Shaping and Misrepresenting Public Perceptions of Ecological Catastrophes: The BP Gulf Oil Spill

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Abstract

Against the background of corporate globalization and the discoursal integration of ecological issues by multinationals this paper examines how BP played down and took steps to minimize the effects of its Deep Horizon rig explosion in 2010. Using a combination of CDA methods and corpus linguistic techniques an empirical analysis is first given of a series of BP's press releases during the attempts to stop the oil spill. Various linguistic features, such as euphemisms and metaphors, are isolated. The manner in which BP presents issues of obligation and responsibility is discussed. A second empirical section considers how the aftermath of the spill, especially the 'restoration' of the Gulf, and BP's claims to be dealing with it is presented on BP's website. This can be seen as a case of how crisis communication is undertaken by corporations. A key feature that is illustrated is the role terminological control and word choice play in deflecting attention from real and potential troubles. A final generalizing discussion section provides a critical political-economic evaluation of the practices and media presentations that state and business corporate bodies engage in to conceal and obscure their real operations and intentions.

Keywords: CDA, corpus linguistics, corporate discourse, crisis communication, power

1. Introduction: Investigating Corporate Discourse

This paper summarizes findings of an empirical analysis of the discourse used by an oil company (BP) relating to environmental issues. Alexander (2009: 42) discussed the manner in which politicians, businesses, industry and the media have succeeded in ideologically integrating the ecological issue. This corporate framing of ecology happened very quickly in our prevailing neoliberal system of capitalism. Such activities are, of course, not new. In the 1970s, O'Neill (1972: 20) stated that multinational corporations were able 'to shape *the national ecology* and *psychic economy of individuals*' (emphasis added, RJA). The view of Crouch (2011: 143) of a triangle constituted by the major players – the state, market and corporations – more than echoes O'Neill's early anticipation of globalization today.

It is against this background that we must situate the activities of a corporation like BP when they create the worst oil pollution disaster in history. Crouch refers to the BP oil-rig disaster (2011: 59), underlining how by

ignoring potential disasters BP saved money. But how by privileging financial specialists over engineers 'the damage has been far greater than the cost of providing protection against it'.

A focus of my work over the past 20 years has been on demonstrating and illustrating how multinational corporations discoursally shape the environmental state of the world. Given the power they hold they can employ obfuscating language that is deliberately used to keep consumers and customers guessing. But we should not allow this to deter us from digging away at the scholarly coalface to attempt to ascertain what really is and was going on. This is the object of this study.

2. *BP on the Oil-Rig Disaster*

The method adopted combines a qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach together with more quantitatively oriented corpus linguistic techniques (Alexander 2009).

2.1 Examination of BP Press Releases on the Gulf Oil spill

Firstly a corpus of BP's press releases (American: 'news releases') is analyzed. According to Scollon (2008: 3): 'A news release is a document which is used to communicate organizational or corporate actions to the public'. Large corporations like BP have a variety of audiences to whom they need to present themselves. Their internal communication channels straddle a broad range of discourses. And when they are faced with the challenges of the greatest known oil spill in history a range of discourses are likely to be found in the press releases with which they have to confront the world at large: engineering, project management, operational research, legal and marketing discourses etc., may be implicated.

2.2 Overview of the Press Releases and First Impressions

Press releases from 21 April 2010 to 23 July 2010 were investigated using the software program AntConc.[1] There were 35,624 words (tokens) and 3,004 different words (types); this gave a type-token-ratio (TTR) of 0.08432517. The repetitive nature of the text is reflected in the extremely low ratio.

A frequency list was calculated. Some of the most frequent 'lexical' items (i.e. not grammatical items) were 'BP' (651), 'oil' (455 instances; the 7th ranked item by frequency), 'well' (287), 'containment' (218 instances) and 'Gulf' (177).

News releases of the first 10 or more days show how BP sets out to demonstrate that they are taking decisive action to deal with the 'disaster'. But the words 'disaster' (1) and 'disasters' (1) occur only once each. The latter is in a piece of legal discourse to their shareholders in the small print: 'Forward Looking Statements - Cautionary Statement', 'Actual results may differ ... depending on a variety of factors, including ... natural disasters and adverse weather conditions; wars and acts of terrorism or sabotage'. The euphemism used instead early on is 'incident' with BP CEO Hayward using the term 'tragedy' (in all, 3 instances). The preferred choice 'incident' is employed 81 times and 'incidents' once.

