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BP'S USE OF TWITTER AS A CRISIS COMMUNICATION TOOL DURING  
THE GULF OIL SPILL CRISIS RESPONSE PHASE

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in the Meek School of Journalism and New Media  
The University of Mississippi

by

LINDSAY A. JORDAN

June 2011

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## ABSTRACT

On April 20, 2010, British Petroleum's Deepwater Horizon drilling rig located in the Gulf of Mexico exploded, creating the largest oil spill in U.S. history. BP launched a major public relations response that targeted its online audience through strategic use of its corporate website, Twitter feed, Facebook page, YouTube channel, and Flickr photostream. This content analysis examines BP's use of Twitter during the crisis response phase of the oil spill. BP tweeted on 1,161 occasions from the time of the explosion to the capping of the well. All tweets during this 13-week period were coded by two separate coders to ensure intercoder reliability. Tweets from @BP\_America reflected reputation repair strategies, responsibility attributions, and public risk perceptions during different emergency management phases. Reputation repair strategies were reflected in 331 tweets, with the strategies of "compensation" and "reminder" appearing most often. An overwhelming majority of tweets indicated an accident crisis (1,129) with a strong/high crisis responsibility (1,044). Public risk perceptions were implied in 831 tweets, and the perception most implied was that the oil spill response had strong political attributes tied to it.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

#### BP's Deepwater Horizon Tragedy

On April 20, 2010, British Petroleum's (BP) Deepwater Horizon drilling rig located in the Gulf of Mexico ignited and exploded, leaving 11 members of its 126-member crew missing and spewing thousands of gallons of oil into the Gulf.

Transocean's<sup>1</sup> Emergency and Family Response Team, BP, and the U.S. Coast Guard immediately began searching for these missing peoples, but suspended the search after covering 5,000 square miles. The 11 workers were pronounced dead, and their bodies were never recovered. On April 22, BP CEO and British native Tony Hayward said, "We are determined to do everything in our power to contain the oil spill and resolve the situation as rapidly, safely, and effectively as possible."<sup>2</sup> However, the Macondo well<sup>3</sup> would not be declared "dead" for nearly five months.

When the Deepwater Horizon rig sank, BP executed a major oil spill response. Initial response efforts included the implementation of a small fleet of response vessels, a protective boom,<sup>4</sup> dispersant,<sup>5</sup> relief well planning, and the skimming of oily surface water.

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<sup>1</sup> Transocean, the world's largest offshore drilling contractor, was drilling an exploration well using the Deepwater Horizon as a contractor to BP.

<sup>2</sup> "Response Timeline," BP, <http://www.bp.com/iframe.do?categoryId=9035136&contentId=7065156> (Accessed February 7, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> The Macondo well was the well from which the Deepwater Horizon was drilling for oil.

<sup>4</sup> A protective boom is used regularly in oil spill cleanups to prevent the oil from reaching the shoreline.

Efforts to seal the well began as early as April 25, but many were unsuccessful. In early May, the drilling of a relief well and a back-up relief well began. A Riser Insertion Tube Tool (RITT)<sup>6</sup> and a Lower Marine Riser Package (LMRP) containment cap<sup>7</sup> were also used to collect oil and pump it to the surface. A sealing cap was put in place on July 15, and oil no longer flowed freely from the well. By August 4, the U.S. government reported that three-fourths of the 4.9 million barrels of spilled oil had been evaporated, burned, skimmed, recovered, or dispersed. On September 16, the relief well drilled by Development Driller III successfully intercepted the annulus<sup>8</sup> of the Macondo well. Finally, on September 19, the U.S. federal government declared the well “effectively dead.”<sup>9</sup>

Monetary reimbursement efforts began shortly after the explosion with the initiation of a claims process,<sup>10</sup> the opening of several claims offices, and the activation of a toll-free call center. From the time of the explosion to the interception by the relief well, BP paid out billions of dollars for statewide oil spill contingency plans, protection plans, research of the oil spill’s effect on the environment and public health, tourism promotion for affected states, restoration of wildlife habitats, unemployed rig workers, the construction of barrier islands, personal claims, etc.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Chemical dispersants are used regularly in oil spill cleanups to break up the oil in an attempt to keep it from destroying marshes, mangroves, and beaches.

<sup>6</sup> The RITT attempts to bring oil flow to the surface by inserting a tube into the broken end of the Deepwater Horizon’s riser.

<sup>7</sup> The LMRP is a containment dome that is placed at the end of the Deepwater Horizon’s broken riser, which is intended to pump oil to the surface,

<sup>8</sup> The void in the leaking valve on the Deepwater Horizon was sealed.

<sup>9</sup> “Response Timeline,” BP.

<sup>10</sup> BP’s claims process followed the “responsible party” guidelines of the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, as the U.S. Coast Guard designated BP as a responsible party.

<sup>11</sup> BP claims to have spent more than \$13 billion on the clean-up, \$500 million on scientific studies, and \$280 million on wildlife rescue and rehabilitation.

## BP's Public Relations Campaign for the Deepwater Horizon Spill

While BP was waging war against the oil in the Gulf, a war waged against its reputation. Not only did BP have to fix the largest oil spill in the history of the United States, it had to fix its damaged reputation, as well. On the image front, BP had much to defend. In an article for *The Washington Post*, Matthew DeBord said, "In recent years, BP has spent heavily to position itself as an environmentally friendly company, redesigning its logo into a green-and-yellow sunburst and advertising its \$4-billion-alternative-energy push to move 'beyond petroleum.'"<sup>12</sup>

Since BP is now in the post-crisis phase of crisis communications, many experts have debated the successfulness, or lack thereof, of BP's PR campaign that accompanied the Gulf oil spill. After one year, and a PR bill of more than \$90 million, BP's reputation is still in question. Antonio Juhasz, the author of *Black Tide: The Devastating Impact of the Gulf Oil Spill*, says BP made the biggest PR mistake by lying to the public and regulators about its level of unpreparedness in combating a spill of such catastrophic proportions.<sup>13</sup> Some have gone as far to say that this PR campaign will serve as a "how not to" case study for future crises.

Many of BP's so-called oil spill related PR blunders can be traced back to Tony Hayward, the company's then Chief Executive Officer. Although traditional crisis public relations campaigns suggest appointing one person, usually a company's CEO, as the general spokesperson, British-born Hayward may not have been BP's best choice for an

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew DeBord, "Crisis PR must not confront its own problems," *The Washington Post* (July 25, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> John Vidal, "BP's PR campaign fails to clean up reputation after Gulf oil spill," *Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/blog/2011/apr/14/bp-pr-campaign-gulf-oil-spill> (accessed May 27, 2011).

American tragedy. Some experts have suggested that BP's biggest mistake was its decision to have Hayward serve as the most prominent spokesperson on the oil spill,<sup>14</sup> as his lack of experience with United States culture was highlighted. Although Hayward got points for making his way to the Gulf shortly after the explosion, people wanted to see him making an effort to fix the problem. Daniel Keeney, president of a Dallas-based PR firm said, "You want to get him right in the thick of things, even if he looks somewhat uncomfortable doing it."<sup>15</sup> On June 1, 2010, National Incident Commander (NIC) Admiral Thad Allen was announced as a spokesperson separate from BP. The public was excited to learn of Allen's new position. Denise Lenci and John Mullane said, "Allen was the reassuring spokesperson, the steady hand that the public needed to see. He consistently refused to put numbers on the flow rate or predict the final plugging of the Macondo."<sup>16</sup> However, having Allen serve as a spokesperson further confused BP's public relations tactics, since Allen represented an entity separate from BP.

During the oil spill, Hayward seemed to be quite careless in his words and actions. One basic rule of PR is to avoid finger pointing, as it can diminish a company's level of trustworthiness. Unfortunately, that is exactly what Hayward did during the immediate days following the explosion. He declared that the incident was "not our accident."<sup>17</sup> Other verbal gaffes made by Hayward included: "What the hell did we do to deserve this?"<sup>18</sup>;

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<sup>14</sup> Eric Reguly, "BP's PR woes start at the top," *The Globe and Mail* (June 16, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Erin McClam and Harry Weber, "BP's failures made worse by PR mistakes," MSNBC.com (Accessed February 13, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Denise Lenci and John Mullane, "Communicating with the public: how BP told the Macondo story," *Oil & Gas Journal* (December 6, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Alex Brownsell, "BP," *Marketing* (July 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin Snyder, "Tony Hayward's Greatest Hits," CNN Money, [http://money.cnn.com/2010/06/10/news/companies/tony\\_hayward\\_quotes.fortune/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2010/06/10/news/companies/tony_hayward_quotes.fortune/index.htm) (Accessed February 11, 2011).

“The Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean. The amount of volume of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume”<sup>19</sup>; “I would like my life back”<sup>20</sup>; and also “The company is not aware of any reason which justifies this price share movement.”<sup>21</sup>

Hayward also caught flack for attending an annual one-day yacht race around England’s Isle of Wight. BP Spokesman Robert Wine attempted to justify Hayward’s action by saying, “He’s spending a few hours with his family . . . I’m sure that everyone would understand that. He will be back to deal with the response. It doesn’t detract from that at all.”<sup>22</sup> Bobby Pitre, a Larose, Louisiana resident responded to this news by saying, “Man, that ain’t right. None of us can even go out fishing, and he’s at the yacht races. I wish we could get a day off from the oil, too.”<sup>23</sup> After news of the yachting incident broke, White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel said, “I think we can all conclude that Tony Hayward is not going to have a second career in PR consulting.”<sup>24</sup>

Experts have cited several additional critical PR errors made by BP. Fraser P. Seitel, a communication consultant who writes for Jack O’Dwyer’s PR Newsletter, claims that BP should not have made early predictions about the amount of oil involved in the spill, as it weakened the company’s credibility.<sup>25</sup> U.S. Coast Guard Rear Admiral and Deputy On-Scene Commander Mary Landry initially said no oil was leaking from the Macondo well. Landry’s

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Rich Blake, “BP Shares Sink Amid Oil Spill Bankruptcy Chatter,” ABC News, <http://abcnews.go.com/Business/bp-survive-company-result-oil-spill-gulf-mexico/story?id=10874702> (Accessed February 11, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Associated Press, “BP chief at yacht race while oil spews into Gulf,” *The New Zealand Herald* (June 20, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Tom Bergin, “Analysis: BP PR blunders carry high political cost,” *Reuters* (June 29, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Alan Caruba, “BP, PR, and the Oil Spill,” *Canada Free Press* (June 7, 2010).

estimates on leaking oil during the initial days of the spill rapidly increased from seepage, to 1,000 barrels per day, to 5,000 barrels per day, to 20,000 barrels per day, and so on, and so on. Estimates on leaking oil ultimately reached 100,000 barrels per day,<sup>26</sup> a far cry from Landry's initial statement.

Another critical error may have been choosing Briton Alan Parker, head of London-based PR agency, the Brunswick Group, as BP's external PR adviser. "Even though [Brunswick Group] has New York and Washington offices, it is by no means a communications and crisis management powerhouse in the United States. A big-name U.S. firm would have given BP better access to the White House and to Congress."<sup>27</sup>

#### BP's Use of Social Media as a Crisis Communication Tool

The Internet and emergence of new media have completely changed the way PR associates plan for crisis communications. As with any crisis communication plan, the online aspect of the plan should be extremely detailed and well rehearsed. Along with executing elements of a traditional PR campaign (i.e. press releases, press conferences, etc.), BP also launched an extensive social media campaign. However, the success of this social media campaign continues to be disputed by social media experts. Prior to the oil spill in the Gulf, BP did have a Facebook page, a Twitter feed, and a LinkedIn account, but none were updated regularly. In the wake of the oil spill, a full week passed before BP initiated any sort of social media response. For example, @BP\_America, BP's Twitter account, did not tweet about the oil spill until April 27, a full seven days after the spill.

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<sup>26</sup> Denise Lenci and John Mullane, "Communicating with the public: how BP told the Macondo story."

<sup>27</sup> Eric Reguly, "BP's PR woes start at the top."

In comparing the communications tactics pertaining to the Deepwater Horizon spill with that of the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill, Harlan Loeb, director of crisis and issues management at Edelman, a leading global PR firm, said that nowadays companies operate in a “24/7 risk environment.”<sup>28</sup> According to Loeb, the two key factors behind this change are the emergence of social media and nongovernmental organizations’ increase in influence. Loeb also said that social media offers companies “an extraordinary opportunity to break through the static of information flow to tell your own story.”<sup>29</sup> With the help of Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide and Purple Strategies,<sup>30</sup> BP launched an aggressive social media campaign after the first few weeks following the explosion. The company added a “Gulf of Mexico response” page to its corporate website providing information on all aspects of the spill, began updating its Facebook page and Twitter feed on a daily and then hourly basis, and broadcasted videos on its YouTube channel and uploaded pictures to its Flickr account of response and recovery effort. A BP spokesperson said its social media outreach efforts are “an additional communication tool [along with] the regular media. They appeal to a slightly different audience. They’re more direct than other channels.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Annabel Symington, “Legacy of the BP spill: What’s a reputation worth?; The BP spill in the Gulf of Mexico caused a public outcry and savaged BP’s share price. Image repair won’t be easy.” *The Christian Science Monitor* (October 18, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Purple Strategies is an agency that specializes in digital communication campaigns such as social media strategy.

<sup>31</sup> Brian Morrissey, “BP Gets Aggressive,” *Adweek* (June 21, 2010).



## BP's Corporate Website

One aspect of BP's social media campaign was to add a webpage titled "Gulf of Mexico response" to its corporate website. This page, which can be easily accessed from BP's home page, details BP's response to the Deepwater Horizon spill.

In a bold, large font, this page stated, "The completion of the relief well operation in the Gulf of Mexico is an important milestone in our continued efforts to restore the Gulf Coast. However our work is not finished. BP remains committed to remedying the harm that the spill caused to the Gulf of Mexico, the Gulf Coast environment, and to the livelihoods of the people across the region."<sup>32</sup>

This page provided the latest updates, response overview, response timeline, response pictures, response videos, response maps, claims information, important contacts, BP internal investigation information, links to Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi state response websites, as well as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, and RSS Feed widgets, etc.<sup>33</sup> As the crisis phase shifted fully into post-crisis mode, BP changed the title of this webpage to "Gulf of Mexico restoration." This page is currently on the website and highlighted by an orange tab. This page contains links to the following additional web pages: Deepwater Horizon accident; How we responded; Restoring the environment; Restoring the economy; Supporting oil spill response efforts; Claims information; and Investigating the accident.

