Framing a Disaster in Multiple Media: Environmental Groups' Response to the Gulf Oil

Spill of 2010

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Abstract

This study develops two theoretical propositions regarding the ways that interest groups respond to focusing events and evaluates those propositions in the context of the Deepwater Horizon blowout and oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. Using content analysis of email communications, press releases, blog entries, and congressional testimony, I show that environmental groups responded to the disaster by offering preconceived causal stories, assigning blame to various parties before the full details of the event were known. I call this phenomenon *blame-casting*. Further, I show that groups used the oil spill to assign responsibility for a wide range of harms not directly related to the causes of the disaster itself. Both rhetorical strategies represent ways that interest groups seek to take full advantage of windows of opportunity following crises. These findings suggest a broader role of causal stories in the policy process than has been assumed in previous research.

Introduction

On April 20th, 2010, an explosion aboard the BP-operated Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico killed 11 workers and precipitated a massive offshore oil spill. More than 200 million gallons of crude oil gushed from the sea floor over the course of three months, leading many to characterize the spill as the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history (Fahrenthold and Ylan, 2010). Interest groups, public officials, and media organizations have spent considerable time documenting the economic and ecological impacts of this spill as well as the causes of the spill, ostensibly to prevent future disasters of this magnitude. Most directly, questions of responsibility have consequences for BP, as well as the rig's owner, Transocean, and cement contractor, Halliburton; these firms could face civil and criminal penalties under numerous federal laws, with potential liability in the billions of dollars. Additionally, investigations into the causes of the spill have broader consequences for the direction of environmental and energy policy. Rather than an unbiased search for answers, such investigations involve strategic efforts by a variety of political actors to define the spill and its causes in ways that lead to their preferred policy solutions.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the causal stories that environmental groups tell about the spill and to develop theoretical propositions about the role of such stories in the policy process. Which actors do groups hold responsible, and how do groups use blame attributions to advance their policy agendas? This research suggests a much broader role of causal attributions in problem definition than has been indicated in previous research. I argue, first, that interest groups construct causal stories long before investigations of policy problems are complete and, second, that groups use focusing events to cast blame for a wide range of harms not directly tied

to the events themselves. In doing so, groups seek to take full advantage of "windows of opportunity" resulting from crises.

The Role of Language in Politics

The importance of language in the social construction of political events has been documented by scholars in multiple social science fields, including sociology, communication, and political science. Across these literatures, scholars have noted that framing—or the way events are interpreted and described—is the essence of politics (Hajer, 1993; McBeth et al., 2007; Rochefort and Cobb, 1994). For instance, the meaning of such phenomena as rising global average temperatures is not "given" (Dryzek, 2005; Hajer, 1993; Hastings, 1998). Depending on one's beliefs about climate change, rising temperatures could signal natural fluctuations or serve as evidence of the catastrophic consequences of human activity. Politics, thus, consists of competition over the meaning of such information, and language is the medium through which actors construct their interpretations and seek to persuade others (Bridgeman and Barry, 2002; Chong and Druckman, 2007; Dryzek, 2005; Edelman, 1971).

More fundamentally, the construction of narratives is viewed as central to human nature (see Fisher, 1984) and as necessary for individuals to make sense of an increasingly complex information environment (Nisbet, 2010). Fischer (1984) goes so far as to state that all human communication consists of stories, while Nisbet (2010) suggests a practical reason for such storytelling: as a means of simplifying complex phenomena and facilitating the development of coherent interpretations of "apparently isolated events, trends and policy solutions" (p. 44). As such, storytelling serves a heuristic function, as a coping mechanism that reflects the fact that humans face cognitive limitations in their encounters with an information-rich world (see Jones and Baumgartner, 2005).

While social scientists agree that language is essential to politics, a consistent terminology for investigating the role of language remains elusive. Perhaps the most prevalent term in use is "framing." Researchers typically use the term "frame" to mean one of two things: 1) "a mental map," or a way of understanding events (see Goffman, 1974; Schon and Rein, 1994), or 2) the specific words, phrases, or other linguistic devices such as metaphors that are used to convey meaning (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Chong and Druckman, 2007). Through the choice of particular language, those engaged in framing selectively highlight certain attributes of an event, while downplaying others in order to exclude contradictory interpretations (Entman, 1993; McBeth et al., 2010).

Within political science, scholars have used two additional terms, "problem definition" and "narrative." Problem definition can be considered a subset of the framing literature to the extent that scholars have focused on the various dimensions of policy problems and how they are conveyed (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984; Rochefort and Cobb, 1993, 1994). Since the late 1980s, problem definition has been replaced by "narrative policy analysis" in research investigating the importance of language in the policy process (see Roe, 1994). According to McBeth and Shannahan (2005), narrative policy analysis addresses "the social construction of problem definitions through the use of language" (p.16). However, rather than focusing on a set of problem dimensions—such as proximity, scope and severity (see Cobb and Elder, 1972; Rochefort and Cobb, 1993)—narrative policy analysis investigates particular story features, including the presence of protagonists and antagonists, dramatic moments, symbols, and morals (Jacobs and Sobieraj, 2007; Jones and McBeth, 2010; Nie ,2003; Stone, 2002). As in the framing literature, scholars have recognized that narratives consist of assumptions and beliefs as well as textual strategies for conveying those beliefs (Jacobs and Sobieraj, 2007; McBeth et al., 2007).

Narratives differ from frames only to the extent that they emphasize a specific temporal order (McComas and Shanahan, 1999).

Finally, in addition to research focusing exclusively on the social construction of policy issues, framing and/or problem definition is a component of larger theories of the policy process. For instance Baumgartner and Jones (1993) note the importance of "policy image," which includes how a policy issue is defined and whether the status quo is portrayed positively or negatively, in explaining major policy change. Similarly, Kingdon's multiple streams model (1984) emphasizes the role of strategic framing by policy entrepreneurs. In response to rising issue salience, Kingdon argues, political actors reshape their justifications for particular policy solutions in the hopes of "selling" these solutions to the problem-at-hand.

These theories, among others, have identified a number of consequences of framing for the policy process. Generally, researchers have noted the importance of framing at both the public and elite levels (Edelman, 1988; Hastings, 1998; Petracca, 1992; Iyengar, 1990). Numerous studies have found that framing influences public opinion (Benford and Snow, 2000; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, 1991; Rochon, 1998; Snow and Benford, 1998). The degree to which problems are framed in dramatic or novel terms can determine the level of attention problems receive (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988; Downs, 1972; see also Best, 1995). By signaling the importance of some issues over others, framing is instrumental in the agenda setting process (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Fischer and Forrester, 1993; Petracca, 1992; Rochon, 1998).

