minus points, Sandman believes you should prioritise diminishing your opposition, which helps you end the fights. As demonstrated in the analysis, BP didn’t ‘fight back’ as they were prioritising getting the well plugged and appeared, to continue with

213 Newport, "Obama Weekly Approval Average Dips to New Low of 46%".
218 Sandman, "Two Kinds of Reputation Management".
219 Sandman, "Two Kinds of Reputation Management".
the boxing metaphor, to ‘bob and weave’ as fighting back would only aggravate the situation and perhaps entail even more damage to their reputation. On the other hand, these disputes were integral to the President’s strategy of focusing on the blame game and reaffirming the responsibility of BP.

On the interplay between the political and economic, perhaps the most interesting aspect is the idea of credibility. As Baron said, a key principle of crisis communication is credibility; if the actor fighting the crisis loses credibility, all is lost.\(^{220}\) The Deepwater Horizon incident demonstrated the potential devastating effect of political influence on the credibility of an economic actor. The President, as demonstrated in the thesis, on many occasions deliberately undermined BP’s credibility. If there was not the specific attacks from the President that created additional suspicion over the company’s ability and commitment to the clean-up and financial compensation, perhaps BP would have been in a much different position today and facing a slightly more nuanced situation on how to re-build its reputation.

In terms of reputational damage, the oil spill and inability to fix the well have had a devastating effect on how people view BP.\(^{221}\) Confronted with a preventable crisis, the company faced the least favourable crisis type. While this thesis shows that BP’s choice of strategies were not sufficiently accommodative, the company’s communications were significantly broader than press releases and a judgement based on this material alone would be unfair. Nevertheless, the reputational damage showed in polls of American public opinion and the linking of the company name to what became a globally known oil spill may very well make the oil spill the single most important issue that defines the company from now on,\(^{222}\) but perhaps surprisingly, not the industry or other multinational players. The thesis also demonstrates that the President, faced with an ambiguous crisis type, was able to largely shape the perceptions of the crisis frame and inoculate the administration from large portions of the blame. On the polling front, although there were some uncertain moments, the President regained a similar footing in the opinion polls after the crisis was over and the oil spill was not one of the principle issues of the Democrat’s failure in the 2010 midterm elections.\(^{223}\)

The aggressive messaging from the President may have kept his approval ratings stable and worsened those of BP’s, but more importantly it may have led to a deterioration in the overall

\(^{220}\) Baron, "Unending Flow", 38.
\(^{221}\) Ertresvåg. Phone interview with Paul A. Argenti.
\(^{222}\) Ertresvåg. Phone interview with Paul A. Argenti.
\(^{223}\) Ertresvåg, Phone interview with Dave Hoppe.
public trust and support in the clean-up operation. For example, when the President communicated mistrust of BP, it sent the message that the clean-up operation was not being done properly and thus added to the public’s misgivings and frustrations about the situation. Rather than reassuring the public that the government was doing all that it could, these negative messages (magnified by the media as these were often catchy sound-bites as when President Obama looked for “whose ass to kick”\textsuperscript{224}) simply magnified the dissatisfaction of the public. In turn, this may have created a demand for an even tougher government stance towards a company perceived as being uncooperative. It should be noted that BP took clear responsibility for the clean-up operation from quite early on\textsuperscript{225} and thus the messages from the President could be perceived as intended only to serve his own political purposes rather than actually having a tangible impact on the clean-up operation.

The lessons learned from this incident should and will inform future crisis communication and public relations efforts on oil spill communication. The most important lesson in the long-term may be that in order to gain public trust and deal with major oil spills, public-private collaboration is fundamental.

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