In an effort to redirect users to its website, BP purchased search terms such as "BP," "oil leak," and "oil spill" from Google. Surprisingly, these Internet ads have generated less

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<sup>32</sup> "Gulf of Mexico response," BP, <http://www.bp.com/extendedsectiongenericarticle.do?categoryId=40&contentId=7061813> (accessed February 15, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

of a backlash than BP's TV ads and ads in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*.<sup>34</sup> BP has caught flack for spending over \$93 million on advertising, but believes it is part of its duty to communicate response efforts and relevant information to interested publics.

"The advertising could be perceived as very wasteful," said Sarah Hofstetter, Senior Vice-President of emerging media and brand strategy at 360i. "[But] it's not like you can reorient your marketing department to clean up beaches."<sup>35</sup>

Although some may not be comfortable with the idea of BP buying up search terms to push negative press down the search ranking, a Google spokesman says that BP is simply exercising the same right as any other advertiser.<sup>36</sup> In fact, many crisis communications experts claim that Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a key online communication tool for a company in the midst of a crisis. BP's SEO efforts, on the other hand, may have proven too little too late.

Steve Marino, who ran BP's social-media efforts at Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide, said, "I wish we had a stronger SEO presence before the BP crisis hit this past summer, but we didn't. Considering what the crisis was, being prepared with terms like 'oil spill' or 'oil something' is a no-brainer, but it didn't happen. So we were behind the eight ball."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Brian Morrissey, "BP Gets Aggressive."

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Bush, "Experts say SEO groundwork must be laid well before crisis hits; The time for climbing search ranks and boosting online reputation is now, not after disaster strikes," *Advertising Age* Pg. 2, Vol. 82 (January 10, 2011).

## Facebook

BP began updating its Facebook page, BP America, regularly after the oil spill. Its page provided links to its corporate website, Twitter feed, YouTube channel, and Flickr account for “more official updates.”<sup>38</sup> This Facebook page also had a “Gulf Updates” section that provided the latest updates on the Gulf of Mexico and a “Voices from the Gulf” section that served as a platform for Gulf residents to tell their stories. BP America has implemented an extensive commenting policy, which is detailed on its Facebook page, and commenting is only an option for those who “Like” its page. Currently, 54,905<sup>39</sup> people “Like” BP America’s Facebook page. Its commenting policy is as follows:

“BP has created this Facebook page to engage the public in an informative conversation and dialogue about our efforts associated with the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. We want our page to be an appropriate forum for everyone. The conversations should be constructive, respectful, and contain language that is appropriate for all groups and ages. We reserve the right to disallow comments that are obscene, indecent, profane, or vulgar; contain threats or personal attacks of any kind; contain offensive terms directed to ethnic or racial groups; are defamatory, libelous or contain ad hominem attacks; or promote or endorse a product or service.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “BP America,” Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/BPAmerica?v=wall> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> This figure was taken April 28, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

## Twitter

BP had a Twitter account prior to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill but failed to update the feed regularly. Following the spill, BP repurposed its account, @BP\_America, to serve as a communication hub for updates and breaking news pertaining to the spill. However, it took BP several days to make this happen. In fact, BP did not tweet about the spill until April 27, seven days after the explosion. This tweet read, “BP PLEDGES FULL SUPPORT FOR DEEPWATER HORIZON PROBES.”<sup>41</sup>

BP’s Twitter profile read, “Updates of BP’s ongoing response efforts are provided by our own social media team, as well as on-the-ground personnel working in affected Gulf regions. From time to time, Mike Utsler, COO of BP’s Gulf Coast Restoration (GCRO), will be giving first-hand updates via this channel.”<sup>42</sup>

From its first oil spill tweet on April 27, BP’s tweets gradually increased to multiple tweets per day. Currently, @BP\_America has 27,102<sup>43</sup> followers. More than a year after the incident, @BP\_America’s Twitter profile read, “Official account of BP America. Stay current on our commitment to the Gulf and our work toward secure, affordable energy while addressing climate change.”

While BP was busy repurposing its Twitter account, a spoof account, @BPGlobalPR, was quickly gaining followers. To date, @BPGlobalPR is surpassing @BP\_America in followers by nearly 150,000. BP Public Relations’ (@BPGlobalPR) profile reads, “This page exists to get BP’s message and mission statement out into the twitterverse.”<sup>44</sup> This Twitter

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<sup>41</sup> “BP,” Twitter, [http://twitter.com/BP\\_America](http://twitter.com/BP_America) (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> This figure was taken April 28, 2011.

<sup>44</sup> “BP Public Relations,” Twitter, <https://twitter.com/#!/BPGlobalPR> (accessed February 16, 2011).

feed was quite detrimental to BP's Twitter efforts, publishing satirical tweets, such as, "Yes, we disabled the alarms on the Deepwater Horizon. Oh, like you've never hit the snooze button?"<sup>45</sup>

Miles Nadal, the chief executive of advertising conglomerate MDC Partners Inc., said, "The brand detractor is more influential and more vehement than the than the brand evangelist."<sup>46</sup> This fact was quite unfortunate for BP's social media campaign.

### YouTube and Flickr

BP also launched an Official BP YouTube Channel as part of its social media campaign on May 18, 2010. Videos on BP's channel were neatly organized in the following categories: "Latest on BP Response," "Beaches and Cleanup," "Claims and Economy," "Health and Safety," "Restore Environment," and "Wildlife." To date, BP's upload views total 6,080,280.<sup>47</sup>

BP's profile read, "BP has created this YouTube channel to engage the public in an informative conversation and dialogue about our efforts associated with the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. We want our page to be an appropriate forum for everyone. The conversations should be constructive, respectful, and contain language that is appropriate for all groups and ages."

However, BP caught a huge backlash for disallowing the public to engage in an informative conversation by deactivating comments. Alex Seitz-Wald said, "It's ironic that

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<sup>45</sup> Ben Hatton, "BP's PR crisis shows why social media matters," *Daily Post* (August 2, 2010).

<sup>46</sup> Hollie Shaw, "The truth shall set you free of PR hell," *National Post* (June 25, 2010).

<sup>47</sup> This figure was taken April 28, 2011.

BP would disable feedback for its social media campaign, considering that the company is actively soliciting ideas from the public on how to stop the gusher in the Gulf.”<sup>48</sup>

The final leg of BP’s social media campaign included the launching of a photostream on Flickr in May 2010. Similar to its YouTube channel, BP America’s photostream on Flickr had photos organized in the following categories: “Cleanup,” “Community Outreach,” “Claims,” “Health & Safety,” “Wildlife,” “Beaches,” and “BP Altered Images.”

Under the “BP Altered Images” category, BP posted the original and altered images of the Houston-based Deepwater Horizon response command center, for which BP was accused of digitally altering.

BP spokesman Scott Dean claimed there was no “diabolical plot” to the altering of the photos. Dean said, “Normally we only use Photoshop for the typical purposes of color correction and cropping. In this case, they copied and pasted three ROV<sup>49</sup> screen images in the original photo over three screens that were not running video feeds at the time.”<sup>50</sup>

### Explanation of Subsequent Chapters

Chapter II, “Literature Review,” provides a review of scholarly research pertinent to the study. Topics include: an overview of public relations, the shift from traditional to digital media tactics, the role of social media in public relations, an overview of crisis communication, the evolution of crisis communication, the role of public relations in crisis

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<sup>48</sup> Alex Seitz-Wald, “BP Launches ‘Aggressive’ Social Media Campaign but Disables Comments from Users Who Don’t ‘Like’ It,” <http://www.truth-out.org/bp-launches-aggressive-social-media-campaign-disables-comments-users-who-dont-like-it60633> (accessed February 16, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> ROV refers to a remotely operated underwater vehicle.

<sup>50</sup> Brett Michael Dykes, “BP caught using altered image of command center,” Yahoo News, [http://news.yahoo.com/s/yblog\\_upshot/20100720/bs\\_yblog\\_upshot/bp-caught-using-altered-image-of-command-center](http://news.yahoo.com/s/yblog_upshot/20100720/bs_yblog_upshot/bp-caught-using-altered-image-of-command-center) (accessed February 16, 2011).

communication, as well as an overview of emergency management phases, reputation repair strategies, crisis types, and responsibility attributions. Chapter III, "Methodology," explains in great detail the specific methodology for this study. This chapter details the coding process, intercoder reliability, the codesheet, and the codesheet key. Chapter IV, "Results," provides a detailed description of the results of the study. This chapter addresses and answers each research question posed in the above "Purpose of the Study" section. Chapter V consists of a discussion of the results, summary and conclusion, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

#### Public Relations: Shift from Traditional to Digital Media

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) formally drafted a definition of public relations at the PRSA 1982 National Assembly that remains widely accepted today. According to PRSA, “Public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other.”<sup>51</sup> Along with creating a mutually adaptive relationship between an organization and its publics, public relations serve to manage an organization’s image.<sup>52</sup> Decaudin et al. (2006) believe an organization’s overall image is composed of the following three components: the desired image, the transmitted picture, and the perceived image.<sup>53</sup> Before the emergence of digital media, traditional public relations techniques were used to manage this image. Such techniques included drafting press releases, creating media kits, planning publicity events, managing communications tactics, etc. In the “simple” days of PR, all a practitioner needed was good pitch and a relationship with a journalist who had access to a traditional news medium (i.e. newspapers, magazines, radio, and television) and his or her client’s message would be publicized.<sup>54</sup> Those “simple” days are long gone.

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<sup>51</sup> “Public Relations Defined: PRSA’s Widely Accepted Definition, PRSA, <http://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/PublicRelationsDefined/> (accessed February 24, 2011).

<sup>52</sup> Cristina Coman and Mihaela Paun, “The image of the public institutions and new technologies,” *Jurnalism si Comunicare* 5(4): 45, 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Decaudin et al. *La Communication interne*, Paris, Dunod, 2006.

<sup>54</sup> John Bell, “Clearing the Air: New guidelines on endorsements mean new responsibilities for PR professionals leveraging social media,” *Communication World*: 28, January-February 2010.



The emergence of micromedia, which consists of the thousands of online media outlets, as well as constant technology innovations, has required modern public relations practitioners to acquire a new set of communication skills that can effectively build the reputations of their clients.<sup>55</sup> Most professionals in the PR industry have accepted this shift. “Given the increasing number of practitioners acknowledging that traditional media relations is beginning to lose its dominance in public relations programming, it is important for public relations scholars and educators to explore the emerging new era of media relations.”<sup>56</sup>

The digital evolution of public relations has allowed for a revamping of the industry, both expertly and economically speaking. Many marketers and advertisers are looking to PR practitioners for social-media and digital guidance, which has in turn led to an increase in clients and assignments.<sup>57</sup> Addressing the growing importance of the PR industry, Ray Kotcher, CEO of Ketchum, a leading public relations agency, said, “You are going to start seeing decisions about whether marketing should report to PR.”<sup>58</sup> From an economic standpoint, the industry is experiencing growth, and many attribute this growth to the explosion of digital media. Spending on PR is estimated to reach \$4.4 billion by 2014. John Suhler, co-founder and president of Veronis Suhler Stevenson, a private-equity firm that

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>56</sup> Richard D. Waters et al., “Media Catching and the Journalist—Public Relations Practitioner Relationship: How Social Media are Changing the Practice of Media Relations,” *Journal of Public Relations Research* 22(3): 242, 2010.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Bush, “How social media is helping the public-relations sector not just survive, but thrive,” *Advertising Age* 81(30): 1, 2010.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 3.

publishes annual reports on the PR industry, said, "Growth is being accelerated by a significantly increased rate of client adoption of social media."<sup>59</sup>

The combination of digital media and online PR has even led to the coining of the term "E-PR." This term refers to the area of public relations that builds relationships with online communities by implementing tools that have been made available through the Internet and digital media. Because E-PR helps to balance the long-term relationships with an organization and its various audiences, it supports the traditional objectives of public relations.<sup>60</sup> It is important for PR practitioners to be skilled in E-PR because the Internet has completely shaken up some traditional aspects of public relations, one of those being the press release. Google News was launched in September of 2002, and this launching made all major public relations wire services searchable online.<sup>61</sup> "The press release is no longer exclusively a media relations tool; now, with the Internet's search capabilities, consider it a direct-to-consumer online page of Web content."<sup>62</sup> Although the press release may have lost its exclusivity as a media relations' tool, its viral nature now allows for multimedia assets, anchor text, hyperlinks, and social media tags to be included. According to A.C. Croft, "Press releases are no longer one-dimensional. Rather, they initiate a dialogue between an organization and its audience and engage an entire online community in an integrated conversation."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Cristina Coman and Mihaela Paun, "The image of public institutions and new technologies," 47.

<sup>61</sup> A.C. Croft, "Emergence of 'New' Media Moves PR Agencies in New Directions: Competitive Pressure Threatens Agencies' Livelihood," *Public Relations Quarterly* 52(1): 17.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 17.

The numerous types of new media, such as corporate blogs, RSS feeds, podcasts, wikis, social media, video blogs, and even Search Engine Optimization (SEO), have undoubtedly changed the daily practice of PR practitioners. According to the Public Relations Education Commission Report, "Often, new technological forms and channels, such as electronic pitching, podcasting, and blogging, prevail over traditional news releases and media kits."<sup>64</sup> More and more PR practitioners are adapting to this digital change and using it as an opportunity to present PR as a vital aspect in "communications arsenal."<sup>65</sup> In a beneficial sense, these new mediums allow practitioners to increase awareness among key publics while decreasing advertising expenditures.<sup>66</sup>

The first edition of *Online Public Relations* claimed that the emergence of online interactive communications, particularly the communications between an organization and its audiences, would be the catalyst for a significant change in the PR industry; this has undoubtedly held true.<sup>67</sup> "The result is a changed world that forces public relations practitioners to adopt new technologies and to adapt to new sociological realities, and which challenges those who wish to understand the new environment to look beyond the social sciences for theoretical insights."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Tom Kelleher, "Contingencies, Blogs & Stance: Organizational Contingencies, Organizational Blogs, and Public Relations Practitioner Stance Toward Publics" (2008).

<sup>65</sup> Michael Bush, "How social media is helping the public-relations sector not just survive, but thrive," 2.

