THE DEEPWATER HORIZON: AGENDA- SETTING IN THE MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON CLAIM DISTRIBUTIONS

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By

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We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

The news media has the ability to influence the public agenda as well as impact business decisions. This thesis explores media agenda-setting and framing during the BP oil spill in order to determine whether newspaper coverage is a contributing factor in the delegation of oil spill claims. The affects of the Deep Water Horizon are slowly dissolving in the coastal Alabama region; however, residents and business owners have not been fully restored to the same economic complacency of pre-oil spill times. This study utilized content analysis to examine newspaper coverage of the BP oil spill in the *Mobile Press Register*, the *Sun Herald*, and the *Pensacola News Journal* from April 20, 2010 to April 20, 2011. Results indicate that more media attention was focused on tourist areas of coastal Alabama, including Gulf Shores Beach and Orange Beach, and these areas did in fact receive the most compensation in claims from the Gulf Coast Claims Facility compared to other affected areas.
SIGNATURE PAGE

We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Thesis Director

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Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM AND DEFINITION OF TERMS USED

Importance of the Study

The news media has a considerable amount of influence on the public agenda. Story selection, story placement, and the emphasis of certain attributes over others help the public to determine how to think about an issue. In other words, it is the news media that regulates the type of attention an issue receives (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; McCombs, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). With the changes in technology, the public has an abundance of choices in how they receive information regarding an issue (i.e., print, broadcast, online); however, the majority of people in the United States continue to learn about significant events of the day from traditional news outlets (Pew Research Center, 2008).

This study seeks to explore how affected areas of the BP oil spill are covered in the news, and it compares the amount of attention these areas receive to the amount/speed of their claims reimbursement. Although more than ten rigs have moved overseas since last summer, it is not certain that a catastrophe of this sort will not occur again (Buchman, 2011). It is also not certain whether or not this type of disaster may occur in this area or other areas in the near future, but this study can help to determine ways in which oil companies can prepare for financial accountability with residents and business owners in affected areas. It is important that policy makers address disaster mitigation plans and implement a better system regarding the distribution of claims.

The Problem

The Gulf Coast Oil Spill, also known as the Deep Water Horizon, occurred more than a year ago, yet the aftermath of the disaster has ceased to disappear. In the three month period that the BP well remained uncapped, more than 4.9 million barrels of oil gushed into the gulf
(Buchman, 2011). Waters were closed down, tourism declined, and the seafood industry plummeted all due to contamination in the gulf. Residents and business owners in the region suffered major losses, and many of them will never regain the economic stability they once enjoyed before the spill. Plagued by a decreased income, the creation of the BP oil spill fund, offered Gulf Coast business owners and workers some relief. However, the $20 billion fund has done little to lessen the oil spill impact.

National and local news agencies spent the summer months of 2010 covering the oil-stained beaches of the Gulf filled with tar; however, all areas affected by the oil spill did not receive the same amount of attention. Because the news media plays a major role on the influence of public agenda, story selection and media attention can determine how the public perceives certain issues (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; McCombs, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The claims process has been in question even before BP appointed Ken Feinberg to distribute claims, and many families have still received little to no benefits. As a result, many businesses have had to close down operations and even depend on social and civic organizations to help care for their families.

Unfortunately, the public sees the images of the oil spill but do not realize the trickledown effect that occurs with a natural disaster of this type. Once oil reached the Alabama coast, waters were closed and fishermen were no longer allowed to make a living from the fishing industry. The Gulf Coast depends heavily on fishing as a way of life with many seafood factories and seafood restaurants. The beach areas were also off limits to tourists, and many of the businesses around this area make most of their money during the summer months of the impact. The Deep Water Horizon oil spill closed businesses, limited profits, and changed people’s lives indefinitely, and the claims process has continued to create even more stress.
Definition of Terms Used

1) Deep Water Horizon Oil Spill (BP oil spill) – The largest accidental marine oil spill occurring in the Gulf of Mexico. It flowed unabated for three months in 2010.

2) BP - British Petroleum- A global oil and gas company headquartered in London.

3) Kenneth Feinburg- An attorney specializing in mediation and alternative dispute resolution. He was chosen by BP to administer claims to Gulf Coast victims.

4) Vessels of Opportunity (VOO) - Program designed to provide cash to local fishermen and other boat operators displaced financially during the BP oil spill.

5) Disaster – A sudden calamitous event that cause widespread harm and damage to the environment, animals, or humans. They can be natural or man-made.

3) Natural Disaster – Disasters that arise from events in nature, such as earthquakes, volcanoes, wildfires, drought, floods, or hurricanes.

4) Disaster loss mitigation – Activities that reduce or eliminate the harmful effects of disasters.

5) News media – Various means of mass communication through which the public obtains information about current local, national, and global events. News media can consist of broadcast (radio and television), print (newspapers, newsletters, and magazines), or electronic (internet).

6) Agenda setting – This study uses the definition of McCombs and Shaw (1972): the act of shaping public and political reality by selecting which information to report and how the information is displayed.

7) Framing – This study uses the definition of Entman (as cited in McCombs, 2005): the act of making a specific aspect of reality more salient in order to —promote a particular
problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation (p. 546).

