



## 100 Days of Gushing Oil: Eight Things to Know About How the Media Covered the Gulf Disaster

The massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, which began with the Deepwater Horizon rig explosion on April 20 and continued to gush for another three months, posed a daunting set of challenges for the news media.

Unlike most catastrophes, which tend to break quickly and subside almost as fast, the spill was a slow-motion disaster that demanded constant vigilance and sustained reporting.

The story was also complex, dominated by three continuing and sometimes competing story lines from three different locales—the role of the London-based oil company, the efforts of the Obama Administration, and the events in the Gulf region—that taxed reportorial resources and journalistic attention spans.

Coverage of the disaster also required a significant amount of technical and scientific expertise. News consumers were introduced to a series of new terms and concepts as the media tried to explain the efforts to contain the spill and formulate reliable estimates of the extent of the environmental and economic damage.

The news media, in short, found themselves with a complicated, technical and long-running disaster saga that did not break down along predictable political and ideological lines. And they were reporting to an American public that displayed a ravenous appetite for the spill story.

How did the press handle the challenge?

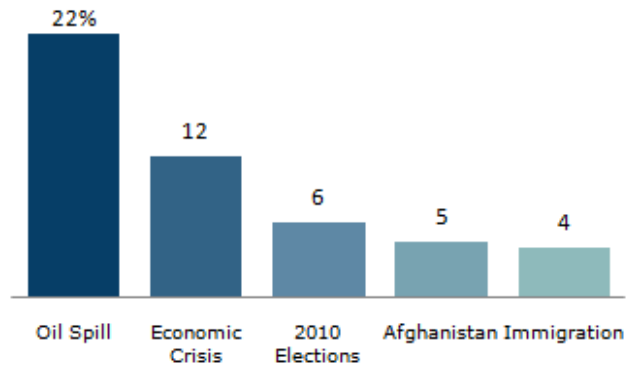
A new study of media coverage of the oil spill disaster by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism finds that, given the tough task they faced, the media as a whole seemed to rise to the occasion.

News organizations displayed real staying power as events continued to unfold. They spent considerable time reporting from the Gulf and humanizing the crisis. They largely avoided the temptation to turn the disaster into a full-blown political finger-pointing story. And in many cases they used their websites' interactive features to illuminate aspects of the story that would have been harder to digest in print or broadcast formats.

### Oil Spill Dominates Coverage

April 20 – July 28

Percent of newshole



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In short, a news industry coping with depleted staffing, decreasing revenues and shrinking ambition was tested by the oil spill and seemed to pass.

To evaluate that coverage, PEJ studied approximately 2,866 stories about the oil spill produced from April 20 to July 28—from the day that the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded to the day after BP CEO Tony Hayward's departure was announced.

The study finds eight essential points about how the media covered the disaster:

- The oil spill was by far the dominant story in the mainstream news media in the 100-day period after the explosion, accounting for 22% of the newshole—almost double the next biggest story. In the 14 full weeks included in this study, the disaster finished among the top three weekly stories 14 times. And it registered as the No. 1 story in nine of those weeks.
- The activities in the Gulf—the cleanup and containment efforts as well as the impact of the disaster—represented the leading storyline of the disaster, accounting for 47% of the overall coverage. Next came attention to the role of BP (27% of the coverage). The third-biggest storyline was Washington based—the response and actions of the Obama Administration (17%).<sup>1</sup>
- The Obama White House generated decidedly mixed media coverage for its role in the spill saga, but questions about its role diminished over time—in part thanks to a Republican misfire. And the administration fared considerably better than BP and its CEO Tony Hayward, who on balance were portrayed as the villains of the story.
- BP emerged as the antagonist in the media narrative about the oil spill, particularly its CEO Tony Hayward. But outside of two Louisiana politicians playing smaller roles, none of the top newsmakers were portrayed as protagonists in the saga.
- The Gulf saga was first and foremost a television story. It generated the most coverage in cable news (31% of the airtime studied), with CNN devoting considerably more attention (42% of its airtime) than cable rivals MSNBC and Fox News. The spill also accounted for 29% of the coverage on network news as the three big commercial broadcast networks—ABC, CBS and NBC—spent virtually the same amount of time on the story.
- The spill story generated considerably less attention in social media, on blogs, Twitter and YouTube. Among blogs, for example, it made the roster of top stories five times in 14 weeks. But during those weeks one theme resonated—skepticism toward almost all the principals in the story.
- While some did better than others, many traditional media outlets made effective use of interactive features on their websites to track key aspects of the disaster. The PBS

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<sup>1</sup> For this study, the Project for Excellence in Journalism began dividing the oil spill narrative into separate storylines—including the cleanup and impact, the government's response and BP's role—in the fourth week of the disasters, beginning May 10.

NewsHour’s Oil Leak Widget, for example, monitored the amount of oil spilling into the Gulf. The New York Times site offered a video animation that helped explain how a last ditch effort to prevent the spill failed.

- If anything, public interest in the Gulf saga may have even exceeded the level of mainstream media coverage. According to surveys by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, often between 50% and 60% of Americans said they were following the story “very closely” during these 100 days. That surpassed the level of public interest during the most critical moments of the health care reform debate.

### **The oil spill was a very different kind of disaster story**

In the three and a half years that PEJ has been regularly tracking news coverage, most disasters have been covered as “one week wonders”—stories that generate a major burst of media attention and then quickly drop out of the headlines.

But the Gulf of Mexico oil spill was a slow-motion disaster that exceeded the usual media attention span, commanding substantial coverage week after week. From April 20 through July 28, the Gulf spill overwhelmed every other story in the mainstream media. It accounted for 22% of the newshole, almost twice as much coverage as the No. 2 story, the economy at 12%.

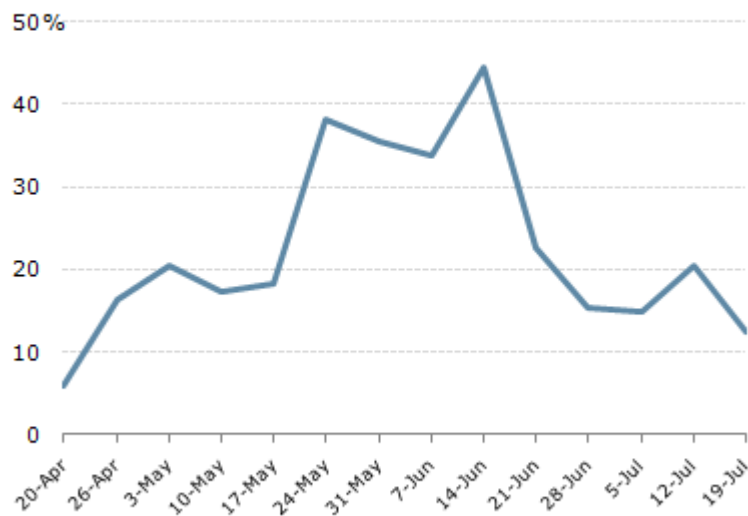
And its presence in the public eye was consistent. The Gulf saga registered as the No. 1 story in the mainstream news agenda in nine of those 14 weeks—and it never finished lower than No. 3. During four of those weeks, from May 24 to June 20, the disaster accounted for 38% of the newshole studied. That is an extraordinary run of coverage for any story, but particularly a disaster that required so many resources spread over so many locations.