Framing can also be an effective means to build political alliances and influence political participation (Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2001; Layzer, 2006). The conflict expansion literature suggests that interest groups can bring in new supporters by defining issues broadly (see Hannigan, 1995; Schattschneider, 1960). Similarly, interest group research suggests that groups

can effectively mobilize their supporters by vilifying their opponents, or those deemed responsible for particular policy problems (see Jacobs and Sobieraj, 2007; Lewicki et al., 2003; Melucci, 1996). Jacobs and Sobieraj (2007) use the term "character funneling" to describe the process by which interest groups demonize their opponents, reducing complexity and heightening antagonistic feelings as a way of encouraging political action (p.9).

At the elite level, framing can be used by decision makers as way of signaling their power and reinforcing their legitimacy (D'Angelo and Kuypers, 2010, p. xiv; Dryzek, 2005; Jacobs and Sobieraj, 2007). It can also be influential in shaping policy outcomes (Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2001; Hajer, 1995; Petracca, 1992). Specifically, the way a policy problem is defined has consequences for the types of solutions that are considered and ultimately adopted (Hajer, 1993; McBeth and Shanahan, 2005; Schon and Rein, 1994). Stone (1989, 2002) notes the importance of causal stories in pointing to particular remedies. Generally, she argues, causal stories that attribute problems to purposeful human action—as opposed to accidents—lead to calls for governmental intervention. By identifying guilty parties, causal stories indicate who (if anyone) should be punished and who should be empowered to "fix" problems. Further, causal stories facilitate the creation of political alliances to move particular policy solutions forward.

John Kingdon's multiple streams model (1984) also emphasizes the relationship between policy problems and solutions, though this model assumes that problems and solutions typically exist independently of one another. Upon the opening of "windows of opportunity"—often brought about by focusing events, or sudden, dramatic events that call attention to the failures of government policy—political actors seek to link their preferred policy solutions to existing problems (see also Birkland, 1997). To do so convincingly requires actions to portray these problems in ways that lead logically to their preferred policy alternatives.

A Theory of Blame-Casting

This research elaborates on an understudied implication of Kingdon's model and extends theorizing about the role of causal stories in problem definition. Kingdon (1984) argues that political actors have solutions just waiting for the right problem to arise, and Boscarino (2009) has demonstrated that groups shift their justifications for policy solutions in response to changes in problem salience. Similarly, I argue that interest groups have well-established beliefs about their political opponents. In policy areas with long-standing problems, groups have causal stories ready, just waiting for focusing events or other developments to raise the salience of those problems. Once a focusing event (such as an oil spill) happens, groups can readily blame particular actors without waiting for full investigation of the causes of the event. In short, just as solutions come before problems, so too does blame come before wrongdoing.

> *Proposition 1: In established policy areas involving long-standing problems, interest groups respond to focusing events by offering preconceived causal stories.*

I call this phenomenon of immediate blame attribution *blame-casting*. The term reflects two aspects of this framing activity: 1) a forecasting element, in which groups offer predictive statements about the conclusions they believe others will draw based on incoming information, and 2) an element similar to typecasting, in which groups build on and reinforce stereotypes about their political opponents. In order to preserve the plausibility of these accounts, groups emphasize facts that are already known and broadly accepted. For instance, in the case of the gulf oil disaster, environmental groups might point to oil companies' pre-existing poor safety and environmental records as evidence of their culpability in the current disaster. Additionally,

groups are likely to keep their blame attributions general enough that new details do not undermine their claims. In the case of the oil spill, for instance, groups might emphasize the general risks associated with oil drilling while avoiding detailed accounts of the events leading up to the spill and the relative contributions of the various companies involved in the drilling operation.

While somewhat risky—to the extent that groups' claims might later be disproven—the practice of blame-casting offers numerous potential advantages. As Kingdon's model indicates, windows of opportunity in politics are unpredictable and can close without the enactment of any policy solutions. By responding immediately to focusing events, interest groups, policy entrepreneurs and other political actors can thus ensure that they don't miss these opportunities. A second advantage of blame-casting is, simply, that these preconceived causal stories have already been developed and can be re-deployed with only minor rhetorical adjustments. Groups have already "tested" these stories; they have likely used them in past communications because they provide strong justifications for groups' preferred policy alternatives. These stories might have been effective in fundraising appeals or efforts to mobilize groups' supporters. Thus, groups can be confident about how these stories will likely be received in a new context.

Assuming that groups' policy goals remain unchanged, their causal attributions should also remain consistent, even in the face of new information. This consistency may reflect the convenience of relying on familiar arguments when responding to policy windows. Additionally, there are a number of constraints on the kinds of credible claims that groups can make, which likely contribute to blame-casting. Within any established policy area, there is a historical discourse, including knowledge of the way problems have been dealt with in the past and a set of values and ideas underlying policy debates (Hajer, 1993; Jacobs and Sobieraj, 2007;

Kane, 1997). Within environmental politics, for instance, it is commonplace to blame

corporations for the harms associated with economic activity (Hajer, 1996). Once accepted, such

narratives are quite difficult to displace (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Bridgeman and Barry, 2002).

Alternative narratives—particularly those that do not reflect pre-existing beliefs systems and

attitudes—are at a significant disadvantage in framing contests (Chong, 2000; Chong and

Druckman, 2007). In addition to these broad limitations, individual groups are also constrained

by the expectation of temporal consistency in their own rhetoric. According to Jacobs and

Sobieraj (2007), groups' current statements are linked to their past statements, as well as to the

past statements of their allies (p. 9). Significant changes within their framing of policy issues

might undermine groups' credibility. For these reasons, I expect blame-casting to be a

widespread phenomenon as groups' respond to focusing events or other windows of opportunity.

A second major proposition of this research extends theorizing about the range of causal

stories groups tell in response to focusing events. I argue that interest groups use causal stories

much more broadly than previous research has assumed. Prior research has focused on

individual problems and the numerous (and competing) causal stories that could be associated

with those problems (see Snow and Benford, 1992; Stone, 1989). For instance, Stone (1989)

illustrates a variety of causal explanations for deaths and injuries involving drunk drivers, noting

that the harms could be attributed not only to the drivers themselves, but also to faulty vehicle

design, unsafe highway design, lax enforcement of drunk driving laws by police, or irresponsible

provision of alcoholic beverages by bars and restaurants (pp. 296-97). In the context of focusing

events, however, blame attributions are not limited to the causes of the events themselves. In

fact, I argue that groups use these events to cast blame for a wide range of harms related to the

events, though not directly to their causes.