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter two provides the theoretical basis that forms the framework for this study, reviews the literature on this topic, and puts forth the research questions. Chapter three describes the scope of the study and explains the methodology used for data collection. Chapter four presents the results of the study, shows how the results relate the previous research, and discusses the implications of findings in relationship to the research questions. Chapter five discusses the limitations of the study, suggests further areas of research, and summarizes the study.
Chapter 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theoretical Basis

The ability of the mass media to shape people’s thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors has been a topic of discussion for many communication scholars. There are several theories that explain the effects of the media on public opinion, as well as the power that news organizations have on business decisions.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Scholars have known for quite some time that the media has the potential and the ability to structure issues for viewers (Cohen, 1963). Each and every day there are a number of events that take place that cannot fit into the allotted times of a newscast; therefore, the media has to be selective in what it chooses to report. It is the media that establishes the issues and the images in the minds of the public. The signature research that has guided other scholars in their quest to determine media bias is the Chapel Hill study of McCombs and Shaw (1972). McCombs and Shaw (1972) studied the role of the media in the 1968 presidential campaign by surveying 100 Chapel Hill, NC residents who were undecided before the election. Their research determined the issues that received the most attention in the news were the very same issues that voters believed to be the important issues facing the nation. This study helped to formulate the idea that the news media has considerable control over which issues receive the public’s attention, and the way in which the public views these issues.

Other studies to test the agenda-setting theory have resulted in similar findings to that of McCombs and Shaw. One of the few studies to test the impact of the news on governmental policy is explained by Cook et al. (1983). These researchers conducted a study with investigative news journalists to determine the effects of the news on policy changes. Because
reporters are in constant contact with government officials, it is important to note that journalists in many ways alert policy makers to the issues concerning the public. Although their research suggested the media affects public and governmental policy maker agendas, it was the ongoing collaboration of journalists and government staff members that led to political action, not the airing of the story. Behr and Iyengar (1985) investigated the public’s concern for inflation, unemployment, and energy by tracing public concern to television news coverage and prevailing conditions. They found that public concern over energy and inflation were related to news coverage rather than that of economic conditions. Yue and Weaver (2009) examined news articles from the most popular newspaper in eighteen states and compared those issues to that of subsequent bills introduced in state legislatures. Seventeen out of eighteen states showed that there was a strong to moderate correlation between issues that media slanted as important and the issues that received attention in the legislature.

**First-Level Agenda Setting.**

There are two levels of agenda-setting and in the first level of analysis, the agenda-setting theory contains media “objects,” or news topics that receive coverage on broadcast news, print media, or online. Media objects can be described as any aspect of central importance discussed in a given news story. This could include whether the story involves a murder, a robbery, and even a home invasion. Media objects are important to news journalists because they allow the reporters to create a mental picture for their audience. These objects in some way determines what an audience thinks about a topic, but also how it thinks about that topic.

Researchers have shown that links do exist between media coverage and public opinion by pointing out that members of the public, when asked to identify issues they consider important, have named issues that correspond to those that are most prominent in the mass
media. For example, a study conducted by Winter & Eval (1981) about the civil rights from the
1950s to the 1970’s found a correlation of +.71 between the level of public concern and the
prominence of news coverage in the weeks immediately preceding. Wanta and Ghanem (2000)
analyzed a meta-analysis of 90 empirical articles reporting correlation coefficients for the
agenda-setting effect and found a mean of +.53. Therefore, the daily decisions by print and
broadcast journalists concerning certain media objects, or public issues, can significantly sway
an audience’s attention to or from them, and set an agenda of issues, or even dispositions toward
those issues.

**Second-Level Agenda-Setting.**

The second level of agenda-setting concerns the attributes of the objects in the first level;
namely, how the mass media describe, and how public groups perceive, a given object. The
attributes of media objects examined in second-level agenda setting are of two sorts: the affective
and the cognitive (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). The affective dimension is an assessment of
tone or disposition expressed in the discussion of an object, and is used to measure its emotional
appeal. The cognitive dimension is an assessment of topical distinctions, or of the concentration
on specified aspects in the discussion.

Assessments of the affective dimension recognize that news stories and public survey
responses carry not only descriptions of objects; they also convey feeling and tone about the
object described (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). These feelings, or tones, expressed for a given
object may be described as positive, negative, or neutral (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, McCombs, &
Lennon, 1998; McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, & Rey, 1997; McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, &
Llamas, 2000). For example, the media object of a story could be a home invasion but the
assessments of the affect dimensions will describe the person who owned the home as well as the
suspects, the items of sentimental value that were taken, and the victims background. These measurements are then used in tracing lines of influence, and in describing correlations between media sources and public opinion. Researchers using the agenda-setting framework may determine to what degree the tone of media coverage for given object affects the sentiment expressed in the public’s descriptions of them.

The cognitive dimension allows classification of large bodies on information into more manageable sub-divisions, each bound by a common theme. The 1996 study of the Spanish election is an example of this. In 1996, researchers classified descriptions of political candidates and their campaigns into five categories: ideology and issue positions, biographical details, personality and image, perceived qualifications, and integrity (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000). In studies of this type, researchers may analyze distinct categories of media content or poll data to trace lines of influence between the two by identifying the prominence or distribution of categories in their descriptions of media objects. This in turn allows for a more sophisticated understanding of any correlation between media sources and public opinion.