The contrast to the media’s handling of other major disasters is striking.

In 2007, the massacre that left 33 people dead on the Virginia Tech campus was the biggest story in any given week that year, filling 51% of the newshole studied from April 15-20. But by the following week, coverage had plunged to 7%, and the week after that, it virtually vanished. Later that year, the rush hour collapse of the 1-35W Bridge in Minneapolis that killed 13 people was the top story (25%) the week of July 29 to August 3. One week later, it was a quarter of that. In April 2010, the West Virginia mine accident that

### **Oil Spill Coverage Over Time**

*Percent of newshole*



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killed 29 topped the list the week of April 5-11, accounting for 17% of the coverage studied. The following week, it had dropped to 3%.

One other disaster that bucked the “one-week wonder” trend was the devastating January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti estimated to have killed about a quarter of a million people. The disaster was among the top five stories for four straight weeks. But coverage of Haiti declined steadily each week, and by week six, it had fallen from a peak of 41% to only 3% of the newshole, ranking as the week’s No. 13 story.

### **The breaking news narrative never went away and, in fact, led the coverage**

For many major news events, coverage seems to follow a fairly typical pattern—an initial burst of event-driven attention followed by post-mortems, commentary and an increasing focus on a political or Beltway angle. That wasn’t the case with the Gulf of Mexico oil spill.

One of the characteristics that made the BP saga unusual was that the event-driven news coverage—the breaking news aspect of the disaster—never went away. That storyline, which included the ongoing efforts to cap and clean up the flow of oil and the environmental and commercial damage caused, kept evolving, requiring constant attention and effectively keeping the story from simply defaulting to a more partisan or politicized story line.

In evaluating how the media handled the spill, PEJ broke the coverage down into key storylines beginning on May 10, at the start of the saga’s fourth week. A qualitative examination of the first three weeks of coverage—from April 20 to May 9—finds that it focused on the explosion itself and the missing workers the first week. In the second week, the media began assessing the size of the spill and looking at the culpability of BP and the government. In the third week, the narrative began shifting to the environmental and economic impacts of the disaster.

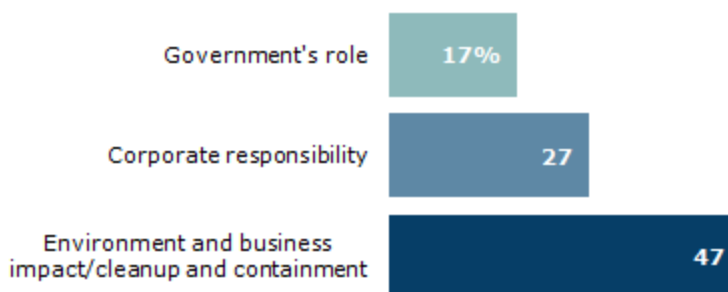
Thereafter, from May 10 to July 28, the top oil spill storyline involved events in the Gulf itself—the environmental and economic impact of the spill, the efforts to cap the leak and the cleanup of the oil that already escaped. Together, these three subjects, often intermingled, made up nearly half (47%) of the coverage of the crisis. Coverage of events from the scene also represented the lead storyline in nine weeks studied.

The June 11 Los Angeles Times, for example, published a report on new estimates from the U.S. Geological Survey that “as many as 40,000 barrels of oil have been flowing daily from the blown-out BP well...greatly expanding the scope of what is already the largest spill in U.S.... The earliest figure, 1,000 barrels per day, was supplanted by

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### **Top Storylines of Oil Spill Coverage**

*Percent of oil spill newshole*



**Date Range:** May 10 - July 28, 2010

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5,000 barrels. A government-appointed scientific team then pegged the flow at 12,000 to 19,000 barrels.”

A month later, a story on the July 13 broadcast of ABC’s World News Tonight looked at some of the human costs of the spill by traveling with hard-hit local fishermen. Anchor Diane Sawyer introduced viewers to one such man who “in ordinary times...could bring back hundreds of pounds of oysters. Yesterday, there were just two living ones.”

Smaller but still significant storylines included the examination of energy company BP’s role and responsibility in the disaster, at 27%.

Some of this coverage was fueled by the discovery of evidence, often from BP documents, that the company had ignored warnings about the rig.

“Several days before the explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, BP officials chose, partly for financial reasons, to use a type of casing on the well that the company knew was the riskier of two options.” a May 26 New York Times story based on a BP document reported.

The third biggest angle of the oil spill coverage, 17%, examined the government’s role and behavior during the crisis—with much of the focus on the Obama White House.

On the June 16 broadcast of the PBS NewsHour, for example, several panelists offered less-than-flattering reviews of the president’s June 15 Oval Office address to the nation on the environmental disaster.

“I was a little bit concerned about last night,” offered former George Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson. “Last night, the president seemed much more passive, much more input oriented,” than some of his predecessors who had used the Oval Office setting to announce major initiatives.

This also was a story that provided three major storylines emanating from three distinct locales. One was in Washington, where the federal government was trying to get on top of the situation and prevent the crisis from becoming another partisan battleground. Another was in London, the corporate headquarters of BP, the energy giant at the center of the disaster that was scrambling to protect its reputation and its bottom line.

But the dominant storyline occurred in the Gulf of Mexico, where the struggle to stop the spill and the impact on the local region were ongoing events. And that’s a major reason why the spill coverage didn’t simply become another story in which politics and commentary took over.

### **In the coverage, BP fared worse than the Obama White House (and the GOP may be part of the reason)**

The Obama White House and energy giant BP stood in the media crosshairs as the gushing oil in the Gulf turned into an environmental and economic disaster. But an examination of the story finds that BP ended up taking the brunt of the negative coverage while the White House suffered a glancing blow.

For one thing, more of the oil spill narrative was focused on the oil company (27%) than the government (17%). And the big weeks of BP-centric coverage—when that narrative accounted

for 42% and 54% of the overall spill story—overshadowed the biggest weeks of Obama-centric coverage. In no single week did the federal government angle account for more than one-third (33%) of the spill story.

BP not only received press scrutiny for being behind the spill in the first place, but also for how its executives handled the aftermath. BP’s honesty in estimating the size of the spill, response to the needs of Gulf residents and the attitude of CEO Tony Hayward also fed critical coverage of the company throughout the 14 weeks.

