

## **ABSTRACT**

INMAN, GINNY TYSON. British Petroleum's Crisis Communication: the Study of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. (Under the direction of Dr. Melissa Johnson).

This case study of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill concentrates on the crisis communication strategies, framing tactics, and technical jargon utilized by the corporation, British Petroleum, along with the framing strategies of local newspaper coverage from Houston, TX and Florida Panhandle newspapers from the date of the rig explosion to the date the spill was capped. The author analyzed the variables quantitatively based on Benoit's Image Restoration Strategies and framing theory with the objective to identify the crisis communication of the news releases, the amount of technical language used in the news releases, and how the local newspapers responded. Additionally, the author analyzed the dissimilarity in local newspaper articles' frames and found a significant difference between the two local newspapers chosen for this study. This investigation raises additional research questions about crisis communication strategies.

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British Petroleum's Crisis Communication: The Study of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

by  
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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this body of knowledge to my husband, Al, who throughout this process of graduate school was first my boyfriend, then my fiancé, and now my husband. A different title for each year I completed. He also deserves an honorary degree in counseling after the publication of this work.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Ginny Tyson Inman graduated from the University of North Carolina Wilmington in 2008 with honors in Communication Studies and a minor in Journalism. She moved from academia into journalism immediately with her first job as a staff writer at a local eastern North Carolina newspaper where I not only constructed content, but shot photographs and edited layout. She was working as a Communication Specialist at North Carolina State University when she decided to enter graduate school to combine her interests in public relations and media. She has always enjoyed focusing on expressing a clear message, and with a background in newspapers and television journalism and a lover of all things media, she enjoys translating messages into consumable information for chosen demographics and telling people's stories.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## CHAPTER 1

April 20, 2010 began what would become the largest manmade marine oil spill in the history of the petroleum industry (Canadian Science Publishing, 2012). The British Petroleum (BP)-licensed Transocean drilling rig, the Deepwater Horizon, exploded, caught fire, and after all preventative measures failed, began a flow of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Images from the area started to blanket the internet, television, and newspapers. First, they showed the burning rig—an unusual metallic structure, stretching out of the ocean with no land in sight surrounded by smaller boats all directing water onto the crippled rig. The explosion killed 11 men and became known as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. After the rig sank and the fires stopped, the new images of oil-soaked birds, aerial pictures of glistening, oil-laden water, and reporters reaching their bare hands into the muck and pulling out a muddy hand filled the media landscape. For about three months, crude oil flowed into the Gulf of Mexico at a rate of approximately 53,000 barrels per day before the well was capped on July 15, 2010 (University of Maryland, 2012). Where was BP?

Multiple communication missteps by BP's CEO, damage to the economies of the surrounding states, and environmental damage to wildlife in the Gulf brought the incident to the forefront of many American minds. Additionally, the story was covered nationally and internationally, and the event and subsequent coverage displayed gaping holes in national environmental regulations and crisis communication errors within the BP organization. One question that will be addressed in this case study will be how did BP respond to the crisis in the news releases they distributed? What messages did BP use?

This study distinguishes itself from Deepwater Horizon studies previously published as well as undoubtedly examines the communication aspects of the tragedy from a different point of view. There are multiple examples that display the relevance and significance of this topic. The spill's magnitude and response by the company alone warrant study of the crisis communication tactics used by BP, but the combination of investigating the media depictions and the public relations tactics central to crisis communication brings previously unexplored data to light. Additionally, this research does not focus on international or even national media resources. Instead, local media are examined. Investigating local media sources is an innovative approach because physical proximity to the accident can drastically alter media frames in comparison to frames in national media. Previous BP media studies have focused on elite newspapers, whose national and international audiences include stockholders, economists, commodities traders, business leaders, and the like, but who are geographically removed from the site of the oil spill's destruction. The locals living in the states surrounding the Gulf are the audience these newspapers' reach. Focusing on this demographic provides a new way to investigate the international event. Understanding news depictions of this massive, man-made national disaster on a local level and their incorporation—or lack thereof—into local news stories is relevant to crisis communication but have not been included in any line of study thus far.

The purpose of this study is to compare local newspaper coverage and BP's public relations response (news releases) in the initial phase of the crisis and to demonstrate frames and image restoration strategies. Additional, this research addresses limitations of other

studies and expands the body of knowledge of public relations' crisis communication effectiveness to a more local level.

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill is a prime example of what experts refer to as a crisis. "A crisis is the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectations of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs, 2012, p. 2). Crises, especially ones of this magnitude, often rise in intensity, are monitored closely by media and/or government agencies, interrupt usual corporate operations, endanger a company's public perception, and can damage the company's bottom line (Fink, 2002). Coombs stated that regardless of the business, crises will disrupt stakeholder relations which can result in tension or anger between the organization and the stakeholder. This in turn will threaten the relationship between the two and eventually the overall reputation. This is especially true when a high-risk industry is involved.

### **Crisis Management in other High-Risk Industries**

For this case study, a high-risk industry is defined as an industry in which a great amount of hazard to personal safety including illness, injury, or fatality is assumed. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1999), this list includes farmers, miners, construction workers as well as many others. An issue that made the Deepwater Horizon oil spill particularly significant involves the nature of oil collection in general. As a high-risk industry, it is imperative for information to reach a large audience quickly and over an extended period of time. Environmental hazards, injuries, deaths,

economic disruption, and other side effects from the explosion and spill exhibit the impact an accident from the oil industry can have on daily lives of individuals and why information will be demanded after the event, especially considering an explosion such as this—an immediate crisis.

In multiple studies of other high-risk industries, researchers found public relations professionals unprepared or unresponsive for the situations they faced. For instance, Miller and Horsley (2009) examined a coal mining accident that trapped 13 miners in 2006. There were only two public relations officials in the entire organization and although a crisis management plan was in place, there were only five sentences on how to handle the media in their manual. A divide between the media and the public relations personnel ensued after the incident. Similarly, crisis communication efforts of NASA after the *Challenger* explosion in 1986 showed NASA did not have an adequate flow of information to the media (Martin & Boynton, 2005). The experts for NASA were unobtainable, and the representatives seemed unprepared to answer questions, represent the organization positively, or apologize for the actions taken pre-crisis. Additionally, the agency came across as veiled or dishonest, and rumors circulated about the organization. These were prime examples of how not to communicate with the media after a crisis.

In both examples, the industries prioritized internal communication over public and media responses thereby doing damage to their companies' reputations. Both displayed an organization-protective reaction as opposed to a public-oriented, proactive response. According to Miller and Horsley, “despite their recognition that more favorable media

coverage could potentially play a significant role in improving the industry's image, an engrained hostility within the industry toward the media was apparent in interviews" (p. 309). The attitude from the interviewees indicated that the media was believed to be untrustworthy and researcher pointed out it was difficult to ever get truthful information from the organization. Based on the interviews, the most significant public was the neighboring community and families of the Sago mineworkers. Similarly, in the *Challenger* explosion, the organization was perceived as closed off and their inaccessibility even included "refusing to let reporters enter headquarters for interviews, telling workers and top officials not to speak to reporters, limiting press conferences to single statements, and not releasing documents or pictures" (Martin & Boynton, 2005, p.256).

On the other hand, the *Columbia* explosion in 2003 showed a vast improvement of external communication between the print media and NASA. The organization demonstrated freer-flowing information and more accessible experts with credible responses. As a result, there were "seven times as many positive news stories published about NASA following the *Columbia* explosion than after the *Challenger* explosion" (p. 258). NASA provided an example of a positive communication crisis and public relations event where the organization was open, used the right experts, and recognized the media was not the enemy. These case studies displayed three illustrations of both positive and negative high-risk industry crisis communication.

### **Prior Oil Spill Coverage**

Along with other high-risk industry studies, it became advantageous to consider researchers' past investigations of the media's reaction to another environmental disaster: the Exxon Valdez oil spill. The similarities in the type of accident and vast comparisons made between the two during the coverage of the Gulf Oil disaster are two major reasons guiding the decision to use the past research in this area to serve as a foundation for a research project on one in a similar field.

Daley and O'Neill (1991) quantitatively analyzed the media's agenda. The researchers focused much of their study to discussing the different narratives created by the media. Crime, disaster, failed reassurances, and the theme of confusion were all exhibited after the catastrophe. Daley and O'Neill (1991) found the disaster narrative as the first and most important discussion topic. The most striking connection from this tragedy to the BP oil spill was a frequently shown picture in the *Anchorage Daily News* of an oil-soaked bird. The photo was an eye-catcher and comparable to an image splashed around the internet, television, and newspaper after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The researchers also pointed to the disaster frame in the *Boston Globe* and especially the use of irony pointing out 25 years to the day after an earthquake devastated the area, 11 million gallons of oil spilled into the Prince William Sound (Daley and O'Neill, 1991). Moreover, both papers developed the disaster frame during the cleanup efforts.

After the initial disaster narrative began to give way, journalists employed both a criminal and environmental narrative to the story. Following the accident, the captain of the

vessel, Captain Joseph Hazelwood, became a villain in the news stories. The *Boston Globe's* environmental narrative focused on the government's reactions to the crisis especially President George H. W. Bush's position on oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) in the aftermath of the oil spill. Daley and O'Neill (1991) stated the journalists "suggested that the political slugfest between the administration and environmental forces was going to be waged on the symbolic battlefield as much as in the halls of Congress" (p. 50).

### **Past BP Oil Spill Research**

Daley and O'Neill focused on the coverage of the Exxon-Valdez from one national and another international newspaper. The Deepwater Horizon oil spill coverage has also been studied from international and national angles. Harlow, Brantley, and Harlow (2010) used image restoration strategies to analyze BP news releases from April 20, 2010 until June 15, 2010. The researchers broke down each news release by paragraph and then using Benoit's (1997) image restoration strategies examined how BP responded initially. "BP focused on two particular strategies—describing how it would correct the problem and describing how it would compensate the victims...BP did not attempt to shift the blame onto other companies nor admit responsibility on their own part" (p. 82). The researchers did recount issues with their coding strategy. They focused on paragraphs within the news releases as their unit of analysis. "The coders reported difficulty categorizing some of the paragraphs. Particularly difficult were some paragraphs in which BP appeared to be describing what had happened"

(p. 82). Because news releases are constructed to convey one complete message, perhaps dividing the news releases by paragraphs to code was not the best idea.

