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# Environmental Conflict and Media Coverage of an Oil Spill in Trinidad

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## Abstract

In December 2013, local media reported an oil spill off the southwestern coast of Trinidad. Subsequent media reports generated local and international interest, statements, and commentary from company and government interests and members of the La Brea community (fisherfolk and residents directly affected by the oil spill), the national community, trade unionists, politicians, oil spill experts, and environmentalists. As the news coverage developed, various narrative themes emerged. Within these themes, various conflict issues, mainly pertaining to the nature and focus of communication, and differences over the prevention, mitigation and management of environmental disasters were manifested in the media coverage and corporate communications management of crisis and reputation. Using crisis communication theory, and content analysis of media and company texts, this study examined the extent of media coverage and organizational and corporate communications framing of the creation, escalation, and management of a significant environmental conflict situation.

Oil spills are not new environmental issues, but the environmental conflicts generated by such issues continue to attract attention from practitioners and scholars. Media coverage of oil spill disasters serves an important and necessary role in a democratic and free society, but it is not clear how much potential and actual responsibility can be laid at the feet of the media for generating conflict by highlighting and featuring the issues which can create conflict, fan inflammatory interests, and generate sales and revenue by selling conflict as a media commodity. Various theoretical and methodological approaches are relevant to analyzing this question, but framing and crisis communication phases, as an aspect of corporate communications and reputation management, offer useful analytical tools for understanding the processes and practices associated with media coverage of the oil spill.

The fourth largest oil spill (90 million gallons) in the world occurred in Trinidad in 1979 when two super tankers collided off the coast of Tobago, one of the twin islands in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, located 7 miles from Venezuela. The largest oil spill was during the Gulf War when Iraqi soldiers reportedly deliberately spilled an estimated 380–520 million barrels into the Gulf of Persia in 1991. More recent events received media coverage such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989 (11 million gallons; 36th largest), the Deepwater Horizon oil spill (estimated 206 million gallons; 2nd largest) in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010, and BP's effort to cap the well by July 2010 (see Figure 1). Twenty years later, the effects of the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska were noted (Moss, 2010; see Figure 2). According to Fingas (2012, p. 18), 15 oil spills occur and spill into navigable waters and about 85 happen on land

*Figure 1*. Controlled burning in the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon disaster. BP's safety lapses have been labeled "chronic." (Photograph: Sipa Press/Rex Features) *Source*: Goldenberg (2010).

and happen because of human error in 30–50% or equipment malfunction or failure in 30–40% of the cases, and worldwide, it takes about $50–400 USD per liter spilled to clean up the mess.

On December 18, 2013, an oil spill was reported in the local media off the southwestern coast of Trinidad. Initial reports stated that 4,200 barrels had been cleaned up by January 18, and another stated 7,500 barrels (Singh, 2014), but it was unclear how much oil had been spilled. By February 2014, the estimated cost of the cleanup was put at 50 million TTD (6.46 TTD = 1 USD), but the effect on the fisherfolk, nearby communities, coast line, sea, marine life, and mangrove had not yet been computed. However, Baptiste and Nordenstam (2010, p., 295) cite research by Khan (2005) indicating that among fence-line communities closest to oil spills in Trinidad, 20–45% of residents polled reported being adversely affected. They used newspaper reports to conclude that the environmental effects of the oil and gas industry had not received adequate attention even after 100 years of oil exploration. They noted a media report that "no formalized Oil Spill Emergency Response Plan exists (Lord, n.d.)" (p. 295), but recent media reports indicate that one was developed to replace the 1977 version (Webb, 2013) and was used to manage the December 2013 oil spill (Energy Ministry, 2014; see Appendix 1).

Commenting on the persistence of environmental conflicts, Lashley and Taylor (2010, p. 490) concluded that an appetite for overconsumption and a lack of understanding of the processes and practices which connect persons everywhere perpetuate such conflicts. This commentary suggests that there is insufficient attention to the processes and practices associated with environmental conflicts related to the oil and gas industry. One of the ways of addressing this issue is to explore the role of media coverage of the 2013 oil spill.



*Figure 2*. OILY LEGACY: Twenty-one years later, oil from the Exxon Valdez spill remains a few inches below the surface on many of Alaska's beaches. (Photograph: John Gaps III/AP).

The roles of nongovernmental activists and the media are identified as having a critical and "sympathetic" attitude to the "plight of the host communities to the oil and gas industries" (Baptiste & Nordenstam, 2010, p. 314). The researchers noted that their results based on a survey of three communities showed "high salience for the issue and strong oppositional potential are present in the communities," but there was no evidence of environmental action (p. 314). Notwithstanding the uncertainty of what environmental action was taken or might have been taken in previous incidents, it is possible that salience and oppositional potential such as those that exist in the recent oil spill are capable of being fueled and can contribute to conflict among stakeholders. Thus, the cost, impact, and implications of oil spills have far-reaching and serious consequences for all, and are of special interest to environmental conflict scholars, environmental justice activists, villagers, fisherfolk, and other individual and corporate interests—all stakeholders.

The oil events over the last three decades have spawned research in the fields of crisis communication, organizational and corporate communications, and stakeholder reputation management and environmental conflict management. Using sensemaking, political economy, conflict management, and crisis and reputation management frames, this study conducted a content analysis of published media texts using print and online sources published between December 18, 2013, and February 6, 2014. In collecting data for the study, it became clear that the media coverage of the oil spill was an unfolding and complex story that lent itself to quantitative and interpretive theoretical and methodological approaches.

# Review of the Literature

## Communication and Conflict Behavior

Communication and conflict are related. Both require management, especially in crisis situations. Management and communication failures were identified in the Deepwater Harbour oil spill (De Wolf & Mejri, 2013; Goldenberg, 2010; see Appendix 2). There are usually cordial but reserved routine interactions between local or central government officials and companies marked by lack of trust, and "protests, allegations and monitoring of each other's behaviour" between activists and companies (Lashley & Taylor, 2010, pp. 440–441). Lashley and Taylor used an integrated framework that considers issue identification, goals, resource mobilization, framing, efficacy of activists and leaders, and tactical interventions. This framework was used to analyze why there is collaboration or not among activists and adopted conflict management and social movement concepts. Data sources were based on participant observation and archival document analysis.