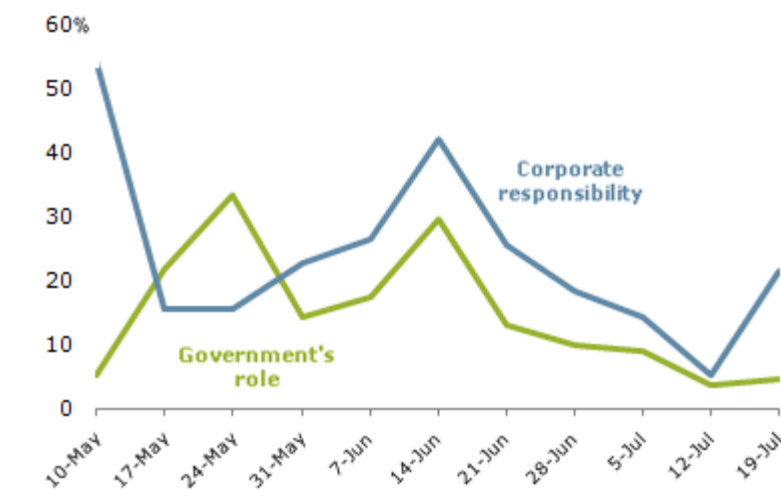
Hayward infuriated a number of Gulf residents by stating, in late May, that “I’d like my life back.” Shortly thereafter, he took time off to watch his yacht race around the Isle of Wight in England.

One of the biggest weeks of oil spill coverage that focused on BP’s role occurred when Hayward visited Capitol Hill on June 17 and took a pounding. “Lawmakers wasted no time in launching attacks on Hayward, BP’s response to the disaster and, particularly, decisions the company made that critics believe led to the failure of the well and the subsequent explosion that killed 11 rig workers,” the Los Angeles Times reported.

While he did not escape criticism, President Obama fared better than the chief executive of BP. One line of questioning that did emerge was about Obama’s temperament—whether he was displaying sufficient anger and outrage.

### Coverage of BP vs. the Obama Administration

Percent of oil spill newshole



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“The president now says he’s trying to figure out ‘whose a\*\*\* to kick’ for the BP oil spill, after weeks of criticism for not appearing angry enough over the mess,” declared a June 11 piece in the Christian Science Monitor. And reviews of his July 15 speech to the nation generated mixed reviews, at best.

Certainly one of the advantages of the White House over BP was the fact that it wasn’t operating the oil rig that exploded and triggered the disaster. But Obama’s response got generally better marks than BP’s in the weeks that followed.

Even someone as disinclined to support the president as Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly declared on his show: “I think President Obama on the oil spill is blameless for the spill. He didn’t cause it and he can’t plug it.”

The administration was also able to make news with a series of actions that included giving an Oval Office speech (however tepidly received), pressuring BP to create a \$20 billion fund to help Gulf residents, traveling to the region four times by the end of July and announcing a criminal investigation of the BP spill.

Indeed, one of the biggest weeks of government-focused coverage (29% of the overall oil spill story) was June 14-20, when Obama helped extract the \$20 billion fund from BP and addressed the nation from the Oval Office.

Something else that may have helped Obama occurred that week when Texas Republican Congressman Joe Barton apologized to BP for what he called an Obama “shakedown” that pried loose the \$20 billion. In a rare bit of Washington bipartisanship, Barton was immediately blasted by members of both parties, and within hours, he retracted his apology. But the GOP was put on the defensive by remarks that appeared to have one of their own siding with big oil in the Gulf spill.

“How Joe Barton Helped Rescue Obama and the Democrats,” was the headline on a blog post on the NPR website.

A close look at the coverage shows that after Barton’s attack, the narrative focusing on the Obama Administration’s performance declined substantially, never exceeding more than 13% of the overall Gulf coverage in any week from that point forward. Certainly other factors played a role in the diminishing attention given to the government. But it’s also likely the controversial apology made it more difficult for Obama’s political opponents to lay out the kind of concerted attack on his performance that would have gained more traction in the media.

**If BP was the bad guy, no protagonist emerged in this saga—outside of Louisiana, that is.**

Looking at the people who generated the most coverage over the course of the oil spill story, one thing is apparent. Protagonists, or heroes in the narrative, were few and far between—certainly none in BP and really, none in the government either.

Even though the role of BP got more coverage overall than the role of the Obama White House, the leading oil spill newsmaker was still the President and his administration. Obama appeared as a lead newsmaker in about 12% of the oil spill coverage. To be a lead newsmaker, a figure must appear in at least 50% of a story and the president—by dint of his powers and bully pulpit—consistently tends to be the top headline generator in all news coverage. But that didn’t mean the president emerged as a favorable character in the oil spill narrative, as evaluations of his role tended to be very much mixed.

Several other government officials showed up in the coverage, but they too were not portrayed as protagonists. Thad Allen, the retired Coast Guard Admiral who evolved into the administration’s point person on the scene, was a lead newsmaker in around 2% of the stories, and he became more visible in the crisis in June and July. While Allen became a conduit for information about the cleanup and containment efforts, a close look at the coverage suggests he never cut the kind of authoritative, action-oriented figure that cigar-chomping General Russel Honoré did when he was overseeing the Katrina cleanup.

Two days after a largely positive June 9 CNN profile of Allen that depicted him as a “measured” and “thoughtful” figure, the CBS evening newscast aired a more critical piece declaring that, “The Government’s top authorities on the spill—the Interior Department and Commander Thad Allen—repeatedly minimized the [oil spill estimates] put out by scientists.”

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar was at the bottom of the top newsmaker list, registering as a lead newsmaker in about .5% of all the stories. And he virtually faded from public view as the story went on. Kenneth Feinberg, tapped by the administration to process BP claims, also finished at .5%, though his role will likely grow now.

One other Democratic notable, Congressman Ed Markey, finished among the top newsmakers (.6% of the stories). As chairman of the Energy and Environment Subcommittee, which probed the disaster, Markey became a loud voice in the chorus of BP critics. But he never really emerged above the cacophony of Capitol Hill anger aimed at the oil company.

Then there was the BP contingent. The second-biggest newsmaker, (about 4% of the stories) was BP boss Tony Hayward, the subject of a good deal of unflattering coverage. Two other less known BP officials were also among the top 10 newsmakers. And while they may have fared better than Hayward, they certainly were not portrayed favorably. Doug Suttles, who functioned as a public spokesman for the company, registered in about 1% of the stories. And Robert Dudley, who became the first American to head BP when it was announced in late July that he would replace Hayward, finished at 1%.

If there were positive figures to emerge in the coverage of this disaster, they were two Louisiana officials. One was Republican Governor Bobby Jindal, a lead newsmaker in about 1% of all the stories.

Jindal was largely portrayed in the narrative as a staunch critic of the White House, which he believed was moving too slowly on the leak, as well as a man of action trying to save his state from crippling environmental damage. Some of the coverage noted that Jindal, a philosophical foe of big government, was walking a political tightrope in pushing for more government intervention.

But a June 30 NPR report discussing Jindal’s popularity among his constituents quoted a local political columnist as saying, “Even if he sometimes seems like he’s beating his head against the wall or trying to hold back the sea [Louisiana residents] give him credit for being out there and persisting and raising hell at times.”