### Three Components of Agenda-Setting

Dearing and Rogers (1996) subdivided agenda-setting theory into three components; media agenda-setting, public agenda-setting, and policy agenda setting. Media agenda-setting is dependent on the mass media news agenda, public agenda-setting is dependent on topics in the public agenda, and policy-agenda setting is a response of sorts to the collective agendas of the media and the public (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). A longitudinal study conducted by Tan and Weaver (2007) provided evidence to support McCombs and Shaw’s contention that media agenda-setting can affect policy. Tan and Weaver studied issues that were most salient in the media, the public, and Congress from 1946-2004 in their paper published in *Journalism and*
*Mass Communication Quarterly* entitled, “Agenda-Setting Effects Among the Media, the Public, and Congress, 1946-2004” (Tan & Weaver, 2007). The authors examined data from three different sources; *The New York Times*, Gallup’s Most Important Problems series of polls, and Congressional hearings. Despite their different definitions, each type of agenda-setting depends on public salience of issues if any sort of influence is to be had.

According to Atwater, Fico, and Pizante (1987), news outlets usually follow one another’s lead even despite the fact that there is abundance of media types (print, radio, television, and online). When one news outlet covers a specific topic or event, and it receives massive coverage, others will focus on the same issue. This occurs because it is believed that the public has taken an interest in the issue, and news outlets need viewers in order to help pay for its programming.

McCombs (2005) reviewed the progression of the agenda setting theory in research from 1972 through 2004. He explained that there are three dimensions which explain why the news media is so effective in shaping public agenda: attention, prominence, and valence. Attention refers to the amount of time devoted to the issue. Prominence is the placement of the issue within the newscast or within the paper. Valence is defined as the tone of the story, whether it be positive or negative.

**Consequences of Agenda-Setting**

Many researchers have concluded that the agenda setting theory has its consequences; one being “priming” (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs, 1993; McCombs & Reynolds, 2002), the process by which certain media objects becomes part of the public’s top priority related to decision making. Priming is due largely to the nature of information’s accessibility in memory. When faced with issues and events of some complexity, people usually rely upon information
that is currently accessible or most easily retrieved, rather than research that topic for themselves (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Iyengar and Kinder (1987) have paid particular attention to priming in studies on television and its influence on presidential reputation. The results of these studies showed that television news not only increased the perceived salience of the issues covered most, but also that prominence in news coverage worked to prime particular issues in the public’s awareness. Iyengar and Kinder applied these particular findings to the discussion of presidential reputation, observing that the “more attention television news pays to a particular problem—the more frequently a problem area is primed—the more viewers should incorporate what they know about that problem into their overall judgment of the president” (1987, p. 65). In other words, the mere mention of political candidates in the media (regardless of the tone expressed) is significant because the public adopts issues primed in this way in its own understanding of the candidate.

**Framing**

Choosing what information to report as well as the information presented are not the only questions that the media must determine. The media also must rely on certain aspects and people of the story to place emphasize. In other words, the media has to “frame” a story.

When the news media talk about an object- and when members of the public talk and think amount an object-some attributes are emphasized, others are mentioned only in passing. For each object on the agenda, there is an agenda of attributes that influence our understanding of the object (McCombs, 2005).

Media agenda-setting gives an issue prominence by its placement in the paper or within the rundown of news programming as well as how many times it is mentioned. The debate of whether or not framing is an extension of agenda-setting is inconclusive, but scholars do believe framing interprets issues by emphasizing certain characteristics over others (Scheufele, 2000;
Scheufele & Tewsksbury, 2007; Sei-Hill, 2002; Weaver, 2007). Framing, therefore, has the ability to influence what people believe about an event, issue, or people because the information that the media gives them may be slanted (Scheufele, 2000).

Both agenda-setting and framing are relevant in shaping the views and beliefs of an audience. Agenda-setting calls attention to issues simply with the messages that are relayed to viewers. Framing, on the other hand, cues the viewer on how to think about that issue (Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele & Tewsksbury, 2007). It is obvious that both agenda-setting and framing work hand in hand in helping to shape public opinion, and both will be considered for this study.

**Research Questions**

Agenda-setting research pertaining to the Gulf Coast oil spill is fairly limited, especially pertaining to the victims of the spill and reimbursements from BP for their suffering. Like the disaster of Hurricane Katrina, the saturation of news regarding the oil spill has been played over and over again on television, the internet, and radio. This study proposes to extend the research on media agenda setting by analyzing the BP oil spill coverage of areas on the Alabama coast, and the impact of this coverage on the distribution of claims. The specific questions to be examined include:

RQ1: What Alabama areas affected by the BP oil spill are covered in the local newspaper?
RQ2: What Alabama areas have received their oil spill claims within a year of the spill?
RQ3: What Alabama areas have been compensated fairly, receive half of their lost income?
RQ4: Is there a correlation between the areas that receive compensation and the news coverage that those areas received?
Chapter 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope of the Study

The explosion that caused the BP oil spill occurred in New Orleans; however, the impact of the explosion affected all areas on the Gulf Coast. The Alabama coastal areas that were chosen for this particular study will include Dauphin Island, Gulf Shores, and Orange Beach. Three Gulf Coast newspapers were chosen for this study: Mobile Press Register, the Pensacola News Journal, and the Sun Herald. Television, radio, and newspapers all covered stories concerning the oil spill; yet and still, this study is limited to newspapers. First, television broadcast were eliminated for this study because transcripts are not as easily available as newspaper articles. Newspapers are more readily available and they provide more coverage and information than a television broadcast (Littlefield & Quenette, 2007).