## Environmental Conflict

Environmental conflict is a dispute over the rights and interests of persons connected by the dual goals of exploiting and preserving the environment. It occurs between parties with incompatible goals that may be pursued in strategic and tactical ways which may result in escalated, protracted, and conglomerated conflict episodes and behaviors. The term "mediatized conflict" describes the complex ways in which the media contributes to the representation of conflict and is implicated by it (Cottle, 2006; Cottle & Matthews, 2013). Mediatized environmental conflict involves the presentation and representation by the media of complex interactions among (a) activists' strategies and campaigns, (b) journalistic practices and news reporting, (c) formal politics and decision-making processes, and (d) industry activities and trade (Hutchins & Libby, 2015). Thus, "mediatized environmental conflict is enacted by events and negotiations that occur at the 'switching points' between the four identified spheres of action." Next, the nature and role of stakeholders is reviewed. This is followed by a review of the framing literature. Framing allows for the creation of a networked meaningful context that reflects the mediatized environ-

mental conflict. Conflict frames, media frames, and crisis communication phases are reviewed and constitute a theoretical framework applied to the analysis of data collected using content analysis.

It is often studied using primary data from surveys, and participant observation (Baptiste & Nordenstam, 2010; Lashley & Taylor, 2010), and secondary sources for content analysis of newspaper reports, audiovisual material, and social networking sites and texts (Valvi & Fragkos, 2013).

## Stakeholders and Issues

Putnam et al. (2005) adopted a view of stakeholders that recognizes the potential lack of homogeneity among them in environmental conflicts. In such a scenario, stakeholders are linked to each other because they are affected by or have an influence over an environmental issue in which interactions among stakeholders are characterized by shifting, ambiguous and contested relationships. Their view of organizations, and communication networks which informed their analyzing of the framing of stakeholder interests, is characterized by an issue-specific, situational, and temporary definition of stakeholders.

Based on this approach to stakeholders as complex entities that exist beyond a monolithic, central organization, and a view of organizational communication as a phenomenon that mediates networked and linked internal and external stakeholder relationships, this study applies these conceptualizations to the identification and characterization of stakeholders and their concomitant framing of issues. In the case of the oil spill incident, the stakeholders are more than the persons at the organization known as Petrotrin. The stakeholders include employees, the local communities, the general public, and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, including the politicians, media workers, and all those with a range of diverse and heterogeneous interests in the oil spill and who contribute to how the oil spill is framed in the media.

## Framing

Putnam et al. (2005) also contribute to an understanding of framing that is relevant to this study. They consider framing as a sensemaking phenomenon that creates and structures the understanding, interpretation, and structuring of deliberate action in selected conflict situations. Thus, they contend that framing both guides and is the result of sensemaking processes (Goffman, 1974; Tannen & Wallat, 2003; Weick, 1995), and incorporates dual processes of constructing and interpreting a problem and is essentially a communicative process (Bodtker & Jameson, 1997; Putnam & Holmer, 1992). They note that the discursive and generative nature of frames can yield differences in framing among stakeholders, which can lead to conflict. Addressing such conflict includes understanding the discursive frames used by stakeholders (Lewicki, Gray, & Elliott, 2003), analyzing the framing process to assist with reframing (Schon & Rein, 1994), recognizing the role of deliberative discourses in facilitating conflict management (Hajer, 2003; Innes & Booher, 2003), and identifying "communities of interpretation" (Yanow, 1996, p. 222) or "discourse coalitions" (Hajer, 2003, p. 102) which can help individuals to arrive at "shared interpretations of issues or policies."

### Conflict Frames

Conflict frames are the cognitive lenses through which disputants perceive, categorize or label, and interpret the factors associated with a conflict. Conflict framing refers to the issues that are highlighted or given emphasis in disputants' varying perceptions of conflict, but may also include equivalent modes of presentation of the same content (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2002). Thus, "frames provide meaning through selective simplification, by filtering people's perceptions and providing them with a field of vision for a problem" (Kaufman, Elliott, & Shmueli, 2003). Within an organizational context, these frames include relationship/task, emotional–intellectual, and compete–win orientations (Pinkley, 1990; Pinkley & Northcraft, 1994). The relationship/task frame concerns whether the focus is on interpersonal concerns in the relationship or material aspects such money, property, or cost factors. The emotional/intellectual

frame concerns the extent to which a disputant perceives the focus of the conflict is on feelings such as anger, jealousy and frustration, or on behaviors and actions. The compete–win orientation focuses on whether the disputant is concerned with both parties' responsibility for the conflict and minimizing the benefit to each party, or blames the other party for the conflict and seeks to maximize gain.

In the case of intractable conflicts, six dominant frames "include identity, characterization, power, conflict management/process, risk/information, and loss versus gain" (Kaufman et al., 2003) and have been associated with the framing of intractable environmental conflicts (Elliott, Gray, & Lewicki, 2003) and land use disputes (Kaufman & Smith, 1999). Framing has been used to analyze the views of actors in a dispute involving different methods for harvesting cane for ethanol production in Brazil as means of conflict resolution (Galli & Wennersten, 2013).

Interactional discourse framing has demonstrated that stakeholders can frame the conflict in different ways according to the conversational context and do not always express their different views in each other's presence (Idrissou, Aarts, van Paassen, & Leeuwis, 2011). Reframing has been presented as an important negotiation strategy that can contribute to the resolution of intractable conflict (Kaufman et al., 2003). Both framing and reframing offer potential insights into the nature of and differences in perceptions of conflict among stakeholders.