But more so than Jindal, it was Plaquemines Parish president and local activist Billy Nungesser, who emerged as the protagonist, as well as a ubiquitous figure in the media. Nungesser, who like Jindal was a lead newsmaker in about 1% of all the spill stories, was featured, for example, in a May 31 New York Times story headlined, “Louisianan becomes Face of Anger on Spill.”

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## Top Lead Newsmakers

*Percent of oil spill stories*

Barack Obama	11.6%
Tony Hayward	3.8
Thad Allen	1.8
Billy Nungesser	1.4
Bobby Jindal	1.3
Joe Barton	1.2
Doug Suttles	1.2
Robert Dudley	1.0
Ed Markey	0.6
Kenneth Feinberg	0.5
Ken Salazar	0.5

**Note:** Barack Obama includes President Obama and the Obama Administration as a newsmaker

**Date Range:**

April 20 – July 28, 2010

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“Within hours of the April 20 explosion aboard the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, Mr. Nungesser, 51, became a go-to guy for the news media,” the story noted. “In the ensuing weeks, he has turned into the angry everyman of the oil spill, whether delivering a broadside against the government and BP’s response efforts on CNN or standing in the gymnasium of Boothville-Venice Elementary School...before an anxious crowd of shrimpers and fisherman.”

Nungesser’s pox-on-all-their-houses persona seemed to fit with the public mood as the oil kept gushing. And by the beginning of July, he had to tamp down speculation that he would run for lieutenant governor of Louisiana.

### **The oil spill has been a TV story, but was different on cable vs. network**

The disaster in the Gulf has been neither a print media story like the economy—where newspapers have devoted the most attention—nor a talk show story like health care, where radio and cable talkers dominated.

Instead it has been a TV story, with cable news (31% of the airtime studied) and network news (29%) devoting the most time to the subject. But the two television platforms took significantly different approaches to the story. Network television focused largely on the disaster itself, with the strong visuals it provides. Fully 64% of the network airtime was devoted to the cleanup, containment and impact storyline, by far the most of any sector.

The overall cable coverage was more mixed, but one key focus was the blame game. Fully 45% of the cable coverage was devoted to examining the government’s role and BP’s role. That represented considerably more coverage than broadcast network news gave to those storylines (28%).

And when it came to cable news coverage, the three major news networks took different approaches, with CNN’s focus markedly different than its competitors.

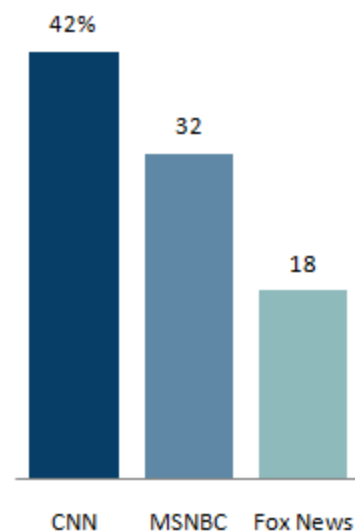
For one thing, CNN spent the most time on the spill story. From April 20 to July 28, nearly half (42%) of the CNN airtime studied was devoted to the subject. That compares with about one-third (32%) on MSNBC and about one-fifth (18%) on Fox. And no one on CNN gave more attention to what was happening in the region than Anderson Cooper, who has gained a reputation as a disaster-scene reporter in locales ranging from hurricane-ravaged New Orleans to earthquake-battered Haiti.

On his June 29 show for example, Cooper reported from the Audubon Aquatic Center outside New Orleans where about 100 oil-soaked sea turtles were being cared for. He interviewed medical personnel and watched as they gave one of the recently arrived animals an injection of antibiotics, which along with vitamins and mayonnaise (which apparently helps rid the turtles’ systems of oil), constitutes the main form of treatment.

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### **Oil Spill Coverage by Cable Channel**

*Percent of newshole*



**Date Range:** April 20 – July 28, 2010

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Cooper’s reporting also helps explain why CNN also offered a different coverage focus than its rivals. More than half its coverage (57%) was devoted to the containment, cleanup and impact storyline, while less time was devoted to the corporate (22%) and government (12%) angles.

By contrast, 39% of the MSNBC airtime studied featured the containment, cleanup and impact coverage. And the network, with its liberal prime-time talk hosts, devoted 22% of its coverage to the government storyline and spent more time than either of its rivals on the BP/corporate storyline (31%).

The harsh light shone on BP was apparent in MSNBC host Keith Olbermann’s assertion on his June 21 show that there was evidence of “the most damning missed warning sign [by BP] yet, weeks before the disaster in the Gulf... a leak in the blowout preventer on Deepwater Horizon unfixed just weeks before BP’s cataclysm.” He then accused the company of “lying” in its earlier estimates of the amount of oil spilling from the leak.

The Fox News Channel—where conservative prime-time hosts dominate—devoted the least time to the breaking news aspect of the story (36%) and the corporate angle (17%). Instead it easily spent the most time on the government storyline (39%), and a good deal of that was critical.

On his June 7 show, Fox host Sean Hannity, noting that it was “Day 49 of the Gulf Coast disaster,” criticized the president for spending his time welcoming athletes and performers to the White House in recent weeks.

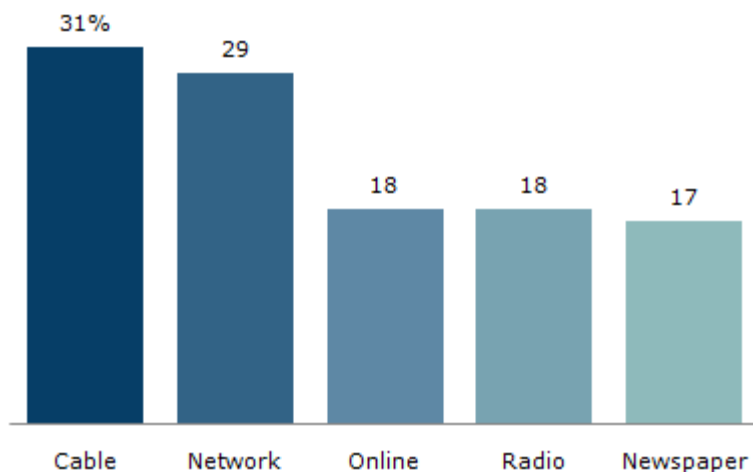
“It seems that no matter how bad this spill gets, the president just can’t seem to forego any type of recreation,” Hannity said.

In broadcast network news—where the commercial networks tend to be much more in sync on news judgment than their cable cousins—the big three spent virtually the same amount of time on the saga. Nearly one-third (32%) of the airtime studied on NBC was devoted to the spill, followed closely by 31% on CBS and 29% on ABC. The PBS NewsHour devoted the least time, 21%, to the story. In addition, all the networks devoted by far the most time, more than 50%, to the cleanup, containment and impact storyline.