We find the press releases frequently pussyfooting around the fact that the event was a complete mess and muddle. As Scollon (2008: 48) notes a CDA can help in analyzing just what the press releases include and, perhaps more importantly, exclude. How a phenomenon is presented and what qualities are ascribed to that phenomenon is what is of interest. So, we can conclude from what we know about corporate websites and news / press releases, that 'bad-sounding' words like 'chaos' and 'disarray' tend NOT to be used. Corporations suppress or understate certain negative facts or events. Whereas by contrast everything which they claim to be doing to remedy the situation, or just to make the best of a bad job, is given a positive status or value (to use Hunston's (2000) word).

This means that we can find euphemisms being employed. Indeed 'spill' itself is one of the most marked or egregious. With 208 instances 'spill' is the 22nd most frequent item with only few other 'lexical' items more frequent, as we saw: 'BP', 'oil' and 'containment'. Related items used are the verb forms: 'spilled' (4), 'spilling' (1) and 'spills' (2).

2.3 Style and Manner of Reporting

When disastrous events happen, how do capitalist business corporations deal with them, other than avoiding using the label 'disasters'? How transparently does their reporting take place? Are events in this case the direct result of human, i.e. engineering, intervention in natural systems 'passed off' as just unlucky or ill-fated? How are unfortunate facts presented? Are they factual statements? Or are we dealing with persuasive texts? There is also the question about who writes the press releases.

On the issue of authorship of press releases Scollon writes (2008: 40): 'it is essential to be able to analyze who is responsible for the ideas expressed in a document (the principal). This is often confused with the identification of who has created the wordings or the design that we read or see (the author), and with who is merely the mechanical producer of the material object (the animator)'.

To be sure, some of the press releases make clear who the principal is. Both titles of 2 May 2010 and 14 May 2010 (Texts 1) make explicit the fact that CEO Hayward is the principal. In one he 'applauds' and in the other he 'comments'. The choice of the reporting verbs serves to frame and position the reader's responses to the CEO's statements. The personal touch is emphasized by the frequent use of first person singular and plural pronouns and possessives (twice 'I' and the exclusive 'we' once accompanying a verbum dicendi and twice to underline BP's willingness to get things done; but then the inclusive use of 'Our teams' expresses solidarity and tries to soften up the expected rebukes and criticisms from the US government). Note also the repetition of the purr-words 'mitigate the damage' in the first one and a similar usage 'mitigate the impact' in the second one. The personalized use of the purr-word – 'my commitment' is typical, corporate sweet-talk.

Simultaneously, in the second release (see Texts 1) we find the carefully vaguely formulated 'we are participating fully in investigations'; this actually commits BP to very little at this stage in the proceedings.

Texts 1: CEO releases

Release date: 02 May 2010

Hayward Applauds President's Statement

The US government leadership here has been excellent since day one. **I** agree with the President that the top priority right now is to stop the leak and **mitigate the damage**. **I** reiterated **my commitment** to the White House today that BP will do anything and everything **we** can to stop the leak, attack the spill off shore, and protect the shorelines of the Gulf Coast. **We** appreciate the tireless efforts of the many federal, state and local responders and the volunteers, men and women who have worked tirelessly since the date of the accident to **mitigate the damage. Our** teams are working hand in hand and **we** look forward to hearing more recommendations for action from the President's visit today.

-Tony Hayward, from Houma Louisiana

Release date: 14 May 2010

Hayward comments on President Obama's statement - 14 May

Tony Hayward, BP Group Chief Executive, today said:

We absolutely understand and share President Obama's sense of urgency over the length of time this complex task is taking. We want to thank the President and his administration for their ongoing engagement in this effort.

BP - working closely with scientists and engineers from across the whole oil industry, from government agencies and departments, and with local officials along the Gulf Coast - is focused on doing everything in our power to stop the flow of oil, remove it from the surface, and protect the shoreline. We are working with state and community leaders **to mitigate the impact** on the lives and livelihoods of those who have been affected.

And while we continue in these efforts, **we are participating fully in investigations** that will provide valuable lessons about how to prevent future incidents of this nature.

More than a month after the explosion and spill we have this statement on BP's own 'investigation', followed at the end by quoted statements from the CEO (see Text 2). The first paragraph is vaguely attributed, 'investigation team's work', agentless operations are alluded to, 'multiple control mechanisms', which somehow 'miraculously' were expected (cf. the irrealis modal 'should') to prevent exactly this kind of activity from happening.

Text 2: CEO comments on 'investigation'

> Release date: 25 May 2010
>
> **The investigation team's work** thus far shows that this accident **was brought about by the failure of a number of processes, systems and equipment.** There were **multiple control mechanisms** – procedures and equipment – in place **that should have prevented this accident or reduced** the impact of the spill: the investigation is focused on the following seven mechanisms. [...]
>
> "**I** understand people want a simple answer about why this happened and who is to blame. The honest truth is that this is a complex accident, **caused by an unprecedented combination of failures**," said Chief Executive Tony Hayward. A number of companies are involved, including BP, and **it is simply too early – and not up to us – to say who is at fault**.
>
> This is a basic summary of the facts as gathered by the investigation team to date. A lot remains unknown, but we hope that the briefings will help the government's inquiries. This was a tragic accident and we need to understand the causes of it to try to ensure that nothing like it ever happens again.