Another group of researchers also explored aspects of the crisis communication during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Schultz, Kleinnigjenhuis, Oegema, Utz, and van Atteveldt (2012) examined the news releases of BP and media coverage using agenda-setting and strategic framing as a theoretical base. The researchers conducted a quantitative content analysis of 126 BP news releases published between April 20<sup>th</sup> and August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010 along with 1376 news articles issued by three national, elite newspapers and 2355 news articles issued by three UK media sources. Their findings are understandable. "U.S. media paid far more attention to the US-actors that were involved in the oil spill crisis than UK media" (p. 102). The White House was a more central story line in U.S. (56%) and UK newspapers (37%) as compared to BP's news releases (26%). The researchers also focused on framing within the news releases using agenda-setting and although they referenced Benoit, did not utilize Benoit's image restoration strategies as part of their content analysis of the corporation's news releases.

While these two studies displayed BP's communication tactics within news releases quantitatively, another set of researchers studied the rhetorical side of the crisis. After Hall, Kice, and Choi (2012) analyzed the BP website, they found countless uses of technical jargon throughout the site along with a "definite lack of aesthetic appeal" (p. 2). Based on the language choices and visual appeal of the website, the researchers stated "BP's target audience does not appear to be the general U.S. public. Rather, BP's target audience appears

to be a mirror of itself" (p. 3). This is remarkable because it means that an international corporation used a medium as open as the internet and as prominent as their website to exhibit messages as a form of "internal self justification instead of an argument to de-vilify itself in the eyes of the general public." The use of technical jargon and lack of compassionate storytelling are now evident in research from at least three past high-risk industry disasters.

### **Theoretical Basis**

From the prior research, several theories emerged as the focus for analyzing communication crises for high-risk industries. To examine how the media covered British Petroleum's communication crisis and the overall disaster, the theoretical focus for this research is framing. Framing is

"the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation. "Fully developed frames typically perform four functions: problem definition, causal analysis, moral judgment, and remedy promotion." (Entman, 2007, p.164)

Frames establish or elevate the salience of concepts or ways at perceiving events which work to encourage audiences to react, think, or act in a particular ways. Along with that, frames may not be preconceived by writers and are difficult to detect fully by the audience; their presence can be demonstrated through research. Frames can reveal bias towards corporations, public policies, and even political parties. They can be positive, negative, or neutral towards

ideas, and ultimately influence the public to take a firm approach by thinking in a certain way.

By focusing on certain aspects of news events, the media establishes salience for individual aspects of a multifaceted incident (Entman, 2007). Along with the multiple components that could be covered, audience considerations are often measured by journalists. National coverage could very well differ from local because of dissimilar audience needs. “Frames tend to change because there are different orientations toward public issues and events depending on how well those issues and events are known” (Houston et. al, 2012, p. 609). Frame changing also occurs throughout the lifecycle of the news event. “The average time span an issue is salient in the American public’s issue agenda is 18.5 months” (p. 609). Throughout the lifecycle of the event, frames will evolve, and the understanding of these changes is instrumental for public relations practitioners, media production, and researchers.

Those are a few aspects that influence frames. There are numerous indicators to discern frames: the length and location of a news item, tones and phrasing of wording, graph and image choice, location, and size (Miller, 2005). Additionally, news frames are located in the keywords, concepts, symbols, tables, photographs, placement, and graphics emphasized in a news narrative (Entman, 1991, p. 7). It was advantageous to examine how the *local* media framed the BP oil spill. Along with the establishment of frames in the news releases, there are other tactics PR professionals can utilize to assist the media and the public in shaping opinions about how the corporation is managing the disaster.

## **Best Practices**

Coombs (2012) understood that there are certain strategies for effective crisis management and crisis response. As soon as the incident is determined by the crisis management team to be a crisis, quick response is necessary. This helps the public form the first impression about how the organization is handling the crisis, provides critical information, gives the media a statement to report, and provides follow-up contact information. On the other hand, a passive response or no comment at all reveals an uncertainty about the organization when one should want to show control (p. 141). This can allow non-organizational affiliates to frame the story such as the media. Another important aspect about responding to the crisis situation is consistency. After a spokesperson or people are selected, it is imperative to have their perspectives align. Coombs (2012) advised that research shows organizational managers are viewed as the most credible source and even more powerful when they report the crisis before other sources. Regardless of whom is chosen as an expert or spokesperson, the message needs to be reliable.

The content of that message is also something Coombs examined. The strategies used to address a crisis involve verbal and nonverbal actions. Coombs explained there are multiple researchers who have created sets of strategies too numerous to count. For the purpose of this study, the researcher chose to focus on Benoit's (1997) image restoration theory. This theory was selected because rather than depicting kinds of crisis situations, Benoit centers on message options and offers clear categories for which to apply PR message strategies. This

theory, which breaks down the strategies into straightforward categories, starts with two statements.

“First, communication is a goal-oriented activity. Second, the maintenance of a favorable image is a primary goal of communication. The theory holds that communicators who need to restore damaged reputations have five general rhetorical options: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Additionally, three of these strategies have further subdivisions.”

(Blaney, Benoit, & Brazea, 2002, p. 380)

Two main strategies included in Benoit’s list of tactics that the researcher anticipated British Petroleum would utilize are mortification, (apologizing) compensation (for victims of the crisis), and corrective action, where organizations lay out a plan for resolving or preventing a problem. Denial is one category that is broken into two tactics. Simple denial is when an organization refutes their responsibility for the accident, crisis, or event. The second strategy found under denial is shifting the blame. Also referred to as scapegoating by other scholars, this strategy is where one organization shifts the blame away from the group to another source. Evasion of responsibility is broken down into provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intention. When an organization uses provocation as an image restoration strategy, it is stating that the action was a levelheaded answer to the offensive act. Defeasibility is when the organization states that an event happened only because of a lack of initial information. An accident is exactly as it sounds: when an organization states they had good intentions and they meant well with what they were trying to do.

The last category of Benoit's strategies is reducing offensiveness of the event. Within this strategy is bolstering where the organization stresses the best characteristics about the situation and actions are taken after or before the event. On the other hand, organizations can also attack the accuser to reduce their credibility with hopes of decreasing the effect of the accusers' action. Other strategies also include minimization or making the act seem not very serious, transcendence where the organization justifies the acts as the higher good, or differentiation which is making the issue seem less important or insulting when compared to other worse offenses. All categories and subcategories along with examples of each can be found in Appendix 1 of this study. All categories and subcategories of Benoit's image restoration strategies were applied equally by the coders when analyzing strategies in the newspapers and news releases of this research. While image restoration message strategies are central in crisis communication, the role of technical jargon in message strategies has received less attention.

### **Technical Jargon and Uncertainty**

After Hall, Kice, and Choi (2012) analyzed the BP website, they found a high use of technical jargon. During a rapidly evolving crisis situation such as this, pertinent information about environmental and health dangers often develops more rapidly than corporations or crisis management officials are able to respond. "In crisis, decision makers must base their choices on what they know, what they can learn, and what their discourse communities can provide. They must do all of this while communicating the potential value of their decisions to publics" (Schwartzmann, Ross, & Berube, 2011, pp. 4). Along with that, there is often

insufficient data about the incident. All of this can lead to miscommunication, mistrust, and ultimately missteps in crisis communication and as the following will illustrate, the overuse of technical jargon can be the forerunner to creating uncertainty.

"Uncertainty exists when details of situations are ambiguous, complex, unpredictable, or probabilistic" (Brashers, 2001, p.478). As a communication principle, it is experienced through interactions, decision making, and, in this case, experiencing volatile situations. Stephens, Malone, and Bailey (2005) argued that along with crisis communication strategies, technical translation strategies could be useful to address stakeholders and decrease uncertainty. Specifically, overuse of technical language can affect the clarity of the message. Clarity, as used by Hurley et al. (2011) and Babrow et al. (1998), is defined by the amplification and explanation of complex terms and information. When dealing with technical information, the general public tends to take a broader approach to evaluating the information (Stephens, Malone, and Bailey, 2005). Social context, for instance, is taken into account. When someone unfamiliar with certain technical principles evaluates technical information, both the technical and social information are necessary and used to process the information; however, often times the two are not merged and organizations only present technical jargon to the community. This creates increased uncertainty in a situation where audiences are searching for forms of comfort. Stephens and Malone (2009) suggest "when stakeholders want to be sure the crisis never happens again—rectification—they are more willing to provide technical examples in their messages" (p. 236). In an initial phase of a

crisis, spreading information and clarifying the situation is significant. Without expounding on technical themes, how can trust be built?

“Technical translation strategies function in parallel to message strategies to manage meaning, represent the organization, build trust and credibility” (Stephens, Malone, & Bailey, 2005, p. 391). Prior qualitative research found high levels of technical jargon on the corporation’s website during the crisis. It could be argued that the way BP used technical communication affected public perceptions of the corporation during the crisis.

Despite all of these dynamics, which can increase confusion and uncertainty, few frameworks indicate how to construct messages to address uncertainty management. While Coombs’ and Benoit’s models for crisis communication messages strategies are constructive for most situations, it is arguable that there is something lacking in the taxonomies when it comes to handling a crisis involving technical communication. This is often the case in high-risk industries. This leads to the following research questions.

### **Research Questions**

1. How did British Petroleum’s image restoration strategy change throughout the crisis from the date of oil spill from the date of the explosion to the date of the cap?
2. How did BP use technical jargon within their news releases from the date of oil spill from the date of the explosion to the date of the cap?
3. How did the media respond to the use of technical jargon from the date of oil spill from the date of the explosion to the date of the cap?

4. How did local media frame the crisis from the date of the explosion to the date of the cap?

## Methods

### Sample

For this research, a content analysis is presented. Data from quantitative content analyses of news stories was compared to news releases from BP printed during the same time span. Descriptive statistics of both data sources demonstrate a layout of communication events transpiring aside from the leak.

The researcher focused on a census of 79 BP news releases from April 20, 2010 to July 15, 2010: the date of the explosion through the date the spill was officially capped and the flow stopped. On the BP website, the news releases were located on the homepage under “Press” and then “Press Releases.” Then using the search tool, all articles were pulled from the theme, “Gulf of Mexico response” and sorted by day, month, and year. The unit of analysis for this study was the paragraph. This yielded a total of 79 news releases and 575 paragraphs coded.