<sup>66</sup> Richard D. Waters et al., "Media Catching and the Journalist-Public Relations Practitioner Relationship," 256.

<sup>67</sup> David Phillips, "The Psychology of Social Media," *Journal of New Communications Research* 3(1): 79, 2008.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

## The Role of New and Social Media in Public Relations

Although various new media platforms have drastically changed the day-to-day functions of the PR industry, one area has been of particular importance: social media. “Social media are the various forms of user generated content and the collection of websites and applications that enables people to interact and share information online.”<sup>69</sup> Unlike any other medium before its time, social media has completely changed the way the people communicate. This drastic change brings with it many opportunities for PR practitioners.<sup>70</sup> For instance, social media enables practitioners to reach out to specific publics and spark conversations, while at the same time strengthening media relations.<sup>71</sup>

Unlike traditional forms of media, said John Bell, the head of Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide, “You have to be on all the time.”<sup>72</sup> This idea of always being “on” has specifically influenced the response communications of PR practitioners. Now, in the instance of a crisis, PR practitioners must respond immediately. Waiting more than a couple of hours to respond is basically like saying “no comment,” which has always been advised against in the PR world.<sup>73</sup> Experts encourage practitioners to engage immediately, even if a solution to the problem has not been met. Rupal Parekh and Edmund Lee said, “If you don’t have an answer right away, say so, but never stay silent.”<sup>74</sup> This ongoing

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<sup>69</sup> Cristina Coman and Mihaela Paun, “The image of the public institutions and new technologies,” 46.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid,

<sup>72</sup> Rupal Parekh and Edmund Lee, “How to Succeed when it’s Time to Make Your Social-Media Mea Culpa,” *Advertising Age* 81(19): 2, 2010.

<sup>73</sup> Kelli S. Burns, “The Misuse of Social Media: Reactions to and Important Lessons from a Blog Fiasco,” *Journal of New Communications Research* 3(1): 51, 2008.

<sup>74</sup> Rupal Parekh and Edmund Lee, “How to Succeed when it’s Time to Make Your Social-Media Mea Culpa,” 2.

exchange of information, especially in times of crises, is what allows PR practitioners to successfully build and maintain clients' reputations.<sup>75</sup>

In comparing, or better yet contrasting, social media with traditional media, there are several characteristics that set them apart. These include: reach, accessibility, usability, transparency, and recency. *Reach* refers to a global audience; *accessibility* to reduced costs that allow freedom of access; *usability* to opportunity for everybody to create and operate; *transparency* to transparent nature of content; and *recency* to the instantaneous element. These unique characteristics allow social media the following advantages: it is stickier than traditional media; it has a viral nature; it is interactive; and it has high visibility on the net. As far as communications go, social media provides constant communication, immediate response, a global audience, knowledge of the audience, bidirectional communication, and a low overhead cost.<sup>76</sup>

Social media is also responsible for the revamping of public relation's most coveted tool, the press release. Although not widely accepted, the emergence of the Social Media Release (SMR) shows the extent of social media's affect on PR. The SMR was launched in February 2006, and it allows readers to interact directly with the organization by contributing to content.<sup>77</sup> According an article by Peter Steyn in the *Public Relations Review*, "The SMR has evolved as a response to the increase in interactivity permitted by social media and is best conceived of as a digital press release that includes the additional elements a reporter or consumer would want to see before they create their own content to

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<sup>75</sup> Cristina Coman and Mihaela Paun, "The image of the public institutions and new technologies," 47.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>77</sup> Richard Waters et. al, "Media Catching and the Journalist," 247.

broadcast or transmit further.”<sup>78</sup> The SMR could quite possibly prove to be an extremely powerful asset for PR specialists.

Due to the emergence of social media, PR experts have encouraged practitioners to change their view of online communication entirely. Communication is not longer one-way; it is a two-way exchange, which demands a more participatory approach.<sup>79</sup> According to Brett Groom, VP of content activation at ConAgra, if practitioners become successfully aligned with the participatory structure of social media, they will have a greater chance of figuring out what does and does not resonate with various audiences.<sup>80</sup> “By understanding how social network sites work, practitioners may determine what information is relevant to their clients and organizations and how they can use these sites to listen and engage with publics.”<sup>81</sup> According to Brian Solis, leading PR 2.0 evangelist and exponent, “Social media is no longer an option or debatable. It is critically important to all businesses, without prejudice. It represents a powerful, and additional, channel to first listen to customers, stakeholders, media, bloggers, peers, and other influencers, and in turn build two-way paths of conversations to them.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Peter Steyn et al., “The Social Media Release as a public relations tool: Intentions to use among B2B bloggers,” *Public Relations Review* 36: 87, 2010.

<sup>79</sup> Tom Kelleher, “Contingencies, Blogs & Stance,” 14.

<sup>80</sup> Michael Bush, “How social media is helping the public-relations sector not just survive, but thrive,” 3.

<sup>81</sup> Marichris Diga and Tom Kelleher, “Social media use, perceptions of decision-making power, and public relations roles,” *Public Relations Review* 35: 442, 2009.

<sup>82</sup> Cristina Coman and Mihaela Paun, “The image of the public institutions and new technologies,” 46.

## James E. Grunig's Four Models of Public Relations

James E. Grunig is a public relations expert whose theoretical research has led to many improvements within the field. Grunig constructed the Four Models of Public Relations, and the compliance of these models has served as core theory for the public relations field. The Four Models of Public Relations include: Press agency/publicity model, which consists of one-way communication; Public information model, which consists of one-way communication; One-way asymmetrical model, which consists of one-way communication; and Two-way symmetrical model, which consists of two-way communication.

The press agency model “uses persuasion and manipulation to influence audience to behave as the organization desires.” The public information model “uses press releases and other one-way communication techniques to distribute organizational information. The one-way asymmetrical model “uses persuasion and manipulation to influence audience to behave as the organization desires. Finally, the two-way symmetrical model “uses communication to negotiate with publics, resolve conflict, and promote mutual understanding and respect between the organization and its publics.”<sup>83</sup>

As far as crisis communications are concerned, the two-way symmetrical model can prove extremely successful. “When a company is clearly viewed as proactive and as engaging in two-way symmetrical communication mode with its constituencies, it can

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<sup>83</sup> “The Importance of the Four Models of Public Relations,” Rationale for public relations law, <http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Fall99/Westbrook/Default.html> (accessed March 2, 2011).

minimize the risk of getting involved in a crisis and of being perceived as guilty, if a crisis eventually occurs.<sup>84</sup>

### Crisis Communications Defined

A crisis is defined as “a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services or good name.”<sup>85</sup> A crisis can present itself in many forms, and it will almost always disturb normal business activities. Depending on the severity of the crisis, it may even threaten the entire existence of the company or organization.<sup>86</sup> Common types of crises include, but are not limited to, chemical spill or leak, contamination, earthquake, fire, hurricane, product failure, and terrorism.<sup>87</sup> In order to successfully manage and overcome a crisis, companies must have a specific crisis management plan. Crisis management is defined as “a process of strategic planning for a crisis or negative turning point, a process that removes some of the risk and uncertainty from the negative occurrence and thereby allows the organization to be in greater control of its own identity.”<sup>88</sup> Crisis management goes hand in hand with crisis communications, which is defined as “the dialog between the organization and its

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<sup>84</sup> Alfonso Gonzalez-Herrero and Cornelius B. Pratt, “An Integrated Symmetrical Model for Crisis-communications Management,” <http://list.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A3=ind9601D&L=AEJMC&E=0&P=538681&B=--&T=text%2Fplain> (accessed March 2, 2011).

<sup>85</sup> Kathleen Fearn-Banks, *Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers), 8.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 291-293.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 9.



public prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence.”<sup>89</sup> These communications tactics are specifically designed to “minimize damage to the image of the organization.”<sup>90</sup>

There are three phases of crisis management: pre-crisis, crisis response, and post crisis. The pre-crisis phase focuses on crisis prevention and preparation. The crisis response phase focuses on successfully responding to an occurring crisis. The post-crisis phase focuses on preparing for future crises while fulfilling promises made during the actual crisis. Pre-crisis best practices include: having a continually updated crisis management plan; having a designated and properly trained crisis management team; implementing mock crisis exercises to test the reliability of the plan; and pre-drafting messages to combat specific crises. Post-crisis best practices include: delivering all promised information to stakeholders; continually updating stakeholders on the progress of the crisis recovery efforts; and closely reviewing the crisis management actions to see if they should be integrated into future crisis management plans.<sup>91</sup> Best practices that take place during the crisis response phase are much more vast.

When a crisis does occur, the crisis response consists of “what management does and says after the crisis hits.”<sup>92</sup> A crisis response consists of two sections: the initial crisis response and the reputation repair and behavioral intentions. Initial crisis response best practices include giving a response to the crisis within the first hour, being accurate with facts, keeping the spokesperson(s) informed of key messages; focusing on public safety,

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>91</sup> Timothy Coombs, “Crisis Management and Communications,” Institute for Public Relations, <http://www.instituteforpr.org/topics/crisis-management-and-communications/> (accessed April 15, 2011).

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

successfully implementing the use of all available communication mediums, providing a human element by expressing concern and/or sympathy.<sup>93</sup>

During this phase, an organization's management is required to communicate important information to affected and/or interested audiences, and the public relations practitioner is responsible for shaping these messages. Most practitioners advise management to abide by three rules during the initial crisis response phase: be quick, be accurate, and be consistent. Of these three rules, a quick response is the most vital. In today's world of 24/7 digital media, people expect an immediate response, and this is exactly what an organization should give them. Even if the organization does not have an answer, an immediate response could simply state that the organization is in the process of gathering important information. "An early response may not have much 'new' information, but the organization positions itself as a source and begins to present its side of the story."<sup>94</sup> The following list breaks down the best practices of the initial crisis response:

### The Evolution of Crisis Communications

The main objective of crisis communication is to communicate pertinent information to specific publics in the hopes of preventing, responding, or recovering from a crisis. Although various forms of crisis communications have existed since the beginning of time, crisis communications has only been identified as a researchable practice in the last 25 years. During this time, crisis communications has continually evolved due to the constantly-changing field of communications. The invention of the World Wide Web and

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> W. Timothy Coombs, "Crisis Management and Communications," (October 30, 2007), 2.

the Internet in the 1990s completely changed the way people communicate. In more recent years, the explosions of new and social media, which include numerous forms of interactive digital media, have once again changed the way the world defines communications. All of these changes, unsurprisingly, have changed the practice of crisis communications. There are both upsides and downsides to this shift in communications. Crises may now be mitigated with blogs, cell phones, and websites, but they may also be sparked by these same new technologies.<sup>95</sup>

To better understand the enormity of the changes occurring in the field of crisis communications, one may compare two relatively similar crises that occurred outside 20 years of one another: Exxon's *Valdez* oil spill and BP's Deepwater Horizon oil spill. In the early hours of Friday, March 24, 1989, one of the most infamous crises in American history began to unfold. The 987-foot Exxon *Valdez* oil tanker was en route off the coast of Alaska to Long Beach, California when it struck the Bligh Reef and began spewing what would eventually amount to 11 million gallons of crude oil<sup>96</sup> into the waters of Prince William Sound. People gradually learned of the massive spill over the weekend through broadcasts on CBS, NBC, ABC,<sup>97</sup> and local news networks. Compared with the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, which instantly made news around the world due to the thousands of websites and blogs, Exxon had a lenient amount of time to draft key response messages. BP had an hour, tops.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Kathleen Fearn-Banks, *Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach*, 2.

<sup>96</sup> At this time, the Exxon's *Valdez* oil spill was the largest oil spill in United States history. It has been estimated that two million sea animals died as a result of the spill.

<sup>97</sup> CBS, NBC, and ABC were the three major television networks at the time.

<sup>98</sup> Kathleen Fearn-Banks, *Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach*, 70-71.

Due to the lack of 24/7 digital media during the time of the *Valdez* spill, Exxon was not held as accountable for certain actions as BP was. For example, Frank Larossi, then-president of Exxon Shipping and Exxon's main representative of the *Valdez* site, was left to initiate the crisis response, as Exxon CEO Lawrence G. Rawl, an employee at Exxon for 37 years, was missing in action. People would not let this happen today. BP CEO Tony Hayward was crucified by the public, for a variety of reasons pertaining to the Gulf oil spill, even though he immediately made himself present at the spill site and available to the media and public. This drastic contrast in public relations case studies highlights the extent of the evolution of crisis communications, which can be attributed to the Internet, new media, and especially, social media.<sup>99</sup>

#### William Timothy Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Since the research study at hand pertains to BP's use of crisis communications during the crisis response phase, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) will serve as a guiding theoretical framework. SCCT is considered as "attribution theory-based approach to crisis communication."<sup>100</sup> During the crisis response phase, a company or organization will attempt to protect its reputation by including specific response strategies within their communications tactics. The main objective of SCCT is to develop a working system of strategies that, when successfully implemented, can effectually protect the company or organization's reputation; or, at the very least, diminish the threat of having

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<sup>99</sup> Kathleen Fearn-Banks, *Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach*, 73.

<sup>100</sup> Robert L. Heath and Dan P. Miller, *Responding to a Crisis: A Rhetorical Approach to Crisis Communication* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2004), 97.

the company or organization's image completely tarnished.<sup>101</sup> SCCT also attempts to link attribution of responsibility with the crisis type. It is important to incorporate SCCT into the theoretical framework of this study since its main components (i.e. reputation repair strategies, crisis types, and attribution of responsibility) are also main components of this study.