The Mobile Press Register was chosen due to its coverage of Mobile and surrounding areas, and the impact of the oil spill in these areas. The Mobile Press Register is Alabama’s oldest newspaper, and it has several bureaus including Mobile. The popularity of the Mobile Press-Register is fairly large as well because it ranks ninth in the nation for readership and penetration (Al.com). Because of its popularity, story ideas are often taken from Mobile Press Register by local news stations and converted into broadcast stories (Littlefield & Quenette, 2007).

The Pensacola News Journal reaches a sizeable audience, some of the same areas as the Mobile Press Register. The Florida border is less than 20 miles from Orange Beach, one of the areas in this study, and although it is a Florida newspaper, it also covers coastal Alabama areas as well. It is important to study local newspapers that are closely linked to the oil spill because reporters live in these areas and are more familiar with the areas that they are reporting.
The last newspaper is the *Sun Herald*. The *Sun Herald* is a Mississippi newspaper that covers Mississippi’s areas as well as surrounding areas, including coastal Alabama areas. Like the *Mobile Press Register* and the *Pensacola News Journal*, the *Sun Herald*’s reporters cover local issues and disasters, and they covered stories regarding the oil spill prior to the oil coming ashore. Each of these three newspapers will prove beneficial to this study because of their high readership and the locality of issues that are covered.

National papers were not chosen for this study. National papers have a stronger influence on public agenda when it comes to national political issues (Hester & Gibson, 2007), and local issues have a stronger influence on local issues. In many instances, reporters for local newspapers relocate to the area that they are covering, and with this being said, they are not as familiar with the area before the disaster occurs.

**Methodology of the Study**

Data was gathered through a content analysis of newspaper coverage of the BP oil spill. According to Rubin et al. (2010), a content analysis is “a procedure that helps researchers identify themes and relevant issues often contained in media messages” (p. 215). A content analysis can be qualitative or quantitative, and it involves identifying specific message characteristics (Altheide, 1987; Hoyle, Harris, & Judd, 2002).

A quantitative content analysis was used for this study. A quantitative content analysis is used to examine objective data that can be counted, and a qualitative content analysis is used to study the communication meaning by examining themes and message context (Altheide, 1987). RQ1 sought to determine the number of Alabama areas affected by the oil spill that are covered in the paper. This required a quantitative content analysis. RQ2 and RQ3 asked what areas have received their oil spill claims and have been compensated fairly. This too required a quantitative
analysis. RQ4 sought to determine a correlation between the areas that receive compensation and their news coverage. This question dealt with comparing the numbers received from the first three questions; therefore, it required a quantitative content analysis.

**Research Design**

Articles were located using LexisNexis Academic with the search terms “Deepwater Horizon,” “BP oil spill,” “Gulf Coast Claims Facility,” and “BP claims” from the date range of April 20\textsuperscript{th} 2010 to April 20\textsuperscript{th} 2011. This time period covers the day of the Deep Water explosion to the one-year anniversary of the explosion. The search initially yielded 2,117 articles in the *Mobile Press Register*, 184 in the *Pensacola News Journal*, and 121 in the *Sun Herald*. After eliminating unrelated stories (those that did not mention the affected areas in this study, the final number of articles was 701 in the *Mobile Press Register*, 59 in the *Pensacola News Journal*, and 31 in the *Sun Herald*. Articles were located using the search terms shown below.

*Search terms for locating articles related to research questions*

**Q1:** What Alabama areas affected by the oil spill are covered in the local newspaper?

**Topic:** Deepwater Horizon

**Search terms:** Alabama Gulf Coast, tar balls, oil spill, BP

**Q2:** What Alabama areas have received their oil spill claims within a year of the oil spill?

**Topic:** BP claims

**Search terms:** Gulf Coast Claims facility, oil spill claims

**Q3:** What Alabama areas have been compensated fairly, meaning they have been compensated for 75\% of their losses?

**Topic:** Gulf Coast Claims

**Search terms:** Gulf Coast claims facility, oil spill claims
Q4: Is there a correlation between the areas that receive compensation and the news coverage of those areas received?

Topic: News coverage, oil spill claimants

Search terms: Oil spill recipients, BP oil spill

A coding instrument was developed to collect and interpret the news articles for this study. The coding instrument shown above and the news articles were uploaded to the Coding Analysis Toolkit, a free online data analysis program available through the University Center for Social and Urban Research. Human coding was utilized as well. The coding system improved the efficiency of the coding process by making sure any mistakes that could have been made by the coder were corrected. There were two coders for this research study in order to help eliminate the possibility of mistakes.

Validity

According to Hoyle et al. (2002), validity is “the extent to which a measure reflects only the desired construct without contamination from other systematically varying constructs.” The three types of validity are construct validity, internal validity, and external validity (Vacha, 2007).