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### Oil Spill Coverage by Media Sector

*Percent of newshole*



**Date Range:** April 20 - July 28, 2010

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A July 6 report on NBC was typical of the kind of on-scene coverage done by network news. It started with the news that oil had been found in Lake Pontchartrain near New Orleans. That was followed by a story about how roughly 1,400 landowners in the region, using federal funds, were trying to save migrating birds by “purposely flooding their fields...to keep [the birds] from reaching oily nesting grounds turned into killing fields.”

Various other media sectors focused on different aspects of the disaster.

The newspapers examined in this study stood out for their attention to BP, devoting 31% of the front-page newshole to that topic, the most of any sector.

The online sector followed very closely behind newspapers when it came to BP-oriented coverage, devoting 30% of its newshole to that storyline.

And driven in part by the ideological talk hosts, radio devoted a higher percentage of its oil spill coverage (31%) to the government’s role than any other media sector. Opinions varied widely about the performance of the Obama team.

Conservative Rush Limbaugh, for example, assailed Obama’s response to the crisis, saying he was “not serious about...actual governing and stewardship on this country.” Across the dial, liberal radio talker Ed Schultz went after Obama critics, asking “What do you want the president to do, swim down there and stick his fist in it...The president...does not run this country, the multinationals do.”

### **In social media, less attention but lots of skepticism**

While the oil spill was a dominant story in the mainstream media for a much of the spring and summer, it was not as hot a topic in social media during the first 100 days of the saga.

According to PEJ’s News Coverage Index and its New Media Index, the spill was one of the top three stories in the mainstream press in each of the 14 full weeks included in this study, spending nine of those weeks as the No. 1 story. In contrast, however, the subject made the list of top five stories in the blogosphere in five weeks, and was the top story only once. On Twitter, the spill was among the top five most Tweeted topics twice during those 14 weeks. And videos about the spill made the list of most viewed news videos on YouTube three times.

If there was less interest, one clear theme seemed to permeate the social media commentary. It was that of a lack of confidence and trust in the capacity and intentions of both public and private institutions—including the federal government, BP and the mainstream media.

The Obama Administration’s response provided fodder for critics on the both the left and right. Commentators in the social media held BP in even lower regard as bloggers treated the company’s efforts with skepticism. Finally, the mainstream press was also a target in the social media. After one blogger unearthed the use of doctored photographs released by BP, bloggers congratulated themselves for playing a fact-checking role once reserved for the mainstream press.

On blogs, the BP saga made the roster of top five stories for the first time in the week of May 3 to 7, when it was No 2. One catalyst was a Washington Post piece by Dana Milbank that

detailed “gulf-state conservatives’ newfound respect for the powers and purse of the federal government.” Liberal bloggers applauded Milbank for exposing hypocrisy, with Bob Cesca suggesting that “Republican lawmakers are quickly stashing their ‘Don’t Tread on Me’ banners and tea bag hats in the nearest closet and demanding that the federal government come to the rescue of the Gulf States.” Conservatives, like Stephen Bainbridge, criticized Milbank for using the spill to “score political points.”

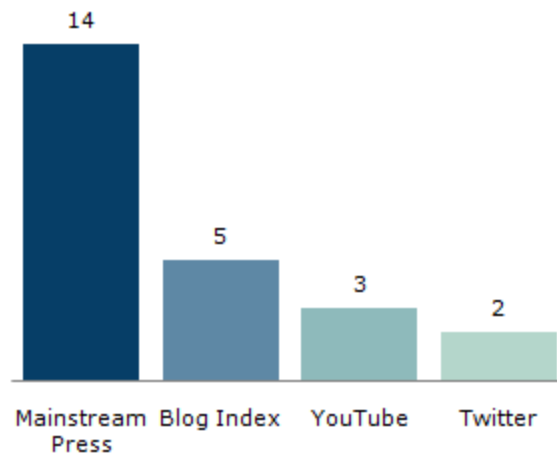
The story next returned to prominence in the blogosphere during the week of June 7 to 11 when it began a run of three straight weeks on the roster of top stories. The placement of a containment cap on the broken wellhead led to an upsurge in coverage, with the spill finishing as the No. 4 subject. Many bloggers expressed doubts about BP’s effort, such as the warning from Udo Schuklenk at the Ethx Blog to “not trust a word BP is uttering.”

One week later, June 14 to 18, it was the second-biggest subject on blogs, driven by the news that the government’s estimate of the flow rate of the spill had increased dramatically to as much as 60,000 barrels per day. This development reinforced the blogosphere’s lack of trust in both the government and BP.

The spill also cracked the top five stories on Twitter that same week, ranking as No. 3. Many tweets echoed the frustration in the blogosphere. In addition to criticism of BP, Dave Morin’s June 17 tweet demonstrated a general lack of confidence in the cleanup effort: “This (the oil spill) is such an epic tragedy. The saddest part of which is that no one knows how to help.”

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**Number of Weeks as a Top Five Story**



Date Range: April 19 – July 28, 2010

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The week of June 21 to 25, the spill ranked as the No. 3 story on blogs. Bloggers reacted to word that beleaguered BP CEO Tony Hayward, who had famously declared that “I’d like my life back,” had spent a day watching his yacht race around the Isle of Wight.

David Rothman of The Solomon Scandals posted satirical diary entries ascribed to Hayward, including pleas that Americans “get a life-and let me enjoy my own!”

The next time the spill showed up as a top story in Twitter was July 12 to 16, when it was the No. 2 story. The precipitating event was the apparently successful sealing of the leaking well with a new containment cap as Twitter was used to spread the news. The Huffington Post tweeted on July 15: “Oil Spill STOPPED For First Time In 3 Months Says BP.” But along with relief, many Twitter users reaffirmed their concern either with the permanence of the seal or the remaining damage to the Gulf. TeenThings remained critical of BP despite the good news: “April: Oil spill

starts. May: Still spilling. June: Still going. July: BP finally thinks of stopping it with a cap. BRILLIANT!”

The final week of significant attention to the spill story on blogs was July 19 to 23, when it was the No. 1 subject. That stemmed in large part from the role blogger John Aravosis played in exposing the manipulation of photographs by BP to make its crisis center look busier than it was. Many commentators focused on bloggers performing a fact-checking role.

“A great example of how a blogger spotted something that traditional media failed to notice,” declared Steve Safran at Lost Remote.

On the video sharing site YouTube, the spill gained traction in three different weeks, first generating interest early May. The top five news videos that week included a report from Al Jazeera about options for containing the spill and a clip featuring oil burning near the site of the Deepwater Horizon rig explosion.

The story re-surfaced on YouTube from June 26 to July 2 when a local activist posted a clip of what he claimed was oily residue on the ground in Louisiana as a result of the oil spill. The video attracted more than 750,000 views and the criticism of a National Weather Service official who questioned whether the substance in the clip was due to the spill.