Coombs outlines three phases of crisis management: pre-crisis, crisis response, and post crisis. The pre-crisis phase focuses on crisis prevention and preparation. The crisis response phase focuses on successfully responding to an occurring crisis. The post-crisis phase focuses on preparing for future crises while fulfilling promises made during the actual crisis. Pre-crisis best practices include having a continually updated crisis management plan, having a designated and properly trained crisis management team; implementing mock crisis exercises to test the reliability of the plan, and pre-drafting messages to combat specific crises. Post-crisis best practices include delivering all promised information to stakeholders, continually updating stakeholders on the progress of the crisis recovery efforts, and closely reviewing the crisis management actions to see if they should be integrated into future crisis management plans.<sup>102</sup>

### The Role of Public Relations in Crisis Communications

Public relations specialists play a large role in helping companies and organizations manage these growing changes in the field of crisis communications. In fact, many public

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>102</sup> Timothy Coombs, "Crisis Management and Communications," Institute for Public Relations, <http://www.instituteforpr.org/topics/crisis-management-and-communications/> (accessed April 15, 2011).

relations specialists also market themselves as “crisis communication experts.”<sup>103</sup>

According to many experts, a strong public relations element must be incorporated into a crisis communications plan in order for it to be successful.<sup>104</sup> For many, the idea of public relations and crisis communications seems like a “perfect match.”<sup>105</sup> Not only are public relations specialists skilled on directing the media relations’ aspect of the crisis communication response, but also they are also skilled at handling additional aspects, such as managing communication techniques and reputation repair strategies.<sup>106</sup> Because public relations specialists seek to strategically manage communications between an organization and its publics, they are key players in successfully delivering crisis response messages to an organization’s various audiences. However, the recognition of public relations’ role in crisis communications came as recently as 1995. Finding of an excellence study completed by several public relations scholars during this time found:

“CEO’s and communicators mentioned crises again and again as catalysts for changes in management’s views of communication; the Bhopal tragedy, the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill, the oil embargo of the 1970s, and activist opposition to nuclear power plants are examples. These events served as wake-up calls to senior managers who previously placed little importance on public relations and communication management.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Linda M. Hagan, “For Reputation’s Sake: Managing Crisis Communication,” *The Future of Excellence in Public Relations and Communications Management* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2007), 413.

<sup>104</sup> Robert L. Heath and Dan P. Miller, *Responding to a Crisis: A Rhetorical Approach to Crisis Communication* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2004), 41).

<sup>105</sup> Linda M. Hagan, “For Reputation’s Sake: Managing Crisis Communication,” 413.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 413.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 416.

This excerpt reveals the importance of communication in all areas or crisis management, both internal and external, as well as the important role of public relations specialists managing this communication.<sup>108</sup> The growth of digital media has also shifted the job of crisis communication into the hands of public relations experts. It is undeniable that public relations play a role in crisis communication, but pinpointing the exact role is a bit more challenging. Cutlip et al. (2000) define the most important role of public relations as “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends.”<sup>109</sup> Therefore, the role of public relations specialists is to successfully manage two-way communications in both times of good and bad. This points back to James E. Grunig’s Excellence Theory in public relations. According to this theory, all communications must be strategically coordinated and executed by the public relations department; so, granting management powers to this department so that the company may successfully respond to a crisis, if and when one does occur, is vital.<sup>110</sup>

#### Four Phases of Emergency Management

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) defines emergency management as “the managerial function charged with creating the framework within which communities reduce vulnerability to hazards and cope with disasters.”<sup>111</sup> There are four phases of emergency management: mitigation; preparedness; response; and recovery. Mitigation is defined as “sustained action that reduces or eliminates long-term risk to

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 416.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 418.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> *Principles of Emergency Management Supplement* (September 11, 2007), 4.

people and property from natural hazards and their effects.”<sup>112</sup> Referred to as the “cornerstone” of emergency management, mitigation, when successfully executed, has the ability to drastically lessen the negative impact disasters may wreak on people and/or property. Examples of mitigation may include purchasing flood insurance, enforcing building codes, or using fire-retardant materials during construction.<sup>113</sup>

Preparedness includes “plans or procedures designed to save lives and minimize damage when an emergency occurs.”<sup>114</sup> Vital aspects of the preparedness phase include planning, training, and exercising disaster drills. Preparedness is an extremely important phase of emergency management because it ensures that crisis managers know what specific actions to take when a certain type of disaster occurs.<sup>115</sup> Response is defined as “the actions taken to save lives and prevent further damage in a disaster or emergency situation.”<sup>116</sup> Examples of responses include: damage assessment, search and rescue, fire fighting, and sheltering victims.<sup>117</sup> Recovery is defined as “the actions taken to return the community to normal following a disaster.”<sup>118</sup> Examples of recovery may include repairing, replacing, or rebuilding property.<sup>119</sup>

## Reputation Repair Strategies

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<sup>112</sup> “Four Phases of Emergency Management,” Ada City-County Emergency Management (ACCCEM), <http://www.accem.org/phases.html> (accessed April 15, 2011).

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.



Just as important as the *initial* crisis response in the crisis response phase is that of reputation repair and behavioral intentions. Much research has been completed in order to compile a database of successful reputation repair strategies.

Coombs built on the work of William Benoit to create a master list of reputation repair strategies used by companies or organizations when a crisis occurs. Coombs master list includes nine strategies of reputation repair: attack the accuser; denial; scapegoat; excuse (provocation, defeasibility, accidental, or good intentions); justification; reminder; ingratiation; compensation; and apology. Attack the accuser exists when a crisis manager confronts the individual who is making a claim against the organization.<sup>120</sup>

Denial exists when a crisis manager denies the existence of a crisis. Scapegoat exists when a crisis manager places blame for the crisis on an individual outside of the organization. A provocation excuse exists when a crisis manager asserts that the crisis resulted out of a response to an outside individual's actions. A defeasibility excuse exists when a crisis manager claims to have had a deficient amount of information prior to the crisis.

An accidental excuse exists when a crisis manager had no control over events prior to the crisis. A good intentions excuse exists when a crisis manager insists that the organization meant to do good. Justification exists when a crisis manager attempts to minimize the resulting damage of the crisis. Reminder exists when a crisis manager reminds the organization's stakeholders of positive works that were completed by the organization in the past.

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<sup>120</sup> Timothy Coombs, "Crisis Management and Communications."

Ingratiation exists when a crisis manager applauds the organization's stakeholders for specific actions. Compensation exists when a crisis manager offers a form of compensation, usually money, to victims of the crisis. Apology exists when a crisis manager apologizes for the crisis and takes full responsibility on behalf of the organization.<sup>121</sup>

### Crisis Types and Attribution of Responsibility

Also present during the crisis response phase are the elements of crisis type and attribution of crisis responsibility, which typically go hand in hand. These elements are extremely important in determining the reputational threat of a crisis. There are three types of crises: victim crisis; accident crisis; and preventable crisis. A victim crisis may consist of a natural disaster, such as a hurricane or earthquake, a rumor, workplace violence, or product tampering. An accident crisis may consist of a challenge, technical error, or product harm. A preventable crisis may consist of a human-error accident, human-error product harm, or organizational misdeed. Usually, a victim crisis charges the organization with minimal crisis responsibility, an accident crisis charges an organization with low crisis responsibility, and a preventable crisis charges an organization with strong crisis responsibility.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand BP's use of Twitter as a crisis communication tool during the Gulf oil spill, specifically during the crisis response phase.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

By analyzing the content of BP's tweets during this time period, one may understand its public relations, crisis communications, and social media strategies. Specific topics that were analyzed include: emergency management phases, reputation repair strategies, crisis types, attribution of responsibility, and Risk Smart items. The following research questions were posed for this study:

- RQ1:** Which phase(s) of emergency management is most prevalent in tweets from @BP\_America?
- RQ2:** What strategy(s) of reputation repair is most prevalent in tweets from @BP\_America?
- RQ3:** Which crisis type(s) is reflected most in tweets from @BP\_America?
- RQ4:** Which type(s) of attribution of responsibility is reflected most in tweets from @BP\_America?
- RQ5:** Which RiskSmart factors do tweets from @BP\_America suggest how most people feel about the oil spill?

### Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it seeks to understand and explain the vitality of the online aspect of a crisis communication plan in a world of 24/7 digital media. In today's world of Internet, blogs, social media, RSS feeds, Search Engine Optimization, etc. all corporate companies must have an online strategy to accompany a crisis communication plan if they wish to be successful in the face of a crisis. On the other hand, this study shows how a lack of an online crisis communication plan prior to a crisis can prove extremely detrimental to a company's reputation. Specifically, this study reveals how certain social

media networks (i.e. Twitter) can be used successfully by public relations specialists as a crisis communication tool. Although a social media network may be used for many reasons during a crisis, this study seeks to uncover how such a platform may be used for purposes pertaining to emergency management, reputation repair strategies, crisis types, types of attribution of responsibility, and RiskSmart public perception items.

### Chapter III

#### Methodology

For this research study, a systematic, quantitative content analysis was designed and implemented. A content analysis is defined as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of manifest content of communications.”<sup>122</sup>

There are several advantages of completing a content analysis when analyzing a communications medium. Content analysis advantages relating to this study include the following: looking directly at communication via texts or transcripts; statistically analyzing specific categories or relationships found within the texts or transcripts; and providing an “exact” research method based on hard facts.<sup>123</sup> The type of content analysis designed was based on conceptual analysis. “In conceptual analysis, a concept is chosen for examination and the number of its occurrences within the text recorded.”<sup>124</sup>

The communication texts reviewed in this content analysis included all tweets by BP\_America from April 20, 2010 through July 15, 2010. This timeline was chosen in concurrence with certain events relating to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig exploded, killing 11 people and spewing thousands of barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. By July 15, 2010, oil finally stopped leaking into the Gulf as the wellhead of the Macondo Prospect (MC252) was successfully

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<sup>122</sup> Bernard Berelson, *Content Analysis in Communications Research* (New York: Free Press), 74.

<sup>123</sup> “Content Analysis,” <http://www.ischool.utexas.edu/~palmquis/courses/content.html> (accessed April 15, 2011).

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

capped. This timeline allowed for BP's use of Twitter during the oil spill to be examined during the crisis response phase. During this time BP\_America broadcast a total of 1,161 tweets. Tweets from April 20, 2010 through June 4, 2010 and tweets from June 7, 2010 through June 9, 2010 were obtained from <http://topsy.com>. Topsy is a website that allows for real-time searches of the social web. An advanced search was completed on Topsy to compile a list of all tweets during this time period. Tweets from June 5, 2010 through June 6, 2010, and all remaining tweets (June 10, 2010 through July 15, 2010), were provided upon request by BP in the form of a spreadsheet titled "Twitter Content Log."

A codesheet titled "BP\_America Tweets Codesheet" was created and implemented during the coding process (See Appendix 1). Two coders were used, as a presence of strong intercoder reliability was needed to ensure the reliability<sup>125</sup> and validity<sup>126</sup> of the chosen methodology. Coder A coded 100 percent of the tweets (i.e. 1,161), while Coder B coded 20 percent of the tweets (i.e. 232) to ensure intercoder reliability. Coder B coded 20 percent of the tweets by coding every fifth tweet of the entire sample. The codesheet was designed to look for a number of concepts within each tweet, and the final version had a total of 44 items.

Items to be coded included the date in which the tweet was broadcast, the actual text of the tweet, whether the tweet was an original post, retweet/RT, or @reply, whether or not the tweet pertained to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill crisis, the number of hashtags

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<sup>125</sup> In *Understanding Research Methods*, Mildred L. Patten writes, "A test is said to be reliable if it yields *consistent* results."

<sup>126</sup> According to Patten, "Researchers say that an instrument is valid to the extent that it measures what it is designed to measure and accurately performs the function(s) it is purported to perform."

included in the tweet, the terms used in hashtags, the number of links included in the tweet, and where the link redirected the user.

The codesheet also examined the phase(s) of emergency management (mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery) reflected in the tweet, and the strategies of reputation repair reflected in the tweet (attack the accuser, denial, scapegoat, provocation excuse, defeasibility excuse, accidental excuse, good intentions excuse, justification, reminder, ingratiation, compensation, and/or apology). The study also identified the crisis type(s) reflected in the tweet (victim crisis, accident crisis, and preventable crisis), and the type(s) of attribution of responsibility reflected in the tweet (none, low/minimal, or a strong/high level of crisis responsibility). It identified any RiskSmart items present in the tweet (victimized entities without their consent or beyond their control, constituted a repeated mistake made by BP that the public can easily recall, was a breach of ethics/widely accepted values, was illegal, as in a misdemeanor or felony, caused serious financial harm to others, has strong political attributes tied to it, damaged partner relationships, has widespread national or international scope, is part of a recent trend of similar acts by BP and/or others, was the first, worst, or biggest oil spill, relates to a current culturally popular subject, as in energy, environment, etc., caused death/injury through action or inaction).

A codesheet key also was created to define all necessary terms and offer a list of detailed instructions on how to code certain aspects of each tweet (See Appendix 2). The codesheet included items for month (1-12) and date (1-31), as well as links that redirect the user to a different website. Coders identified whether each tweet was an original post, a retweet/RT, or an @reply. An original post is defined as a tweet that was organically

composed by BP\_America. A retweet/RT is defined as a tweet that was originally tweeted by another Twitter user that BP\_America chose to retweet using its Twitter account. A retweet/RT may be identified by the “RT” abbreviation plus the other Twitter user’s Twitter name (Ex: RT @lajordan13: see spot run...). An @Reply is defined as a tweet that is composed specifically in reply to another Twitter user or directed at a specific Twitter user. @Reply may be identified by the @ symbol at the very beginning of a tweet, followed by the other Twitter user’s Twitter name.

Each tweet was coded for whether it pertained to the Gulf of Mexico crisis, how many hashtags were included in the tweet, what term(s) were included in the hashtag, how many links were present within the tweet, and where the link(s) redirected the user.

Coders then identified any of the four phases of emergency management reflected in the tweet: mitigation, preparedness, response, and/or recovery. More than one phase could be present within one tweet. For example, a tweet might include elements of both mitigation and preparedness.

A tweet in which mitigation was reflected would include language that attempted to reduce the impact of the Deepwater Horizon explosion and/or oil spill. According to the Ada City-County Emergency Management website, “Mitigation is the cornerstone of emergency management. It’s the continuing effort to lessen the impact disasters have on people and property. Mitigation is defined as ‘sustained action that reduces or eliminates long-term risk to people and property from natural hazards and their effects.’”<sup>127</sup>

If the word mitigation, or a variation of that word, was included in the tweet, the coder chose this crisis phase. A tweet in which preparedness was reflected would include

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<sup>127</sup> “Four Phases of Emergency Management,” Ada City-County Emergency Management, <http://www.accem.org/phases.html> (accessed April 4, 2011).



language that revealed the existence and/or development of risk management plan(s) for the current and/or future oil spill(s). According to the Ada City-County Emergency Management website, “Preparedness takes the form of plans or procedures designed to save lives and to minimize damage when an emergency occurs. Planning, training, and disaster drills are the essential elements of preparedness. These activities ensure that when a disaster strikes, emergency managers will be able to provide the best response possible.”<sup>128</sup> A tweet in which response was reflected would include mentions of oil spill emergency services. According to the Ada City-County Emergency Management website, “Response is defined as the actions taken to save lives and prevent further damage in a disaster or emergency situation. Response is putting preparedness plans into action.”<sup>129</sup> This phase also includes protecting wildlife and/or shorelines by way of booms, dispersants, and skimming.