Hayward makes what is intended to be a personal statement; note the use of the first person pronoun 'I' and the desire for 'a simple answer'; he is arguably fishing (with the use of 'The honest truth') for a 'human', i.e. sympathetic, reaction on the part of readers or listeners; but it is carefully hedged with pseudo-legalistic sounding phrases like 'it is simply too early – and not up to us – to say who is at fault'. Scollon notes the hybrid forms of style one can find on corporate websites. His characterization fits aptly the 25 May BP release (2008: 60):

> This 'synthetic personalization', to use Fairclough's term, mixes personal and formal styles or registers to provide quasi-legal information in a way that is simultaneously non-informative but gives the impression of abundant information and concern.

2.4 BP's Treatment of the Semantic Field of Obligation and Duty

In view of the consequences for the natural habitat and human activity in the Gulf region and how labelling affects or influences readers the semantic field of obligation is worth considering. This can show us how the company dealt with highly sensitive topics. We find clear evaluative choices constructing the sense of statements. In the 25 May release (see Text 2) no human responsibility is taken: 'this accident was brought about by the failure of a number of processes, systems and equipment'. Here we have the impersonal passivization followed by a pseudo agent 'the failure of a number of processes, systems and equipment'. As Hunston (2000: 181) puts it, features like these 'together constitute a constructed culture of knowledge and opinion, which the reader is expected to share and be convinced by'. Never admit you have committed a great misdemeanour, until your lawyer has had the chance to gather evidence to cover your back or soften your fall – this appears to be the tactic adopted by BP.

We turn to the adjacent field of 'obligations' (21 instances), namely 'liabilities' (18), 'liability' (6), 'liable' (1), 'responsibilities' (1), 'responsibility' (3) and 'responsible' (9). In Figure 1 BP uses 'responsible' twice in its non-legal everyday sense, i.e. 'able to be counted on owing to qualities of conscientiousness and trustworthiness'; once with the right collocate, purr-word 'steward'. The other 7 instances are specialist, legal usage. Five have the right collocate 'party' or 'parties', such as is used in contracts. One has the left collocate 'act as "operator"' also from contractual law. Number 8 is a near hybrid: partly legal and partly appealing to the 'conscientious' and trustworthy parameter, despite appearances and the proven track record! The uses underline its 'weasel' quality.

1	onal Fish and Wildlife Foundation is a strong and	responsible	**steward for this money** from the wildlife fund," s
2	er Tony Hayward. "Other parties besides BP **may be**	responsible	for costs and liabilities arising from the oil sp
3	t under which BPXP would **act as "operator" and be**	responsible	for conducting operations in MC252, but that the
4	tly and severally liable, together with any other	responsible	**parties**, for oil spill removal costs and damages
5	package of measures to meet its obligations as a	responsible	**party** arising from the Deepwater Horizon spill.
6	said that we fully accepted our obligations as a	responsible	**party**. This agreement reaffirms our commitment to
7	he Oil Protection Act of 1990, BP is considered a	responsible	**party** and is required to fund clean up and restor
8	ate tasks. We will meet our obligations both as a	responsible	**company** and also as a necessary step to rebuildin
9	imants to make a claim against BP as a designated	responsible	**party**. If a claim is not resolved and paid within

Figure 1. Concordance of 'responsible' (9 instances)

The noun 'responsibilities' occurs only once (see Text 3, line 10). BP's shareholders are the addressees. There is a cluster of purr-words – 'top priority', 'rebuilding trust and confidence in BP' and 'ensuring'. This is followed by what can only be termed crocodile tears, being mis-aimed and used as formal politeness – in the phrase 'expressed their deep regret and sorrow for the tragedy'.

Text 3: Release date: 04 June 2010

> Chairman and CEO Give Assurance that BP will Meet its Obligations in Gulf Of Mexico
>
> BP's Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg and Group Chief Executive Tony Hayward told shareholders today that the company's response to the Gulf of Mexico oil spill is **their top priority,** along with **rebuilding trust and confidence in BP** and **ensuring that** such an accident never happens again. Both Svanberg and Hayward **expressed their deep regret and sorrow for the tragedy.**
>
> Svanberg underscored **the company's commitment to mitigating damage** from the oil spill. "The Board of BP has been clear from the outset that **all resources available to the company** should be applied to **meeting BP's responsibilities in addressing these events**", he said. The task is by no means complete and we have a long way to go. This is a tough job and Tony and the team continue to work relentlessly. They have all our support.