Proposition 2: Interest groups will not only assign blame for the causes of focusing events, but will use these events to cast blame for a wide range of related harms.

In the case of the gulf oil disaster, environmental groups might criticize the actions of BP and the federal government related to the clean-up of the spill. They might accuse other oil companies of negligence in developing plans to respond to blowouts and oil spills. They might also express disappointment with Congress for failing to pass specific bills in the wake of the spill. Unlike causal explanations of the spill itself—which are likely to remain consistent over time—these blame attributions can be expected to change as groups respond to new information about the problem as well as to political developments. In fact, one advantage of this type of blame attribution is that it helps groups to preserve the elements of drama and novelty in their claims. As Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) note, constant repetition of the same arguments can lead to "saturation" of social issues, as members of the public become tired of the same messages; subsequently, issues lose their perceived urgency and their places on the agenda. One can imagine that blame-casting is quite susceptible to saturation to the extent that groups' pre-conceived causal stories quickly lose their novelty. Thus, by responding to new developments and casting blame for related harms, groups can sustain attention to selected issues. An additional advantage of such blame attributions is that they may be subject to less scrutiny. In other words, to make an argument about what caused the spill is also to invite criticism by those who would offer counterclaims (Loseke, 2003, p. 85; Rochefort and Cobb, 1994, p. 16). Blame attributions related to events but not to their causes may be less risky to the extent that they focus on harms of lesser severity and scope and, thus, the accusations themselves are less damning.

The Environmental Case

Not limited to interest groups, the practice of blame-casting is likely to be found in the rhetoric of elected officials, political party leaders, and policy entrepreneurs, among other actors. For a number of reasons, however, interest groups are particularly worthy of study. As noted by Tierney and Frasure (1998), framing constitutes a large component of interest group activity, eclipsing more "traditional" strategies such as seeking to influence elections (pp. 311-12). Second, the impact of interest group advocacy on the policy process is well-documented. Interest group framing can have an impact on agenda setting (Andrews and Edwards, 2004) as well as on the alternative selection phrase of the policy process (Kingdon, 1984; Smith, 1995). Finally, in a general sense, framing by one set of actors can influence framing by others, constituting a positive feedback loop (Hope, 2011, p. 15). Due to the prominence of interest groups within major policy debates, it is reasonable to assume that groups can influence the broader discourse.

Furthermore, environmental and energy policy constitute an appropriate case study to test the theory of blame-casting. Given that the environmental interest group community is similar to other public interest policy communities, the findings of this study should be generalizable to other social policy areas (Bosso, 2005). Additionally, the energy and environmental policy domains are "crowded," meaning that there are numerous political actors jockeying for influence (Boscarino, 2011). In this competitive context, the importance of crafting persuasive narratives is heightened.   Environmental problems are also highly complex and can be understood from multiple perspectives; the greater the number of possible understandings of an issue, the more important framing is in structuring issue definition (Dryzek, 2005). Similarly, Nie (2003) describes environmental issues as "wicked problems," or value-based conflicts which cannot be

easily resolved through "techno-rational analysis" and for which there are multiple possible problem definitions—hence the importance of framing efforts in getting one's preferred problem definition accepted.

Finally, as a powerful focusing event, the gulf oil disaster constitutes an incredible opportunity to study the role of framing in the policy process. Since environmental issues typically have low salience (McComas and Shanahan, 1999), the significance of this event as an opportunity for policy change cannot be understated. Unlike some focusing events that take just minutes to occur—such as plane crashes or earthquakes—the gulf oil disaster played out over five months in 2010, starting with the blowout of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in April, continuing with a massive underground oil spill, and ending with the sealing of the well with cement in September. While the spill was ongoing, BP made numerous unsuccessful attempts to stem the flow of oil, and the federal government took a variety of steps to address perceived shortcomings in the oversight of oil and gas activities, including canceling of proposed lease sales and instituting reforms within the Department of Interior. As such, the events surrounding the disaster offered environmental groups numerous opportunities for blame attribution. Further, the findings of this case study are likely to be generalizable to other problem events that occur over extended periods of time, such as the financial crisis and recession of 2008 and 2009.

Research Expectations

There are numerous implications of the aforementioned propositions that can be tested in the context of the gulf oil disaster. First, I expect environmental groups to offer causal explanations of the spill immediately following the April 20th blowout, rather than to wait for the results of investigations by BP and the federal government.

Hypothesis 1A: Interest groups will offer causal explanations immediately

following focusing events.

Given the technically complex nature of the drilling operation and the web of actors across BP, Transocean, and Halliburton—each of which sought to displace blame onto the others—the time required to complete the investigation was likely too long for environmental groups seeking to use the event to move their preferred policy solutions forward. Many groups had been lobbying the U.S. Senate to pass climate and energy legislation, hoping to secure passage before the 2010 election season (when Democrats would likely lose seats in Congress). Having a prepared causal story for the spill could serve that purpose well before the full details of the spill could be revealed. Prior to the disaster, there were several causal stories in circulation that groups could easily and credibly adapt to the oil spill. For instance, the problem of America's "addiction to oil" was well-recognized, having been previously articulated by President GW Bush during his State of the Union address in January of 2006. The fact that a Republican president uttered this phrase suggests a high level of legitimacy and widespread appeal for this causal story, which also offers a strong justification for climate change legislation and other initiatives prioritizing renewable energy. Additionally, environmental and safety violations were not new to the oil industry, allowing groups to point to previous spills such as the Exxon Valdez spill in 1989 as evidence of the dangers of associated with the industry. Finally, BP also had a checkered past, suggesting potential culpability in the current disaster. Perhaps most notably, an explosion at the Texas City oil refinery in 2005 left 15 workers dead and 170 injured. BP was ultimately found in violation of federal environmental and worker safety regulations and fined $50 million (Rudolf, 2010). In short, I expect environmental groups to draw on these and other preexisting stories in their immediate responses to the spill.

Additionally, I expect that groups' attributions of blame will follow the overall pattern of attention of the disaster. Following conventional wisdom, one might expect that as new information comes in, the relative intensity of blaming activity will increase as interest groups, policy-makers and members of the media are able to construct the events of the disaster in greater detail. Assuming, however, that groups need only a minimal amount of information on which to base causal stories and that they will seek to take immediate advantage of policy windows created by focusing events, I expect to see a great deal of blame-casting early on, followed by a gradual decline as overall attention to the disaster wanes.