Construct validity. This type of validity occurs when the theoretical constructs of cause and effect accurately represent the real-world situations they are intended to model (Pennington, 2003). Vacha (2007) states that “construct validity refers to the ability of a measure or indicator to capture the essence of the abstract concept it is supposed to measure (p. 4). Construct validity is thus an assessment of the quality of an instrument or experimental design (Campbell, 1959). This study addressed construct validity through the use of a coding instrument that contained the same definitions for each of the three newspapers.
**Internal validity.** Internal validity occurs when it can be concluded that there is a causal relationship between the variables being studied (Hoyle et al., 2002). Internal validity is uncertain in media effects studies because one of the dangers is that changes may be caused by other factors, not necessarily an exposure to media (Hoyle et al., 2002). This study seeks to determine if media coverage was a contributing factor in the amount and timeliness of claims to recipients, it is not possible to prove that one causes the other. Internal validity would be a limitation in this study.

**External validity.** According to Hoyle et al. (2002), external validity is the extent to which the results of the research can be generalized to populations and settings of interest. This study examined three papers over the period of a year. It is difficult to determine if similar results would have been achieved if broadcast reports had been used or national papers would have been used in this study.

**Reliability.** Mehrens and Lehman (1987) state that reliability is the degree of consistency between two measures of the same thing. In quantitative content analysis, reliability is commonly measured by the percentage of agreement between coders (Stemler, 2001).

The researcher initially coded the entire study sample manually. The sample and coding instrument were then uploaded to a data analysis computer program. The researcher and the second coder also coded a subsample of the percentage of the data consisting of articles.
Chapter 4: THE STUDY

Introduction

The data for this study were obtained from newspaper articles from three different local papers. The total number of articles was 701 in the Mobile Press Register, 59 in the Pensacola News Journal, and 31 in the Sun Herald. This chapter explains how the articles were coded and reviewed, and it discusses the results of agenda-setting in regards to oil spill recipients and media coverage.

Data Analysis

The articles were first reviewed to identify the topic of the BP oil spill/Deep Water Horizon. In cases where the oil spill was mentioned but not the predominant theme, the article was not used for the research. For each article where this theme was present, the researcher searched for a second theme: Alabama coastal areas affected by the spill including but not limited to Dauphin Island, Bayou La Batre, Gulf Shores, and Orange Beach). For the articles that mentioned more than one of these areas, the researcher determined which area received the most amount of attention. Each article was reviewed for the purpose of determining the amount of coverage each of these four areas received, and the type of attention they received in regards to the oil spill. The coding instrument used for identifying and collecting the data is shown in the Appendix.

In addition to reviewing each news story that mentioned the oil spill, and the coastal Alabama areas that incurred damages, the researcher gathered information regarding the claims process including the amount of time it would take victims to receive compensation, and the claim office’s approval rating. The articles that mentioned the claims process and more than one area were still used for the study. The coder would determine what information was needed and
take notes. The articles that mentioned the claims process in general but did not mention an area in Alabama were read for background information but were not used to answer the research questions.

**Result of the Study**

The research questions sought to explore coverage of the BP oil spill in relation to Alabama coastal areas. Although it has been more than a year since oil touched surfaces in Alabama, the affects of the oil spill still linger. One being the distribution of oil spill claims to victims of the disaster. As mentioned earlier, the media has the ability to structure issues for viewers, as well as “frame” those issues in order to influence how audiences interpret them (Cohen, 1963; Sei-Hill, 2002). Examining newspaper articles about the BP oil spill disaster can provide insight into the affect of the media on disaster response. As shown in Table 2, the most dominant themes in each of the newspapers were the claims process and the victims of the oil spill. These findings coincide with previous studies of disaster news coverage (Atwater & al., 1987; Coombs, 1999; Fishman, 1999).

The *Mobile Press Register* had a much higher percentage of stories about the oil spill in coastal Alabama areas than both the *Pensacola News Journal* and the *Sun Herald*. Because the *Mobile Press Register* is an Alabama paper, it makes sense as to why there are more articles in this paper compared to the other two. Holt et al. (2010) found that newspapers located within the same city of an event more frequently put a human face on the issue, while papers furthest away more likely framed the issue as a moral wrong. *The Pensacola News Journal* and the *Sun Herald* predominantly cover the Pensacola and Biloxi area, both of which are located more than 50 miles from the areas of this study’s focus. Tar balls landed on beaches in these areas, as well as oil
coming ashore, but the impact of the oil spill was more predominant in Alabama and its coastal areas.

The *Pensacola News Journal* coverage included articles primarily pertaining to Pensacola Beach and issues concerning the BP claims process. The *Sun Herald* covered its beaches as well and the impact of the spill on shrimpers and fishermen in Mississippi. These two papers contained few articles on the coastal Alabama regions, and when they did it pertained to when oil first hit those areas, as well as issues concerning Ken Feinburg, the BP claims distributer. Many articles in all three newspapers contained information regarding the dismay of locals with Ken Feinburg and his actions while presided over the claims facility. This information was not useful for this particular study but, nonetheless, informative on the feelings and thoughts of the victims in these affected areas.