During the unfolding of an environmental conflict, which is the focus of this study, and before such developing conflict becomes an intractable one, early media coverage of an oil spill is likely to be concerned with getting the facts, getting it right in reporting on the situation and presenting a range of views on the trigger incident, especially when there is uncertainty and lack of information on the nature and extent of the problem and there is speculation on its anticipated and actual impact on the environment. Subsequent media coverage tracks the crisis response and postcrisis phases. In these later phases, the tone and focus of media coverage is likely to change and become more sophisticated as investigative work is undertaken, reports are conducted and released, and some assessment and further evaluation of the situation occurs. During the later stage(s) of media coverage, there may be a greater potential for what is described as reframing, or changing perspectives to work toward resolution (Schütte, 2015), or for a dominant frame to be used to influence change in other frames (Castaño, Hartmann, Dewulf, & van Huffelen-de Kort, 2015), but such reframing need not be confined to the later phase(s) of the crisis.

## Media Coverage and Media Frames

Media coverage can frame conflict and negotiation issues within a larger social context beyond the microprocesses typically associated with these issues (Putnam & Fuller, 2014). Watson (2012) found that journalists' ideologies tend to predict their attitudes toward the oil industry. This evidence may help to explain the framing and sensemaking processes of journalists who, in Carey's (1997) view, are not purely dispassionate bystanders. Thus, as stakeholders, media personnel engage in framing issues that reflect their ideologies, and which can affect the ways in which other stakeholders with whom they interact frame issues related to the oil spill. These other stakeholders can affect the ways in which issues are identified and influence how media coverage is understood, interpreted, and expressed.

The research on agenda-setting theory dates from the early 1960s with precedents relating pictures in the media with pictures in our heads (Lippmann, 1922). Agenda-setting theory's interest in the media's influence on what to think about rather than what to think (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1977) has dominated the study of media effects, but more recently, questions have been raised about the effect of public opinion on what the media selects for attention, particularly in an era of increasingly accessible Internet and information communication technology (Ragas, Tran, & Martin, 2014).

Agenda-setting theory has been contrasted with framing theory which highlights or focuses on specific subjects and creates a meaningful context or interpretive lens for interpretation. Framing, then, focuses on the issues more than the informational content. Frames may be episodic, particularly in television news coverage that focuses on isolated narratives which are disconnected from other narrative events, or

thematic in which an interconnected web of meaning is presented within a coherent and meaningful context (Iyengar, 1991). Trigger events are spawned by disasters and catastrophes such as earthquakes and oil spills which provide examples of "a spectacular rare incident that brings an issue to the forefront of attention" (Ragas et al., 2014, p. 50). Such events generate and maintain media and public attention over periods of time, but the media, as well as public opinion, may play a role in framing a trigger event. Both public opinion and the media may frame a trigger event individually or collectively within a conflict context. As Chewning explains, source and media both contribute to framing (Chewning, 2015). It is not clear how much the media contributes to framing a trigger event, and if it does, to what extent such framing contributes to conflict, when it is possible for conflict to occur without the media's singular or direct intervention.

This study is concerned with the media's framing of an oil spill, and how such framing may or may not have contributed to the creation, escalation or resolution of conflict. A distinction may be made between media frames and audience frames and a case has been made for theorizing about the relationship between the two using a four stage process model of frame building, frame setting, individual level processes of framing, and a feedback loop for audiences to journalists (Scheufele, 1999). Given the finding of "an interactive two-way street in the transfer of salience between the media and search agendas" and the documenting of "reverse agenda-setting" occasioned by the news media's response to search trends during an oil spill disaster (Ragas et al., 2014), it is quite possible that isolating the media's role in framing a trigger incident and in framing such an event in conflict terms could remain a challenge.

Scheufele and Iyengar (2002) describe the conceptual confusion in framing research that is reflected in the existence of two different schools of thought on framing. The equivalence-based model of framing typically "defines framing as only encompassing media effects that are due to variations in the mode of presentation for a given piece of information" (Schefele & Iyengar, 2002, p. 11). Thus, the content is the same, but framing is based on the mode of presentation. The other school views framing, priming, and agenda-setting "as fundamentally related to the central concept of agenda-setting and the salience-based expectations underlying it" (pp. 9–10). The salience-based approach focuses on the prominence and emphasis given to the news content. Thus, the content is varied on the basis of emphasis. Accordingly, framing is defined as "a dynamic, circumstantially-bound process of opinion formation in which the prevailing modes of presentation in elite rhetoric and news media coverage shape mass opinion (Iyengar, 1991; Scheufele, 1999)" (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2002, p. 1). Accordingly, "framing effects refer to behavioral or attitudinal outcomes that are not due to differences in *what* is being communicated, but rather to variations in *how* a given piece of information is being presented (or framed) in public discourse" (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2002, p. 1).

For this study, the scope is limited to an analysis of media texts which may or may not be contributing to our understanding of the media's role in framing an oil spill and in framing it within a conflict context. This study does not attempt to analyze audience framing as an index of media effects; rather, it focuses on part of the picture, the media's role in framing, notwithstanding its presumed interactive link to audience frames. Second, while extensive research has documented the media's agenda-setting effect in political settings (Ragas & Kiousis, 2010; Ragas & Tran, 2013), on the civic agenda (McCombs, Holbert, Kiousis, & Wanta, 2011; McCombs & Reynolds, 2009), on smoking bans (Schulz, Uwe, & Fiordelli, 2012), and on an audience's fatalistic beliefs about cancer in health settings (Niederdeppe, Fowler, Goldstein, & Pribble, 2010), there has been less attention to this phenomenon in organizational and corporate settings (Kiousis, Popescu, & Mitrook, 2007; Ragas, Kim, & Kiousis, 2011) and in oil spill disasters (Ragas et al., 2014) where there has been a greater focus on agenda-setting rather than framing. Third, while the majority of studies focus on episodic or thematic dimensions of framing, there has been less attention to the cyclical dimension of framing, and the stages of framing, especially in smaller, developing-world settings where the oil company is nationalized. This study offers that perspective for comparison with findings based on studies of media coverage and framing of oil spills in larger societies where distinctions may or may not exist between local and national agendas (Botes, 2007; Hester &

Gibson, 2007; Taylor, Lee, & Davie, 2000), and where oil companies may be privately, rather than state-owned.