Hypothesis 1B: Rather than increasing over time as new information comes in,

blame attributions will decrease as overall attention to policy problems declines.

Finally, assuming the advantages of engaging in a wide range of blame attributions, I expect that attributions of blame related to the spill, but not directly to its causes, will outnumber causal stories about the spill itself.

Hypothesis 2: Blame attributions related to focusing events, but not directly to

their causes, will outnumber statements about the underlying causes of focusing

events.

Research Methods

Data

Data for the study were drawn from the communications of 33 national-level environmental organizations based in the United States. These groups were identified from a larger data set of 200 environmental organizations (citation removed to protect the integrity of the peer review process). These organizations represent a range of program areas that are potentially relevant to the oil spill: climate change, oceans, energy, and wildlife.   Given the

expectation the groups will use causal stories to advance their preferred solutions, it is important

to study groups with a variety of policy objectives.[1] These organizations also represent diversity

of political strategies, with organizations that rely on both "radical" tactics (such as boycotts and

protests), including Public Citizen and Rainforest Action Network, as well as mainstream

organizations that typically rely on lobbying and litigations, such as Earthjustice and

Environmental Defense Fund.

All groups in the study communicated about the spill on at least two occasions in at least

one of four media—blogs, press releases, email, or testimony before Congress. The median

number of communications per group is 16, ranging between 2 communications (Earth Day

Network) and 231 communications (Natural Resources Defense Council).   Capturing variation

in groups' relative attention to the spill is important to the extent that it approximates the overall

pattern of attention to the spill in the environmental policy community. Additionally, most

groups communicated in multiple media.[2] Given the possibility that groups communicate

differently to different audiences, it is important to capture communications across a range of

communication forums. The four media included in the study also encompass a variety of

communication purposes, including information provision, mobilization, fundraising, and direct

lobbying.

For each organization, all blog posts, emails, and press releases related to the spill were

collected between the date of the blowout (April 20, 2010) and the date that the well was

officially sealed and declared "dead" (Sept. 20, 2010). Emails were collected by signing up for

each organization's email list, and blog posts and press releases were collected from groups'

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[1] The appendix contains a table illustrating how these program areas are distributed across the organizations.

[2] In fact, two-thirds of groups communicated in at least two media, and a majority communicated in at least three media.

websites. Communications were included in the sample if at least ten percent of the text addressed the gulf oil spill. Email newsletters were an exception in that many groups use these to cover multiple topics. Rather than include the entire newsletters, I chose to excerpt content about the spill. Additionally, groups' testimonies at congressional hearings and at hearings conducted for the Natural Resource Damage Assessment were collected. The dates of the testimony ranged from May 16, 2010 to Oct. 28, 2010. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of communications, with a total sample size is 1394 communications.

Table 1. Distribution of Communications in the Sample

Communication Forum	Number of Statements
Blog	787
Email	252
Press Release	33
Testimony	22
Total	1394

Blog posts constitute a majority of communications in the sample, reflecting the fact that many groups posted multiple times on a daily basis in the immediate aftermath of the spill. Emails and press releases, in contrast, are typically issued less frequently. The small number of testimonies is a function of the limited number of hearings following the spill and the fact that groups had to be invited to testify.

Content Analysis

The content analysis was designed to assess groups' use of causal stories and the link between causal explanations and policy solutions. For each document, it was determined whether the communication contained statements blaming particular actors. Twenty responsible parties were identified, including BP, oil companies generally, Americans (due to their "addiction to oil"), the Minerals Management Service, the federal government, the Obama

Administration, Congress, and the Environmental Protection Agency. Additionally, each statement containing blame was coded into one of three categories: 1) blame for directly causing the spill or contributing to conditions that precipitated the spill, 2) blame related to a party's response to the spill, including policy proposals in the aftermath of the spill or specific actions taken during the clean-up, and 3) blame for something unrelated to the causes of or responses to the spill. For example, the following statement from a Center for Biological Diversity press release suggests that the oil industry is to blame for conditions that led to the spill: "The Gulf of Mexico disaster shows with tragic clarity the absurdity of the claims by the oil industry . . . that offshore oil and gas development is safe." In other words, the oil industry contributed to a false sense of safety, encouraging risky behavior that would inevitably lead to disaster. Examples of blame assignments related to responses to the spill include criticisms of BP's use of chemical dispersant and criticisms of oil companies for opposing a moratorium on offshore drilling in the aftermath of the spill. Finally, examples of blame attributions unrelated to the causes of or responses to the spill include criticisms of members of Congress for accepting campaign funds from oil companies and criticisms of the federal government for allowing oil companies to conduct seismic surveys (which are believed to harm marine life). Each document was also coded in terms of what (if any) policy solutions were mentioned. Finally, the date of each communication was noted in order to analyze the temporal dimension of groups' assignments of blame across various parties. Two coders coded 950 documents, while one coder coded the rest (444 documents). There was strong inter-coder reliability among the coders, as indicated by the 93 percent agreement across all coding items.

Results

General Blame Attribution

　　　　To determine whether groups engaged in blame-casting, it is instructive to look at the

distributions of communications about the gulf oil disaster. Figure 1 plots the temporal

distribution of all communications and communications containing blame attributions, using a

20-day moving average. The x-axis represents days since the blowout of the Deepwater Horizon.