The researcher also did a purposeful sampling of local newspaper articles. After multiple attempts to collect local articles through diverse databases, the articles were extracted from LexisNexis Academic. Using the term “BP” and choosing to only pull articles from the “source type” of newspapers, articles with dates between April 20, 2010 and July 15, 2010 were gathered from two newspapers, the *Houston Chronicle* and *Tampa Bay Times*. The rationale for these dates is this was the time period from the date of the explosion through the date the spill was officially capped and the flow stopped, the same dates as the news releases collected. Furthermore, previous research demonstrated that 62.8% of all

disaster news stories appeared within 30 days after the initial event (Houston et. al, 2012, p. 612). The unit of analysis was the paragraph. After taking all of this into consideration, a total of 338 newspaper articles with 5,420 paragraphs were found to be directly relevant to the study.

### **Rationale for Newspapers' Locations**

The two local newspapers selected were from the Panhandle of Florida and Houston, Texas. The *Tampa Bay Times* was selected because of its circulation and location on the Florida Panhandle. Florida received the most financial compensation, \$62 million, for tourism marketing from BP after the spill, followed by \$45 million in Louisiana, \$38 million in Alabama, and \$34 million in Mississippi (Wilkinson, 2012). The news about the oil spill impacted tourism economically statewide. According to the official Florida Tourism Industry Marketing Corporation, from January to March of 2010 before the spill, there were 22.5 million visitors to the state. From April to June of the same year, there were 19.8 million and from July to September of 2010, there were 19.4 million. There were a total of 82.3 million that year. Comparatively, in 2012 there have been 23.7 million visitors to Florida from January to March and 22.1 million from April to June (Quarter Two Visitor Numbers for 2010, 2010). Overall for the state, tourism for the summer following the spill dropped 15% (Allen, 2011).

Along with the impact to the state's tourism industry, 88,522 square miles of the fishing waters in the Gulf of Mexico were closed due to the Deepwater Horizon spill and the continuing clean-up effort at the height of the spill on June 2, 2010 (Deepwater Horizon/BP

oil spill, 2010). The shuttering of 36.6% percent of the Gulf enormously affected the employment of individuals already impacted by national economic anguish. It is important to note that the Panhandle of Florida was more significantly impacted environmentally than the rest of the state, because "the dominant transport of oil and oil products was toward the Northern Gulf coastline, and no oil was observed to reach the Atlantic Ocean" (University of Miami Rosenstiel School of Marine & Atmospheric Science, 2012). In the Florida Panhandle where the analyzed Florida newspaper is located, at the height of the closures for the region, 565 square miles were closed to fishermen (Associated Press, 2010). No other areas near Key West, St. Petersburg, Fort Myers, or any area on the Atlantic Ocean side of the state experienced the closings of fishing water.

Additionally, the *Tampa Bay Times* is Florida's largest newspaper (Wallace, 2012). Their daily circulation averages 313,003 on the weekdays and is the nation's 15th largest newspaper (Associated Press, 2012). The *Houston Chronicle* was chosen as a comparison news outlet, because of the newspaper's circulation size and the city's close ties to the oil industry. The *Houston Chronicle* is the nation's 14th largest newspaper. Their daily circulation averages at 346,118 for 2012 (Houston Chronicle, 2012). Houston was also one location for BP's U.S. public relations headquarters.

An intercoder reliability test was performed to determine the reliability of variables using randomly selected articles from inside of the chosen sample. Reliability was not calculated for news release variables such as date and contact information because these variables were found directly within the content and context was not necessary.

Chronbach's alpha was used to detect the reliability for variables in news releases such as technical jargon, news releases title valence, and rhetorical option. For the technical jargon variable in news releases, Chronbach's alpha was 0.876. For the rhetorical option variable in news releases, Chronbach's alpha was 0.929. For the valence measurement of article titles within the news releases, Chronbach's alpha was 0.75. Chronbach's alpha was also used to detect the reliability for variables in the newspaper articles. For the valence measurement of newspaper titles, Chronbach's alpha was .938. Chronbach's alpha for valence of newspaper paragraphs was 0.702. For the technical jargon variable in newspaper articles, Chronbach's alpha was 0.743. For the rhetorical option variable in newspaper articles, Chronbach's alpha was 0.722.

### **Procedure**

A total of 16 variables were coded for in both news releases and newspaper articles. At the outset, the researcher gave a unique index number to each news release from the census and recorded the month and day the response was printed and sequence number for the day issued. For example, if there were two releases published on the same day, the first was coded 1 and the second as 2. After these general variables were recorded, it was noted what contact information was contained within the document if any. Contact information recorded by the coder included BP's London or Houston, TX office, the United States Coast Guard office, the joint information center between BP and the US government, or BP's response website. More than one phone number or website could also be provided and this was recorded. Another variable was focused on measuring the tone of the news release title,

particularly if the corporation was mentioned negatively, positively, neutrally, or not directly cited in the title. The unit of analysis for all of these variables was the entire news release.

Coders also analyzed the news releases on the paragraph level. Of those variables, one was selected to examine the presence of technical language: whether there was no technical jargon, technical jargon was present, or technical jargon was used but explained in terms understandable to the coder. Each paragraph was coded as to whether or not it was a quote. Coders also determined which of Benoit's Image Restoration Strategies, if any, were utilized in each paragraph. Of the rhetorical options for coders to decide from, the strategies were: simple denial, shift the blame, provocation, defeasibility, accident, good intentions, bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, compensation, corrective action, mortification, or no tactic. (See coding sheet in Appendix 1)

The newspaper articles were then given a unique index number and coded for the newspaper source, date, number of words within the article, page number, and sequence number for the day issued (for example, if there were two articles recorded on the same day, the first was coded 1 and the second, 2). The location of the article within the newspaper was also coded for as front page or section A, local news or section B, or other section besides A or B. With most newspapers, the front page of the newspaper is A1 denoting that it was some of what the newspaper staff considered to be the most important news of the day and signifying prominence to the reader. Type of content was coded as where the article was in the newspaper based on the information contained in the story. For example, A1 stories are normally news stories while C1 can refer to sports. Article type was another coded

variable—specifically whether or not the article was news or editorial then separately whether or not the article was written by journalists at the newspaper or a source outside of the newspaper such as AP or Bloomberg. A variable to determine valence measured the tone of the article title of the story. The variable considered explicitly if the corporation was mentioned negatively, positively, neutrally, or not directly cited in the title. The unit of analysis for all of these variables was the entire newspaper article.

On the paragraph level, a variable was selected to examine technical jargon use—analyzing if there was no jargon, technical jargon, or technical jargon utilized but explained terms explicitly understandable to the coder. Along with that, a variable to determine valence measured the tone of the paragraph. The variable considered explicitly if the corporation was mentioned negatively, positively, neutrally, or not directly cited in the paragraph. Each paragraph was coded as to whether or not it was a quote. Lastly, Benoit’s image restoration strategies were utilized to focus on the rhetorical option of each paragraph. The attributes of this variable were: simple denial, shift the blame, provocation, defeasibility, accident, good intentions, bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, compensation, corrective action, mortification, or no tactic.

After compiling and coding the data, the researcher used SPSS to analyze the multivariate data. All of the variables compared were discrete variables, and contingency tables and percentage comparisons in SPSS were used to evaluate relationships between the variables. Two data sets were created; one was for paragraph-level variables and the other for

article-level. In order to analyze articles based on paragraph-level attributes, the two data sets were combined in SPSS.

## **Results**

### **Article Level Newspaper Descriptive Statistics**

There were 5,420 total paragraphs in 338 newspaper articles. Of those, 2,199 paragraphs or 126 articles were published by the *Houston Chronicle* and 3,221 paragraphs or 212 articles were published by the *Tampa Bay Times*. Seventy-six percent or 257 articles were news and 81 articles were editorial. Only 60 were not written by the staff at the local newspapers, while 82% were not from wire services. The majority, 205 articles, did not mention BP directly in their title. Alternatively, 18 referred to BP positively. Forty newspaper articles denoted BP neutrally and 75 cited the corporation negatively in the title. Eighty-four percent of the newspapers published between one and three articles per day from April 20, 2010 to July 15, 2010. The greatest number of newspaper articles published in one day was twelve on June 19, 2010 which was the day after BP chief executive Tony Hayward, the corporate spokesperson, appeared at his first congressional hearing about the Deepwater Horizon spill. Of all the newspaper articles, 189 were located on the front page or section A, 66 were found in section B where local news is typically printed, and 83 ran in other sections besides A or B. There were five newspaper articles printed in the two local newspapers examined from April 21, 2010 until April 30, 2010, 103 in the entire month of May 2010, 168 in the entire month of June 2010, and 62 from July 1, 2010 through July 15, 2010. The top two most articles printed in a day were 12 on June 19 followed by 11 on June 2, 2010.

### **Paragraph Level Newspaper Descriptive Statistics**

The researcher analyzed 5,429 total paragraphs this research study. Of those, 1,361 were quotes from journalists' sources, and 4,058 did not contain a quote. The amount of technical jargon was examined, but 93.5% of the paragraphs did not contain any technical jargon. The remaining 343 paragraphs had technical jargon or technical jargon explained, defined, and/or explicitly obvious to the reader. For the purpose of this research, technical jargon was identified by paragraphs that relied heavily on words and phrases consistent with drilling based mechanics, chemicals, or operational techniques. For example, technical information was present in an article if there was information about lease operators, MC252, Transocean's subsea equipment, Macondo/MC252. If the blow-out preventer was not defined or explained, this was also noted as unclear. Finally, the valance variable measured the tone of the article by paragraph. This variable did not code for whether or not the incident was referred to as positively or negatively, just the corporation. Of the 5,419 paragraphs, 3,409 or 62.9% did not mention BP directly. Nine hundred and twenty-six paragraphs (17.1%) cited BP neutrally; 946 paragraphs (17.5%) referred to BP negatively; and 2.5% (138 paragraphs) cited the organization positively.

### **News Release Article Level Statistics**

The 78 total news releases collected were printed between April 21, 2010 and July 15, 2010. Broken down by months, there were 10 releases printed from April 21, 2010 until April 30, 2010, 27 in the entire month of May 2010, 30 in the entire month of June 2010, and

11 from July 1, 2010 through July 15, 2010. The most news releases printed in one day was four on June 10 and 15.