In the final paragraph Svanberg heaps up the purr-words 'the company's commitment to mitigating damage'. But what kind of commitment is hidden and hedged in the preceding phrase 'The Board of BP has been clear'? What does 'being clear' mean? If anything, it blurs the situation even more. It is sufficiently unclear to satisfy the corporate legal representatives and to minimize the risk of a lawsuit. The phrase 'all resources' is qualified by 'available to the company'; so this does not mean everything – a hazy phrase again. 'BP's responsibilities in addressing these events' is a further fuzzy phrase; 'addressing' means zero action; whereas 'these events' is a general encapsulation on the part of the speaker (principal) of what happened and what they really feel responsible for. This leaves extremely open and vague what exactly they are going to respond to.

2.5 Playing the Blame Game

The issue of 'who is to blame for what' underlies such slippery discourse. Less than two months after the explosion the topic of 'responsibility' (see Figure 2) appears in the 18 June 2010 press release.

1	ven though **another party already is disputing its**	responsibility	for costs associated with the Deepwater Horizon i
2	orporation has announced **it is refusing to accept**	responsibility	for oil spill removal costs and damages, claiming
3	n the spread of the oil spill. **We are taking full**	responsibility	for the spill and we will clean it up, and where

Figure 2. Responsibility concordance (3 instances)

As the immediate left collocates make clear, BP is criticising the attitude of third parties towards their responsibility in the first two cases. Whereas, by contrast, BP, of course, is now emphasizing that it is 'taking full responsibility for the spill'!

We see that the legally significant term 'liable' is only used once, very significantly with the immediate left collocate 'severally', thus underscoring BP's desire to implicate other parties' legal responsibility in the 'accident'. It comes in the final section of Release date: 18 June 2010:

> All the co-owners of the leasehold interest previously entered into a written operating agreement under which BPXP would act as "operator" and be responsible for conducting operations in MC252, but that the parties would share the costs of operations, including the cost to clean up any spill resulting from drilling the MC252 exploratory well, according to their respective ownership interests in MC252.

> Further, all the co-owners of the leasehold interest filed documents with the U. S. federal government clearly certifying that **each would be jointly and severally *liable*, together with any other responsible parties**, for oil spill removal costs and damages in accordance with the Oil Pollution Act of 1990.

2.6 Metaphor Usage

A consideration of the metaphors used shows that military ones are the most prominent. Note what Hayward says at one point: 'We are attacking this spill on two fronts'. The following list (with the frequency for the items) (Figure 3) illustrates that this is fairly consistent throughout the period studied.

attack (3)	attacking (3)	deploy (5)	deployed (62)
deploying (4)	deployment (30)	fronts (5)	intercept (9)
intercepting (1)	interception (1)	kill (48)	killed (2)
killing (2)	launch (2)	launched (7)	launches (1)
operation (53)	operational (11)	operations (100)	relief (96)
supplies (2)	target (3)	targeted (3)	

Figure 3. Military metaphors

This need not perhaps surprise us, since the U.S. Coast Guard took over a key role in the clean up and as the press release for 19 July 2010 stated: 'BP continues to work cooperatively with the guidance and approval of the National Incident Commander'. A further release refers to 'the Unified Command'.

Under this structure, BP's Gulf States response activities, which are centered in the Unified Command with the Coast Guard in New Orleans, will now report directly to Mr. Dudley. (23 June 2010)

In Figure 4 the use of 'fronts' epitomizes this metaphorical usage. The spill is being 'fought' or 'attacked'.

1	ainment Subsea efforts continue to focus on **two**	fronts:	first, reducing the flow of oil spilled by physi
2	ill. We are **determined to fight** this spill on **all**	fronts,	in the deep waters of the Gulf, in the shallow w
3	block. BP continues to **attack** the spill **on many**	fronts	- making continuing attempts to prevent oil escap
4	n 252 well. "We are **attacking** this spill **on all**	fronts,	bringing into play all and any resources and adv
5	ew Orleans. "We **are attacking** this spill **on two**	fronts	- at the wellhead and on the surface offshore," s

Figure 4. Concordance of 'fronts'

The engineering terms 'top kill' and later 'static kill' for the attempts to block the flow of the crude oil were frequently mentioned in TV coverage of the operation. The 48 instances of 'kill' are testimony to its prominence.

3. *BP's Dealing with the Aftermath*

3.1 Statistical Data on BP's Website

I now turn to the aftermath study. I selected a section from BP's website entitled 'Gulf of Mexico restoration' during December 2011 and January 2012. The pages relating to this drop down menu were collated in a corpus which was again processed using AntConc software. In addition to a close reading of the webpages I undertook a computer-assisted hand count of specific items. The automatic count resulted in 11,936 tokens and 2,454 tokens, giving a TTR of 0.20559651.