Figure 1. Distribution of Environmental Groups' Communications about the Gulf Oil Disaster
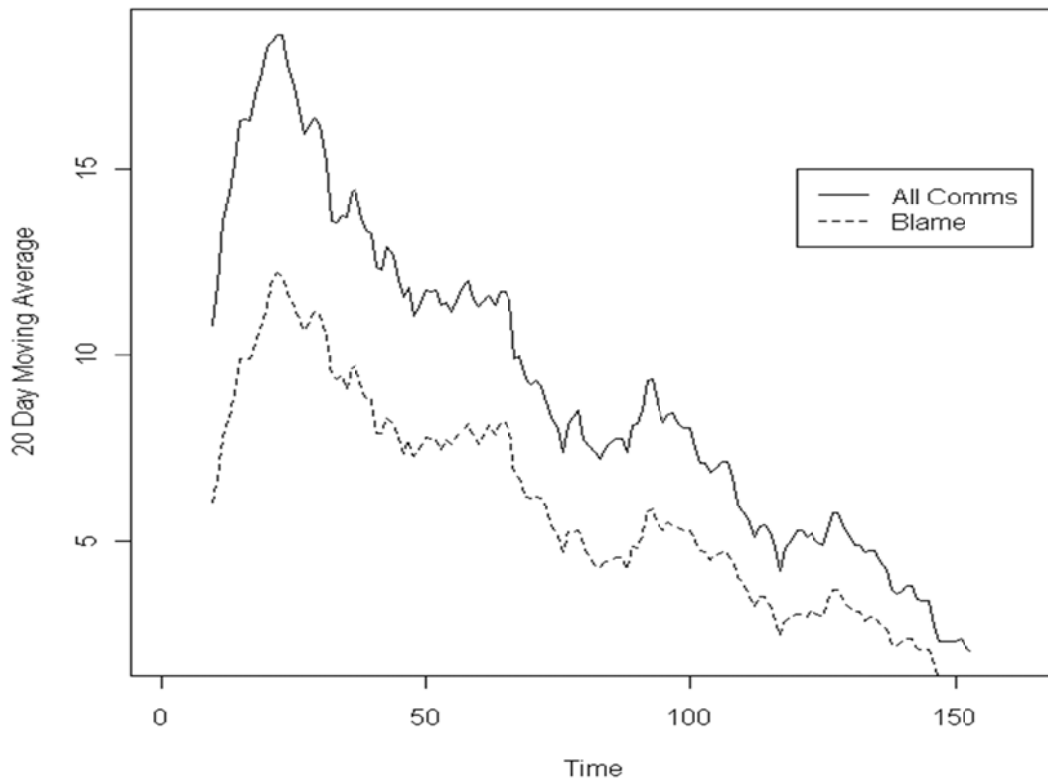
Overall attention to the gulf oil disaster peaked between 11 and 20 days following the April 20th

blowout, while communications involving blame peaked shortly thereafter, between 21 and 30

days following the blowout. These data indicate strong support for both *H1A* and *H1B*; blame

attributions occurred almost immediately following the blowout and declined as overall attention

to the spill decreased. In fact, the first instances of blame-casting occurred within days of the

initial blowout. On April 24th, a League of Conservation Voters blog post blamed the blowout

on Americans' addiction to oil and criticized a state senator in Virginia for falsely claiming that

oil drilling is safe. On April 25th, a National Audubon Society blog post blamed Obama for

previously supporting expanded offshore drilling. Also on April 25th, a press release from the

Ocean Conservancy noted the dangers of offshore drilling and lamented Americans' dependence

on oil, stating, "Nearly a generation after the Exxon Valdez spill, the nation's addiction to oil still

threatens our coastal communities, marine wildlife, economy, and ocean--our planet's life

support system." In short, these early responses to the disaster drew on facts known prior to the

blowout and articulated these organizations' pre-existing beliefs regarding the perils of offshore

drilling; the tragedy of the Deepwater Horizon blowout simply offered a new opportunity to

make the kinds of claims these organizations had been making for years.

As indicated by the drop-off in blame attributions over time, there is no linear

relationship between the availability of information and the propensity of groups to use that

information to construct causal stories. While it might be reasonable to expect an initial wave of

communications simply reporting on the spill, followed by communications seeking to interpret

and explain its causes, it is clear that was not the case here. Rather, groups had preconceived

explanations, which they offered even as the spill was ongoing and the circumstances

surrounding its causes and consequences were still coming to light. In fact, these blame

attributions remained fairly consistent over time, varying between roughly 50 and 70 percent of

groups communications and displaying no consistent trend over time.

Specific Targets of Blame

     In addition to observing general trends in blaming activity, it is important to distinguish among various targets of blame in environmental groups' communications. Figure 2 illustrates the percentages of groups' communications mentioning the four most frequent targets in groups' communications: BP, oil companies generally, Americans' "addiction to oil", and the federal government.

Figure 2. Percentages of Total Blame Attributions Directed at Four Targets
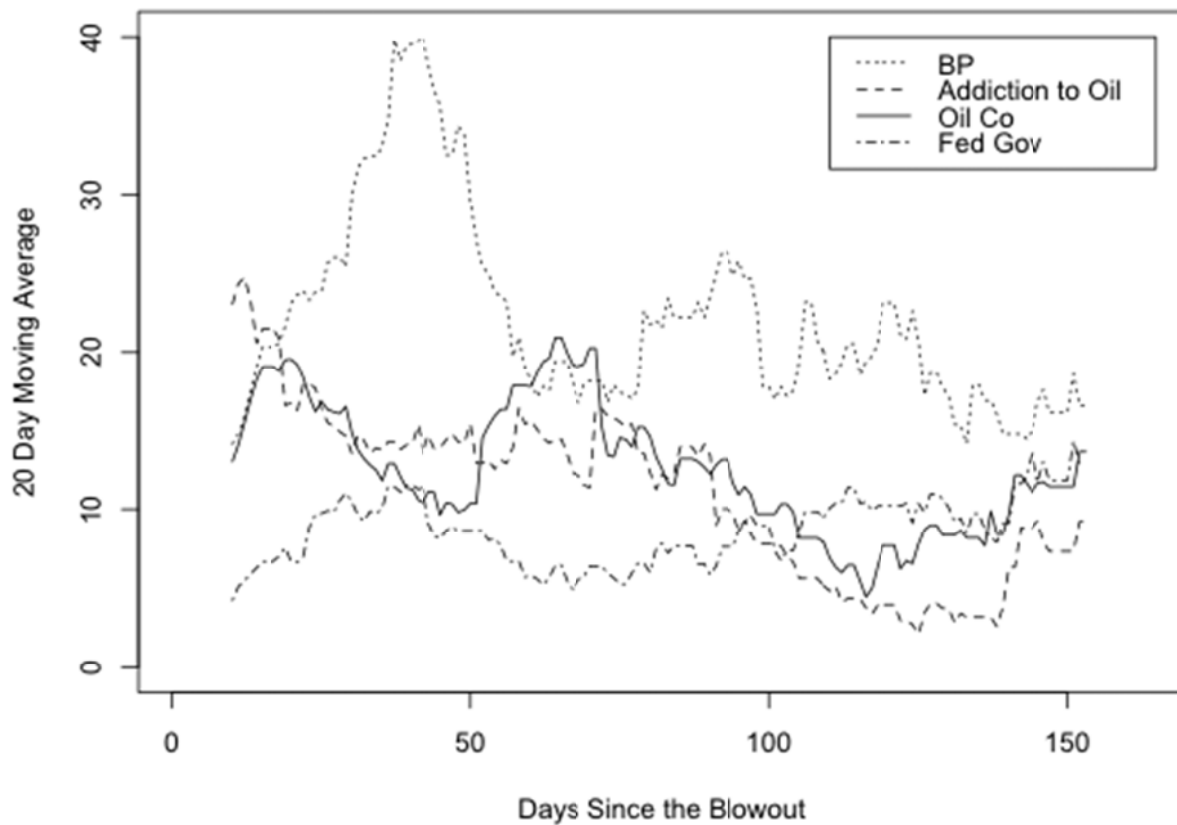
As Figure 2 indicates, there is substantial variation in the targets of groups' communications, with some targets appearing earlier than others. The phenomenon of blame-casting is apparent