Of the 78 total articles, it was necessary to locate the specific contact information at the bottom of each news release and to note which office, whether stateside or not, was represented. Seventy-two of the 78 news releases did include contact information. It was particularly interesting to note BP's press office in London was present in 63 releases or 83.3% of the time. On the other hand, contact information for their Houston office, a more local branch, was only given in three of their releases. Very few Florida locations were ever provided in any news release and those were only mentioned when monetary amounts became available. BP's Deep Water Horizon Response Website at [www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com](http://www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com) was on 62.8% (49 in total) of the news releases. The United States Coast Guard was another contact printed in four of the releases and a Joint Info Center which was a combined effort from the United States government and BP was cited in 38 articles or 48.7% of the time. Locations for these offices were not provided in the news releases, only a telephone number was provided. Other contacts such as BP's website, [www.bp.com/gulfofmexicoresponse](http://www.bp.com/gulfofmexicoresponse), and the BP U.S. office whose location was not given, which was different from the Houston branch, were also found in 62 of the articles.

Aside from contact information, one variable measured the tone of the title for the release, specifically, how BP was mentioned in the title. The corporation was not mentioned in 53.8% of the releases; it was mentioned positively in 28.2% (in 22 total articles) of the releases; neutrally in 13 articles (16.7%); and negatively in one.

### **News Release Paragraph Level Statistics**

Of the 78 news releases, there was a count of 757 paragraphs. Only 66 or 11.5% of those were quotes. Within the content of the paragraph, the news releases were also coded as to whether they included any technical jargon. A total of 16.9% (97 paragraphs) did include technical jargon without explanation while an additional 11.1% (64 paragraphs) had technical jargon that was explained or defined. The results show that BP indeed did present technical jargon to the public and based on research, this tactic creates increased uncertainty in a situation where publics are searching for forms of comfort. Although the corporation did implement some technical translation strategies and explain the information, it was not determined if this built trust and credibility (Stephens, Malone, & Bailey, 2005) for BP. However, the majority, 414 paragraphs or 72%, did not include any technical jargon. Of the 78 news releases, 13 or 16.7% did not include any technical jargon throughout the entire release. Additionally, the researcher determined 42.6% or 245 of the paragraphs did not include any of Benoit's image restoration strategies. Those paragraphs described facts about the spill or other work site related information. Of those that did, corrective action was used the most in 157 paragraphs or 27.3% of the time. Bolstering was utilized in 96 paragraphs or 16.7%; and compensation was utilized 10.3% or in 59 in paragraphs. The restoration strategies used in five or fewer of the paragraphs were defeasibility (four paragraphs), transcendence (four paragraphs), provocation (three paragraphs), simple denial (one paragraph), differentiation (one paragraph), and mortification (five paragraphs). There were

five rhetorical options not employed: shift the blame, accident, good intentions, minimization, and attack the accuser.

### **Research Question One**

To determine how British Petroleum utilized Benoit's image restoration strategies throughout the crisis dates examined, the image restoration strategies' frequencies were analyzed by date and took into account that on 13 out of the 84 days analyzed multiple news releases were issued on one day. This data set demonstrated the corporation's shifting frames of the multifaceted incident and identified certain areas of salience for the corporation. As the descriptive statistics explained, 57.5% of the news releases' paragraphs contained a rhetorical option. The top three utilized were corrective action in 157 paragraphs or 27.3%; bolstering in 96 paragraphs or 16.7%; and compensation 10.3% or in 59 in paragraphs. When comparing the usage over time, a pattern was exposed.

Through the end of April and into June, BP's predominant strategy was corrective action or the organization explaining their plan to solve or prevent the problem (Benoit, 1997). A representative exemplar of this tactic included information about efforts to contain the oil through oil collection, natural gas flares, or new equipment deployments.

“The lower marine riser package (LMRP) containment cap, installed on June 3, continues to collect oil and gas flowing from the MC252 well and transport them to the Discoverer Enterprise drillship on the surface” (BP Global, 2010, Update on Gulf of Mexico oil spill response).

As one may observe in Figure 1, this strategy first peaked on April 30 or the date the oil reached the Mississippi River delta and the day BP began spraying chemical dispersants directly on the well, something no one had ever tried. The strategy then spiked again when President Obama visited the Gulf region for fourth time on June 14 then tended to fade at the end of June and into July.

The second most applied tactic was bolstering or the organization's attempts to stress good qualities or traits over the negative. An example directly from a June 4, 2010 BP news release was "the financial consequences of this incident will undoubtedly be severe, but BP is a strong company and we have weathered many storms before" (BP Global, 2010, Chairman and CEO give assurance that BP will meet its obligations in Gulf of Mexico). After an initial spike on April 30 which was the day the oil reached the Mississippi River delta, bolstering was not a focus in the news releases until another later, consistent intensification for the majority of June. On June 4, the highest spike was recorded. It is interesting to note that corresponding news events for that date included BP's announcement of a transition of leadership in the Gulf with the corporation relieving former CEO Tony Hayward of his duties. The day with the most bolstering in the news releases was the day they fired their CEO. The strategy then subsided a bit from the news releases into the beginning of July.

Compensation was the third most heavily applied tactic. This strategy specifically addressed the organization's intentions to reimburse victims. Although not used until May 5<sup>th</sup>, this strategy was applied by the corporation occasionally in May, consistently throughout the month of June, and diminished slightly into the beginning of July. Compensation was

exemplified in 59 paragraphs but the corporation only employed the strategy of mortification, or apology, in five paragraphs from the date of the explosion to the date of the cap. These results confirm that BP never fully took responsibility for the cause but instead focused on how they were stopping the spill and compensating those impacted.

### **Research Question Two**

In order to analyze BP's use of technical jargon within their news releases from the date of oil spill from the date of the explosion to the date of the cap, technical jargon was identified by words or phrases containing information about drilling based mechanics, chemicals, or operational techniques. For example, technical jargon was present in an article if there was information about lease operators, MC252, Transocean's subsea equipment, Macondo/MC252. An example of a paragraph that contained technical jargon would be "A containment dome was loaded aboard a transport vessel at Port Fourchon, Louisiana, and began its transport to the MC252 well site (BP Global, 2010, Update on Gulf of Mexico oil spill response-6 May). As with the first research question, when multiple news releases were issued on one day, the entire day was measured as one component.

Within the dates analyzed, technical jargon peaked twice. The first time was during the beginning of the crisis on April 30 with eight citations. This was the date the oil reached the Mississippi River delta, and the day BP began spraying chemical dispersants directly on the well, something no one had ever tried. Then again with seven on July 12; this was the day after BP began their final, successful attempt to seal the leaking well. Along with that, no jargon at all remained the highest throughout the remainder of the crisis (See Figure 2).

From April 21<sup>st</sup> to the end of April, there were 15 recorded instances of technical jargon and five occurrences of explained jargon. From May 1<sup>st</sup> through May 31<sup>st</sup>, the researcher recorded 27 uses of technical jargon in the corporation's news releases and 37 of explained jargon. It is interesting to note in Figure 3 the consistently similar spikes and dips between technical and explained technical jargon especially from June 17 through July 15. A few spikes of particular note were on June 17 when BP President Tony Hayward testified in front of Congress; June 30 was the day Hurricane Alex hit the Gulf; and throughout July the corporation worked to successfully cap the spill. All of these events could help justify the jargon spikes found in the news releases.

### **Research Question Three**

For the purpose of this research question, the newspaper articles analyzed were found within the local newspapers, but included both locally written articles as well as wire written articles from sources such as AP and Bloomberg. These articles contained certain amounts of technical jargon. Technical jargon was defined in newspaper articles identically to the way it was in news releases and was identified by words or phrases containing information about drilling based mechanics, chemicals, or operational techniques. The use of technical jargon hit its apex on June 2 with 16 recorded instances. News stories from this date included information about environmental groups taking action to sue BP, it was three days after Hayward's "I want my life back" statement, and articles described projections showing the spill reaching Pensacola, FL's beaches soon after that date. It is interesting to note that there was no technical jargon or explained technical jargon recorded in news releases on June 2 or

June 3 and only two instances of either the day before on June 1. Therefore, when comparing June 2's newspaper articles' technical jargon use to news releases' technical jargon use around and on that date, there appears to be no connection. The date with the second highest record for technical jargon was July 11. This was due, in part, to stories focusing on what became the final effort in sealing the leaking well.

For the purpose of this research, explained technical jargon was defined as words and phrases consistent with drilling based mechanics, chemicals, or operational techniques but the information is presented explicitly to reader, terms are defined, or jargon is described in detail. June 15<sup>th</sup> had the most recorded occurrences of explained technical jargon with a total of 13 throughout all newspaper articles that day. On that day, the foremost stories included a Congressional House panel accusing BP of taking shortcuts that led to deadly blowout and President Obama traveling to the Panhandle of Florida with Florida's governor, Charlie Crist where he announced BP's commitment to set aside \$20 billion for claims made by those affected by the spill. On the other hand, no instances of technical or explained technical jargon were recorded within news releases that day.

#### **Research Question Four**

To determine how the *Houston Chronicle* and *Tampa Bay Times* framed the crisis from the date of the explosion to the date of the cap, valence of the article titles was measured. These data sets identified certain areas of salience for the newspapers.

First, the researcher compared locally written stories to those written by national sources with bylines such as AP or Bloomberg found in the two newspapers based on how

the titles referred to BP, the corporation. It was revealed local newspapers' titles referenced BP negatively 59 times. They referred to them positively in 14 instances, neutrally 35, and not at all 170 times. The nationally sourced titles cited the corporation positively four times, negatively 16 times, and neutrally five times. In 35 instances, the corporation was not mentioned at all in the national sources. A Chi Square test revealed no significant differences between newspaper story titles and wire service titles in tone.

A clearer picture evolved when comparing the two local newspapers, *Houston Chronicle* and *Tampa Bay Times*. Statistically, there was a significant difference between the *Houston Chronicle* and *Tampa Bay Times* news article titles' valence in covering the corporation BP from the date of the explosion to the date of the cap ( $\chi^2 = 90.066, 4df, p < .05$ ). With regard to the framing process, indeed differences can be observed. The researcher analyzed a total of 126 articles from the *Houston Chronicle* and 212 from the *Tampa Bay Times*. Of those, 257 articles were news and 111 articles from the *Houston Chronicle* and 146 from the *Tampa Bay Times*. With 20.7% of the titles where BP was not mentioned by the *Houston Chronicle* were analyzed, 12.6% had the corporation referred to positively, 26.1% mentioned BP neutrally, and 40.5% referenced the organization negatively. Within the titles analyzed for the *Tampa Bay Times*, 78.8% of the titles did not reference the corporation. This demonstrates a much higher percentage than the compared local newspaper articles (see Fig. 4). There was only one instance, or >1%, where BP was referred to positively in the title, seven, or 4.6%, where it was referenced neutrally, and 23, 15.6% where the corporation was

mentioned negatively. As Fig. 4 documents, the *Tampa Bay Times*' titles demonstrate a wider range of disparities between the four attributes as compared to the *Houston Chronicle*.