### Oil Spill Media Coverage

Over the last 50 years, we have come to know that the type of media (such as traditional mass and alternative) can influence the content of media coverage (Beresford, 1997; Chewning, 2015; Lee, 1993; Lyons, 2013; Molotch & Lester, 1975; Walton, Cooley, & Nicholson, 2012; Watson, 2014a), in thematically patterned or cyclical ways (Johnson & Goggin, 2015; Meissner, 2012; Miller, 1997), or in stages (Watson, 2014b) and can influence the impact of media coverage (Cheong, 2012; Ragas et al., 2014; Ritchie & Gill, 2008; Stinchcomb, 2011). Three main media framing patterns appear to have evolved over this period: nonconfrontational/privileged framing, adversarial/confrontational framing and the presentation of competing and contradictory parallel accounts.

Humphreys and Thompson's (2014) analysis of the public discourse surrounding the Exxon Valdez spill of 1989 and BP Gulf Spill of 2010 found that "media coverage of such events ultimately contains the anxieties that are sparked by initial news coverage." In this sense containment refers to the management and control over the outcomes of the discourse. The framing of such anxieties has the potential to contribute to the framing of conflict, or the nonframing of conflict, but the researchers found that "The brandcentric disaster myths generated by media coverage frame public discourse in ways that help to reestablish consumers' trust in expert systems while also insulating corporations and governmental institutions from more systematic critiques." Meissner's (2012) content analysis of media coverage of an oil spill from an offshore container ship during a state election generated adversarial, episodic, and governmental frames with an emphasis on political and government sources and less attention to socioeconomic issues that was consistent in international media coverage of oil similar disasters. Other studies have found that media framing has had an inhibiting influence on conflict in presenting controversial views while privileging profit over the social good of human or environmental health (Gilroy, 2011; Kleinnijenhuis, Schultz, Utz, & Oegema, 2015). Shultz, Walsh, Garfin, Wilson, and Neria's (2015) study of the multiimpact influence of the 2010 Deepwater Harbour oil spill, which was subjected to "extensive media coverage," on the psychological trauma experienced by persons found that the experience was counterbalanced by narratives of "remarkable resilience in the face of daunting challenges." A similar story of preparing residents, likely to be impacted by an oil spill disaster, for resilience is based on qualitative interviews and media coverage (Ritchie & Gill, 2008).Thus, one potential influence of the media frame is to avert conflict by restoring public trust while insulating corporations, presenting an authoritative, expert view that privileges the interests of political elites, and big corporations, or to portray stories of human triumph and resilience-building capacity. But the issue is whether the media's framing of disasters has any potential and actual influence on conflict generation, escalation or resolution.

On the other hand, the media's framing of disasters can focus on blame. The public's attribution of blame toward the U.S. president has been linked to the media's framing of the 2010 BP oil spill (Johnson & Goggin, 2015). Using Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory to analyze an organizational crisis in the 1992 Westray mining disaster, O'Connell and Mills (2003, p. 337) found that "In the case of Westray, the media authored an early tale of sorrow and loss and a later tale of blame and responsibility. In so doing they have profoundly influenced the larger discourses of worker safety and organizational responsibility in the province of Nova Scotia. In the construction and reconstruction of the Westray story, historical narrative has become overdetermined (Weick, 1995), allowing heuristics of grief and blame to represent pathological reproduction of dysfunctional practices (Mills, 1998; [Wicks], 2001)." Miller (1997) found a thematic pattern of "ambiguity of the causal circumstances surrounding the event, different stages of the media portrayal of the story, different social groups blaming each other for the cause of the event, different social groups enacting roles and the attribution of meaning to those roles. The second major finding identified corrosive and therapeutic impacts on the community resulting from the competition of these multiple realities portrayed through the media. Finally, from this study, a theoretical

model based the coverage of the Exxon Valdez oil spill is presented." Negative reporting, presenting criticism of the role of big oil corporations and their unsatisfactory efforts and responses in the ace of disaster, is characteristic of the adversarial approach found in British and American newspapers over the 1966–1990 period (Lee, 1993). The question is does the media's predictable pattern of portraying stages of sorrow and loss followed by the attribution of blame and responsibility generate, escalate or resolve environmental conflict?

The third main approach to media framing has been to present multiple, and sometimes contradictory accounts. The coexistence of various accounts across traditional and new media has been documented in the BP oil spill disaster (Chewning, 2015), and can be coordinated and synchronized by organizations (Diers & Donohue, 2013), but the media has no political economy, or other special interest in doing so. These multiple accounts appear to be concerned mainly with political economy concerns of selling. These concerns are not so much about selling a captive audience to advertisers, but are more about converting public interest in a controversial issue, the subject of investigative journalism, into a public appetite for controversy, newsiness, exposes and revelations. This appetite converts a captive audience into a media consuming public willing to spend money on getting multiple coexisting versions of the news. In this type of framing the media neither champions nor pursues any specific cause of action, but stands to benefit from the portrayal of multiple, differing and competing accounts. The media's interest in conflict resolution has been questioned (Pauly, 2009). In this framing process the media's negotiation of the spaces between the competing interests is tempered by appeals to rational and responsible discourse on the one hand and impassioned appeals to respond to the plight and suffering of the victims or to reject the sabotage or undermining of the economy, and the industrial interests or political elites, on the other hand. For example, Hardin (2011), Lyons (2013) and Miller (1997) demonstrate the range of contradictory, competing and stakeholder and collective interpretations that are possible. Cheong (2012) shows that the oil disasters can have different impacts and outcomes on fishing and tourism industries. Radsch (2013) contends that social and alternative media demonstrate a potentiality to influence change, for example, in the civil revolt in Egypt, but notes the actuality is influenced by the peculiar circumstances in which technological support for change are used to bring about change. The suggestion here is that the media simply reports the discourse associated with a contested issue which is already packed with conflicting and opposing points of view, and neither chooses to instigate, nor fuel, nor escalate, nor seek to resolve conflict.