Then from July 3 to 9, the top-ranked video was a clip of CNN’s Anderson Cooper, who reported extensively from the Gulf region, criticizing federal government rules limiting media access to some cleanup sites.

This type of coverage, migrating from the mainstream press to the social media, may have reinforced the views of a blogosphere already quite skeptical about the role of the government—as well as the other key players—in the massive oil disaster.

### **Media outlets used the web to try to tell a complex story**

The long-running environmental crisis stemming from the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico gave media outlets an opportunity to use the web as a significant platform for coverage, frequently in ways that enhanced or augmented print and broadcast reports.

In connection with this study, PEJ examined the websites associated with 14 major national news outlets to evaluate how those organizations used their sites to bolster ongoing coverage of the spill.<sup>2</sup> The analysis focused on interactive graphics and multimedia tools on those websites. While by no means an exhaustive look at the web tools developed, it did offer a sampling of how they were deployed as an accessory to coverage.

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<sup>2</sup> This included the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, USA Today, the Associated Press, ABC News, CBS News, MSNBC, PBS NewsHour, Fox News, CNN, the Huffington Post and ProPublica. PEJ researchers examined the interactive features between July 30 and August 4, 2010.

Among key findings:

- The most common element in these web tools was the timeline used to highlight key events and often to catalog a news site’s coverage of those events. In many cases, these features were used to drive news consumers to spill-related stories on the website. And often, they could not be fully understood without the context of broader reporting.
- The most successful online tools included clickable icons linking to more information on a particular topic, audio narration that explained complicated technical and scientific concepts and animations that showed various processes, including the spread of oil in the Gulf. One example was the New York Times [video animation](#) detailing failures in the rig’s blowout preventer.
- Some website features provided static graphics or graphics that were simply too intricate to be understood by someone without a working knowledge of engineering or science. The Los Angeles Times often posted [graphics](#) that appeared exactly as in the newspaper. The Wall Street Journal offered [diagrams](#) that weren’t interactive and packed with so much detail that they were difficult to comprehend.
- CNN.com stood out among the websites examined for the sheer volume of interactive features it produced and their level of sophistication. The most informative was a multifaceted [feature](#) breaking down the spill by the numbers, effectively putting the story of the spill into historical, economic and environmental contexts.

These web tools traced the causes of the spill and provided a window into the disaster as it was unfolding. The best among them allowed users to explore various aspects of the crisis on their own and offered assessments of the spill’s impact on the Gulf Coast that otherwise would have proved a daunting task for traditional print or broadcast outlets. The function of these features fell into several different categories.

### *Monitoring and tracking the leak*

Many of the interactive tools examined here monitored the gusher in the Gulf. Two of them that generated substantial pickup were counters featured on the PBS NewsHour [website](#). The NewsHour’s [Oil Leak Widget](#) tallied how many gallons of oil leaked into the Gulf based on competing low-to-high estimates from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, from [outside experts](#) and from BP. Figures were regularly updated as sources released new estimates. The high estimate topped out at 328 million gallons, as of August 11, 2010.

The widget—embeddable by others, at no charge—appeared frequently on blogs and local news websites. Accompanying the leak counter, NewsHour provided [video](#) of the leaking well via the free streaming website [UStream](#) by using video from remote cameras operated by BP.

Going beyond the numbers, most news organizations launched animated illustrations tracking the appearance of oil in the Gulf and coastal marshes. The websites of [USA Today](#), [the New York Times](#), and [CNN](#) provided oil spill “trackers” that visualized where oil in the water had been observed. The animated maps showed the movement of oil slicks from the leak over time, from

their origination at the former site of the rig to their spread that eventually pushed sludge onto Gulf beaches.

### *Assessing the impact*

USA Today maintained a [map](#) tracking beach closures, swimming advisories and recreational fishing bans affecting those states. In a related [map](#), the New York Times depicted the oil spill's effect on wildlife in the Gulf region, showing the number and location of dead or injured animals since the oil spill began.

CNN's [Depths of the disaster](#) feature displayed diagrams showing different methods to stop or contain oil shooting from the well, graphics depicting BP's cost of responding to the oil disaster versus its profits, figures on the number of BP claims paid and the potential economic tourism loss to the Gulf Coast over the next three years. Most graphics included rollover boxes for users to get detailed information on icons in diagrams, numbers in underlying graphs and the chronology of major events.

In another CNN.com graphic, [Oil disaster by the numbers](#), the size of the BP spill was compared to the 1989 Exxon Valdez accident and the 1991 Persian Gulf oil spill, which was estimated to be slightly larger than the BP spill as of August 2. A separate [interactive map](#) detailed the 10 worst domestic oil spills—the 2010 Gulf oil spill being No. 1—in the U.S. since 1975, detailing their causes and how much oil was spilled.

### *Anatomy of the disaster*

News organizations also used graphics and animation to explain technical failures on the oil rig that led to the explosion and BP's attempts to stanch the flow oil from the ruptured well. Several examples were highly detailed and required a higher level of comprehension than the average news article.

The Wall Street Journal offered a comprehensive series of [static illustrations](#) detailing different methods to contain and cap the spill, including the “static kill” and siphons.

In a [video animation](#), the New York Times examined the possible causes of the initial leak, focusing on a critical failure in part of the rig's blowout preventer, the blind shear ram, which is intended to cut off the oil flow in emergencies. The Times' video also included narration by reporter James Glanz explaining the more technical aspects of the blowout preventer's critical components.

Another example of interactive graphics aiding in the explanation was MSNBC's [physics of oil spills](#) feature. It illustrated and detailed how raw oil spreads, evaporates, disperses and eventually biodegrades over time. The feature, though unrelated to an August 4 [government report](#) stating that as much as three-quarters of the oil released from the BP had been dispersed, revealed how crude concentrations can dissipate in the ocean.

### *Citizen journalism and crowd sourcing*

Among the outlets we examined, CNN and the web-only investigative news website ProPublica were the only ones who tapped their audiences to provide firsthand accounts of the Gulf oil spill.

CNN extended the use of iReports—news videos and photos created by users of CNN.com and viewers of its cable channels—to collect first-person accounts from residents along the Gulf Coast. As of August 5, the website provided more than 240 videos on a [page devoted to oil spill iReports](#).

Many of the reports offered the personal experiences of residents affected by the disaster. iReporter [Geoff Livingston profiled](#) a sixth-generation Louisiana fisherman known only as [Kerry](#) grappling with the reality that he may have to give up his profession. “My father always told me this business was a dying one,” Kerry told Livingston. “But no one imagined it would happen like this.”

ProPublica also used its website to connect with readers. Along with reporter Sasha Chavkin’s [Unofficial Guide to BP Oil Spill Claims](#), ProPublica asked readers who had filed claims and received letters from BP stating that they had provided insufficient documentation to contact Chavkin, who was pursuing a story on this issue. In this instance, ProPublica was using the interactivity of the web to enhance its more traditional reporting.