The two, local editorial newspaper stories were also compared within the *Houston Chronicle* and *Tampa Bay Times*. Statistically, there was a significant difference between the two's editorial article titles' valence in covering the corporation BP from the date of the explosion to the date of the cap ( $\chi^2 = 35.409, 3df, p < .05$ ). The researcher analyzed 15 articles from the *Houston Chronicle* and 66 from the *Tampa Bay Times*. In those editorial articles by the *Houston Chronicle*, 40% of the titles did not mention BP, 6.67% referred to the corporation positively, 6.67% mentioned BP neutrally, and 46.66% referenced the organization negatively. Within the titles analyzed for the *Tampa Bay Times*, an overwhelming 92.4% of the titles did not reference the corporation. Only 3.1% referred to BP positively in the editorial titles, 4.5%, where it was referenced neutrally, and the corporation was not mentioned negatively at all in the *Tampa Bay Times*' editorial titles. These findings reveal a wider range of disparities in the *Houston Chronicle* editorial articles and shows how much more negative opinion was represented in Houston when compared to Tampa Bay.

With regard to the frames within the paragraphs, measurements differed slightly. Because these were paragraph level statistics measured by date, the total sum of negative or positive mentions about the corporation was compared within both news and editorial articles. As one observed in the valence measured by titles, there was no significant difference between the locally written article paragraphs' valence and the national article paragraphs' valence analyzed. However when investigating a comparison of the valence of

paragraphs within the *Houston Chronicle* and *Tampa Bay Times* news articles, a significant difference was observed ( $\chi^2 = 27.090$ ,  $12df$ ,  $p < .05$ ). As illustrated in fig. 5, 31.5% of the *Tampa Bay Times* news articles contained one instance of negative tone within the article, 19.2% had two recordings, and 15.8% had three occurrences of negative valence towards the corporation. The *Houston Chronicle* on the other hand had 18% with one recording of negative tone within the article and had three occurrences, 18.9% had two recordings, and 39.6% of the articles had four or more instances of negative valence. Fig. 5 demonstrates that there was a greater volume of *Houston Chronicle* news articles that contained higher records of negative valence per article.

Again, when investigating the valence of editorial paragraphs within the *Houston Chronicle* and *Tampa Bay Times* articles, a significant difference was observed ( $\chi^2 = 34.174$ ,  $11df$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In fig. 5, one can observe that 32.3% of the *Tampa Bay Times* editorial articles contained one instance of negative tone, 27.71% had two recordings, and 9.23% had three occurrences of negative valence towards the corporation. In comparison, the *Houston Chronicle* had 6.67% with none, one, two, or three recording of negative tone within the article and 73.33% of the articles had four or more instances of negative valence. Fig. 5 exhibits that not only was there was a greater volume of *Houston Chronicle* news articles but also editorial articles that contained higher records of negative valence per article when compared to the *Tampa Bay Times*.

As for the positive valence paragraph sum, again there was a significant difference discovered between *Houston Chronicle* and *Tampa Bay Times* articles ( $\chi^2 = 37.207$ ,  $6df$ ,  $p <$

.05). The research and figure 6 demonstrate that there was a greater volume of articles with paragraphs containing no positive valence instances within the *Tampa Bay Times* when compared to the *Houston Chronicle* and that the highest instance of positive valence within one article was in the *Houston Chronicle*. 86% of the *Tampa Bay Times* contained no instance of positive tone within the article, 10.95% had one, and 2.05% had two recordings of positive valence towards the corporation within the articles. The *Houston Chronicle* in contrast had 54% had no positive tone within the article, 24% had one recording, and 12% had two occurrences of positive valence. Both paragraph valence statistics demonstrate that through all of the articles analyzed, the *Houston Chronicle* contained more positive or negative valences than the *Tampa Bay Times*.

There was a significant difference between the *Houston Chronicle* and *Tampa Bay Times* in regards to the positive valence paragraph sums within editorial articles ( $\chi^2 = 6.178$ ,  $3df$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The research demonstrates there was a greater volume of articles with paragraphs containing no positive valence instances within the *Tampa Bay Times* when compared to the *Houston Chronicle*. 89.2% of the *Tampa Bay Times* contained no instance of positive tone within the article, 9.2% had one, and 1.6% had two. The *Houston Chronicle* had 73.3% with no positive tones within the article, 20% had one, and 6.7% had four recordings of positive valence. Both paragraph valence statistics within the editorial and news articles illustrate that through all of the articles analyzed, the *Houston Chronicle* contained more positive or negative valences than the *Tampa Bay Times*.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this research was to analyze the crisis communication tactics utilized by British Petroleum in response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and the frames created by local newspapers from April 21, 2010 through July 15, 2010 based on 338 newspaper articles and 78 news releases. This research also aimed to investigate the usage of technical jargon by the corporation and the jargon usage by the local media outlets. This is to the researcher's knowledge the first analysis in the field of public relations and crisis communication to focus on local newspaper coverage of the incident and the first to analyze technical jargon utilized by the corporation's news releases during the major event.

### **Implications for Theory**

These results contribute to prior research and theoretical frameworks in several ways. First, it extends crisis communication research on the Deepwater Horizon crisis in general. Continuing to expand analysis of this corporate crisis using framing and Benoit's image restoration strategies increases insight from organizational communication for BP and media coverage. Second, the study contributes to the theoretical frameworks of framing as applied in the field of mass communication (Entman, 1991, 1993) when analyzing this event. Although no significant difference between the local coverage and wire coverage analyzed was found, it revealed a significant difference between the framing of the two local newspapers which expands the body of knowledge about this theory.

The local significant difference was an unexpected outcome. It was determined the Houston, TX newspaper displayed more negative frames within the titles than that of the

Florida newspaper. Along with that, there was a greater likelihood of finding larger amounts of negative or positive instances in one Houston article when compared to one Tampa story. The more demonstrative coverage could be explained by a preceding BP disaster close to the area. It was discovered while reading the articles that in March 2005, a fire and explosion occurred at a BP refinery in Texas City, Texas which killed 15 workers and throughout the articles analyzed, this event was restated (AP, 2011). This could explicate the rationale behind the newspaper's larger amounts of negative titles as compared to the Tampa Bay articles. It is also imperative to communication that the journalists are not always responsible for the printed titles in the newspapers. The copydesk editors and senior news editors often change or edit them to represent the views they see fit for the newspaper. Therefore, these negative frames are possibly a more justifiable representation of tone of the newspaper than the paragraphs for each article.

This research also adds to the theoretical basis of Benoit's image restoration strategies. Within the categories of strategies, readings made it difficult to distinguish among the levels of the strategies; some are broken down into multiple facets and others are not and past researchers decided to allow all strategies to be equal. This research did as well and discovered a necessary addition to the strategy list. Though this would need to be further explored, the researcher proposes *defend the act* as a possible addition. This strategy is where an organization protects their employees or decisions in order to attempt to preserve their reputation. BP did this when they reassured their stockholders about a possible drop in stock prices due to their decisions about the spill. They defended their actions when a failed

attempt to plug the leak occurred. Using the current image restoration strategies, this was recorded as *bolstering*, but there should be a distinct difference between defending an action taken versus stressing the good aspects. With that limitation about the strategy list noted, it is still acknowledged that Benoit's image restoration strategies provides a useful framework for recounting organizational responses in the initial stages of a disaster and this research suggests an enhancement for the outline.

### **Implications for Journalism & Public Relations Practitioners**

This investigation argues in line with prior approaches to public relations crisis response strategies (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2012) and that BP ignored certain strategies such as shifting the blame, accident, good intentions, minimization, and attacking the accuser. One issue with the corporate communication made evident by analyzing the media and news releases was the lack of consistent messaging between the organization's news releases and CEO Tony Hayward, the corporation's spokesman. Research showed (Coombs, 2012) organizational managers are viewed as the most credible source and even more powerful when they report the crisis before other sources. Regardless of whom is chosen as an expert or spokesperson, the message needs to be reliable and consistent throughout message channels of the organization. This affected the articles and prompted journalist to use other experts (such as academics) to analyze the organization's missteps (Steffy, 2010).

This research analyzed an aspect of crisis communication rarely examined within news releases: technical jargon. Because this research examined both news releases and media, the researcher was capable of counting incidences of technical jargon within news

releases and knowing what was being covered in the newspapers on the corresponding date. This proved that the local newspapers did not include information (including technical jargon) from BP news releases. Although news releases are not the primary information source for journalists, this implication is especially surprising when regarding the *Houston Chronicle* because of the location of the BP press office there and the recent, past problems which could indicate the possibility for a personal or professional relationship between the corporation's PR practitioners and the journalists. Past research (Seletzky & Lehman-Wilzig, 2010) found this relationship tended to show beneficiary implications and greater influence on newspaper content. Although no test was performed to show a direct correlation between the two sources, this research demonstrates that the news releases did not affect the coverage.

### **Limitations**

Despite the theoretical and methodological contributions, the study also faced some limitations. First came the difficulty in locating local newspaper articles. Initially, other newspapers such as the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* were sought but those articles were unavailable through databases available to the researcher. Other smaller newspapers were researched within Alabama, Louisiana, and along the Panhandle of Florida but attempting to find local Gulf articles proved difficult and discovered a possible issue with conducting research on local media: availability. Another limitation involved in the coding of the data was the difficulty categorizing and separating variables by both paragraph and overall article. For future research, the researcher would suggest using one or the other or devising a more suitable coding sheet in order to address these issues.

### **Future Research**

This research raises more questions, offers new information, and brings a possibly for future research opportunities on the subjects of crisis communication, technical jargon use, and framing within local media. For future research, it would be interesting to further measure the use of technical language in news releases and determine if there was any affect on the clarity of the message or amount of uncertainty and mistrust. Because of the nature of the industry and the spill, there was already a presence of mistrust with BP and uncertainty with the situation, but it would be interesting to see how it changed over time. Now knowing the results regarding the significant differences between the two local newspapers' frames, it would be interesting for future research to utilize other coded variables such as newspaper article location, length, and type of article to also analyze the local newspapers' frames and determine if there was a distinction between the two newspapers analyzed there.