## Crisis Communication

### Frames

Ketola (2006) identifies and tests four main corporate psychological defences (refusals, excuses, justifications and concessions) in an oil spill case. These defences offer ways of exploring how the crisis was managed and communicated in the media coverage of the Trinidad oil spill. Choi (2012) found that BP adopted a corporate responsibility frame in their press releases, which dealt with the Gulf oil spill crisis in April 2010. Choi conducted a content analysis of the main themes and subthemes to examine BP's crisis communication strategy. Choi noted that BP attempted to update the public on its effort to resolve the oil spill crisis employing the company's official update frame. BP's use of the social responsibility frame was designed to show their intentions of taking responsibility for the oil spill. Additionally, BP used a minimal number of defensive frames as a way of showing the public that they did not want to shirk their responsibility for the oil spill crisis.

It is quite possible that organizations might choose to use more than one frame, or modify and switch frames as the situational understanding and grasp of the crisis emerges. In such cases, it is possible for organizations to remain locked in a crisis management mode. For this reason Jaques (2009) suggests focusing on issue management in the postcrisis stage as a means of moving beyond crisis management mode to handle longer-term postcrisis impacts. This analysis is applied to the media coverage of the oil spill which incorporates the institutional press releases and communication strategies, as well as the

media coverage provided by other diverse and heterogeneous stakeholders including journalists and other contributors.

### Crisis Communication Phases and Theoretical Framing

Crisis communication is concerned with anticipation and planning, response, dissemination, and monitoring and evaluating the response to crisis situation in the various phases of a crisis event (Coombs, 2006, 2010). Precrisis (Coombs, 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 2002, 2006; Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Wan & Pfau, 2004), crisis response (Coombs, 2006, 2010; Huang, Lin, & Su, 2005), and postcrisis phases have been identified by practitioners and academics. Crisis communication may be distinguished from disaster management, in the former's focus on organizational scenarios and the latter's focus on industrial scenarios (Coombs, 2010; Quarantelli, 1988). Work in crisis communication was dominated in the early stages of its history by a focus on descriptive case studies of practitioners' lived experiences and the generation of lists of practical tips. This early work was followed by a focus on apologia based on analytical work of the practitioners' case studies conducted by academics (Coombs, 2010). Later, other research trends evolved, which are described next.

As Coombs (2010) observes, historically, the analysis and theoretical framing of crisis communication was related to approaches connected with the relevant focus on each of the three stages of a crisis. Thus, descriptive cases studies yielded lived accounts that were subsequently subjected to analytical frames which generated theoretical accounts using situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), attribution theory and contingency theory. SCCT is concerned with anticipation and risk prevention, and locating and sensing risk. Attribution theory is concerned with how persons make sense of the unfolding crisis and the response messages associated with them. Contingency theory considers what-if scenarios, considers the nature of specific crisis situations and prepares and rehearses the type of response for a given situation.

In the precrisis stage, situational analysis is characterized by anticipatory training scenarios, and the development of media relations skills. The success of such work depends on homophily or the extent to which there is a perceived match between the communicators and their audiences based on similarities of culture, age, race, gender and other variables. The crisis response or action phase, where most of the resources and energies of an organization may be focused, tends to use a range of seven responses. The firsts three include tactics; strategies; and an informal crisis communication theoretical approach involving (a) apologia or defensive work, (b) defensive reputation preservation, and (c) reputational renewal focusing on the organization's future rather than on what happened. Three additional approaches incorporate transitional crisis communication using media reports, organizational messages and social media (Huang, 2006); formal crisis communication research which examines relationships among variables and attempts to predict audience responses; and crisis response strategies research which examines the appropriateness and effectiveness of receivers' responses. This examination uses the accommodative–defensive continuum to balance victims' interests and the organization's self-interests and the specification to ambiguity continuum focusing on the receiver's response to the level of detail in a response (Coombs, 2006; Huang et al., 2005). The final approach focuses on audience effects research using attribution theory to understand how people make sense of the response and contingency theory which considers the selective application of a repertoire of appropriate responses for various scenarios.

In the postcrisis phase, which is often difficult to gauge, the most common approach is to focus on continuing crisis response communication, but with an intensification based on managing and responding to stakeholder communication in addressing external reporting and emphasizing the future, and the renewal and the reputation of the organization. Another postcrisis approach embodies organizational learning but this is often characterized by defensive and opposing behavior to avoid blame and punishment. This behavior can be addressed proactively using independent external agents to assist in the organizational learning process in a nonthreatening manner.

In studying the oil spill, the theoretical framing of this article considers the unfolding events between December 2013 and February 2014 as the crisis response phase, focusing on transitional crisis communi-

cation. This approach facilitates the analysis of media reports and the organization's messages during the crisis response phases and the unfolding of the crisis.

## Research Questions and Propositions

Based on the foregoing review of concepts related to media coverage, and the role of framing, two research questions were posed, each with two related propositions.

RQ 1: How did the media present the oil spill?

Proposition 1: Media coverage will create salience for the issue among stakeholder parties.

Proposition 2: Media coverage will create potential opposition between stakeholder parties.

RQ 2: What was the media's role in portraying the oil spill as a site for conflict?

Proposition 3: The media will create messages that reflect the incompatible goals of the stakeholder parties.

Proposition 4: The media coverage will generate an escalating environmental conflict among the stakeholder parties.

# Method

Print and online articles of the coverage of the oil spill were collected from the three daily newspapers (*Trinidad Express, Trinidad Guardian, Newsday*) between December 18, 2013 and February 6, 2014 over a 50-day period comprising an approximate target of three to four stories per day resulting in potentially 150–200 media items. There were 916,000 items on Google for this period but this includes nonmedia items, archived material and related stories of other oil spills. The print and online coverage suggested significant local and international interest and searching for information on the oil spill. An outline of the timeline emerged from the collection of print and online media coverage. Forty-eight items were assigned a number, and article source and date. Each item was coded for its content, crisis phase, media frame and conflict frame. Representative events and samples are provided below. These items were coded using the rubrics set out.