A tweet in which recovery was reflected would include mentions of oil spill recovery efforts to rebuild and repair damage caused by the explosion or oil spill. Recovery efforts may include mentions of cleanup, drilling of relief wells, capping of the well, etc. Recovery may also include mentions of monetary response efforts, such as donations from BP, fines assigned to BP, personal claims, etc. According to the Ada City-County Emergency Management website, “Recovery is defined as the actions taken to return the community to normal following a disaster. Repairing, replacing, or rebuilding property are examples of recovery.”<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> “Four Phases of Emergency Management.”

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

Reputation repair strategies were coded in terms of whether the tweet confronted a person or group claiming that something is wrong with BP, an assertion by BP that no crisis, or specific aspect of the crisis, is present, if BP was placing blame of the crisis on an outside group or person, if BP was attempting to make an excuse by claiming the crisis was a result of someone else's actions, if BP was attempting to make an excuse by claiming a lack of information about events leading up to the explosion and/ or oil spill, if BP was attempting to make an excuse by claiming a lack of control over events leading up to the explosion and/or oil spill, if BP was attempting to make an excuse by claiming that the organization meant to do well, if the tweet included a justification that minimizes the perceived damage caused by the explosion and/or oil spill, if the tweet reminded people of past good works completed by BP, if a reminder is present such as a specific amount of oil collected, money paid in claims, boom deployed in response to the oil, or wildlife rescued, if the tweet praised BP stakeholders for their actions pertaining to the oil spill, including the thanking or praising of volunteers, if the tweet included offers of money or other gifts from BP to direct and indirect victims of the explosion or oil spill such as claims given to individuals, research funds, or wildlife funds, or if the tweet indicated that BP accepted full responsibility for the explosion or oil spill and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.

Coders then identified one of the three crisis types reflected in the tweet: victim crisis, accident crisis, and preventable crisis. If the tweet pertained to the Gulf crisis, one of the crisis types was indicated. Only one crisis type could be chosen for each tweet. A tweet in which victim crisis was reflected would claim that BP was the victim of the explosion or oil spill, such as the victim of the crisis was a result of a natural disaster, rumor, or product tampering/malevolence (ex: the oil spill being compared to Hurricane Katrina).

A tweet in which an accident crisis was reflected would claim that the explosion or oil spill was an accident. An accident crisis may have included a challenge (i.e. a stakeholder claims the organization operated in an inappropriate manner), technical error accident (i.e. the explosion and/or oil spill was caused by equipment or technology failure), or technical error product harm (i.e. an equipment or technology failure caused a product to be defective or harmful). Most tweets indicated an accident crisis, unless otherwise noted. A tweet in which a preventable crisis was reflected would claim that the explosion or oil spill could have been prevented. For example, the crisis may have been caused by a human-error accident (i.e. the explosion and/or oil spill was caused by human error), human-error product harm (i.e. a product was defective or harmful because of a human error), or organizational misdeed (i.e. BP management actions put stakeholders at risk and/or violated the law). Preventable crisis was only reflected in one tweet, as ongoing investigations during this tweeting period never proved that BP was guilty of a human-error accident, human-error product harm, or an organizational misdeed.

Coders evaluated three types of attribution of responsibility reflected in tweets: no crisis responsibility, low/minimal crisis responsibility, and strong/high crisis responsibility. Only one type of attribution of responsibility was for each tweet. A tweet in which no crisis responsibility was reflected would indicate that BP is not responsible for the explosion or oil spill. This type of attribution of responsibility further indicates that the explosion or oil spill was a victim crisis, such as comparing the oil spill to Hurricane Katrina. A tweet in which low/minimal crisis responsibility was reflected would indicate that BP is minimally responsible for the explosion or oil spill. This type of attribution of responsibility further indicates that the explosion or oil spill was an accident crisis. For

low/minimal crisis responsibility, no specific actions taken by BP were noted. However, if BP tweeted about an entity separate from itself taking an action against the oil spill, this would reflect low/minimal crisis responsibility. A tweet in which strong/high crisis responsibility was reflected would indicate that BP is fully responsible for the explosion and/or oil spill. This further indicates that the explosion and/or oil spill was a preventable crisis. For strong/high crisis responsibility a specific action will be noted.

In coding the RiskSmart public perception items, coders identified the types of acknowledgement or implication of peoples' feelings about the oil spill. More than one RiskSmart item could be chosen for an individual tweet, since some tweets included information on more than one oil spill topic. The following are the RiskSmart items used in this study. A tweet was coded in terms of whether it acknowledged that people feel their entities were victimized without their consent and outside their control, acknowledged that people feel as though the oil spill constituted a repeated mistake by BP that can be easily recalled by the public, acknowledged that people feel that the oil spill constitutes a breach of ethics or widely held views, acknowledged that people feel that the oil spill was or was caused by illegal activities, or acknowledged that people feel that the oil spill caused serious financial harm to others.

This RiskSmart item often was chosen in tweets that mentioned compensation pertaining to individual claims. However, this item was not chosen if compensation was referring to research funds, wildlife funds, etc. Coders also noted if the tweet acknowledged that people feel that the oil spill had strong political attributes tied to it. This RiskSmart item was chosen any time a political or governmental individual or organization was mentioned in the tweet or redirected by way of a link. Other items

included if the tweet acknowledged that people feel that the oil spill damaged partner relations, or if the tweet acknowledged that people feel that the oil spill has a widespread or international scope. This RiskSmart item was chosen any time a national or international news organization was mentioned or redirected using a link. This item also was chosen when tweets provided access to oil spill information via a foreign language.

Each tweet was coded in terms of whether it acknowledged that people feel that the oil spill is part of recent trend of similar acts by BP or others, or if the tweet acknowledged that people feel that the oil spill was the first, worst, or biggest oil spill. Since the Deepwater Horizon oil spill was the largest in the history of the United States, this RiskSmart item was chosen any time a tweet includes a specific oil flow rate or amount of oil collected.

A tweet was coded if it acknowledged that people feel that the oil spill relates to current culturally popular subject such as energy or the environment. When a tweet included information about air or water quality, this RiskSmart item was chosen because of its environmental element. The last RiskSmart item noted whether the tweet acknowledged that people feel that the oil spill caused death or injury through action or inaction to people or wildlife.

After all coding was completed, all information from the codesheets was consolidated into an SPSS spreadsheet for analysis. During the initial coding process, recurring themes present in the hashtag term(s) and link redirection site(s) were noted, and a secondary coding process was implemented to quantify recurring hashtag terms and URLs. Recurrent and/or unique hashtag terms and URLs were then given a label and were included in the spreadsheet so they could be accounted for as well. Because of the

approach used, the hashtag term and URL coding was not exhaustive. The following hashtags were included in the spreadsheet: #bp, #oilspill, #Oil\_Spill\_2010, #gulf, #air, #water, #birds, #topkill, #bpcares, #uscg, and #usfws. The following websites and/or web pages were included for where for URLs directed the user: BP's website (general); BP's Press page on website; BP's Gulf of Mexico restoration page on website; Facebook; YouTube; Flickr; RestoreTheGulf.gov; Deepwater Horizon Memorial; ABC; CNN; CSPAN; CBS; NPR; AP; PBS; MSNBC; *The Wall Street Journal*; *The New York Times*; *The Los Angeles Times*; *The Huffington Post*; *The Boston Globe*; *USA Today*; U.S. Coast Guard; GeoPlatform.gov/GulfResponse; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; Tri-State Bird Rescue; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; International Bird Rescue; National Fish and Wildlife Foundation; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The spreadsheet was then imported into SPSS. All data in the spreadsheet was analyzed using the "frequencies" procedure, a form of descriptive statistics. Most items in the spreadsheet were entered as nominal (category) data, with the exception of the initial, month, date, number of hashtags, and number of links. These items were entered as ordinal (category) data. SPSS was then able to generate numerous output tables that included statistical information on all items, such as valid, missing, mean, range, and sum. Crosstabulations were also performed to determine patterns in BP tweets over a weekly period.

## Chapter IV

### Results

#### Primary Coding

From April 20, 2010 through July 15, 2010, @BP\_America published 1,161 tweets, most of which appeared in July. Three tweets were tweeted in April for a percentage of 0.3. 265 tweets were tweeted in May for a percentage of 22.8. A total of 434 tweets were tweeted in June for a percentage of 37.4. A total of 459 tweets were tweeted in July for a percentage of 39.5. The overwhelming majority of tweets were original posts (990 tweets for a percentage of 85.3), while 97 tweets were replies (8.4 percent) and 74 were retweets (6.4 percent). Out of every tweet, only six did not apply to the Gulf of Mexico crisis, making 1,155 tweets (99.5 percent) relevant to the oil spill situation. A total of 572 hashtags appeared within the tweets; 129 tweets included a single hashtag; 200 tweets included two hashtags; 13 tweets included three hashtags; and one tweet included four hashtags. A total of 815 links were included within the tweets. A total of 763 tweets included one link; 20 tweets included 2 tweets; and four tweets included three links. The overall percentage of intercoder reliability was 89 percent.

#### RQ1

RQ1 sought to discover which phase(s) of emergency management was most prevalent in tweets from @BP\_America. The four phases appeared within the 1,161 tweets on 1,090 separate occasions. Of the four phases of emergency management (mitigation,

preparedness, response, and recovery), the recovery phase was most prevalent in tweets from BP, appearing in 624 tweets. Therefore, the recovery phase accounted for most (53.7 percent) emergency management phases seen within tweets. The response phase appeared in 422 tweets (36.3 percent). The preparedness phase appeared in 39 tweets (3.4 percent). Finally, the mitigation phase appeared in five tweets (0.4 percent).

Two crosstabs<sup>131</sup> were also completed for this research question. Since recovery and response were the most frequent phases of emergency management to appear within tweets, these phases were chosen for the crosstabs analyses. The time period from which tweets were coded was broken down into a weekly basis,<sup>132</sup> so these crosstabs were run with the “week” variable as the row and the “recovery” or “response” variable as the column. The crosstabulation including weeks and response revealed that the response phase surfaced most in tweets tweeted during week 12, while the least amount of response tweets (if present at all) were tweeted during week two. The crosstabulation including weeks and recovery revealed that the recovery phase surfaced most in tweets during week 13, while the least amount of recovery tweets (if present at all) were tweeted during weeks three and seven. See Appendix 3, Line Graph 1.

A Chi-square test was also completed to compare the observed date between the occurrence of the response and recovery phases. Since crisis weeks one and two included less than five frequencies for each phase, these weeks were omitted. The test only compared frequencies for crisis weeks three through 13. Condition one consisted of response frequencies, while condition two consisted of recovery frequencies. The test

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<sup>131</sup> A crosstab is a descriptive statistics analysis that cross-tabulates two variables.

<sup>132</sup> This time period consisted of a 13-week period, so weeks were broken down into “Week 1,” “Week 2,” etc.



yielded a Chi-square of 67.6, with nine degrees of freedom (df) and a *p*-value of < .001. This test revealed a significant difference between the two conditions.

## RQ2

RQ2 sought to discover which strategy(s) of reputation repair was most prevalent in tweets from @BP\_America. These reputation repair strategies included Attack the accuser; Denial; Scapegoat; Excuse (provocation); Excuse (defeasibility); Excuse (accidental); Excuse (good intentions); Justification; Reminder; Ingratiation; Compensation; and Apology. Of these 12 reputation repair strategies, eight were reflected within the tweets. The compensation strategy was reflected most, appearing in 163 tweets (14 percent). Reminder was reflected in 139 tweets (12 percent). Denial was reflected in 11 tweets (0.9 percent). Ingratiation and Apology were each reflected in six tweets (0.5 percent). Justification was reflected in four tweets (0.3 percent). Attack the accuser and Excuse (accidental) were each reflected in one tweet (0.1 percent). Scapegoat, Excuse (provocation), Excuse (defeasibility), and Excuse (good intentions) were not reflected in any of the tweets. See Appendix 4, Table 1.

Crosstabs were also run in this section for reminder and compensation versus weeks, respectively, since these strategies of reputation repair were most prevalent within tweets. Crosstabulation for weeks and reminder revealed that reminder tweets were tweeted most during week 10 and least (if present at all) during weeks three and four. Crosstabulation for weeks and compensation revealed that compensation tweets were tweeted most during week nine and least (if present at all) during week six. See Appendix 3, Line Graph 2.

### RQ3

RQ3 sought to discover which crisis type(s) was reflected most in tweets from @BP\_America. The three crisis types included victim crisis, accident crisis, and preventable crisis. Accident crisis was reflected in the majority of tweets, appearing in 1,129 tweets (97.2 percent). Victim crisis was reflected in two tweets (0.2 percent). Preventable crisis was reflected in one tweet (0.1 percent).

### RQ4

RQ4 sought to discover which type(s) of attribution of responsibility was reflected most in tweets from @BP\_America. The three types of attribution of responsibility included no crisis responsibility, low/minimal crisis responsibility, and strong high crisis responsibility. Strong/high crisis responsibility was reflected most within tweets, appearing in 1,044 tweets (89.9 percent). Low/minimal crisis responsibility was reflected in 83 tweets (7.1 percent). No crisis responsibility was reflected in two tweets (0.2 percent).

### RQ5

RQ5 sought to discover which RiskSmart items were most prevalent in tweets from @BP\_America. RiskSmart items included: victimized entities without their consent or beyond their control; constituted a repeated mistake made by BP that the public can easily recall; was a breach of ethics/widely accepted values; was illegal (misdemeanor, felony); caused serious financial harm to others; has strong political attributes tied to it; damaged partner relationships; has a widespread national or international scope; is part of a recent

trend of similar acts by BP and/or others; was the first, worst, or biggest oil spill; relates to a current culturally popular subject (i.e. energy, environment, technology); and caused death/injury through action or inaction.