**Research Question 1**

RQ1 asked what Alabama areas affected by the oil spill are covered in the local newspaper. A search in the *Mobile Press Register* found 701 articles, the *Pensacola News Journal* found 59 articles, and the *Sun Herald* found 31 articles from April 20th 2010 to April 20th 2011. The areas that were predominant in this search were Orange Beach, Gulf Shores, Dauphin Island, and Bayou la Batre. Other areas that were covered included Coden, Irvington, and Grand Bay; however, these articles only mentioned information about claims, not the affected area. The four predominant areas that were found in these local newspapers were chosen based on the profiles written about them pre-oil spill as well as the affects of the oil spill on the residents, the businesses, and tourism in these areas. Orange Beach, Dauphin Island, and Gulf Shores were known for their beaches before the spill and had high levels of tourism. Bayou
La Batre does not have a beach, but it is known as the “Seafood Capital of Alabama” with its seafood-processing harbor for fishing boats and shrimp boats.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspapers</th>
<th>Orange Beach</th>
<th>Gulf Shores</th>
<th>Dauphin Island</th>
<th>Bayou la Batre</th>
<th>Irvington</th>
<th>Coden</th>
<th>Prichard</th>
<th>Mobile</th>
</tr>
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<td>Mobile Press Register</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>212</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>Sun Herald</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Question 2**

RQ2 asked what Alabama areas have received their oil spill claims within a year of the oil spill. There were 1242 articles dealing with the claims process, and of these articles, 434 mentioned areas that are in RQ1. The 434 articles dealt with the issues of oil spill victims and their problems concerning the entire process. There were 17 articles from businesses affected by the oil spill that were pleased with the timeliness of their oil spill claims. There were 269 articles that described the dissatisfaction of oil spill victims with Ken Feinburg, oil spill distributor and the claims process. Of the 269 articles that discussed dissatisfaction with the oil spill, 136 included quotes from fishermen/shrimpers, while the other 133 included quotes from disgruntled restaurants owners. There were articles that contained information regarding lawsuits against BP, and many of those lawsuits were from the locals in Alabama. These articles were used to determine the dissatisfaction with the claims process.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas</th>
<th>Satisfied Articles</th>
<th>Unsatisfied Articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gulf Shores</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange Beach</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dauphin Island</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bayou la Batre</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 3

RQ3 asked what Alabama areas have been compensated fairly, meaning they have been compensated for 75% of their losses. The 434 articles that dealt with the answers in RQ1 and RQ2, there were 17 articles that mentioned oil spill victims that felt they were well compensated for their loss wages. The 17 victims that were pleased were local businesses in Gulf Shores, Orange Beach, and Dauphin Island. Bayou la Batre did not have any articles that expressed satisfaction with the claims process. These articles did not mention the amount of money that recipients received for their troubles; however, the claims process guarantees that if a person turns in the appropriate paperwork for their loss in wages, they should be guaranteed the exact amount of losses (BP).

Research Question 4

RQ3 asked is there a correlation between the areas that receive compensation and the news coverage of those areas received. According to BP, the oil company has paid out over $5.5 billion in oil spill claims (Buchman, 2011). Alabama received $988,800,000 in claims payouts, including $599,887,962.91 in Baldwin County and $359,934,754.15 in Mobile County. Dauphin Island and Bayou la Batre are in Mobile County, and Gulf Shores and Orange Beach are in Baldwin County. The Baldwin County areas received a significantly higher amount of claims.
than the Mobile County areas. There are also more articles covering the Baldwin County areas and Orange Beach and Gulf Shores areas received the most compensation.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claims by area</th>
<th>Mobile</th>
<th>Baldwin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orange Beach</td>
<td></td>
<td>$4,778,010.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulf Shores</td>
<td></td>
<td>$5,603,866.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dauphin Island</td>
<td>$229,985.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bayou la Batre</td>
<td>$130,000.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

According to McCombs (2005), the core proposition of agenda-setting theory is that the prominence of elements in the news influences the prominence of those elements among the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This influence process begins with the agenda of objects receiving prominent attention in the mass media. Consistent with previous studies (Harbert, 2010; Holt & Major, 2010), this study found the agenda set forth by the news media has an impact on the outcome of a crisis situation.

The time frame of April 20th 2010 to April 20th 2011 produced more than 2000 articles that dealt with the oil spill and claims in coastal Alabama areas; however, only 797 articles were utilized for this study. More than half of these articles were found on the front page of the newspapers, and each three papers utilized often contained several oil spill stories on their front page. The placement of a news story relays the importance of that issue (Baumgartner, Jones, & Leech, 1997; Smith, 1987). The oil spill was a topic that covered the front pages of each of the three newspapers, and the reader, and as well as other news agencies, were lead to believe this topic was the most important issue at the time. In other words, the agenda was set in Alabama for the Deepwater Horizon.
Accounts of the coastal Alabama areas before and after the oil spill provided information as to the affects of the Deep Water Horizon on residents, businesses, and tourism. The articles that discussed the areas with beaches (Dauphin Island, Orange Beach, and Gulf Shores) acknowledged the dependence of these cities on tourism and its fishing industry. Bayou la Batre does not have a beach, but the community is seafood driven; therefore, more than 47% of people in the area work for the oyster factory or in the fishing industry on boats. In the articles, personal accounts of business owners shutting down and seafood workers no longer having steady work were themes throughout each of the three local papers. There were 434 newspaper articles that contained information regarding the claims process, and the amount of time it took to receive claims. Each of these changes in livelihood stories appealed to the audience’s emotions and their curiosity in different ways than that of information released by BP with statistics and other data. Discussing devastation through personal accounts and specific focus on local areas allowed the media to share the disaster of the oil spill in a way that the audience would comprehend (Moeller, 2006; Singer & al., 1991).