## Crisis Phase

CP1, precrisis; CP2, crisis response; CP3, postcrisis.

## Media Frame

MFE or emphasis = highlighting or focusing on selected content reflecting the views or perspectives, of any of the following see codes 1–12 below:

MFP or presentation modes or style = expressing equivalent content by varying presentation mode through differences in text such as language, images, graphics, formatting, visuals, text, layout, and design reflecting the views or perspectives of any of the following:

1. Fisherfolk and residents, those affected; 2. State-owned oil company, Petrotrin; 3. Ministry, Ministry official, State agency, government official, politician; 4. Environmental agency; 5. Environmental group; 6. Union, workers; 7. Opposition politician; 8. News editorial; 9. Public view; 10. Newspaper commentator, columnist, feature writer; 11. Community group; and 12. Impact on environment, for example, beaches, property, sea, coastline, mangrove, boats, fishes, sea creatures, marine life, water.

## Conflict Frame

CF1, contrasting views; CF2, opposing views; CF3, conflicting views; CF4, win–lose views, blaming; CF5, compromising views; CF6, accommodating views; CF7, win–win views, integrating, solution-oriented views.

## Samples

Sample 1: Images of the oil spill disaster, photos show devastation along the La Brea coastline December 19–24 2013 (Images, 2013)

Sample 2: Minister: "Mystery" Oil Spill not a political issue, December 22, 2013 (Minister, 2013)

**Minister of Energy Kevin Ramnarine told the media today that the oil spill in south Trinidad remains a mystery.**

While the Minister along with the President and Vice President of Petrotrin toured affected communities today the Minister told 95.5 FM News that the Ministry has only three concerns at this time.

Ramnarine said: "The first concern of the Government of course is the health and the safety of the residents in the area. The second concern is cleaning up the beach as fast as possible and the third concern is identifying the source of this crude oil. . .that has washed up on the beach. It's still a great mystery to all of us at the Ministry of Energy and at Petrotrin."

The Minister said there were a total of five leaks: Rancho Quemado (on land), Trinmar (two leaks), one in Point-a-Pierre and in La Brea.

**"Not a political issue"**

Minister Ramnarine added: "At this point in time we don't want to blame anybody. We have not accused anybody of anything and I don't want to make this into a political issue as I see some people are trying to make this a political issue. This is am – our role here is simply about moving forward and restoring this community to what it was."

Sample 3: Oil spill, December 23, 2013 (Oil Spill, 2013)

**OIL SPILL**

Six days after the worst oil spill the country has experienced, and an international SOS, black gold is still stiffling [sic] life in La Brea, the South West peninsula of Trinidad.

All day-to-day activity has come to an abrupt halt, residents have been advised not to cook in their homes, small children and expecting women have been advised not to stick around and inhale the dangerous fumes.

Tv6 news went to the village today, here is an idea of how life has changed in La Brea.

Sample 4: Petrotrin acknowledges oil spills in Trinidad, Written by OilOnline Press — December 28, 2013 (OilOnline, 2013). See Figure 3 (Lord, 2013).

Oil spills around Trinidad began to be reported on 17 December, suggesting more than one of contamination.

The state oil company of Trinidad & Tobago, Petrotrin, suggested sabotage and environmental terrorism. The Oilfield Workers Trade Union (OWTU) said Petrotrin should shoulder the blame for the disaster, as a result of poor management practices that resulted in lax security and monitoring, and the lack of oil spill response contingency contracts.

*Figure 3*. Employees of State-owned Petrotrin pull a containment boom as they try to contain the spread of the oil spill at Queen's Beach La Brea yesterday. Petrotrin has now entered into it's [sic] sixth day of clean up of the oil spill along the south-western coastline which is affecting communities from La Brea to Cedros. PHOTO: RISHI RAGOONATH. (Source: Lord, 2013)

"We do not concur with the company's offering of the excuse that it is some kind of sabotage or otherwise," OWTU president general Ancel Roget told a news conference on Sunday. Rather, multiple system failures have resulted in serious pollution to the coastal environment with concomitant health hazards.

Dozens of people have become ill, fishing fleets are grounded, their equipment fouled, and wildlife is covered in oil.

Today, Petrotrin provided a chronology of events. The company said its "management continues to engage all available resources in the clean-up activities within the affected areas to ensure minimal adverse effects to the communities and the environment" **Chronology of incidents over the period 2013 December 17th – 26th** . . **.**

Samples 5–14:
Sabotage, Chairman Lindsay Gillette, January 3, 2014
Blame, company fined over Trinidad oil spills, January 8, 2014
Mystery: South oil spill: unanswered questions, January 8, 2014
Aboud: Oil spill spreads to Venezuela, Sunday, January 12, 2014

The massive oil spill in the Gulf of Paria is believed to have spread to Patos Island, off the coast of Venezuela. This was revealed by president of Fishermen and Friends of the Sea Gary Aboud, who mounted a pre-dawn campaign to prevent Petrotrin's 510 km$^2$ Ocean Bottom Cable (OBC) seismic survey, currently being done in the Gulf of Paria. Braving possible arrests, dozens of fishermen accompanied Aboud on his journey, saying it was the only way to protect their livelihood.

With the National Security helicopter hovering ahead, the fishermen left the Otaheite Bay shortly after sunrise and headed towards the Sanco Star seismic ship, stationed about six miles off the coast of Cap-de-Ville. They

arrived around 8:25 am and were advised by Petrotrin police to stay off the seismic zone. The T&T Coast Guard and Air Guard also kept watch.