A frequency list was calculated. The most frequent non-grammatical items were unsurprisingly: 'BP' (180 instances), 'Gulf' (130), 'technical' (90), 'claims' (83), 'oil' (82), 'response' (82), 'coast' (66), 'briefing' (61), 'kb' (61), 'July' (60), 'government' (59), 'well' (58), 'information' (55), 'part' (49), 'deepwater' (48), 'spill' (48), 'seafood' (45), 'Mexico' (44) and 'horizon' (41). Many of these items relate to the name of the oil rig and its location – 'Gulf', 'oil', 'coast', 'well', 'deepwater', 'Mexico' and 'horizon' (368 tokens); 371 tokens are covered by procedural items 'technical', 'claims', 'response', 'briefing' and 'information'. The remaining four 'kb' (61), 'July' (60), 'government' (59), and 'part' (49) make up 249 tokens. In all, 19 items constitute 8.11 % of the total words.

3.2 BP's Dealings with a Crisis Situation

A short discussion of crisis communication in the BP case is in order at this point. What we are dealing with here is how a corporation handles 'critical situations threatening to put the organization at peril' (Jørgensen and Isaksson 2010: 520).

Lischinsky (2011: 155) makes the pertinent point that 'crises ex hypothesi demand measures to contain and correct their impact'. And given the far-reaching consequences of the massive 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill and BP's prominent position in US economic life, we can safely assume that 'their discursive construction can have a strongly constitutive effect on public policy (van Dijk 1993), selectively legitimating certain courses of action on the basis of the implicit bias of the construal' (Lischinsky 2011: 155).

Arguably, disasters are closely linked to self-deception. Crisis communication 'functions as a kind of screen leading our attention in specific directions', write Frandsen and Johansen (2010: 548); and this is where terminological control plays a key role.

As Frandsen and Johansen affirm, corporate communication theorists encourage crisis managers 'to express sympathy for crisis victims' (2010: 546). Yet, '[i]t sometimes can be difficult to produce the right apology' (ibid.: 557). To a certain extent we find BP sharing this difficulty. The word 'apology' occurs nowhere in the text analyzed. 'Regret' appears twice, however. Consider the two instances and their co-text, in two successive sentences:

> Eleven people died as a result of the accident and others were injured. **We deeply regret** this loss of life and **recognize the tremendous loss suffered by the families, friends and co-workers of those who died.**
>
> **We regret the damage** caused to the environment and livelihoods of those in the communities affected. We are putting in place measures to help ensure it does not happen again

Both have 'we' as a subject, thus attempting to 'personalize' the act. The indirect reference to the killed workers is modified by 'deeply'. Also the use of 'recognize the tremendous loss' appears to be an avoidance procedure, maybe designed to sidestep possible legal obligations. Jørgensen and Isaksson (2010: 519) refer to 'corporate facework' in connexion with the issuing of apologies. And certainly the final sentence can be interpreted as an attempt to save face and simultaneously claim they aim to prevent a repeat performance.

During the oil spill itself, and with BP issuing press releases since the beginning on 21 April 2010, it was not until the release dated 4 June 2010 and entitled 'Chairman and CEO Give Assurance that BP will Meet its Obligations in Gulf Of Mexico' that something resembling an apology was published (see Text 3).

3.3 How is the 'Event' Named?

As stated a significant feature of crisis communication is terminological control. We saw in the news releases in 2010 that the 'event' was referred to as the 'incident'. At the very beginning (21 April 2010) we read 'Transocean Ltd.

Reports Fire'. The second release on the same day talks of a 'fire' and CEO Hayward used the word 'incident' for the first time.

It is a truism of corporate language that word choice and lexical patterning play a significant role in deflecting attention and downplaying real and potential troubles (cf Alexander 2009: 18). Chomsky has commented (1988: 663) on how '[t]his is a typical case of the way the framework of thought is consciously manipulated by an effective choice and reshaping of terminology so as to make it difficult to understand what's happening in the world'. BP's choice of lexis in this situation of crisis serves as a frame to guide our viewing and reading along certain direction paths (Frandsen and Johansen 2010: 548).

In the corpus investigated here the words 'accident' (23 times) and also 'incident' (23 times) are used to designate what happened. The term 'explosion' occurs 4 times (see Figure 5). The co-text of the first instance situates it as following a gas release. Also it is worth noting how far down the chain of connectedness BP appears.