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**APPENDIX**

## Appendix 1

### The Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill: Coding Instructions for the Newspapers

#### Introduction

The goal for this study is to discover the aspects of local newspaper coverage compared to BP news releases from the time of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill to the day the oil spill was capped. We hope to determine how the local newspapers and BP handled the event and the difficulties that followed. You will code the newspapers and news releases separately. As a coder, you will follow the detailed explanations of each variable.

#### General Information

V1 Coder ID Number

V2 Index

Each newspaper article should have an individual, sequential number. Starting with 1, give each a unique number provided by the researcher. The number will be whatever number it is in the sequence. Example: The fifth article coded has an index number of 5.

V3 Newspaper

Each newspaper has been assigned a code.

1. *Houston Chronicle*
2. *Tampa Bay Times*

V4 Month/Day

Month article appears; use a two-digit numeric code. (ie: January 01, February 02 etc.) and day article appears in paper; use a two-digit numeric code . Format together as 01/01.

V5 Sequence Number

Number the stories sequentially for each daily issue of the paper. For example, the first article you code for the October 1st issue of a paper should be coded 1 for sequence number, the second article in the same issue is a 2, and so forth. For each new day or new paper, restart the sequence at 1.

V6 Section

This is the location of the article within the newspaper. The general news section is the "main" or A section of the paper. The rest of these options are specific sections within the paper that have a distinct heading at the top of the page or heading for a set of stories; national news, election/campaign news, and op/ed sections should be specifically labeled.

1. Front Page or section A
2. Local News (usually found in section B)

## 3. Other section besides A or B

## V7 Page number

Page number that the article appears on. For example, if it is A13, code 13.

## V8 Article length

Number of words within the article

Article Level Coding

## V9 Article Type

This variable captures the nature of the article being coded. This can be determined by the way the journalist writes. An article without quotes, prominently featured opinions, or referring to themselves in the first person are all signs the article is an editorial.

1. News
2. Editorial

## V10 Wire Service

This variable describes whether or not the article is from a source besides the newspaper it is published in. To determine this variable, look for AP or Bloomberg either in the byline of the article or at the end.

0. No
1. Yes

## V11 Article Title

This variable measures the tone of the article title for the story. Is BP explicitly mentioned in the article title? If so, did the newspaper refer to the company negatively, positively, or neutral? This variable does not code for whether or not the *incident* was referred to as positively or negatively, just the corporation.

0. Not mentioned directly
1. Positively
2. Negatively
3. Neutral

Paragraph Level Coding

*These variables will be coded in a separate Microsoft Excel sheet.*

## V12 Index

Each newspaper article should have an individual, sequential number. Starting with 1, give each a unique number provided by the researcher. The number will be whatever number it is in the sequence\_the number paragraph it is in the article. Example: The fourth paragraph in the fifth article coded has an index number of 5\_4.

## V13 Technical Jargon

Within the content of the paragraph, does the journalist include any technical jargon? Paragraphs that rely heavily on these words and phrases consistent with drilling based mechanics, chemicals, or operational

techniques should be coded as complex. For example, technical information is present if a an article contains a information about lease operators, MC252, Transocean's subsea equipment, Macondo/MC252. If the blow-out preventer is not defined or explained, this is also complex information.

0. No jargon
1. Technical jargon
2. Technical jargon explained (information is explicit to reader, terms are defined, or jargon is described)

#### V14 Quote

Was this paragraph a direct quote (with quotation marks)?

0. No
1. Yes

#### V15 Valence

This variable measures the tone of the article by paragraph. Is BP explicitly mentioned in the paragraph? Is BP explicitly mentioned in the article paragraph? If so, did the paragraph refer to the company negatively, positively, or neutral? This variable does not code for whether or not the *incident* was referred to as positively or negatively, just the corporation.

0. Not mentioned directly
1. Positively
2. Negatively
3. Neutral

#### V16 Rhetorical Option

Determine what if any of Beniot's Restoration Strategies were used. Refer to table in Appendix A for determining each.

0. No Tactic
1. Simple Denial
2. Shift the Blame
3. Provocation
4. Defeasibility
5. Accident
6. Good Intentions
7. Bolstering
8. Minimization
9. Differentiation
10. Transcendence
11. Attack accuser
12. Compensation
13. Corrective Action
14. Mortification

**The Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill:  
Coding Instructions for the News Releases**

General Information

V1 Coder ID Number

V2 Index

Each news release should have an individual, sequential number. Starting with 1, give each a unique number provided by the researcher. The number will be whatever number it is in the sequence. Example: The fifth news release coded has an index number of 5.

V3 Month/Day

Month the response was released; use a two-digit numeric code. (ie: January 01, February 02 etc.) and day response was released; use a two-digit numeric code . Format together as 01/01.

V4 Sequence Number

Number the news releases sequentially for each daily issue. For example, the first release you code for the October 1st should be coded 1 for sequence number, the second news release in the same day is a 2, and so forth.

Article Level Coding

V5 Contact Content

Locate the contact information found at the bottom of the news release and note which office, whether stateside or not, is represented. If there is contact information, mark yes. If not, mark no.

- 0. No
- 1. Yes

V6 Contact Content- London office

Locate the contact information found at the bottom of the news release and note which office, whether stateside or not, is represented. If BP's press office in London is there as contact information, mark yes. If not, mark no.

- 0. No
- 1. Yes

V7 Contact Content- Houston Office

Locate the contact information found at the bottom of the news release and note which office, whether stateside or not, is represented. If BP's press office in Houston is there as contact information, mark yes. If not, mark no.

- 0. No
- 1. Yes

V8 Contact Content- United States Coast Guard

Locate the contact information found at the bottom of the news release and note which office, whether stateside or not, is represented. If the United States Coast Guard is there as contact information, mark yes. If not, mark no.

- 0. No
- 1. Yes

V9 Contact Content- Joint Info Center

Locate the contact information found at the bottom of the news release and note which office, whether stateside or not, is represented. If the Joint Info Center is there as contact information, mark yes. If not, mark no.

- 0. No
- 1. Yes

V10 Contact Content- Deep Water Horizon Response Website

Locate the contact information found at the bottom of the news release and note which office, whether stateside or not, is represented. If BP's website is there as contact information, mark yes. If not, mark no. The site is [www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com](http://www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com).

- 0. No
- 1. Yes

V11 Contact Content- Others

Locate the contact information found at the bottom of the news release and note which office, whether stateside or not, is represented.

- 0. No
- 1. Yes

V12 News Release Title

This variable measures the tone of the response title for the release. Is BP or the incident mentioned in the title? If so, did they refer to the company negatively, positively, or neutral? This variable does code for whether or not the incident was referred to as positively, negatively or neutral.

- 0. No Title
- 1. Positively
- 2. Negatively
- 3. Neutral

Paragraph Level Coding

*These variables will be coded in a separate Microsoft Excel sheet.*

V13 Index

Each news release should have an individual, sequential number. Starting with 1, give each a unique number provided by the researcher. The number will be whatever number it is in the sequence\_the number paragraph it is in the

release. Example: The fourth paragraph in the fifth news release coded has an index number of 5\_4.

#### V14 Rhetorical Option

Determine what if any of Beniot's Restoration Strategies were used. Refer to table in Appendix A for determining each.

0. No Tactic
1. Simple Denial
2. Shift the Blame
3. Provocation
4. Defeasibility
5. Accident
6. Good Intentions
7. Bolstering
8. Minimization
9. Differentiation
10. Transcendence
11. Attack accuser
12. Compensation
13. Corrective Action
14. Mortification

#### V15 Technical Jargon

Within the content of the paragraph, does the news release include any technical jargon? Paragraphs that rely heavily on these words and phrases consistent with drilling based mechanics, chemicals, or operational techniques should be coded as complex. For example, technical information is present if an article contains a information about lease operators, MC252, Transocean's subsea equipment, Macondo/MC252. If the blow-out preventer is not defined or explained, this is also technical information.

0. No jargon
1. Technical jargon
2. Technical jargon explained (information is explicit to reader, terms are defined, or jargon is described)

#### V16 Quote

Was this paragraph a direct quote (with quotation marks)?

0. No
1. Yes

## Appendix A: Benoit's Restoration Strategies

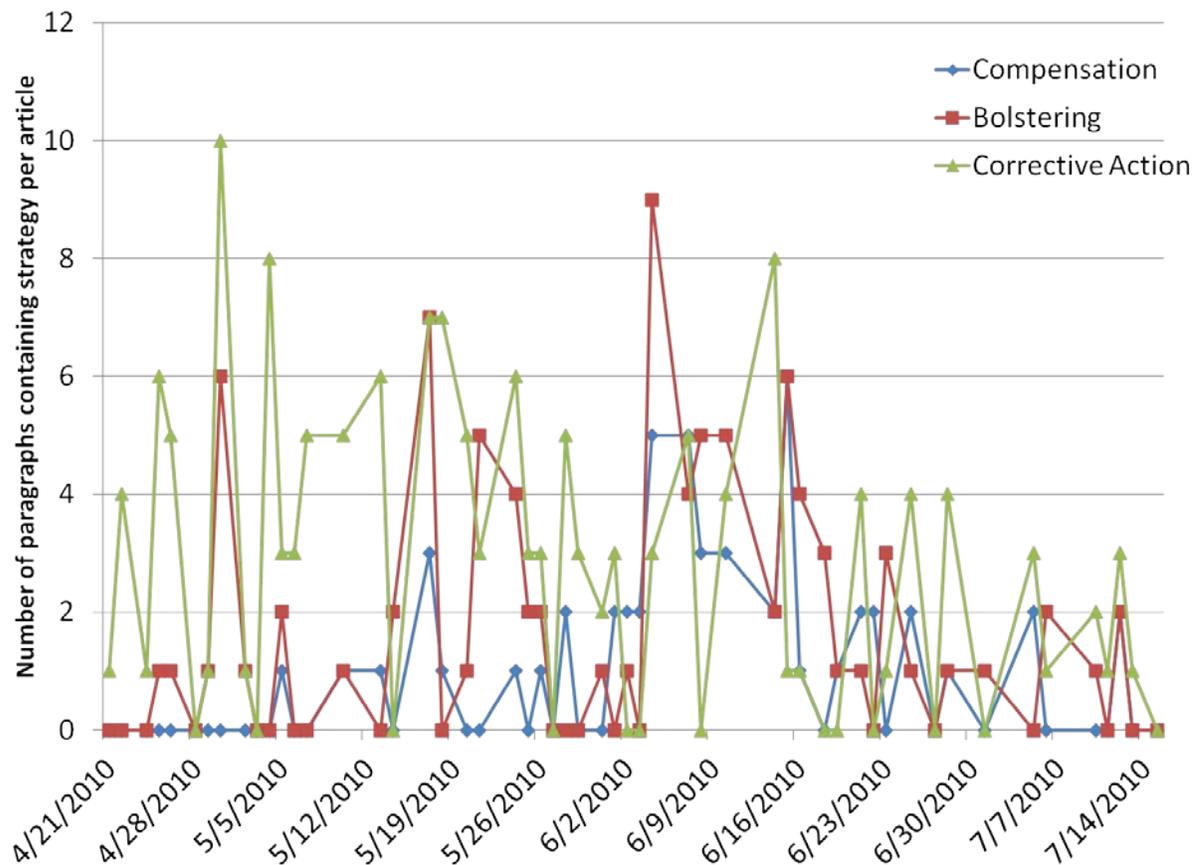
Use the table below to determine what strategy, if any, was used in the paragraph of the news release. If the word is *italicized* in the table, it is the category of the strategy. If not, it is one of the variants of the category. You may choose any of them equally if there is not a break down in the category as shown in the variable description.