A total of 335 tweets (28.9 percent) implied that people felt strong political attributes were tied to the BP crisis. A total of 147 tweets (12.7 percent) implied that people felt the BP crisis had a widespread national or international scope. A total of 138 tweets (11.9 percent) implied that people felt the BP crisis caused serious financial harm to others. Ninety-four tweets (8.1 percent) implied that people felt the BP crisis was the first, worst, or biggest oil spill. Ninety tweets (7.8 percent) implied that people felt the BP crisis caused death/injury through action or inaction. Twenty-seven tweets (2.3 percent) implied that people felt the BP crisis related to a current culturally popular subject.

None of the tweets implied that people felt the BP crisis did any of the following: victimized entities without their consent or beyond their control; constituted a repeated mistake made by BP that the public can easily recall; was a breach of ethics/widely accepted values; was illegal; damaged partner relationships; or was part of a recent trend of similar acts by BP and/or others. See Appendix 4, Table 2.

Crosstabs were also completed for this research question to reveal the relationship between weeks, “had strong political attributes tied to it,” and “caused serious financial harm,” “caused death/injury through action or inaction,” respectively. Crosstabulation for weeks and “had strong political attributes tied to it” revealed that most political tweets were tweeted during week nine, while the least (if present at all) were tweeted during week 10. Crosstabulation for weeks and “caused serious financial harm” revealed that most financial tweets were tweeted during week nine, while the least (if present at all)

were tweeted during week six. Crosstabulation for weeks and “caused death/injury through action or inaction” revealed that most death/injury tweets were tweeted during week 10, while the least (if present at all) were tweeted during weeks two and six. See Appendix 3, Line Graph 3.

#### Secondary Coding: Hashtags and URLs

All tweets were coded for the following hashtags: #bp; #oilspill; #Oil\_Spill\_2010; #gulf; #air; #water; #birds; #topkill; #bpcares; #uscg; #usfws. The most prevalent hashtag was #oilspill, which appeared in 304 tweets (26.2 percent). Next was #bp, which appeared in 223 tweets (19.2 percent). #Oil\_Spill\_2010 appeared in 6 tweets (0.5 percent). #topkill and #usfws each appeared in four tweets (0.3 percent). #gulf and #uscg appeared in three tweets (0.3 percent). #air, #water, #birds, and #bpcares appeared in one tweet (0.1 percent).

All tweets were coded for the following website redirects: BP’s website (general); BP’s Press page on website; BP’s Gulf of Mexico restoration page on website; Facebook; YouTube; Flickr; RestoreTheGulf.gov; Deepwater Horizon Memorial; ABC; CNN; CSPAN; CBS; NPR; AP; PBS; MSNBC; *The Wall Street Journal*; *The New York Times*; *The Los Angeles Times*; *The Huffington Post*; *The Boston Globe*; *USA Today*; U.S. Coast Guard; GeoPlatform.gov/GulfResponse; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; Tri-State Bird Rescue; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; International Bird Rescue; National Fish and Wildlife Foundation; and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

URLs redirected users to RestoreTheGulf.gov on 113 occasions (9.7 percent). URLs redirected users to the Gulf of Mexico restoration page on BP’s website on 105 occasions

(9.0 percent). URLs redirected users to YouTube on 93 occasions (8.0 percent). URLs redirected users to BP's website (general) on 91 occasions (7.8 percent). URLs redirected users to the Press page on BP's website on 77 occasions (6.6 percent). URLs redirected users to Facebook on 57 occasions (4.9 percent).

URLs redirected users to CNN on 46 occasions (4.0 percent). URLs redirected users to Flickr and CSPAN on 19 occasions, respectively (1.6 percent). URLs redirected users to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on 14 occasions (1.2 percent). URLs redirected users to MSNBC on 12 occasions (1.0 percent). URLs redirected users to GeoPlatform.gov/GulfResponse on 11 occasions (0.9 percent). URLs redirected users to ABC on nine occasions (0.8 percent). URLs redirected users to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration on eight occasions (0.7 percent). URLs redirected users to the AP and Tri-State Bird Rescue on five occasions, respectively (0.4 percent). URLs redirected users to CBS and the U.S. Coast Guard on four occasions, respectively (0.3 percent).

URLs redirected users to *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, NPR, and PBS three times, respectively (0.2 percent). URLs redirected users to *The Boston Globe* and International Bird Rescue on two occasions, respectively (0.2 percent). URLs redirected users to the Deepwater Horizon Memorial website, *The Huffington Post*, *USA Today*, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation on one occasion each (0.1 percent).

## Chapter V

### Discussion

This study sought to analyze BP's use of Twitter as a crisis communication tool during the 2010 Deepwater Horizon crisis response phase. The research questions guided an analysis of the emergency management phases, reputation repair strategies, crisis types, types of attribution of responsibility, and RiskSmart public perception items within BP's tweets from April 15, 2010 to July 15, 2010.

RQ1 revealed that the recovery phase of emergency management was most prevalent, appearing within 53.7 percent of the tweets. BP used most of its tweets during the recovery phase to inform its audience of its efforts to rebuild or repair damages in the Gulf and on the coast, particularly the repair or rebuilding of the damaged Macondo well. These efforts included the Lower Marine Riser Package, the Riser Insertion Tube Tool, and drilling relief wells.

Recovery tweets also included information about coastal cleanup efforts and wildlife rehabilitation and release. The response phase was the second-most prevalent emergency management phase seen during this period, appearing within 36.3 percent of the tweets. This means that BP also used a large number of tweets to provide information about saving wildlife and preventing further damages. Response tweets included information about rescuing wildlife and protecting shorelines from oil using booms, dispersants, and skimming.

A Chi-square test completed for these two separate conditions revealed a significant difference between the raw number of recovery tweets and response tweets. Response tweets were most prevalent during the early weeks of the crisis response, and they gradually decreased over time. The opposite is true of recovery tweets, which increased over time. This shows that BP acted in way that was directly in line with emergency management protocol. That cycle begins with mitigation, moves into preparedness, then response, and finally recovery. The phase of emergency management reflected in BP's tweets paralleled the phase of emergency management BP was engrossed in at that time.

This finding is important because it shows that BP was exercising two crisis response best practices that are outlined in Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory: responding in a timely manner and being accurate with facts. Since SCCT is a guiding theory for most crisis communications, it was expected that BP would follow its basic guidelines.

RQ2 revealed the reputation repair strategies most prevalent in tweets from @BP\_America during this period. The compensation and reminder strategies appeared at a much higher rate than the other 10 strategies. The compensation strategy appeared in 14 percent of the tweets, revealing that BP used 163 tweets to provide information about claims given to individuals who were financially harmed as a direct result of the oil spill, as well as donations made to research and wildlife funds. During the ninth week, the most compensation tweets appeared (34 tweets), which happened to be during the same week BP announced its agreement to pay \$20 billion over 3.5 years to meet the obligations arising from the oil spill.

The reminder strategy appeared in 12 percent of the tweets, revealing that BP used sufficient tweets to provide reminders of good works pertaining to the oil spill that had been completed. These good works included individual claims checks cut, money donated to research or wildlife funds, amount of oil collected, and amount of boom deployed. Week 10 contained the most reminder tweets; the same week that BP announced it would donate the net revenue from the sale of oil recovered from the Macondo well to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

This finding is important because it reveals that certain reputation repair strategies work better in different crises or situations. Although BP attempted eight of the 12 strategies at some point during the 13-week period studied, the public relations/crisis communications specialists found which strategies worked best and stuck to them. This reveals that BP was using social media, specifically Twitter, in a beneficial manner. By finding what strategy(s) resonated best with its online audience, BP was able to provide relevant information. Since most people viewed the oil spill as causing serious financial and physical damage, the strategies of compensation and reminder seemed to work best. These strategies specifically informed people of efforts made to reverse these damages, thus repairing BP's image one tweet at a time.

RQ3 revealed that accident crisis was the crisis type reflected most within tweets, appearing in 97.2 percent of the tweets. An overwhelming majority of tweets during the analyzed 13-week crisis response period suggested that the explosion and/or oil spill was an accident. Most tweets during this period suggested an accident crisis, since the investigation into the cause of the explosion and/or oil spill had not found BP responsible.



RQ4 revealed that strong/high crisis responsibility was the attribution of responsibility most reflected within tweets, appearing in 89.9 percent of the tweets. This means that an overwhelming majority of tweets during the analyzed 13-week crisis period indicated that BP took full responsibility for the explosion, oil spill, and all resulting issues.

When viewed simultaneously, the results of RQ4 and RQ5 reveal an interesting finding. Coombs' SCCT suggests that an accident crisis usually requires a low attribution of responsibility. However, BP assumed the highest level of responsibility for the oil spill in most tweets. This was a smart move on BP's part. Since BP assumed this level of responsibility while engaging its Twitter audience in two-way asymmetrical communication, it was gaining the trust of its followers. Ironically, assuming such a high level of responsibility made BP appear less guilty of foul play.

RQ5 revealed the RiskSmart public perception items that were most prevalent in tweets from @BP\_America during this time. The RiskSmart item that implied that a tweet had strong political attributes tied to it appeared in 28.9 percent of the tweets. In these tweets, BP typically mentioned a political or governmental individual or organization, or redirected the user to a political or governmental website. Most political tweets occurred during week nine. This just happened to be during the same week that BP was involved in a hearing with the U.S. House of Representatives.

Since Admiral Thad Allen, a retired U.S. Coast Guard admiral, was appointed as National Incident Commander of the Unified Command for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, his name was mentioned in a large amount of tweets, implying strong political attributes. This finding is important because it reveals that BP was in tune with its public audience. The public was much more fond of oil spill spokesman Allen than oil spill spokesman

Hayward. Therefore, BP placed its audience in direct contact more often with spokesman Allen, since this is who garnered more trust. In turn, this was another strategic move on BP's part to gain the trust of its audience.

The RiskSmart item that implied that a tweet had a widespread national or international scope appeared in 12.7 percent of the tweets. In these tweets, BP often redirected users to a national or international news organization's website by way of a link. Once again, BP was attempting to gain the trust of its audience by giving its followers direct access to news stories by accredited news sources.

The RiskSmart item that implied that BP caused serious financial harm to others, as a result of the oil spill, appeared in 11.9 percent of the tweets. This means that a sufficient amount of tweets by BP acknowledged the financial harm caused by the oil spill. These financial harm tweets included information about personal claims checks cut for individuals who were financially harmed by BP. Most tweets coded for "caused serious financial harm to others" occurred during week nine, the same week that BP announced its agreement to pay \$20 billion over 3.5 years to meet obligations arising from the oil spill.

This result directly parallels the result of RQ2. Since one of the biggest public perceptions was that the oil spill caused serious financial harm, it only made sense that BP implement the compensation and reminder strategies to inform the public of efforts it was making to reverse this financial damage. The findings clearly reveal that week 9 had the most "compensation" strategies and "caused serious financial harm" perceptions.

The RiskSmart item that implied that BP caused death or injury, as a result of the oil spill, appeared in 8.1 percent of the tweets. These tweets included information about rescuing, rehabilitating, and releasing harmed or injured wildlife. Most tweets coded for

“caused death or injury through action or inaction” occurred during week 10, the same week that BP announced its donation of the net revenue from the sale of oil recovered from the Macondo well to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. This finding is interesting because it too parallels with the result of RQ2. Since a large public perception was that the oil spill caused death or injury to wildlife, it only made sense that BP implement a reminder strategy to inform the public of its attempts to rescue and rehabilitate wildlife. The research clearly reveal week 10 as having the most “reminder” strategies and “caused death/injury” perceptions.

BP included hashtags in many tweets in an attempt to be included in trending conversations in the twitterverse. Although a variety of hashtag terms were used during the crisis response phase, #oilspill and #bp were by far used the most. This is probably because these terms were more popular trending terms; therefore, if BP used these specific hashtag terms, they were able to secure a place in trending conversations. Hashtags that did not trend well they immediately retired. For example, the hashtag #bpcares appeared in only one tweet during the analyzed 13-week period.

BP strategically included certain links in its tweets, as well. Most links either redirected users to [RestoreTheGulf.gov](http://RestoreTheGulf.gov), a government website created solely for the Gulf oil spill, BP’s website, or to one of BP’s other social media outlets. BP probably redirected users most to the government website to gain or retain the trust of its followers, while it probably redirected users to its other websites to remain the main source of information relating to the oil spill.

## Summary and Conclusions

After the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig and the resulting Gulf oil spill, BP implemented an extensive online crisis communication and public relations campaign. One of the major legs of this campaign consisted of repurposing its Twitter account, @BP\_America, to serve as a hub for updates and information pertaining to the oil spill response. @BP\_America tweeted its first oil spill-related tweet on April 27, seven days after the explosion, and continued to tweet thousands of oil spill-related tweets as the response and recovery efforts continued.

The results of this research study reveal that BP used its Twitter account for a variety of reasons, and quite strategically. Through these tweets, one can identify various emergency management phases, reputation repair strategies, crisis types, types of attribution of responsibility, and public perceptions. BP implemented specific reputation repair strategies in a manner in line with current events. For example, BP employed a compensation strategy after making a large monetary donation or a reminder strategy after collecting a large amount of oil. A striking revelation of this study is that BP's use of reputation repair strategies was directly in line with public perceptions. For example, the most "compensation" strategies appeared when the public perception of "caused serious financial harm" was the highest.

However, one area of BP's crisis communication plan was not in line with past crisis communication research. Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory suggests that accident crisis types usually indicate a low or minimal attribution of responsibility. However, most of BP's tweets revealed an accident crisis with a high or strong attribution

of responsibility. This is because the investigation into the explosion and oil spill did not point to a preventable crisis, but BP still took full responsibility for the incident.

This research study is important for a variety of reasons. First of all, it reveals that BP successfully followed best practices laid out in two guiding public relations/crisis communications theories: Grunig's Two-way Symmetrical Model and Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory. It also reveals reputation repair strategies that work best for this type of crisis. Therefore, this study may serve as a future reputation repair guideline for a company facing a similar situation.

Overall, studies of this kind are vital because they add to a new and growing body of knowledge concerned with online crisis communication plans. In a world of 24/7 digital media, all corporations must have an online aspect of a crisis communication plan. Analyzing past crises' online crisis communication plans helps to reveal which strategies are most successful for different companies in different situations.