within the first ten days of the blowout, with more than 20 percent of groups' communications addressing the "addiction to oil" problem and more than 15 percent criticizing oil companies generally. For example, in a press release on April 30th, Sierra Club executive director Michael Brune stated, "This disaster changes everything. We have hit rock-bottom in our fossil fuel addiction. This tragedy should be a wake up call." Similarly, on May 10th, the League of Conservation Voters (LCV) stated in an email, "As BP tries to contain their catastrophic spill in the Gulf Coast, our leaders seem to be scrambling to investigate the cause. However, the real cause of this environmental disaster is clear: It is a direct result of our dependence on oil." Interestingly, the LCV email seems to acknowledge the relative lack of information about the causes of the spill and nonetheless suggests that the investigation is not needed, given that the disaster can clearly be traced to Americans' dependence on oil. The same organization also noted in a blog post (on May 11th) that while drilling technology has improved, the oil industry has failed to develop spill response technology, concluding, "It's a classic story of profit-chasing over safety." This statement draws on the well-established narrative of the greedy corporation despoiling the environment and cites the gulf oil disaster as evidence of the narrative's veracity. In short, the early emphasis on the failings of the oil industry and Americans' addiction to oil illustrate pre-prepared storylines that depend very little on the details of the gulf oil disaster.

While the "addiction to oil" storyline was the most prevalent in the days following the blowout, it is also the only target to see a consistent decrease over time in groups' communications. One possible explanation for this is that the phenomenon of blame-casting— using pre-conceived storylines and drawing on general ideas and known facts—is strongest early on in the blame attribution process, but is later crowded out as new information comes in and new attributions are developed; in this case, blame directed at the federal government increased

at the same that the addiction storyline declined. There are at least two more possible explanations for the decreasing emphasis on the addiction narrative, including the lack of novelty inherent in the storyline, which offers few variations in how it can be conveyed. In contrast, groups could shift what they were blaming other targets for, thereby preserving the elements of novelty and drama that are vital for sustaining public attention. Additionally, it is possible that groups stopped discussing our nation's addiction to oil because the frame wasn't resonating with policy makers, who ultimately did not enact groups' most ambitious policy goals, including clean energy and climate change legislation.

In contrast to the "addiction to oil" storyline, blame directed at the federal government increased over time, peaking in early August (with more than 30 percent of groups' communications mentioning this target). The lack of attention to the federal government in the immediate aftermath of the disaster is likely due to the fact that environmental groups typically *don't* blame the federal government for policy problems; rather, most are strong proponents of government regulation in the realm of environmental policy. However, as investigations following the blowout revealed the extent of corruption within the Minerals Management Service—as evidenced by the practice of excluding drilling permits from environmental review, for instance—the emphasis on the federal government as a target of blame increased. This revelation prompted statements such as the following blog post by Earthjustice (on July 22nd), "This pollution tragedy exposed serious gaps in America's regulatory system. It has failed to protect the environment, the wildlife, and the public from harm." Second, the increasing negative attention to the federal government reflects environmentalists' growing frustration with the government's response to the spill. For instance, in an Aug. 4th blog post, Oceana criticized both BP and the federal government for using chemical dispersant to prevent the oil from

washing ashore, stating: "BP and the government may have saved sea birds and marshes at the expense of corals and fish." On the same day, the NRDC created a blog post criticizing the federal government for falsely claiming that most of the oil was gone from the gulf waters. Invoking a well-known reference to President Bush's claim in 2003 that major combat operations in Iraq were finished, the group stated: "unfurling the Mission Accomplished banner today is premature at best and unrealistic at worst."

Finally, it should be noted that blame directed toward BP varied considerably over the time frame. Interestingly, the corporation was mentioned the least among the four targets in the first ten days following the blowout. This may reflect the fact that environmental groups had not directed much blame toward BP prior to the spill. A survey of groups' email communications between August of 2006 and April of 2010 revealed that only 13 out of the 33 groups in the study mentioned BP at all. Out of a total of 27 emails, 6 of these actually praised BP. In 2007, for instance, environmental groups touted the formation of a coalition called the US Climate Action Partnership, of which BP was a part. Most negative mentions of BP noted the corporation's record profits—during a period of high gas prices in 2008. However, many of these emails included BP in lists of oil companies; while accused of being greedy, BP was not singled-out as especially greedy among the major "oil giants."

In short, the blame directed at BP following the blowout is *not* indicative of blame-casting, but rather reflected groups' responses to new information. It likely also reflected the fact that BP was the major focus of media attention as the primary responsible party in the wake of the blowout (see Hope 2011). While environmental groups might have preferred *not* to focus on BP, it appears that they essentially rode the wave of blame generated by the broader discourse about the disaster. They did so, in part, by focusing much attention on BP's containment and

clean-up operation, harshly criticizing the corporation for burning sea turtles alive in the course

of efforts to corral and burn off oil from the surface of the water, for failing to provide clean-up

workers with respirators, and, of course, for its various failed attempts to stop the flow of oil,

including the "junk shot" and "top kill." Environmental groups also criticized BP for its use of a

chemical dispersant called Corexit, which had never before been used on such a large scale.

Groups were not only concerned about the toxicity of the dispersant and potential harms to

marine life, but also about the possibility that BP was using the dispersant—which broke the oil

into tiny droplets—to hide evidence of the magnitude of the disaster. As the Center for

Biological Diversity stated in an email on June 3rd, "There is an element, here, of BP trying to

'bury the body' with dispersants by keeping the oil beneath the surface, keeping it from shore,

making it a lot harder to track." Similarly, the National Wildlife Federation stated in a May 6th

press release:

> …the dispersant that BP has been pouring into the Gulf of Mexico has formed a
> toxic mixture of oil, chemicals and water that could be in the hundreds of millions
> of gallons…Dispersants hide the worst potential visual impacts (such as oil-
> coated birds and beaches) and sweep the damage under the carpet by hiding it
> underwater where people are less likely to see it.