> On the evening of April 20, 2010, a gas release and subsequent **explosion** occurred on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig working on the Macondo exploration well for BP in the Gulf of Mexico

Two instances, (1) and (3), have the lemma 'occur**' as immediate right collocate, with no agency acknowledged.

1 g of April 20, 2010, a gas release and subsequent	explosion	**occurred** on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig working
2 investigation In the immediate aftermath of the	explosion,	BP launched an investigation, drawing on the exp
3 r Act provision A timeline of events 20 April	Explosion	**occurs** on the Deepwater Horizon 22 April Dee
4 Watch the film Response timeline April 20	Explosion	and fire on the Deepwater Horizon, Transocean's s

Figure 5. 'Explosion' Concordance

Compare how the next largest spill publicly quantified before this, that of the Exxon Valdez, remains forever on record and perhaps indelibly linked with Exxon in many people's memories. Of course, BP always has said that the oil rig was nothing to do with them. And it appears as if the BP website authors have been diligent in seeing to it that, two years after the spill, the connection with BP, in the guise of the label attached, has been severed. Looking at the 'accident' concordance, we find 'BP' never appears as a left collocate of 'accident'. Left collocates include 'environmental impacts of the Deepwater Horizon' and 'impacts and implications of the Deepwater Horizon'. Indeed, in 9/23 instances 'Deepwater Horizon' appears as a left collocate in the 'accident'

concordance and 10/23 instances in the 'incident' concordance (see Figures 6 and 7).

As for the explanation for why the 'accident' happened, there are a number of downtoning or hedging collocates, for example, (16) 'that no single cause was responsible for' and (18) was 'the result of multiple causes'. In (6) the left collocated modal adverb 'Fundamentally' and the right collocate verb 'involved' and the nominalization 'a loss of control' diminish any agency implications. There is a focus elsewhere as reflected in the collocates on 'impact' in (2), (3), (8), (9), and (10), on 'investigations' in (11), (12), (13), (14), (15), (16), (17), (23) and 'response' (13), (15), (20), (22). Here we see the distracting 'screen', mentioned above, in operation.

1 orts * Claims information * Deepwater Horizon	accident	* Contacts Follow us on:BP on TwitterBP o
2 nd environmental impacts of the Deepwater Horizon	accident.	Environmental sampling during the response B
3 ng the long-term impacts of the Deepwater Horizon	accident.	This 10-year programme seeks to engage and uti
4 te tourism promotion efforts. Within weeks of the	accident,	we had announced block grants of $87 million to
5 7 By Fax:†1-866-682-1772 Deepwater Horizon	accident	The Deepwater Horizon rig On the evening of
6 ell was closed and sealed. Fundamentally, the	accident	**involved** a **loss of control** over the pressure in t
7 occur. Eleven people died as a result of the	accident	and others were injured. We deeply regret this lo
8 o compensate people affected by the impact of the	accident,	and to look after the health, safety and welfare
9 impacts and implications of the Deepwater Horizon	accident	and to learn and act on lessons from it. The ma
10 reached the shoreline from the Deepwater Horizon	accident	**impacted** Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Flor
11 0 sustainability reporting. Investigating the	accident	**Investigations** into the Deepwater Horizon accid
12 ident Investigations into the Deepwater Horizon	accident	will play an important role in understanding its
13 operations, and performed independently from BP's	accident	**response**. BP internal **investigation** External
14 n BP's investigation into the Deepwater Horizon	accident	drew upon the expertise of more than 50 technical
15 operations, and performed independently from BP's	accident	**response**. The BP **investigation** concluded that
16 uded that no single cause was responsible for the	accident.	**The investigation** instead found that a complex,

17 everal companies including BP, contributed to the	accident.	**The investigation** team made 26 recommendatio
18 the emerging consensus that the Deepwater Horizon	accident	was **the result of multiple causes** involving multi
19 ed the leak in multiple, parallel ways. After the	accident,	teams immediately set to work to stop the leak a
20 uipment developed specifically in response to the	accident.	For example, we introduced 'sand sharks'. large
21 from entering oiled areas. Within days of the	accident,	BP established a hotline for the public to be ab
22 ment and technology developed in response to this	accident.	In September 2010, we shared an initial set
23 om this oil spill. The many investigations of the	accident	will bring changes to our industry - changes that

Figure 6. 'Accident' Concordance

As for the explanation for the 'incident', similar down-toning collocates to those of 'accident' are to be found. Instance (18) (in Figure 7) contains the agentless 'occurring' and (19) 'we believe that no accurate determination can be' is a reference to the fact that initially BP hesitated to release numbers on the volume of oil lost. This was no doubt done in order to minimize the potential liability costs.