### Limitations

Although BP provided a Twitter Content Log for the majority of tweets used in the content analysis, this log only dated back to June 5, 2010, and tweets were missing for the dates of June 6 through June 9, 2010. Therefore, many tweets were obtained from a source other than BP. The online source used to collect the remainder of tweets for the specified time period was Topsy.com, a real-time search engine for the social web. Although Topsy.com is a credible search engine with an extensive Twitter library, there is always the possibility that some tweets from @BP\_America were missing from their library.

### Recommendations for Future Research

BP extensive online crisis communication campaign included the use of its corporate website, Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, and YouTube. Future research might study how BP used Twitter during the post-crisis phase of the oil spill, since reputation repair strategies and public perceptions are still extremely prevalent during this phase. Other studies might examine the of BP's other social media outlets, including Facebook, Flickr, and YouTube, during various phases of the crisis. One could then compare the use of these social media outlets to Twitter and uncover important similarities and differences. Finally, future research might compare BP's Twitter response to tweets used in a different corporate crisis, such as the 2010 Toyota recall for brake problems. Such a study would reveal how they responded differently in admitting mistakes to the public.

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## LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

BP\_AMERICA TWEETS CODESHEET

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. Coder's first initial

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. Month (1-12)

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. Date (1-31)

4. Tweet text: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ 5. What type of post is the tweet? (1-original post, 2-retweet/RT, 3-@reply)

\_\_\_\_\_ 6. Did the tweet pertain to the oil spill? (no-blank, yes-1)

\_\_\_\_\_ 7. How many hashtags were included in the tweet? (ex: #oilspill)

8. Term(s) used in hashtag (if included)? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ 9. How many links were included in the tweet?

10. If a link(s) was included, where did it redirect the user?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Indicate which phase(s) of emergency management are reflected in the tweet (1=present; leave others blank).**

\_\_\_\_\_ 11. Mitigation (attempts to reduce impact of disaster)

\_\_\_\_\_ 12. Preparedness (development of risk management plans)

\_\_\_\_\_ 13. Response (mobilization of emergency services)

\_\_\_\_\_ 14. Recovery (rebuilding/repair)

**Indicate which strategy(s) of reputation repair are reflected in the tweet (1-present).**

\_\_\_\_\_ 15. Attack the accuser

\_\_\_\_\_ 21. Excuse (good intentions)

\_\_\_\_\_ 16. Denial

\_\_\_\_\_ 22. Justification

\_\_\_\_\_ 17. Scapegoat

\_\_\_\_\_ 23. Reminder

\_\_\_\_\_ 18. Excuse (provocation)

\_\_\_\_\_ 24. Ingratiation

\_\_\_\_\_ 19. Excuse (defeasibility)

\_\_\_\_\_ 25. Compensation

\_\_\_\_\_ 20. Excuse (accidental)

\_\_\_\_\_ 26. Apology

**For the following items, indicate which crisis type(s) is reflected in the tweet (1-present).**

\_\_\_\_\_ 27. Victim crisis          \_\_\_\_\_ 28. Accident crisis          \_\_\_\_\_ 29. Preventable crisis

**Indicate which type(s) of attribution of responsibility are reflected in the tweet (1-present)**

\_\_\_\_\_ 30. No crisis responsibility  
\_\_\_\_\_ 31. Low/minimal crisis responsibility  
\_\_\_\_\_ 32. Strong/high crisis responsibility

**RiskSmart items: Which of the following does the tweet acknowledge and/or imply that people feel about the oil spill? (1=yes, blank=no)**

\_\_\_\_\_ 33. Victimized entities without their consent or outside their control?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 34. Constituted a repeated mistake by BP that the public can easily recall?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 35. Was a breach of ethics/widely accepted values?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 36. Was illegal (misdemeanor, felony)?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 37. Caused serious financial harm to others?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 38. Has strong political attributes tied to it?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 39. Damaged partner relationships?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 40. Has a widespread national or international scope?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 41. Is part of a recent trend of similar acts by BP and/or others?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 42. Was the first, worst, or biggest oil spill?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 43. Relates to a current culturally popular subject (i.e., energy, environment)?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 44. Caused death/injury through action or inaction?

## APPENDIX 2

### BP\_AMERICA TWEETS CODESHEET DEFINITIONS

1. Enter the initial of your first name.
2. Enter the month the tweet was tweeted using numerals 1-12 (ex: January = 1).
3. Enter the date the tweet was tweeted using numerals 1-31 (ex: January 22 = 22).
4. **Tweet Text:**  
Include all text from the original tweet. If the original tweet is longer than 140 characters, and a tweet lengthening application was used, click the URL or “Read More” link to view the full tweet. The original tweet is what should be copied and pasted under “Tweet text,” not the abbreviated version. Also include all hashtags and URLs included in the tweet.
5. **Type of post:**  
Specify if the post is an original post, retweet/RT, or @Reply.  
**Original post:** An original post is defined as a tweet that was organically composed by BP\_America.  
**Retweet/RT:** A retweet/RT is defined as a tweet that was originally tweeted by another Twitter user that @BP\_America chose to retweet using its Twitter account. A retweet/RT may be identified by the “RT” abbreviation plus the other Twitter user’s Twitter name (Ex: RT @lajordan13: see spot run...).
6. **@Reply:** @Reply is defined as a tweet that is composed specifically in reply to another Twitter user or directed at a specific Twitter user. @Reply may be identified by the @ symbol followed by the other Twitter user’s Twitter name.
6. Enter 1 if the tweet **did** pertain to the oil spill and/or the Gulf of Mexico crisis situation. Leave blank if the tweet **did not** pertain to the oil spill and/or the Gulf of Mexico crisis situation.
7. **Hashtags:** One Twitter option is to include a hashtag in a tweet. A hashtag is used to create groupings on Twitter and may be created simply by prefixing a word with a hash symbol (ex: #hashtag). Enter a numerical value for the number of hashtags found within the tweet. For example, if a tweet has a three hashtags, a “3” should be entered. If no hashtags are present, simply leave blank.
8. If a hashtag(s) was included within the tweet, specify what term(s) was used in the hashtag.
9. **Links:** Sometimes links are included in tweets to redirect the user to another website, picture, video, etc. Links may also be included if the original tweet is longer than 140 characters. Enter a numerical value for the number of links included within the tweet. If no links a present, simply leave blank.
10. If a link was present in the tweet, provide the URL and state where this URL redirected the user.
- Phase(s) of emergency management reflected in tweets:** Enter a 1 for each phase of emergency management that is reflected in a tweet. More than one phase of emergency management phase may be selected for an individual tweet.
11. **Mitigation:** A tweet in which mitigation is reflected will include language that attempts to reduce the impact of the Deepwater Horizon explosion and/or oil spill.

“Mitigation is the cornerstone of emergency management. It's the continuing effort to lessen the impact disasters have on people and property. Mitigation is defined as ‘sustained action that reduces or eliminates long-term risk to people and property from natural hazards and their effects.’”<sup>133</sup> If the word mitigation, or a variation of that word, is included in the tweet, choose this phase.

**12. Preparedness:** A tweet in which preparedness is reflected will include language that reveals the existence and/or development of risk management plan(s) for the current and/or future oil spill(s). “Preparedness takes the form of plans or procedures designed to save lives and to minimize damage when an emergency occurs. Planning, training, and disaster drills are the essential elements of preparedness. These activities ensure that when a disaster strikes, emergency managers will be able to provide the best response possible.”<sup>134</sup> If the word preparedness, or a variation of that word, is included in the tweet, choose this phase.

**13. Response:** A tweet in which response is reflected will include mentions of oil spill emergency services. “Response is defined as the actions taken to save lives and prevent further damage in a disaster or emergency situation. Response is putting preparedness plans into action.”<sup>135</sup> If the word response, or a variation of the word, is included in the tweet, choose this phase. Response also includes protecting wildlife and/or shorelines by way of booms, dispersants, skimming, etc.

**14. Recovery:** A tweet in which recovery is reflected will include mentions of oil spill recovery efforts to rebuild and repair damage caused by the explosion/oil spill. Recovery efforts may include mentions of clean-up, drilling of relief wells, capping of the well, etc. Recovery may also include mentions of monetary response efforts, such as donations from BP, fines assigned to BP, personal claims, etc. “Recovery is defined as the actions taken to return the community to normal following a disaster. Repairing, replacing, or rebuilding property are examples of recovery.”<sup>136</sup> If the word recovery, or a variation of the word, is included in the tweet, choose this phase.

**Strategy(s) of reputation repair reflected in tweets:** Enter a 1 for each strategy of reputation repair that is reflected in a tweet. More than one may be chosen for an individual tweet.

**15. Attack the accuser:** This type of tweet will confront the person or group claiming something is wrong with BP.

**16. Denial:** This type of tweet will consist of BP asserting that no crisis, or specific aspect of the crisis, is present.

**17. Scapegoat:** This type of tweet will consist of BP blaming a person or group outside of BP for the crisis.

**18. Excuse (provocation):** This type of tweet will include an excuse by BP claiming the crisis was a result of someone else’s actions.

**19. Excuse (defeasibility):** This type of tweet will include an excuse by BP claiming a lack of information about events leading up to the explosion and/ or oil spill.

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<sup>133</sup> “Four Phases of Emergency Management,” Ada City-County Emergency Management, <http://www.accem.org/phases.html> (accessed April 4, 2011).

<sup>134</sup> “Four Phases of Emergency Management.”

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

**20. Excuse (accidental):** This type of tweet will include an excuse by BP claiming a lack of control over events leading up to the explosion and/or oil spill.

**21. Excuse (good intentions):** This type of tweet will include an excuse by BP claiming that the organization meant to do well.

**22. Justification:** This type of tweet will include a justification that minimizes the perceived damage caused by the explosion and/or oil spill.

**23. Reminder:** This type of tweet will remind stakeholders about the past good works completed by BP. A tweet in which a reminder is present may include a specific amount of oil collected, money paid in claims, boom deployed in response to the oil, or wildlife rescued.

**24. Ingratiation:** This type of tweet will praise BP stakeholders for their actions. A lot of the time, ingratiation will praise volunteers.

**25. Compensation:** This type of tweet will include offers of money or other gifts from BP to direct and indirect victims of the explosions and/or oil spill. Compensation includes claims given to individuals, research funds, wildlife funds, etc.

**26. Apology:** This type of tweet indicates that BP takes full responsibility for the explosion and/or oil spill and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.

**Crisis type(s) reflected in tweets:** Enter a 1 for each crisis type reflected in a tweet. Only choose a crisis type when the tweet specifically mentions the actual oil spill and/or the Deepwater Horizon explosion or the specific actions being taken to counteract the spill and/or explosion. Choose a crisis type for every tweet that directly or indirectly refers to the oil spill/Gulf of Mexico crisis situation. For most tweets, “accident crisis” will be chosen since the investigation into the cause of the oil spill had not revealed evidence to suggest the explosion/oil spill was a preventable crisis. Only one crisis type will be chosen for tweets in which a type is reflected.

**27. Victim crisis:** This type of tweet will claim that BP was the victim of the explosion and/or oil spill. For example, the crisis was a result of a natural disaster, rumor, or product tampering/malevolence (ex: the oil spill being compared to Hurricane Katrina).

**28. Accident crisis:** This type of tweet will claim that the explosion and/or oil spill was an accident. An accident crisis may include a challenge (i.e. a stakeholder claims the organization operated in an inappropriate manner), technical error accident (i.e. the explosion and/or oil spill was caused by equipment or technology failure), or technical error product harm (i.e. an equipment or technology failure caused a product to be defective or harmful). Most tweets will indicate an accident crisis, unless otherwise noted.

**29. Preventable crisis:** This type of tweet will claim that the explosion and/or oil spill could have been prevented. For example, the crisis may have been caused by a human-error accident (i.e. the explosion and/or oil spill was caused by human error), human-error product harm (i.e. a product was defective or harmful because of a human error), or organizational misdeed (i.e. BP management actions put stakeholders at risk and/or violated the law).

**Type(s) of attribution of responsibility reflected in the tweet:** Enter a 1 for each type of attribution of responsibility reflected in a tweet. If a crisis type is present, then an attribution of responsibility must be indicated as well. Most tweets will reflect “strong/high crisis responsibility,” unless otherwise noted. This is due to the fact that BP took full responsibility for the explosion/oil spill. Only one type of attribution will be chosen for tweets that reflect a type.



**30. No crisis responsibility:** This type of tweet will indicate that BP is not responsible for the explosion and/or oil spill. This will further indicate that the explosion and/or oil spill was a victim crisis (ex: comparing the oil spill to Hurricane Katrina).

**31. Low/minimal crisis responsibility:** This type of tweet will indicate that BP is minimally responsible for the explosion and/or oil spill. This will further indicate that the explosion and/or oil spill was an accident crisis. For low/minimal crisis responsibility, no specific actions taken by BP are noted. However, if BP tweets about an entity separate from itself taking an action against the oil spill, this will reflect low/minimal crisis responsibility.

**32. Strong/high crisis responsibility:** This type of tweet will indicate that BP is fully responsible for the explosion and/or oil spill. This will further indicate that the explosion and/or oil spill was a preventable crisis. For strong/high crisis responsibility a specific action will be noted.

**RiskSmart Items:** Enter a 1 for each type of acknowledgement or implication of peoples' feelings about the oil spill. More than one RiskSmart item may be chosen for an individual tweet.

**33. Victimized entities without their consent of outside their control:** This type of tweet acknowledges that people feel their entities were victimized without their consent and outside their control.

**34. Constituted a repeated mistake by BP that the public can easily recall:** This type of tweet acknowledges that people feel as though the oil spill constituted a repeated mistake by BP that can be easily recalled by the public.

**35. Was a breach of ethics/widely accepted values:** This type of tweet acknowledges that people feel that the oil spill constitutes a breach of ethics or widely held views.

**36. Was illegal (misdemeanor, felony):** This type of tweet acknowledges that people feel that the oil spill was or was caused by illegal activities.

**37. Caused serious financial harm to others:** This type of tweet acknowledges that people feel that the oil spill caused serious financial harm to others. This RiskSmart will likely be chosen in part with compensation pertaining to individual claims. This item will not be chosen if compensation was referring to research funds, wildlife funds, etc.

**38. Has strong political attributes tied to it:** This type of tweet acknowledges that people feel that the oil spill has strong political attributes tied to it. This RiskSmart item will be chosen any time a political/governmental individual or organization is mentioned in the tweet or redirected to by way of a link.

**39. Damaged partner relations:** This type of tweet acknowledges that people feel that the oil spill damaged partner relations.