### The public had a huge appetite for this story

If the mainstream media gave the Gulf spill a large amount of attention over an unusually long time span, the public, if anything, was even more fascinated.

According to surveys from the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, public interest in the saga remained extremely high throughout the first 100 days of the disaster, equaling the levels of attention to some of the grimmest moments of the recent economic crisis and exceeding the interest at the most pivotal moments of the health care debate.

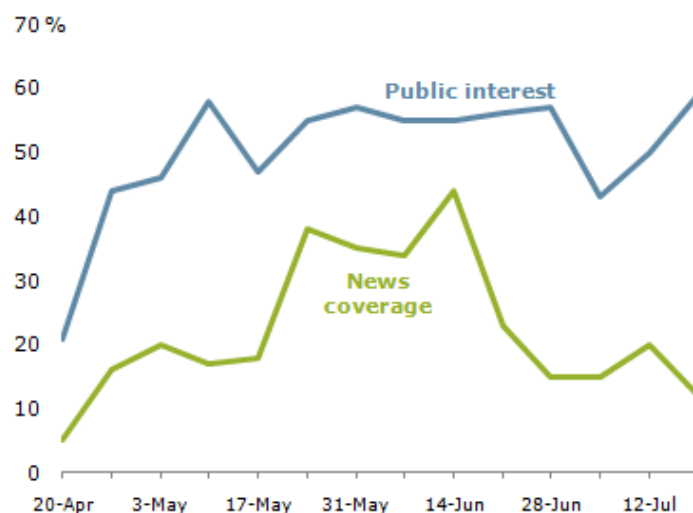
In the 14 full weeks of coverage included in this report, the oil spill was the No. 1 story in the mainstream media nine times, according to the PEJ’s News Coverage Index. When asked by the Pew Research Center which stories they were following “very closely” in that span, news consumers ranked the oil spill at the top of the list in 13 of those 14 weeks.

Public interest in the oil disaster, indeed, tended to deviate from media coverage in two ways. The public became keenly interested in the disaster even earlier than the media did, and

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### Public Interest vs. Coverage

*Percent of respondents very closely following the BP spill compared with coverage (percent of newshole)*



**Note:** The dates listed above correspond with the News Coverage Index schedule, which operates Monday through Sunday. The public interest survey was initially conducted Friday through Monday but switched to a Thursday through Sunday schedule as of May 13. The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press is responsible for the News Interest Index



the public remained fascinated at those levels for even longer than the press.

In the four weeks from April 26 to May 23, coverage of the spill was substantial, but not overwhelming, never exceeding 20% of the newshole. But in the same period, public interest was very high as the percentage of respondents who said they were very closely following events in the Gulf ranged between 44% and 58%.

Mainstream media attention to the story also began to level off in late June. But news consumers' interest stayed very high. In the month between June 28 and July 25, for example, spill coverage ranged between 12% and 20% of the weekly newshole studied. But in that same time frame, the percentage of those paying very close attention remained at near peak levels—between 43% and 59%.

As much as the media focused heavily and in a sustained way, in other words, the public was even more interested.

Moreover, the intensity of public interest in the BP disaster compares favorably with some of the other mega-stories of the past few years.

When the extent of the Wall Street meltdown first became apparent in September 2008, public interest in the economy peaked, with 70% saying they were following the story very closely the week of September 26 to 29, 2008. But in February and March 2009, when the grim economy was once again driving the news, that number ranged between 48% and 56%, levels very comparable to the oil spill numbers.

And despite the polarizing passions stirred by the battle over health care in August 2009 when the town hall meetings were a major newsmaker, interest in the subject peaked with 49% following it very closely from August 21 to 24, 2009. In late March, the time of the final legislative showdown that led to the passage of a bill, the percentage following the story very closely topped off at 51%.

But that doesn't quite match America's interest in the oil spill story; indeed, in eight different weeks in the saga, the percentage of respondents saying they were following the story very closely ranged between 55% and 59%.

On several occasions—in May, June and July—Pew Research Center asked whether news outlets were producing the right amount of spill coverage, too little or too much. In each case, a majority of respondents said they were getting the right amount of news. But in each of the surveys, the percentage of people saying they were not getting enough coverage exceeded those who said they were getting too much—by 24% to 14% in May, 27% to 15% in July and a narrower 21%-19% in June.

## **About This Report**

A number of members of the PEJ staff assisted in the production of this report, “100 Days of Gushing Oil: Eight Things to Know About How the Media Covered the Gulf Disaster.”

The team that aided in the research, including coding and content analysis of almost 2900 stories about the oil spill, included: Vadim Nikitin, Sovini Tan, Nancy Vogt, Danielle Kurtzleben, Kenny Olmstead, Mahvish Khan, Jeff Beattie, Kevin Caldwell, Jesse Holcomb, Emily Guskin, Angela Sanson and Paul Hitlin.

Other staff members who made substantial contributions to the report were: Researcher/coder Aaron Ray, research analyst Josh Appelbaum, public relations associate Dana Page, weekly News Index manager Tricia Sartor, analyst/coder Laura Houston Santhanam, senior methodologist Hong Ji, associate director Mark Jurkowitz, deputy director Amy Mitchell and director Tom Rosenstiel.

## **Methodology**

As a special report for PEJ’s weekly News Coverage Index (NCI), “100 Days of Gushing Oil: Eight Things to Know About How the Media Covered the Gulf Disaster” is based on aggregated data collected from April 20, 2010 through July 28, 2010. The complete methodology of the NCI is available [here](#).

Examining the news agenda of 52 outlets in five media sectors, including newspapers, online, network TV, cable TV, and radio, the NCI is designed to provide news consumers, journalists and researchers with hard data about what stories and topics the media are covering, the trajectories of major stories and differences among news platforms.

Following a rotation system, PEJ analyzes all stories with a national or international focus that appear as follows:

- On the front page of newspapers
- In the entirety of commercial network evening newscasts
- During the first 30 minutes of network morning news and all cable programs
- During a thirty minute segment (rotated daily) of the PBS evening news and NPR’s Morning Edition or All Things Considered
- As one of the top 5 stories on each website at the time of capture
- During the first 30 minutes of radio talk shows
- During the entirety of radio news headline segments

## ***Capture and Retrieval***

All outlets included in the weekly index are captured and included in PEJ’s media archive.

For newspapers that are available in print in the Washington, D.C. area, we have hard copies delivered to our office each day. For newspapers that are not available for delivery, digital

editions of the paper are retrieved either through the newspaper's own web site, or through the use of digital delivery services such as [pressdisplay.com](http://pressdisplay.com) and [newsstand.com](http://newsstand.com). When necessary, the text of articles are supplemented by the archives available in the LexisNexis computer database.

Radio programs are captured through online streams of the shows. Using automated software, we record several local affiliates that air the program in various markets throughout the country. The purpose of this method is to ensure that we have a version of the program in case one of the streams is unavailable on a particular day, and so that we record the show in a manner that represents the way a typical listener would hear the program with commercials and newsbreaks.