1 they would have been in if the Deepwater Horizon	incident	**had never occurred**. In addition, experts for
2 Health to enable and support sampling during the	incident	and high-priority studies of the distribution, co
3 Damage Trustees to investigate the impact of the	incident	on natural resources and human use of those resou
4 ters in the Gulf of Mexico, the Deepwater Horizon	incident	had **a dramatic impact** on the economy of the Gulf
5 The report identified four broad lessons from the	incident.	Collaboration: A broad range of stakeholders
6 ame together in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon	incident	to provide effective solutions and build new capa
7 challenges on the scale of the Deepwater Horizon	incident.	Systemization: The response to the incident
8 incident. Systemization: The response to the	incident	required the development of extensive systems, pr
9 for damages resulting from the Deepwater Horizon	incident	Individual and business claims All claims by
10 s and businesses related to the Deepwater Horizon	incident	are now being processed by the Gulf Coast Claims

11 government entities due to the Deepwater Horizon	incident	in the Gulf of Mexico. Under the Oil Pollution Ac
12 new pre-approvals for work undertaken due to the	incident	in the Gulf of Mexico. Gulf Coast Incident Co
13 he incident in the Gulf of Mexico. Gulf Coast	Incident	**Command** has sent a letter to political subdivisio
14 Release. Government entities are asked to contact	Incident	**Command** to obtain pre-approvals for ongoing activ
15 ed on the pre-approval. †**Letter from Gulf Coast**	Incident	**Command** (pdf, 591KB) Supporting materials for t
16 s and businesses related to the Deepwater Horizon	incident	are now being processed by the Gulf Coast Claims
17 A look at the key events in the Gulf of Mexico	incident	and **response Response** in video and pictures
18 nd permanently kill the well Within days of the	incident	**occurring**, the US federal government formed a Uni
19 volume of oil spilled from the Deepwater Horizon	incident,	**we believe that no accurate determination can be**
20 d public services and loss of revenues due to the	incident.	Government claims Supporting rig workers B
21 e images of the response to the Deepwater Horizon	incident.	Over the course of six months, the photograp
22 aring the insights and experience gained from the	incident	with BP staff involved in other deepwater project
23 onal Association of Oil and Gas Producers' Global	Incident	**Response Group** which works to facilitate the appl

Figure 7. 'Incident' Concordance

4. Discussion: Shaping and Framing of Socio-Economic Events and Ecological Catastrophes

Some scientists testing the Gulf for contamination stress how the reality they encounter is deeply at variance with the image painted by BP (Flaherty 2012). Arguably this preliminary study of BP provides further evidence of the egregious ways corporate groupings and political élites engage in, shape and misrepresent socio-economic events and ecological catastrophes. In part these misrepresentations are coming to be 'normalized' and 'naturalized'. They have become standard practice.

We do well to ask seriously what sort of society we are living in, in the light of such findings. How does the real world function? This where our approach needs to be informed by scepticism, critical scrutiny and a refusal to take things at face value. We can recall the analysis Marcuse applied to 'The Language of Total Administration' (1964: 77ff.). He pinpointed the jargon that reflects what he terms (ibid.: 82) 'the authoritarian character of this language'. Marcuse details some of the features it manifests, such as 'concreteness' (ibid.:

84): 'This language, which constantly imposes *images*, militates against the development and expression of *concepts*. In its immediacy and directness, it impedes conceptual thinking; thus, it impedes thinking'. (Emphasis in original.) A closely related phenomenon is what Agre (2000) calls 'simulated rationality'. This is employed routinely by both state and corporate rhetors or operators and has a vast public relations and related communications industry to reinforce it. And certainly a high percentage of corporate discourse acts can be seen to conform to this principle. The central notion is the management of the 'perception' of what is going on. It turns out that the corporate texts do not need to actually argue in rational terms. It is all about making things look on the surface as if rational argument is being engaged in. It is a case, in Agre's words, of

> arranging words in logical-seeming ways, using scientific vocabulary, adducing (carefully selected) facts, providing impressive-sounding statistics, citing the opinions of authorities (that is, people who will be perceived as authorities), and so forth.

A reading of the BP website section 'Gulf of Mexico restoration' demonstrates how apt these points are. Here we find, among others, the adducing of (carefully selected) facts and the provision of impressive-sounding statistics.

The not-for-profit organisation Hamilton Group staged a mock trial (The Ecocide Trial) in which the proposed international crime of 'ecocide' was showcased. This holds that Ecocide is part of Earth law – a new body of law we need to protect the Earth. Higgins (2010) proposes ecocide, to prevent the 'damage, destruction to or loss of ecosystems', as a 5th Crime Against Peace. But despite terrible things like this happening, business profit continues to be put ahead of both human need or respect for the Earth, the empty rhetoric of the former CEO of BP, John Browne in 1997 (see Alexander 2009: 41-53) notwithstanding.