As these quotations illustrate, criticisms focusing on BP's response to the spill were *not just*

about the response; rather, these statements also implied the corporation's responsibility in

causing the disaster. Within two months of the blowout, this wave of criticism directed toward

BP "crested," after which groups' attention to BP leveled off and blame attributions toward other

targets increased.

Different Types of Blame Attributions

As indicated in Proposition 2, it is important to look at the kinds of accusations made in

the wake of focusing events. Figure 3 below plots the distributions of three different types of

blame—for causing the spill, for actions related to the spill response, and for other actions and situations—using a 20-day moving average.

Figure 3. Distributions of Three Different Types of Blame in Environmental Groups' Communications
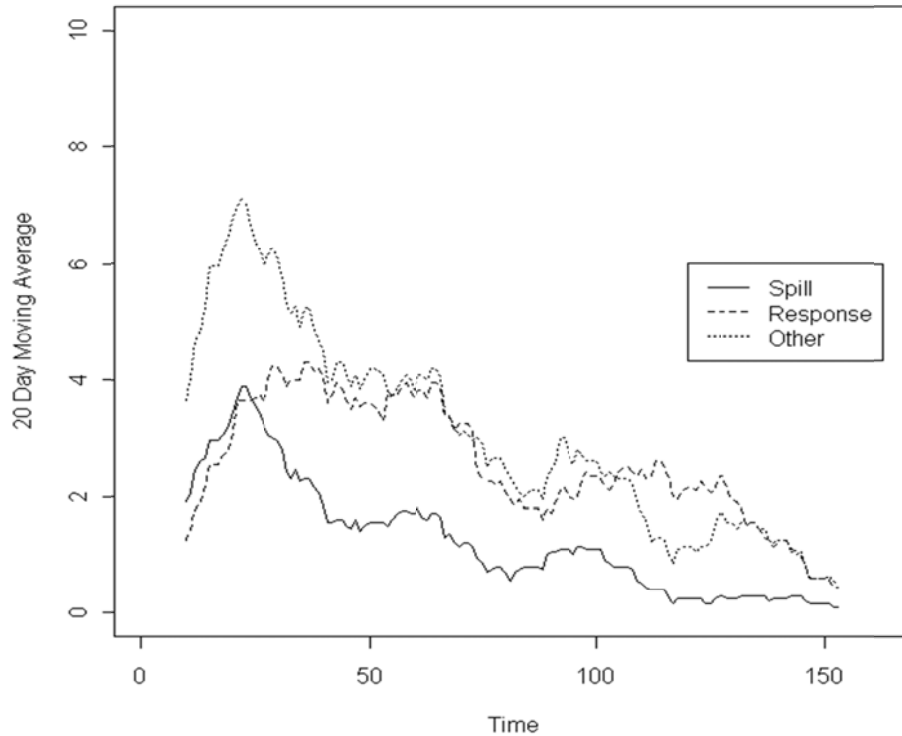
Consistent with Hypothesis 2, attributions for causing the spill are seen in just 13.6 percent of groups' communications, compared to 27.4 percent and 33.3 percent for response-related attributions and blame for related harms, respectively. This finding suggests that "windows of opportunity" that open in the wake of focusing events may be quite broad, as groups seek to address a wide range of policy problems in addition to the immediate harms of the events themselves.

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Figure 3 illustrates how these communications are distributed over time, using a 20-day moving average. For both the "spill" and "other" categories, communications peaked in the first few weeks following the blowout, a pattern consistent with groups' overall attention to the disaster. Notably, however, that peak was substantially higher for communications addressing related harms. These trends suggest that environmental groups saw the oil spill as an opportunity—albeit a tragic one—to gain supporters and sought to strike while the iron was hot. Attributions related to various actors' responses to the spill experienced a more subtle peak and slower drop-off, followed by a second, smaller peak in early August. This distribution is less consistent with the blame-casting concept; these attributions reflected groups' interpretations of incoming information about BP's clean-up operation and about the government's handling of the disaster, and we would expect these attributions to take up a greater proportion of groups' blaming activity over time. For instance, environmental groups paid close attention to the Obama administration's imposition of a temporary moratorium on deep water oil drilling, which was subsequently blocked by a federal judge before being reinstated again. Through the course of these events, groups found many actors to blame, including the oil companies fighting the moratorium and the judge in the case. In addition, groups tracked the progress of two spill response bills and directed much criticism at Congress when both bills died.[3]

The emphasis on harms related to the spill, but not its causes, is most prevalent in two of the forums of the study—i.e., emails and press releases—as indicated in Figure 4 (see next page). More so than blogs, emails and press releases are crafted with specific, policy-relevant goals in mind. Emails typically serve fundraising and mobilization purposes, and press releases represent

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[3] These bills were the Consolidated Land, Energy, and Aquatic Resources Act of 2010 (which passed the House on July 30th) and the Clean Energy Jobs and Oil Company Accountability Act of 2010 (which was introduced in the Senate, but did not pass).

groups' efforts to advance their problem definitions in the larger discourse. Blogs, in contrast, usually serve to provide information to groups' supporters, but are not designed to motivate those supporters to take action (see Merry 2010). The association of the gulf oil spill with a wide range of harms in emails and press releases thus reflects groups' strategic efforts to "expand the scope of conflict" and to get the most political leverage out of the spill as possible (see Schattschneider 1960).