The news media “frames,” or characterizes people, events, or issues by emphasizing some things more than others (McCombs, 2005; Scheufele, 2000; Sei-Hill, 2002). The findings in this study provided insight in to the way in which the BP oil spill frames are used by the media to communicate disasters. One “frame” found in the three newspapers was the idea of the oil spill being a disaster. It was described as a one of the worst disasters to hit the area because of the poor planning by BP. One article in the Mobile Press Register is quoted saying “[The oil spill] is unlike that of a hurricane because the people in this area had no time to plan for the unexpected outcome.” The people in this area were not aware of the long-term effects of this disaster, including the decrease in tourism and the contamination of Gulf seafood. Another
“frame” mentioned frequently in the newspaper articles was the description of those affected by the catastrophe as “victims.” The “victims” lost revenue, hope, and sometimes even their sanity when dealing with the spill and the claims process. The Mobile Press Register stated that R & A Oyster Company in Bayou la Batre was forced to close its doors due to the contamination of seafood and lay of more than a 100 employees. Not only were business owners on the beaches seen as “victims,” but also the workers in seafood factories and restaurants.

Journalists also played on the physical environment of the Gulf Coast before the oil spill occurred. In this “frame,” articles referred to the beaches of Orange Beach, Gulf Shores, and Dauphin Island as having “white sandy beaches.” These “frames” created a sense of pity for those living in these areas because Alabama beaches were no longer beautiful and pristine. They were now “tar-stained sand and included “golf sized tar balls.” With these new descriptions, the appeal of the beach area was no longer visible. The comparisons of the beach pre and post oil spill hurt the region even more. Local papers mentioned oil slicks, tar balls, and contaminated seafood, and these scenes promoted an interpretation of reality that these areas were completely covered in oil and uninhabitable. These negative images resulted in a decrease in visitors to the beaches, and a decline the revenue for the area. Like these areas, other studies have shown the correlation between negative news coverage and decline in business (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Malcheff, 2010; Price, 2010).

There were 17 stories with a positive image of BP after the spill, or as a competent company. There were articles that spoke of BP’s presence on the beaches cleaning tar balls and other debris brought ashore, yet in still, this did not make up for all the negative publicity associated with the company. Many articles, when referring to the spill also mentioned the number of days it took for BP to close the gushing oil well in the gulf. BP capped the well after
85 days of a trial and error period. Due to this fact, residents and locals of the gulf believed BP’s actions were unacceptable. These actions caused this disaster as millions of barrels of oil to be dumped in their areas, and they were the ones who suffered the cost, with little to no help from the oil giant.

The *Mobile Press Register* contained the most articles about the affected areas in this study, and they often relied on testimony from local fishermen and restaurant owners along the beaches. Again, the “victims” are being “framed” in order for the world to sympathize with their losses. The gulf waters were closed as a result of the oil spill; therefore those people making a living from the waters were now unemployed. Fishermen spoke about not having the proper training to find and tend to jobs in other professional field. The summer months are the fishing industries’ highest grossing months of the year, and their workers were not compensated fairly for this time. Local restaurant owners complained about the decreasing numbers in tourism because of the “oil stained beaches.” Few tourists in the areas equate to low numbers in those dining in restaurants close the beach. This disaster not only put the locals at a disadvantage for jobs, but it also had an impact on tourism. With that being said, it is important to note that the “frames” used to describe the beaches after the oil spill were typically negative.

The *Pensacola News Journal* contained news articles with personal stories of victims as well as stories from BP officials explaining the reasons behind their actions. Ken Feinburg and the claims facility was another “frame” that was found throughout these newspapers. He was quoted in several articles stating that those individuals who have been denied have not turned in the proper documentation (Kam, 2011). He even stated that the US Coast Guard office has upheld all the denials that have been appealed (Buchman, 2011). Because there are so few articles (17 in total) that mentioned a satisfaction with the claims facility, the audience is once
again shown a negative aspect in relation to the oil spill. According to BP and the claims facility, their company is taking the necessary actions to ensure that the Gulf Coast is restored to the same conditions pre-oil spill, both financially and physically. When articles mentioned success stories from claims and BP, they all included information from a BP official. Other research found that officials have an invested interest and are required to publicize their company in a positive way (Ashcroft, 1994; Smith, 2009;). Because of the negative stories regarding the claims process, one is only left to believe BP is not handling their business in a professional way. Research does prove public opinion relies more heavily on the personal accounts rather than that of business news from officials (Carroll & McCombs, 2010).

Other studies have found that the portrayal of disaster victims as helpless is a mechanism to garner support for relief efforts (Harber, 2010; Salwen, 1995; Tierney & al, 2006). In this study, the victim myth served the same purpose. Orange Beach and Gulf Shores were mentioned more than other areas, and their selling point was the tar balls found on the beaches. Many of the locals that were mentioned in the newspaper articles were saddened because the beaches have been a part of their lives for generations, and now their kids and grandkids would not have the same memories of the beaches as them. The emotion of those interviewed was clearly displayed through the articles. In many instances, there was rage, anger, and even sadness associated with BP and the spill. This emotion added to the “victim” portrayal within these articles. No matter how much these “victims” complained, yelled, or even cried, they still had no control over the outcome of the claims process or the severity of the spill.