The fishermen circled the boats for several hours, and the Sanco Star seismic ship left the seismic area around noon. It is uncertain whether seismic surveys continued in the afternoon. Aboud said the seismic surveys should have been halted until Petrotrin removes all traces of oil from the seabed." Day before yesterday, we got a report in Patos, off the coast of Venezuela, that there was oil there. Once the oil is submerged it is going to move. In the Gulf, the tides move in a circular motion so it is spreading to Venezuela," Aboud said.

"We have serious concerns about the health of the fisheries and the long term viability of fishing in the Gulf of Paria as a whole. This raises a very serious concern about the liability of Petrotrin to the nation."

Call for independent investigation, Rowley, January 13, 2014
Trinidad PM appoints independent task force, ignores union, January 17, 2014
Clean-up: EMA satisfied with oil spill clean-up, Bachan, January 18, 2014
Oil spill "sabotage" made up, says Rowley: Petrotrin probe shows faulty sealine to blame, [Opposition Leader], January 31, 2014

Petrotrin concocted a story of sabotage to gain public sympathy when its own internal investigation found the oil spill originated from a faulty sealine at the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery port, says Opposition Leader Dr Keith Rowley.

Rowley yesterday reiterated his call for the dismissal of Energy Minister Kevin Ramnarine at a news conference at his Parliament office, Port of Spain, saying the minister was defending Petrotrin when there were documents from the State enterprise which showed there were red flags with respect to lines in the sector that needed attention but were never addressed.

Rowley met with the Oilfields Workers' Trade Union (OWTU), led by Ancel Roget, on Wednesday and was presented with a report entitled "Petrotrin Oil Spill Cover-Up."

The report, said Rowley, is based on documents from Petrotrin itself and EMA (Environmental Management Authority).

Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar has rejected a call for a meeting with the OWTU, saying it would be premature to do so as the oil spill was being investigated.

Fishermen claim new oil spill: $20,000 net destroyed, February 3, 2014
La Brea MP: Govt failed residents, February 5, 2014
Using the emergent timeline December 18, 2013–February 5, 2014, it was possible to identify various thematic narratives and conflict issues to elicit data on how media coverage of the oil spill was framed. A blog post on BP's oil spill PR blunders commented on its apparent failure to manage the response to the crisis even after 50 days (Borde, 2010):

Wow. The BP PR team just can't get it right. Even fifty days plus after one of the worst environmental disasters in history, the BP crisis communication strategy (if there is one) continues its downward spiral and never ceases to surprise me.

# Results

## RQ 1: How did the media present the oil spill?

The media initially presented the story as a report of an oil spill about 1 week before Christmas 2013. There was little in the initial reporting to suggest that the event was as significant and disastrous as it

turned out to be. Subsequent reporting 1 week later highlighted the scale and seriousness of the issue resulting in more prominent and multiple stories in the same editions. Much of the reporting was aimed at getting the reader's attention, often drawn to photographs, images of communities, wildlife, wetlands and people affected by the oil spill. Negative, controversial and significant claims and allegations were mentioned first followed by secondary official statements or press releases.

> Proposition 1: Media coverage will create salience for the issue among stakeholder parties.

> Proposition 2: Media coverage will create potential opposition between stakeholder parties.

There was support for the first two propositions evidenced in the front page and other prominent placement of stories, and the juxtaposition of competing and opposing views from Petrotrin, trade union leaders, politicians, community groups and fisherfolk and environmentalists. Official statements from Petrotrin and state officials that the situation was being managed and that the cleanup was proceeding with minimal impact on the local communities and environment were challenged, refuted and denied. Charges of negligence, mismanagement, and cover-up on one hand were confronted by allegations of sabotage, industrial terrorism, and skepticism on the other hand.

### RQ 2 What was the media's role in portraying the oil spill as a site for conflict?

Initial reporting appeared to be neutral and dispassionate, but the intensity, frequency and prominence and space given to media coverage of the oil spill began to dominate stories in the period after Christmas as more information on the extent and implications of the damage occasioned by the oil spill became available and clearer. Reader interest was fueled by a growing sense of mistrust, suspicion and a desire to hold someone accountable for what had transpired. Strong emotions, personal tragedies and human interest stories began to receive more attention as the plight and suffering of local communities and fisherfolk were highlighted. The media role in the coverage of the oil spill created a space for contestation and debate among stakeholders about the handling of the oil spill.

> Proposition 3: The media will create messages that reflect the incompatible goals of the stakeholder parties.

> Proposition 4: The media coverage will generate an escalating environmental conflict among the stakeholder parties.

The third and fourth propositions were supported in the claims for management to be held accountable, for someone to be blamed and for the true cost of the cleanup to be calculated, and for an investigation into the oil spill with the results of an independent inquiry to be made public. By the end of the 50-day period (December 18, 2013–February 6, 2014) four main sets of stakeholders (oil company management, trade union leaders, local communities and fisher folk, and environmentalists and activists) were accessible to the media and were well represented in the media coverage.

## Discussion

As an emergent quantitative and qualitative analysis of an ongoing and unfolding environmental conflict, this study regards it as important to recognize that the current conflict is unresolved and dynamic. The narrative has moved from initial shock and trauma, to defensive acknowledgment, blame, sabotage, claims and counterclaims of negligence, incompetence, mismanagement and allegations of sabotage, conspiracy, cover-up, and delinquency. There is much uncertainty and much that is still not clear, despite many appeals for fact-finding investigations, accountability and mitigation and restoration of not only environmental damage but corporate reputation. There are obvious limitations when there is so much uncertainty and lack of clarity. This has consequences for diffusing and defusing the specifics of the conflict issues.