### Image Restoration Strategies

<i>Denial:</i> Simple Denial	<b>Did not perform act</b> <b>Example: McDonald's did not use horse meat in hamburger patties in UK.</b>
Shift the Blame	Act performed by another Example: BP claimed Transocean was responsible for the rig explosion.
<i>Evasion of Responsibility:</i> Provocation	Responded to act of another Example: Company outsources jobs because of new tax laws.
Defeasibility	Lack of information or ability Example: Executives were not told information that would have altered the outcome positively.
Accident	Act was a mishap Example: Company lacked control over the weather which caused the issue.
Good Intentions	Meant well in act Example: Best Buy did not mean to overcharge customers for sale item.
<i>Reducing Offensiveness of Event:</i> Bolstering	Stress the good traits Example: Exxon stressed how quickly they were cleaning up a spill.
Minimization	Act was not serious Example: Exxon states only a few animals were killed in the accident.
Differentiation	Act less offensive Example: Because of this incident, a corporation will be better prepared for future incidents.

Transcendence	More important considerations Example: Testing on animals is justified because it helps humans.
Attack Accuser	Reduce credibility of accuser Example: If the government accused a company of misconduct and the company turned back and accused the government of lacking federal regulations.
Compensation	Reimburse victim Example: McDonald's plans to pay individuals who spilled hot coffee on themselves.
<i>Corrective Action</i>	Plan to solve or prevent the problem Example: Explicit information about how Verizon will improve customer service.
<i>Mortification</i>	Apologize for act Example: If Lance Armstrong came out to Oprah and said, "I'm sorry."

## FIGURES



*Figure 1.* Benoit's image restoration strategies as observed from April 21, 2010 through July 15, 2010 located in British Petroleum's news releases. There were 757 total paragraphs and 512 contained Benoit's image restoration strategies. Only the top three strategies utilized by the corporation are represented in the graph. All are reported in the News Release Paragraph Level Statistics portion of the Results. N= 512 paragraphs.

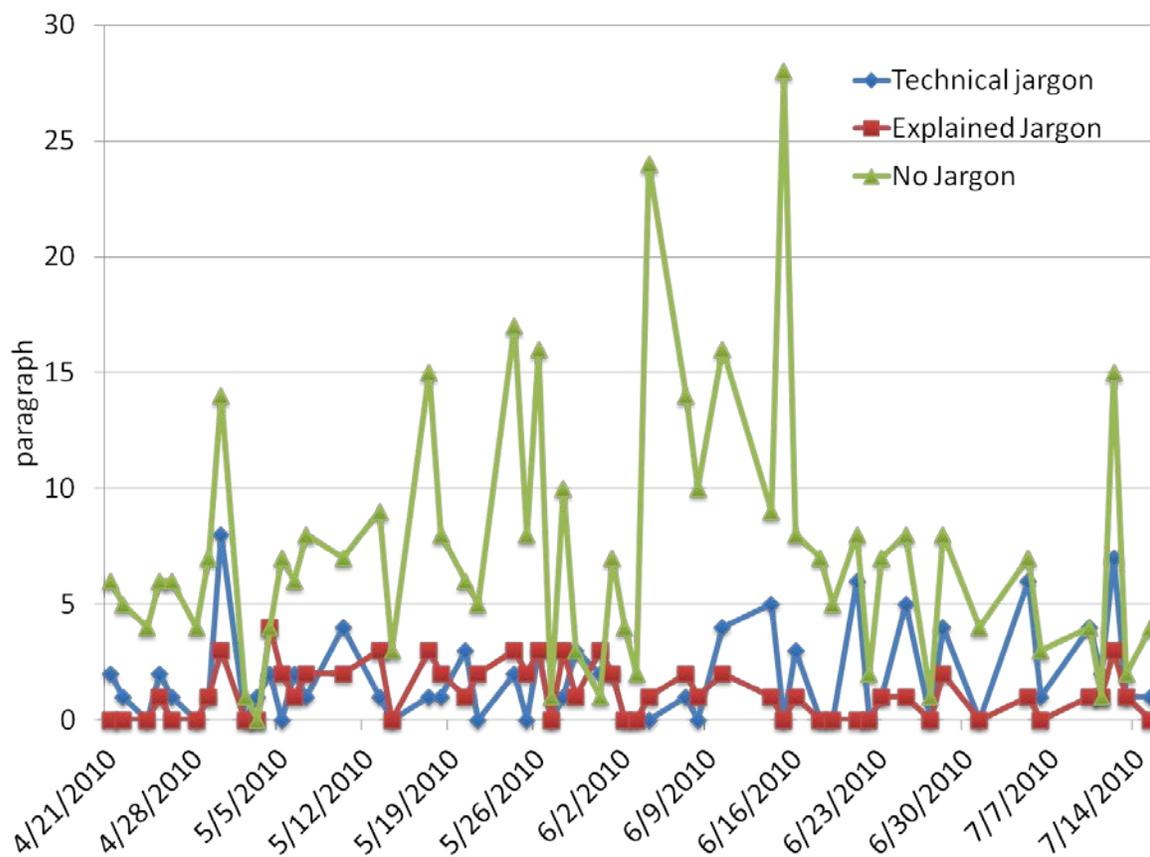


Figure 2. Total values of attributes of the technical jargon variable measured from April 21, 2010 through July 15, 2010 located in British Petroleum's news releases. N= 512 paragraphs.

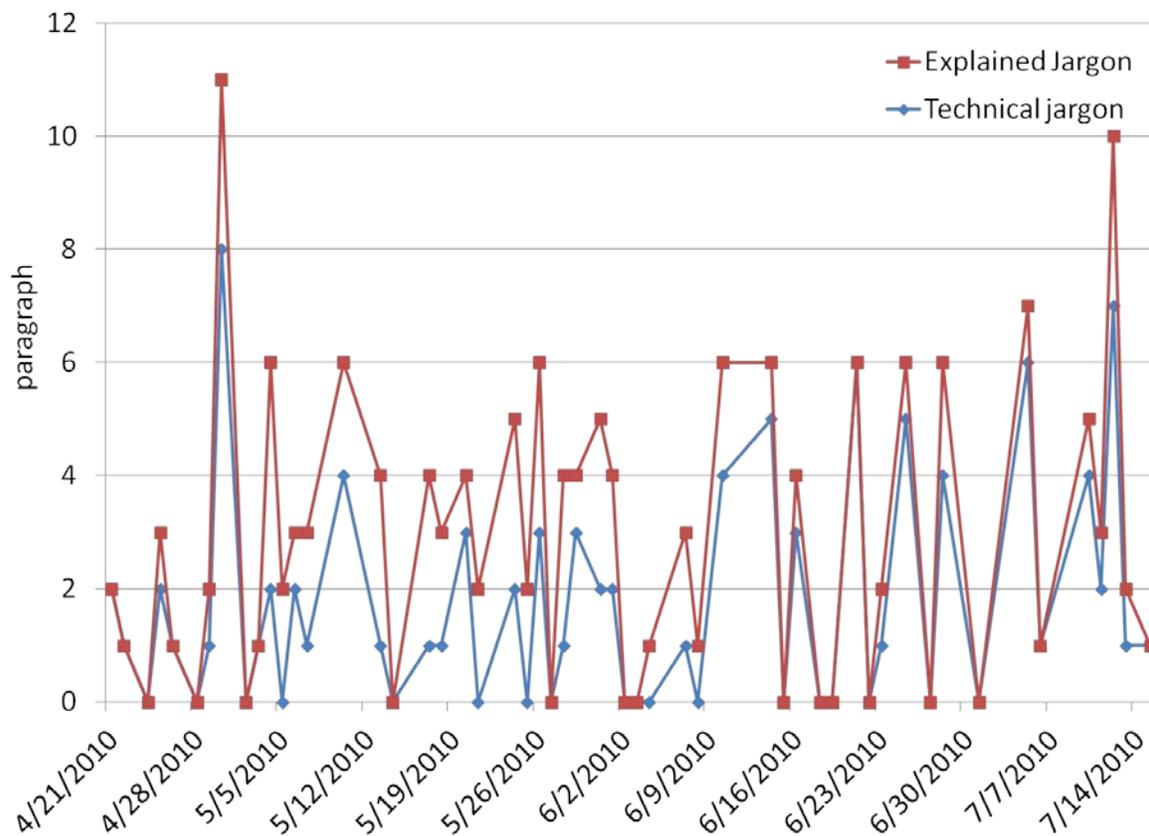
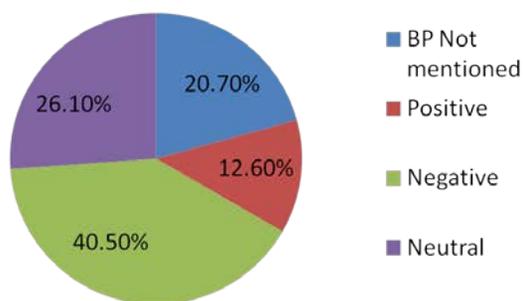


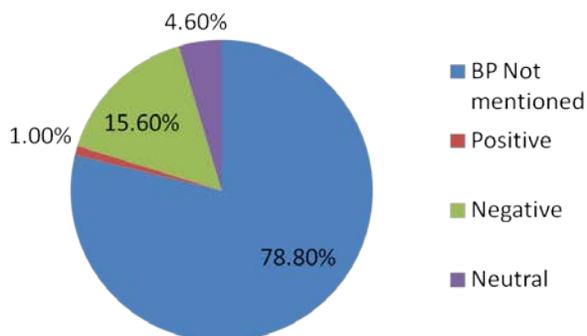
Figure 3. Two of the three attributes of the technical jargon variable measured from April 21, 2010 through July 15, 2010 located in British Petroleum's news releases. N= 512 paragraphs.