While the Pensacola News Journal, the Sun Herald, and the Mobile Press Register wrote stories about the victims of the oil spill being helpless, they also featured articles about BP hiring some of those people put out of work to help them with restoration projects. In other words,
these papers “framed” the good deeds of BP in the coastal regions of Alabama. Those newly unemployed workers were hired by BP, filed claims from lost revenue, and received compensation for the work they did with BP. Some of those jobs included cleaning tar balls from the beach and making and laying skimmers in the waters to collect oil. The articles that showed BP in this positive light featured a BP spokesperson, and never personal stories. Other articles explained that BP would not allow their workers to make comments to the news media, and only BP officials were allowed to speak to journalists.

A very important issue in this study is the difference in roles of the victims verses the roles of the BP officials. The victims of the oil spill blamed BP for their misfortunes. In the Mobile Press Register, the Pensacola News Journal, and the Sun Herald, there were considerately more business owners and locals that were upset with the way the oil giant handled the crisis, than those that were pleased. The articles mentioned the company’s slow response time in fixing the gushing oil levy in the water, the response time for claims, and the lack of accountability for the disaster. On the other hand, the articles that mentioned BP officials always made sure to emphasize the positive things on their agenda. These articles mentioned the Vessels of Opportunity (the hiring of fishermen to help remove the oil), the amount of claims that were paid out, and the money that each state received to help with tourism. The differences in responses from victims and officials could create confusion with readers depending on what article was read. While the news stories featuring locals provided an example as to the feelings of the “victims,” the responses from BP provided examples of damage control from big companies during a crisis. Other studies explained how damage control prevents the companies from losing the respect of the potential and present clients during a critical time (Ferns-Banks, 1996; Fishman, 1999).
Chapter 5: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Limitations of the Study

One of the most discussed limitations of agenda setting research is that causation cannot be proven. Although correlations can be shown between what the news features and what the public believes or does, it cannot be proven that these two variables have a direct impact on one another. This study found that the areas that received the most amount of coverage in the three newspapers did in fact receive the most amount of compensation from the Gulf Coast Claims Facility. However, it is not possible to prove that the lack of media attention is the reason for the lack of distribution of claims to other coastal Alabama areas.

Another limitation in this study is the examination of only newspapers rather than local television content. This may impact the ability to generalize the study findings as being representative of the BP oil spill news coverage. Although it is difficult to determine whether similar results would have been attained if local news content had been included, local news coverage is just as important in its distribution to the masses as newspapers.

This study only included articles that discussed coastal Alabama areas from the time frame of April 20th, 2010 to April 20th, 2011. In order to receive emergency payments, claimants were required to file their claims by November 23, 2010. Because the timeframe used for this study yielded so many articles, the process was lengthy and the definition of “timely compensation” could be challenged. Since November 23, 2010, that date should have been used and defined as the appropriate time frame for claims to have been received.
Further Study Recommendation

The Deep Water Horizon is a fairly new research topic and not as many studies have been produced concerning the area of agenda setting. Therefore, this area of research would benefit greatly from additional studies. An inter-media study that examined newspaper, TV, and radio coverage of the same oil spill would provide valuable insight as to whether the agenda and frame are consistent across the media.

Further studies of media agenda setting in natural disasters should include surveys of news consumers to determine if their beliefs and opinions coincide to what images and opinions of the media. Also surveys to include journalists may help determine if the types of stories covered about disasters are because of necessity or availability.

Conclusions

This study found that the new media devote more oil spill attention to coastal Alabama areas with high percentage of tourism pre-oil spill. The greatest amount of attention is focused on the beaches of Gulf Shore and Orange Beach, including the restaurants and businesses within those areas. These findings from the Deep Water Horizon news coverage were consistent with findings of previous studies (Carroll & McCombs, 2001; Malcheff, 2010; Price, 2010).

While this study did find that the areas that received the most amount of coverage were in fact the areas that received the most amounts of claims within a year of the spill, it is important to note that there were non-beach areas that also received fair claims as well. News coverage of the individuals and businesses with little to no work or clientele, were a significant part of the disaster story. These stories were personal accounts of business operation pre and post oil spill, as well as the affects of the spill on their livelihoods. The stories that involved personal accounts from “victims” portrayed BP and the disaster relief efforts in a negative way. On the other hand,
those stories that involved just a BP official included damage control of the company, and explained the positive aspects of the company.

The public and public policymakers utilize the issues broadcast within the media to determine what issues are important (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; McCombs, 2005; Yue & Weaver, 2009). Because the media uses personal accounts of local individuals and business owners, it implies that the major corporations involved in disasters are not fully taking care of their responsibilities. The “victims” are helpless because their finances have changed and they are not receiving the appropriate amounts of funding from the government and/or the guilty parties. The heightened attention on the lack of response time from BP during the Deep Water Horizon indicates that financial and physical recovery should be the public’s main priority.

In this study, claims to oil spill victims emerged as a significant issue in the media; however, problems with the Gulf Coast Claims Facility still exist today. There have been no solutions to make this process any quicker or easier for victims living in coastal Alabama areas. The fact that business owners and workers within the highest concentrated tourist areas of Alabama (Gulf Shores and Orange Beach) have received the most amount of claims as well as had their areas publicized the most, supports the idea that there is a correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda.
Review of Literature


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