A second consideration is that the environmental conflict situation, unresolved up to May 2015, seems geared to becoming a protracted and resource-hungry phenomenon that can have an impact on the will and resolve of the stakeholders to endure and survive the conflict episodes. The evidence suggests that resolution of n environmental conflict can be a protracted affair especially when there is no intervention for mediation or a negotiated outcome. The 2005 Hurricane Katrina decade-long lawsuit episode (Hayes, 2009; Schleifstein, 2012) culminated in a 2015 ruling that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was responsible for some of the flooding caused by failures in the hurricane protection system (Schwartz, 2015). The legal wrangling over the penalty to be incurred by BP for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010 is a similarly protracted affair. A January 2015 ruling that reduced the size of the oil spill was challenged in March 2015 by the U.S. federal government (Trott, 2015). In the Trinidad oil spill, Petrotrin reported in 2014 that the cost of the cleanup was estimated at 50 million TTD (Bridglal, 2014), and 57 million TTD by May 2014 including a 20 million TTD Environmental Management Agency fine (Maharaj, 2014) but by May 2015, almost 2 years later after the oil spill, no final figures were available for the cost to the environment and the estimated 5 million TTD compensation due to residents and fisherfolk affected by this disaster. Thus, the likelihood of an early resolution of conflict over an environmental issue, whether it emanated from what is regarded as a natural or man-made disaster, is remote and appears to be protracted.

Third, although the period of the environmental conflict studied in this article was relatively short, it was noticeable that no public media coverage had indicated that the pursuit of mediation or transformational approaches to resolving the conflict had been initiated. With respect to these three issues, it is useful to consider exploring the emotional dimension of the conflict in a positive and integrative fashion rather than adopting a competitive win–lose approach. Recent research by Claeys, Cauberghe, and Leysen (2013) suggests that the lack of success of existing rational approaches to the crisis generated conflict situations can benefit from the expression of sadness, empathy and genuine concern for each stakeholder representing diverse interests. To date the media coverage has not allowed for that degree of sensitivity and discretion in treating a complex environmental conflict issue. Indeed the character of the media coverage for the 50-day period suggests that the media are both agents and objects of the environmental conflict discourse, with perhaps a predisposition to sympathy for the disadvantaged vulnerable and working class stakeholders rather than the managerial elite and policy makers who appear to be disconnected from the plight of those who stand to lose the most from this experience. Putnam and Fuller's (2014) study of turning points in a labor–management dispute found that "procedural precipitants in combination with the corporate campaign triggered departures that escalated the conflict, while procedural and external precipitants shaped departures that led to an agreement." The present study found that media coverage contributed to the escalation of conflict. In the absence of any evidence of procedural precipitants in the Trinidad oil spill, given no report of mediation or negotiation interventions, it is worth exploring the role of the corporate campaign in managing the oil spill reporting. This was beyond the scope of the current study. However, the media coverage described in this study may be regarded as an example of an external precipitant which had the potential, but did not contribute to shaping departures which might have led to an agreement.

The fourth observation is that it seems useful to consider postcrisis strategies that go beyond crisis management to issue management (Ketola, 2006). To do so will require teamwork and alliances of the kind in which emergency managers work together with journalists rather than in a manner that is perceived to be against each other, and is regarded with suspicion and mistrust (Veil, 2012). Media coverage can contribute to an integrative approach to conflict and negotiation, but it may not always be in the interest of boosting newspaper ratings. The negotiation processes of 294 practitioners were analyzed to unravel the pragmatic strategies used to arrive at agreements (Fells, Rogers, Prowse, & Ott, 2015). That study, however, noted the need for further research into the pressures and context which impact negotiators' decision-making. The current study demonstrates the role of media coverage in framing such pressures and context by creating, escalating and managing the reporting of the oil spill in a public space.

# Conclusion

This emergent, exploratory *in situ* study of a current environment conflict is not unlike flying into the eye of a hurricane in order to understand the processes and practices that are always accessible and available for analysis, inspection and reflection to those who are untouched or are disconnected by barriers of power and privilege, geography, and social and economic circumstances. As in the eye of the hurricane, the center of the conflict can be transient and even deceptive, masking as always the reversal and thrust of winds coming from the opposite direction with greater force. Such is the ecology and dynamism of the eye of a hurricane and the center of an environmental conflict. In this case the center is not within the organization, but resides within the diverse range of stakeholder interests centered outside of the organization. These stakeholder interests include the oil company officials, union leaders, local community and national interests, political leaders, civil society organizations and the media organizations covering this issue. This discourse center is also located in and influences the ways in which those interests are mediated by those empowered with agency and efficacy for media coverage and ultimate management of the environmental conflict engendered by this oil spill.

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# Appendix 1

**January 3, 2014**: The Ministry of Energy and Energy Affairs (MEEA) notes with concern the misleading editorial of the Trinidad Guardian dated January 1, 2014 headlined, "Oil spill contingency plan collapses."

Contrary to what was said in that editorial, the facts are that the National Oil Spill Contingency Plan has served and continues to serve its purpose in dealing with the La Brea oil spill incident.

**The MEEA further advises for the record that:**

1. A National Oil Spill Contingency Plan (NOSCP) is designed to deal with all oil spill situations. The plan provides for dealing with oil impacting beaches and mangrove areas as well as providing the parameters for cleanup of these areas. The plan was not developed to prevent oil spills. It was developed to respond to oil spills in keeping with International Maritime Organization (IMO) mandates. The current plan, which was prepared in 2013, replaces the 1977 version.

# Appendix 2

Bad management and a communications breakdown by BP and its Macondo well partners caused the oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, the White House oil spill commission said today. A report to the commission said safety lapses were "chronic" at the company and improvements to its systems still needed to be made.

In its final public deliberations before delivering its findings to Barack Obama next month, the commission said the fatal blowout on BP's well could have been avoided.

"The series of decisions that doomed Macondo evidenced a failure of management, and good management could have avoided a catastrophe," William Reilly, the cochair of the investigation, said.

A report by expert staff said all three companies – BP, Halliburton, and Transocean – were guilty of bad management. "Most of the mistakes and oversights that led to the blowout were the result of management failures by BP, Halliburton Co, and Transocean Ltd," the staff concluded.

However, the commission singled out BP for failing to ensure its cost-cutting measures did not further increase risks in an already dangerous environment. Further unchecked cost-cutting would mean "financial pressures will likely bias decisions in favour of time and cost savings," technical staff said.

Source: Goldenberg (2010)

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