Online websites are captured manually by a member of PEJ's staff. The capture time is rotated between 9 am ET and 4 pm ET. The home pages and pages with the top articles for all sites are saved so that when we reference the material, the format is the same as it appeared online at the time of capture.

Finally, all television shows are recorded digitally and archived for coding purposes. PEJ is a subscriber to DirectTV satellite service and all programs are burned onto DVDs for archival purposes.

All television and radio programs are then coded by a member of PEJ's staff who watches or listens to the archived version of the program.

### ***List of Outlets and Rotation Schedule***

The most current list of outlets and rotation schedule is available [here](#).

### ***Story Selection***

This report aggregates the NCI from April 20, 2010 through July 28, 2010. The data is primarily based on 2,866 oil spill stories during that time. Stories were considered to be about oil spill if 50% or more of the story was on that topic.

### ***Coding Team***

The coding team responsible for performing the content analysis is made up of seventeen individuals. The daily coding operation is directed by a coding manager, a training coordinator, a methodologist, and a content supervisor. Several of the coders have been trained extensively since the summer of 2006 and most of the coders have more than a year's worth of coding experience.

### ***Social Media Coverage of the Oil Spill***

This study also examined the coverage of the oil spill in social media, which is based on the data collected from PEJ's [New Media Index](#) from April 20, 2010 through July 28, 2010. The NMI is

a weekly report that captures the leading commentary of blogs and social media sites focused on news.

**A prominent Web tracking site *Icerocket*, which monitors millions of blogs, uses the links to articles embedded on these sites as a proxy for determining what these subjects are. Using this tracking process as a base, PEJ staff compiles the lists of links each weekday. They capture the top five linked-to stories on each list (25 stories each week), and reads, watches or listens to these posts and conducts a content analysis of their subject matter, just as it does for the mainstream press in its weekly *News Coverage Index*.**

The priorities of the bloggers are measured in terms of percentage of links. Each time a news blog or social media Web page adds a link to its site directing its readers to a news story, it suggests that the author of the blog places at least some importance on the content of that article. The user may or may not agree with the contents of the article, but they feel it is important enough to draw the reader's attention to it. The percent of links of each big story is determined by taking the total number of links in the sample and then dividing that number by the number of links devoted to each specific story. The percentages are then ranked in order to discover the five storylines that were most present in online commentary.

*For the examination of the links from Twitter, PEJ staff monitored the tracking site *Tweetmeme*. Similar to *Icerocket*, *Tweetmeme* measures the number of times a link to a particular story or blog post is tweeted and retweeted. Then, PEJ captured the five most popular linked-to pages each weekday under the heading of "news" as determined by *Tweetmeme*'s method of categorization. And as with the other data provided in the NMI, the top stories are determined in terms of percentage of links.*

The New Media Index also includes a section of the most popular news videos on YouTube each week. Each Friday at noon ET, a PEJ staff member captured the list of most viewed **news and politics videos** on YouTube over the previous week. These videos are categorized as such on the YouTube site and are often a mix of mainstream news reports, raw footage relating to breaking events, or other types of public affairs clips. PEJ determined the top five most viewed videos as they are listed on YouTube's page at the time of capture.

The complete methodology of New Media Index available [here](#).

### ***Interactive Feature on Media Websites for the Oil Spill Coverage***

In connection with this study, PEJ examined the websites associated with 14 major national news outlets to evaluate how those organizations used their sites to bolster ongoing coverage of the spill.

The outlets examined included: the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, USA Today, the Associated Press, ABC News, CBS News, MSNBC, PBS NewsHour, Fox News, CNN, the Huffington Post and ProPublica.

PEJ researchers examined the interactive features between July 30 and August 4, 2010. Researchers audited these websites and searched for interactive features on the homepages and in sections of the sites devoted to coverage of the Gulf oil spill. The analysis focused on interactive graphics and multimedia tools on those websites. While by no means was this an exhaustive look at web tools developed, it did give us a sampling of how news outlets used the web to supplement their coverage.

### ***Public Interest in the Oil Spill***

This study also compares public's interest in the oil spill with the media coverage of the oil spill during the first 100 days of the disaster. In this study, while the media coverage is based on the data collected from PEJ's News Coverage Index, the public interest is based on the [News Interest Index](#) surveys (NII) produced by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. NII is a weekly survey measuring the public's interest in and reaction to major news events, and has been used in conjunction with the NCI.

These twin indices of what the media are covering and how the public is responding help understand the degree to which journalists and citizens are in sync—or in disagreement—over what constitutes important news.

**Topline**  
**100 Days of Gushing Oil:**  
Eight Things to Know About How the Media Covered the Gulf Disaster

**Oil Spill Coverage by Media Sector (April 20, 2010-July 28, 2010)**

<b>Media Sector</b>	<b>% of Newshole</b>
Overall	22.3%
Newspapers	16.7
Online	17.6
Network	28.8
Cable	30.9
<i>CNN</i>	<i>41.9</i>
<i>Fox News</i>	<i>18.5</i>
<i>MSNBC</i>	<i>31.9</i>
Radio	17.6

**Oil Spill Storylines by Media Sector (May 10, 2010-July 28, 2010)  
(Percent of Newshole)**

Storylines	Overall	Newspapers	Online	Network	Cable				Radio
					Overall	CN N	Fox News	MSNBC	
Environmental, Business Impact/ Containment, Clean-up	47.4%	48.9%	44.2%	64.0%	46.7%	57.3%	35.5	38.7%	33.6%
Corporate Responsibility/ Culpability	26.9	30.8	30.2	19.2	24.4	22.2	17.2	31.4	27.5
Government/ Politician Impact	17.2	12.6	15.5	8.6	20.8	12.3	38.8	22.4	31.3
Effect of Weather/ Storms on Clean-up	2.4	0.3	3.1	4.3	2.1	2.3	3.4	1.3	2.8
Offshore Drilling Issues/Debate	2.0	2.6	2.0	0.9	1.7	1.9	2.8	0.8	2.8
Joe Barton Apologizes to BP	1.2	0.4	1.3	0.6	2.1	1.4	1.1	3.5	1.5
Other	2.8	4.4	3.7	2.3	2.1	2.6	1.2	1.9	0.5

**Top Ten Lead Newsmakers in Oil Spill Coverage (April 20, 2010-July 28, 2010)**

Rank	Lead Newsmaker	# of Stories	% of Stories
1	Obama, Barack*	333	11.6%
2	Hayward, Tony	108	3.8
3	Allen, Thad	51	1.8
4	Nungesser, Billy	39	1.4
5	Jindal, Bobby	38	1.3
6	Barton, Joe	34	1.2
7	Suttles, Doug	33	1.2
8	Dudley, Robert	29	1.0
9	Markey, Ed	17	0.6
10	Feinberg, Kenneth	13	0.5
10	Salazar, Ken	13	0.5

\*Includes Barack Obama and Obama Administration as a Newsmaker.