**40. Has a widespread national or international scope:** This type of tweet acknowledges that people feel that the oil spill has a widespread or international scope. This RiskSmart item will be chosen any time a national or international news organization is mentioned is redirected to by way of a link. This item will also be chosen when tweets provide access to oil spill information via a foreign language.

**41. Is part of a recent trend of similar acts by BP and/or others:** This type of tweet acknowledges that people feel that the oil spill is part of recent trend of similar acts by BP and/or others.

**42. Was the first, worst, or biggest oil spill:** This type of tweet acknowledges that people feel that the oil spill was the first, worst, or biggest oil spill. Since the Deepwater

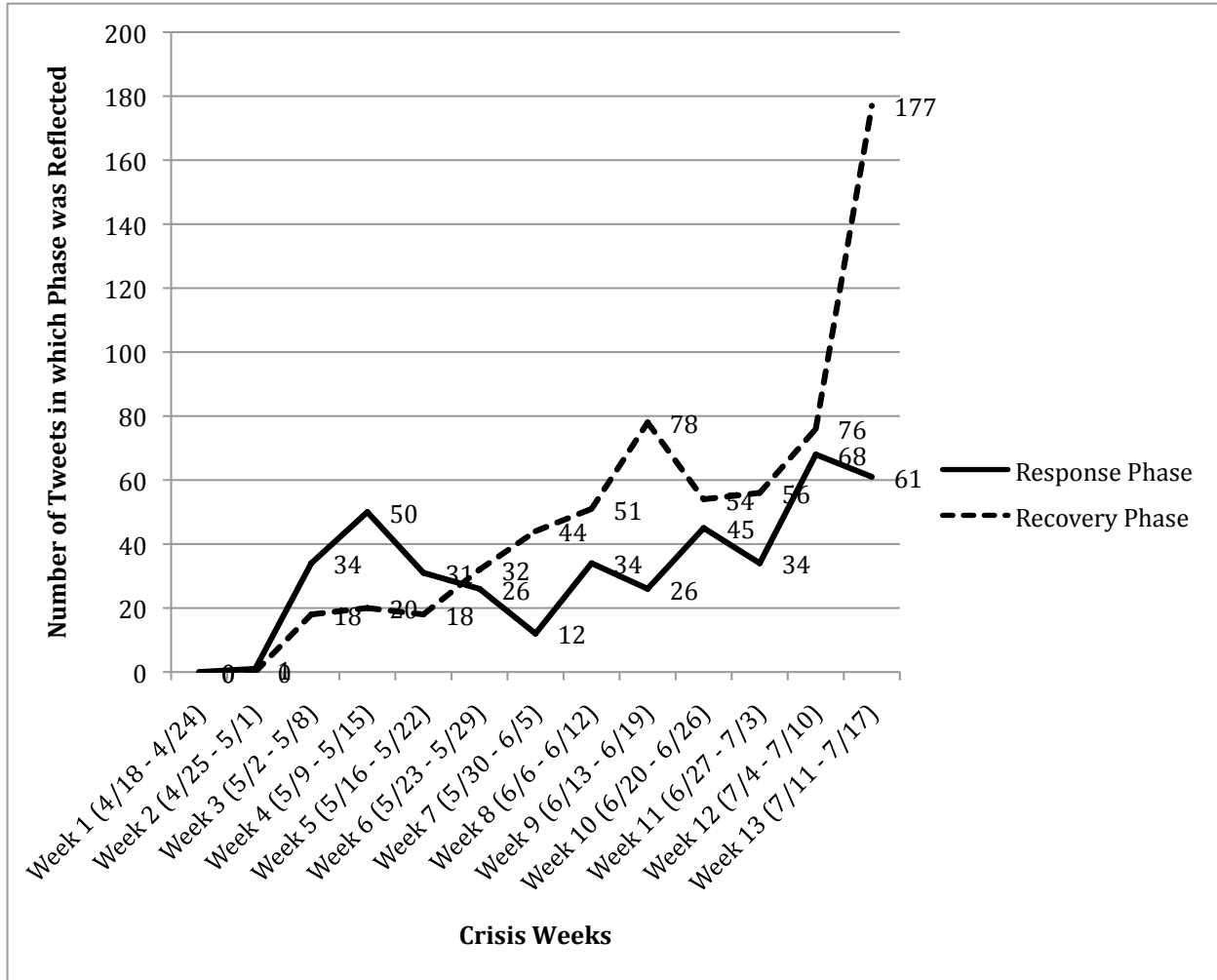
Horizon oil spill was the largest in the history of the United States, this RiskSmart item will be chosen any time a tweet includes a specific oil flow rate or amount of oil collected.

**43. Relates to a current culturally popular subject (i.e. energy, environment):** This type of tweet acknowledges that people feel that the oil spill relates to current culturally popular subject (i.e. energy, environment). When a tweet includes information about air/water quality, this RiskSmart item will be chosen due to its environmental element.

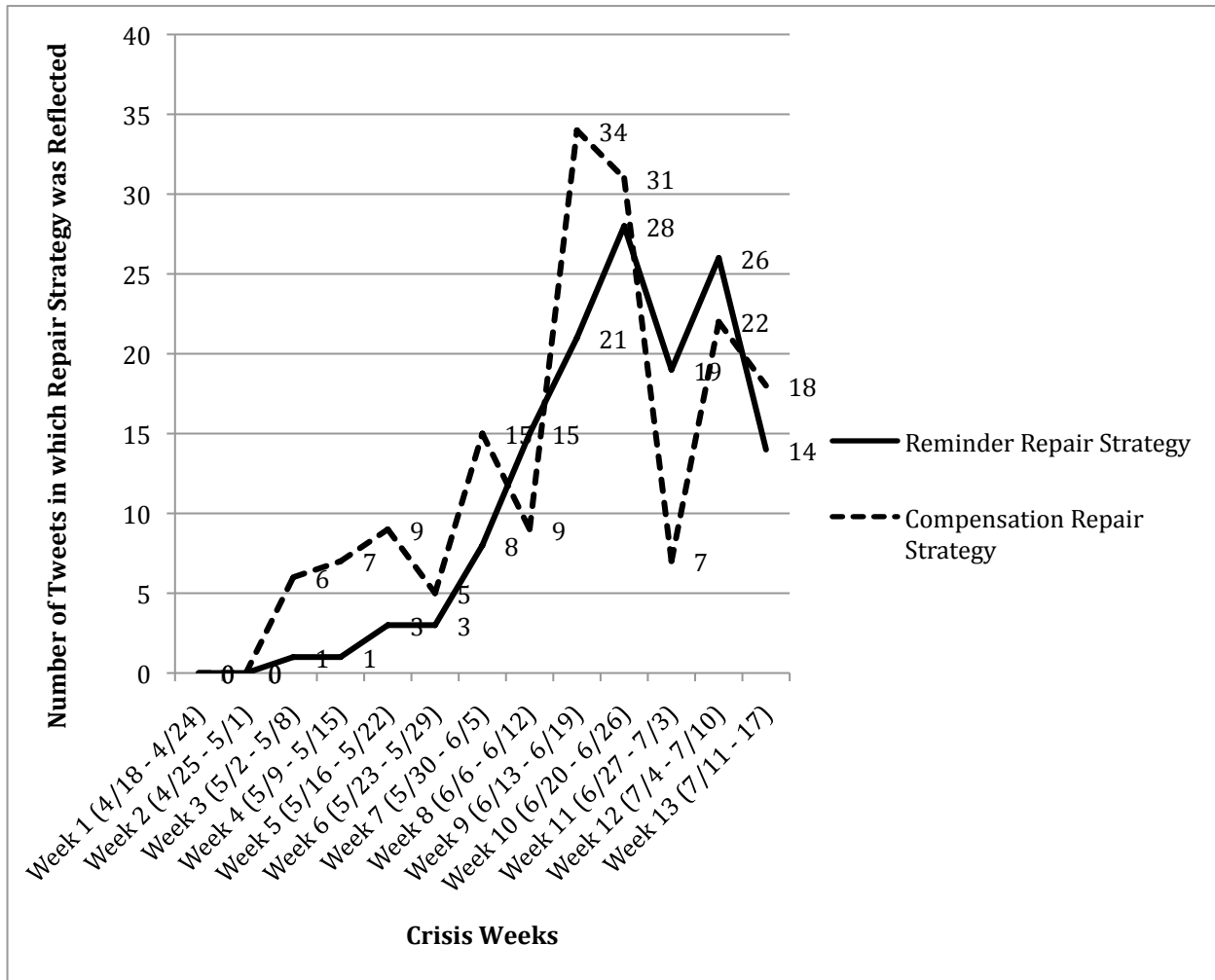
**44. Caused death/injury through action or inaction:** This type of tweet acknowledges that people feel that the oil spill caused death/injury through action or inaction. This injury/death may affect people and/or wildlife.

APPENDIX 3

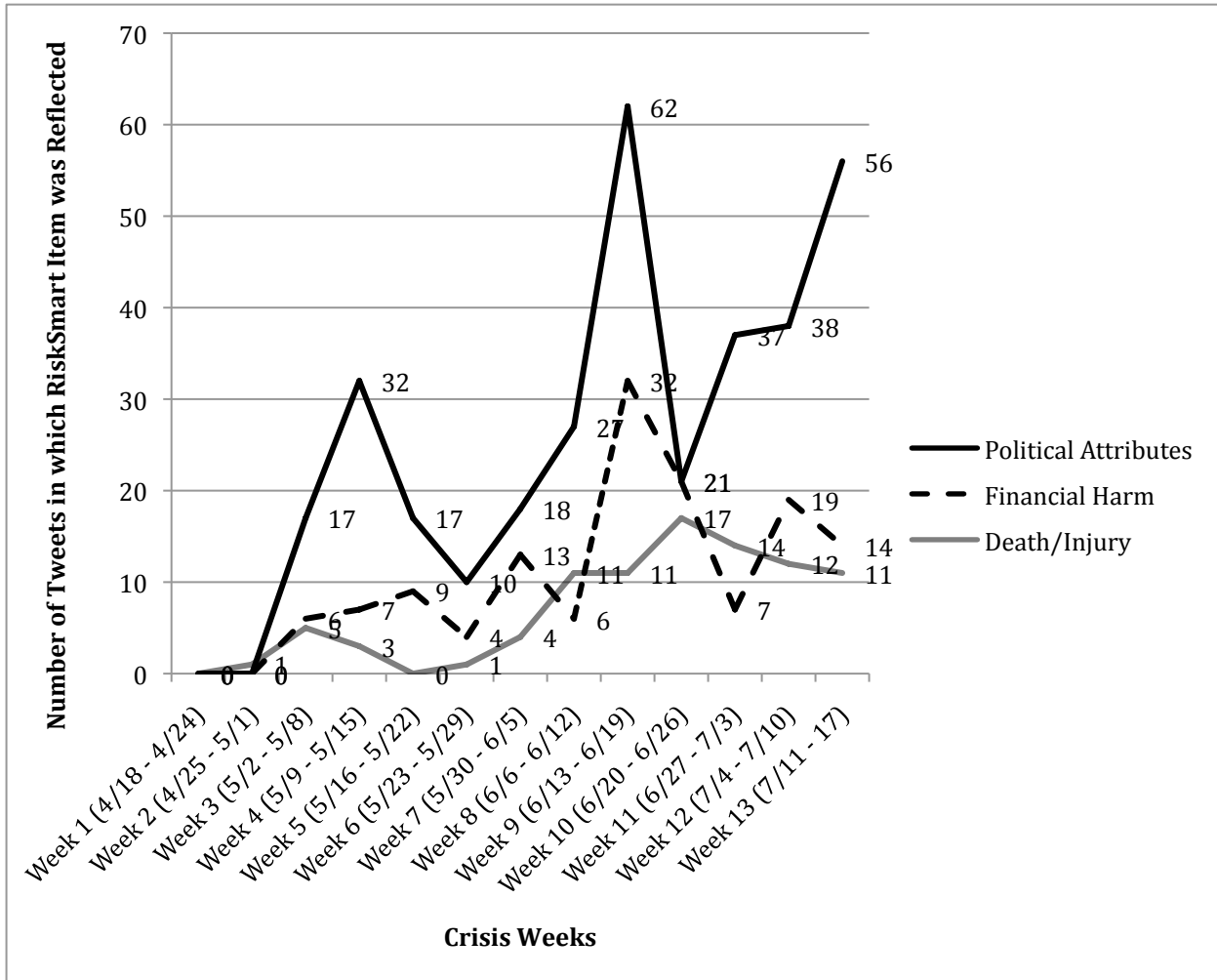
**Line Graph 1: Crosstabulation of Response and Recovery**



**Line Graph 2: Crosstabulation of Reminder and Compensation**



**Line Graph 3: Crosstabulation of Political Attributes, Financial Harm, and Death/Injury**



APPENDIX 4

**Table 1: Instances of Reputation Repair Strategies within Tweets**

<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Compensation	163	14.0
Reminder	139	12.0
Denial	11	0.9
Ingratiation	6	0.5
Apology	6	0.5
Justification	4	0.3
Attack the accuser	1	0.1
Excuse (accidental)	1	0.1
Scapegoat	0	0.0
Excuse (provocation)	0	0.0
Excuse (defeasibility)	0	0.0
Excuse (good intentions)	0	0.0

**Table 2: Instances of RiskSmart Items Implied within Tweets**

<b>RiskSmart Items</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Had strong political attributes tied to it	335	28.9
Had a widespread national or international scope	147	12.7
Caused serious financial harm to others	138	11.9
Was the first, worst, or biggest oil spill	94	8.1
Caused death/injury through action or inaction	90	7.8
Related to a current culturally popular subject	27	2.3
Victimized entities without their consent	0	0.0
Constituted a repeated mistake made by BP	0	0.0
Breach of ethics/widely accepted values	0	0.0
Recent trend of similar acts by BP	0	0.0
Was illegal (misdemeanor, felony)	0	0.0
Damaged partner relationships	0	0.0

**Table 3: Instances of Specific Website Redirects within Tweets**

Websites	Frequency	Percent
Webpage on BP Corporate Site	273	23.4
Social Media	169	14.5
Government Oil Spill Response	124	10.6
National Broadcast	101	8.5
Government Agency	27	2.3
Elite Newspaper	13	1.0
Environmental Agency	8	0.7
Other	1	0.1

VITA

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