Figure 4. Percentages of Communications Containing Three Types of Blame Attributions, Separated by Communication Forum
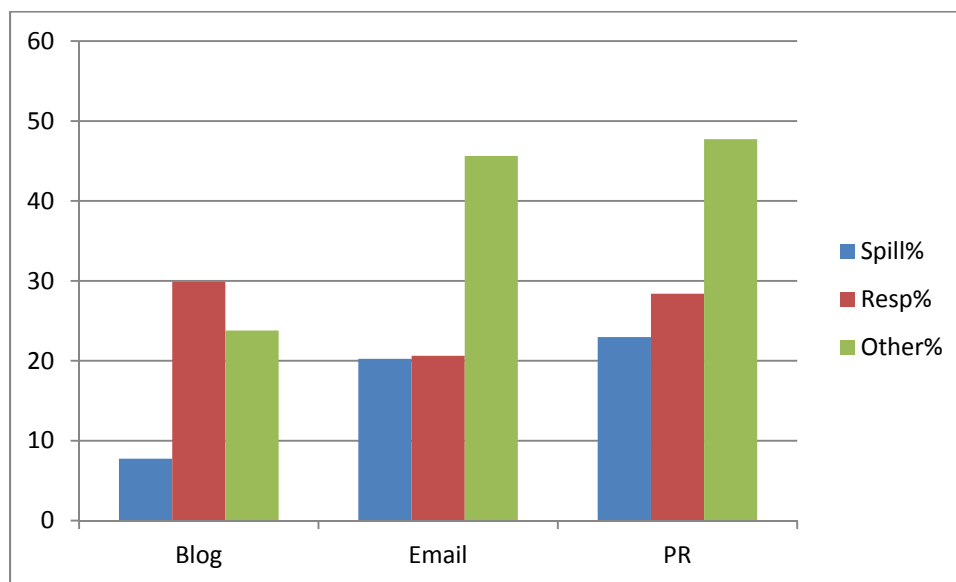
Conclusions

In summary, this research has developed two broad theoretical propositions regarding the ways that interest groups respond to focusing events. First, I argue that groups engage in *blame-casting*: that is, they respond to focusing events by offering preconceived causal stories, drawing on pre-existing information and pointing fingers at well-established opponents. Second, groups use focusing events to draw attention to a range of harms not directly linked to the causes of the events themselves. There is a common logic underlying these propositions in that both represent

ways that political actors seek to capitalize on policy windows. Not knowing how long these windows will remain open, interest groups act immediately to advance their political agendas and seek to leverage focusing events in as many ways as possible. Both of these propositions are supported by the case of the gulf oil disaster, as groups articulated causal explanations of the disaster within days of the blowout and offered a range of blame attributions over the five months that followed.

These rhetorical strategies are likely important in explaining how political actors shape the broader discourse about policy problems. Especially given that discourses, once established, are difficult to displace, the ability to influence discussion early on in the emergence of a problem could have long-term impacts on the policy response. Furthermore, the use of the same causal stories over time could lead to a gradual acceptance of particular types of blame attribution, making their use more likely in the future, especially in response to similar focusing events. While it is difficult to empirically demonstrate the link between groups' causal explanations and their influence on public policy, a number of policy goals supported by environmentalists were enacted following the gulf oil disaster, suggesting that their efforts had some impact. For instance, the Obama administration suspended plans for exploratory drilling in the Arctic and off the coast of Virginia, and the Department of Interior initiated reforms strengthening safety requirements for offshore drilling operations. Other policy goals, including climate change legislation and efforts to increase the cap on oil companies' liability in the event of a spill, were not realized. The failure of these initiatives is likely attributable, at least in part, to the highly competitive nature of energy politics (see Boscarino, 2011), in which environmental groups are arguably at a disadvantage relative to the oil industry lobby. Additionally, these losses may reflect a drawback of the use of preconceived causal stories; that

is, blame-casting might undermine groups' credibility to the extent that it is perceived as an attempt to take advantage of crisis. A second potential drawback relates to policy responses based on preconceived causal stories: if those stories are misguided or inaccurate, policies based on those stories may be similarly misguided. One need only look to President George W. Bush's justification for invading Iraq (based on the false belief that Saddam Hussein was building weapons of mass destruction) to realize the dangers of enacting policy based on preconceived ideas.

For better or worse, blame-casting is likely to become increasingly widespread as political actors expand their use of information technology and, consequently, their capacity to react almost instantaneously to problem events. Scholars should thus continue to investigate this phenomenon and to provide further insight into the role of causal attributions in the policy process. There are numerous remaining questions regarding blame-casting, including whether groups offer policy solutions as readily (and immediately) as they blame various parties and how blame attributions are linked to particular policy solutions. Additionally, research should investigate whether causal attributions vary according to group characteristics—such as issue-focus, ideology, and tactics—and across communication venues. Finally, these propositions should be tested in the context of other focusing events. This topic clearly warrants further exploration, both in the context of the gulf oil disaster and in other policy areas.

Appendix

Group Name	Climate Change	Energy	Oceans	Wildlife	Number of Forums	Total Communications
Billfish Foundation	N	N	Y	Y	1	3
Center for Biological Diversity	Y	N	Y	Y	2	78
Defenders of Wildlife	Y	Y	N	Y	3	114
Earth Day Network	Y	Y	N	N	1	2
Earthjustice	Y	Y	N	Y	4	109
Endangered Species Coalition	Y	N	N	Y	1	15
Environment America	Y	Y	Y	N	3	31
Environmental Defense Fund	Y	N	Y	Y	4	56
Friends of the Earth	Y	Y	Y	N	2	23
Global Green USA	Y	N	N	N	1	5
Green America	Y	N	N	N	1	2
League of Conservation Voters	Y	Y	Y	Y	3	62
National Audubon Society	Y	Y	N	Y	4	119
National Wildlife Federation	Y	N	N	Y	4	101
National Wildlife Refuge Association	N	N	N	Y	1	2
Natural Resources Defense Council	Y	Y	Y	Y	3	231
Nature Conservancy	Y	N	Y	N	4	37
Ocean Conservancy	N	N	Y	N	3	42
Oceana	Y	Y	Y	Y	4	91
Pew Environment Group	N	Y	Y	Y	3	12
Public Citizen	N	Y	N	N	3	92
Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility	N	N	N	Y	2	9
Rainforest Action Network	Y	N	N	N	3	16
Save the Manatee Club	N	N	Y	Y	1	3
SeaWeb	N	N	Y	N	1	7
Sierra Club	Y	Y	N	N	4	71
Southern Environmental Law Center	Y	Y	N	N	2	14
Union of Concerned Scientists	Y	Y	N	N	1	3
Waterkeeper Alliance	N	Y	N	N	2	9
WildEarth Guardians	Y	Y	N	Y	1	4
Wilderness Society	Y	Y	N	N	3	18
Wildlife Conservation Society	Y	N	N	Y	1	2

The first four columns illustrate the distribution of program across groups in the study. The most common program area is climate change, with 26 groups focusing on this issue. Additionally, 18

groups address energy policy; 13 groups focus on ocean conservation; and 17 groups focus on wildlife conservation. The fifth column indicates the number of forums that each group communicated in about the spill, out of a total of four possible forums (blogs, email, press releases, and testimony before government officials). Finally, the last column indicates the total number of communications from each group about the gulf oil disaster during the time frame of the study.

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