Deceit, lying, omission, distraction, disinformation – there are many words for what the Australian social psychologist, Alex Carey (1995) calls in the title of one of his chapters, 'Reshaping the truth'. Recall, also, that this is taking place in nominally democratic, so-called, 'free societies'. As Pilger (1998: 486) puts it: 'The public has been groomed, rather than brainwashed'.

How can we explain that such 'accidents' occur and nothing is changed, either in legislative terms or in consumer behaviour? After all, BP is a corporation whose safety operations record has not always been 'clean'. In 1998 BP acquired the US oil company Amoco. In 2004, 'three major incidents caused three fatalities' according to Heffernan (2011a: 152). These took place against the background of a BP 'directive' demanding a 25% cut in costs at Amoco after the takeover. Heffernan (2011a: 89) argues that the legal concept of wilful blindness can explain how BP executives failed to respond to the problems which led to an explosion at BP's Texas City site.

The response to the oil spill we have been analyzing certainly reminds one of the corporate managerial mental set Heffernan finds many other examples of. But let us turn to a point Chomsky (2010: 45) makes: 'Easy tolerance of contradiction is an important talent to acquire, the talent for Orwell's 'doublethink': the ability to hold two contradictory beliefs in one's mind

simultaneously, while accepting both of them'. In this essay Chomsky is discussing issues related to international relations and the yawning gap between rhetoric and reality. Chomsky says that policy conforms to ideals only if interests are simultaneously involved. 'It is important to stress again that that term 'interests' does not refer to the interests of the domestic population, but the interests of the concentrations of power that dominate the domestic society' (ibid.: 47). Nor does Chomsky neglect to underline how a major influence on policy is 'internationally oriented business corporations' with a secondary effect of 'experts', who 'may themselves be influenced by business'.

Patently, corporate behaviour can be viewed similarly. We can usefully concur with Chomsky's formulation of principles guiding élite groups' actions, whether in government or in business circles. Chomsky (2010: 52) mentioned the unwillingness of educated classes to perceive what they are doing: the Jennings (1988) corollary. Earlier he has commented on a citation of Jennings (2010: 14): '"In history the man in the ruffled shirt and gold-laced waistcoat *somehow levitates above the blood he has ordered to be spilled by dirty-handed underlings*,"' calling it one of 'the enduring principles of intellectual history'. Chomsky elaborates further on Jennings (2010: 16): 'Another pervasive principle is that those who hold the clubs *can carry out their work effectively only with the benefit of self-induced blindness*'. (Emphasis in original.)

The accounts given by Heffernan of how BP executives rationalize their behaviour conform closely to Chomsky's principles. Heffernan (2011b: 35): quotes the former BP chairman John Browne saying '"I wish someone had challenged me and been brave enough to say, 'We need to ask more disagreeable questions'"'. Yet [Browne] did not seem to understand why they hadn't'.

We must, however, certainly dispute Heffernan's conclusion (2011b: 35). 'The central irony of wilful blindness is that it makes us feel safe even as it puts us in danger'. That use of the 'royal' or inclusive 'us' runs the risk of overlooking the simple insight we can gain from Chomsky's related notion of 'intentional ignorance'. He shows how this is a feature of systematic power wielding, and how powerful groups employ language and discourse to distort what they are or have been doing. As with 'doublethink' we are here looking at social structurally linked behaviours on the part of the ruling (educated, producer, owner) classes. As with 'false consciousness' the political or corporate agency aspect (in this case the obfuscation of agency on 'our' part) is important, not the individual psychological side. When thinking about the propagation of disinformation, another phrase fits in here: 'cognitive dissonance'. David Cromwell (2001) helpfully and somewhat optimistically quotes Andrew Marr, the BBC's political editor, giving advice to the public:

> If people don't know about power and let their attention wander completely, then those in power will take liberties. And the only way to keep the huge power of the market and the political elites in some kind of check is through an informed, active and occasionally difficult citizenry. And this, in turn, needs public-sphere journalism, even if it doesn't always realise it. (The Independent, 16 March, 2001.)

At the end of his article Cromwell formulates a practice that CDA can contribute to:

> Let us take the BBC's Andrew Marr at his word and demand real 'public-sphere journalism'. Let us challenge state-corporate power in all its guises, including its media industries, and strip away all illusions of its 'benign' nature.

The outcome of this paper appears to highlight the truism that when we read texts or watch images about environmental issues, we need to look for 'where people are coming from', that is to say, what real interests underlie texts such as appear in both scientific and journalistic genres, as well as in business and politics (Alexander 2008; Scollon 2008).

Notes

[1]   The program was compiled by Laurence Anthony and is downloadable from his web site.

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