**Houston Chronicle Title Valence—  
News**



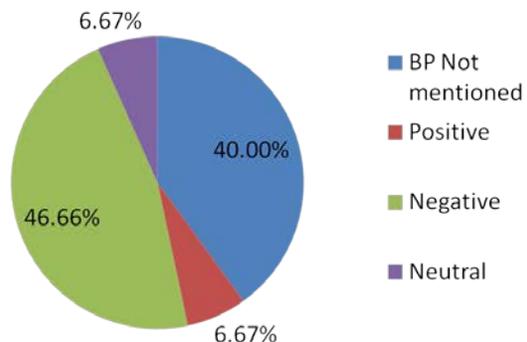
Total Number = 111 articles

**Tampa Bay Times Title Valence—  
News**



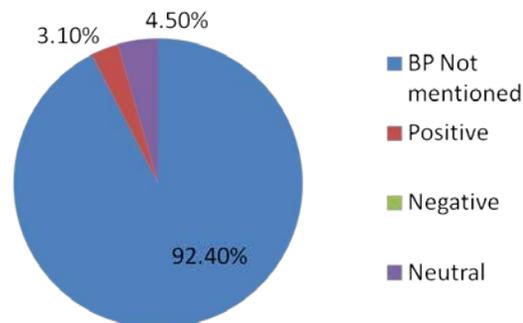
Total Number = 146 articles

**Houston Chronicle Title Valence—  
Editorial**



Total Number = 15 articles

**Tampa Bay Times Title Valence—  
Editorial**



Total Number = 66 articles

*Figure 4.* Valence of the titles from the news and editorial articles of the two local newspapers, *Houston Chronicle* and *Tampa Bay Times*, recorded from articles printed April 21, 2010 through July 15, 2010.

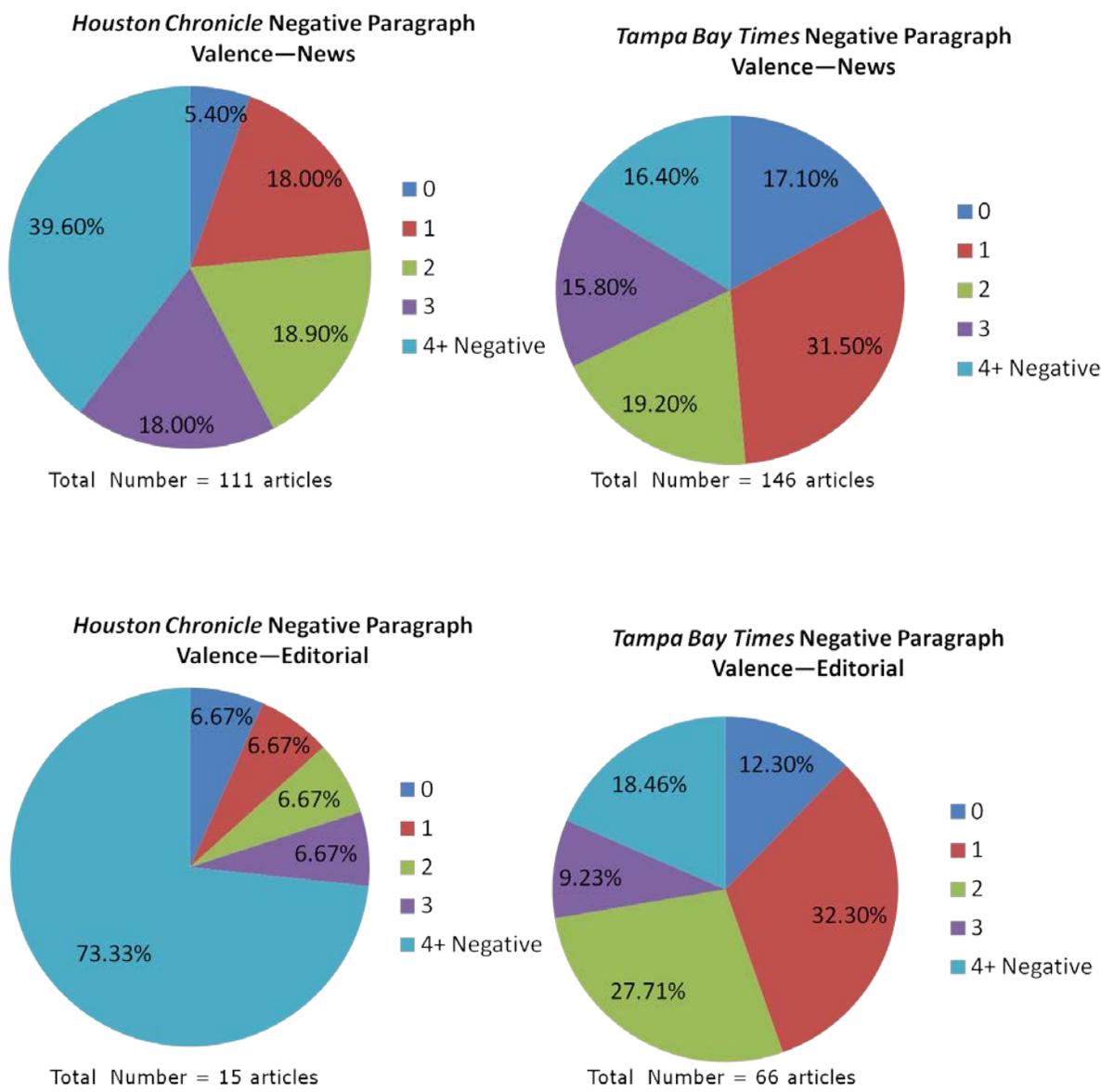
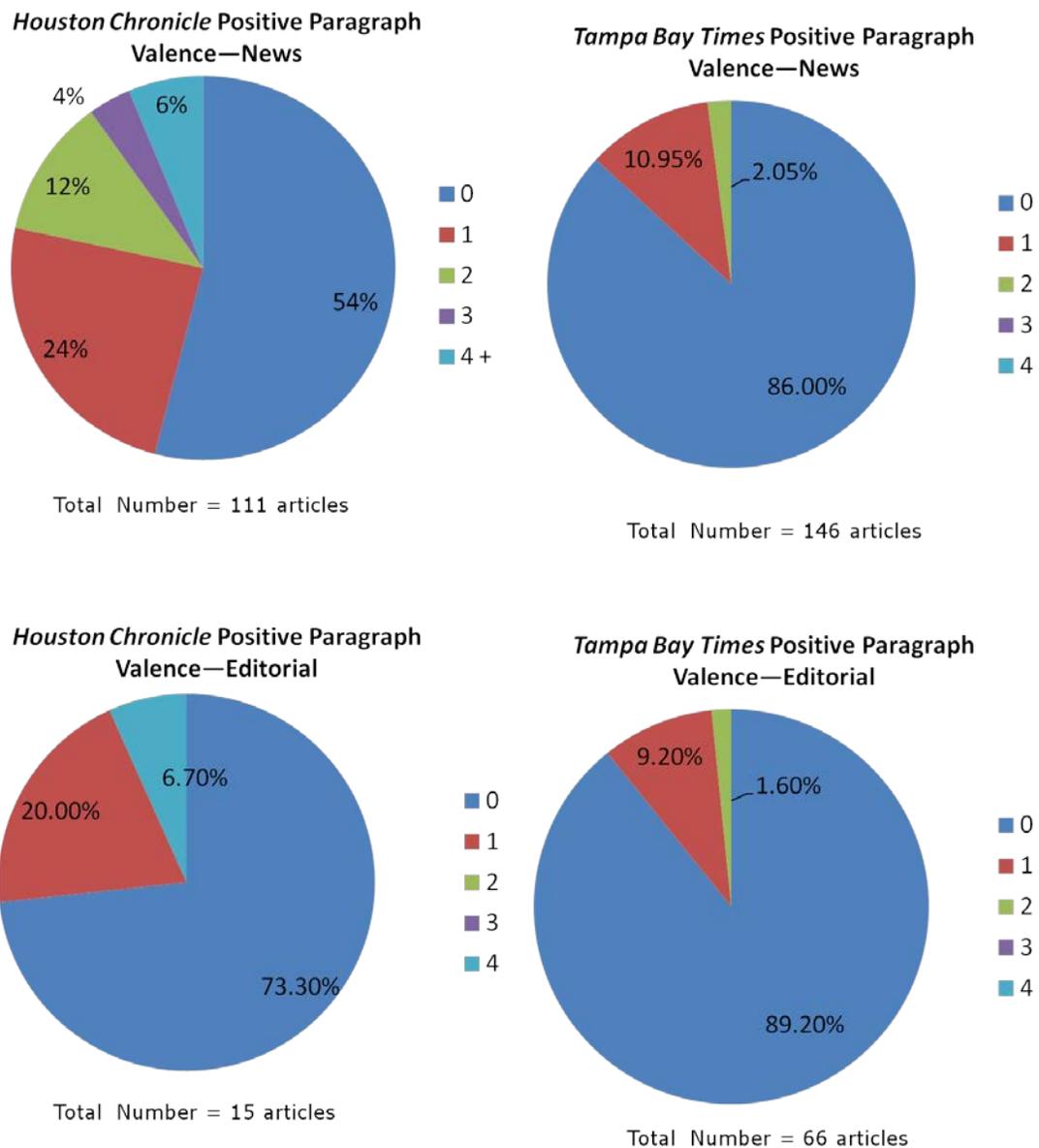


Figure 5. Percent of sums of negative tones of paragraphs per newspaper in news and editorial articles from the two local newspapers, *Houston Chronicle* and *Tampa Bay Times*, recorded from articles printed April 21, 2010 through July 15, 2010.



*Figure 6.* Percent of sums of positive tones of paragraphs per newspaper in news and editorial articles from the two local newspapers, *Houston Chronicle* and *Tampa Bay Times*, recorded from articles printed April 21, 2010 through July 15, 2010.