The 2010 Gulf Oil Spill: A Very Local Story

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Abstract

On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon oil-drilling rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, resulting in the death of 11 oilrig workers and a sea floor oil gusher releasing over 4.9 million barrels of oil into the Gulf during the three months it took crews to cap the wellhead. This study compares local television news coverage of the 2010 Gulf Coast oil spill in the five states most directly affected by the spill to the national television coverage. Results indicate that coverage varied across focused on local contexts reflecting differences in proximity to the spill and local economic considerations.

The 2010 Gulf Oil Spill: A very local story

When the Deepwater Horizon oilrig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico on April 20, 2010, it became the catalyst for a series of different events. First, it started an oil spill that turned out to be the largest environmental disaster in the history of the United States, eclipsing the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill by more than 30 million gallons of oil (Environmental Protection Agency, May 30, 2010). It also began an onslaught of media coverage unlike any other disaster coverage. As the Pew Research Center's Project for the Excellence in Journalism states, most disaster coverage can be described as "one week wonders." The story receives a significant amount of media attention during the first week, but then slowly fades from the headlines. The 2010 Gulf Coast oil spill was a different type of disaster story. It was a slow-motion disaster that exceeded the usual media attention span, commanding substantial coverage week after week. From April 20 through the month of July, it overwhelmed every other story in mainstream news; accounting for 22 percent of the newshole, almost twice as much coverage as the number two story, the economy at 12 percent ("100 Days of Gushing Oil"). Finally, it reenergized the debate over offshore drilling issues and the role of public opinion in the debate. Prior to the spill, President Obama had announced he was opening more waters in an effort to expand offshore drilling. However, the oil spill halted the expansion of offshore drilling and brought the issue back into public discourse.

This present study seeks to take advantage of this unique circumstance in order to examine the media environment surrounding the 2010 Gulf Coast oil spill. By comparing national and local media coverage as well as national and local public opinion polling data, we are able to provide insight into what kind of story was being told to whom and during what time. This project draws heavily on this pre-existing research for its theoretical lens. For example, we know that there are specific differences between local and national news coverage of environmental disasters like the Gulf oil spill (Molotch and Lester, 1975). Previous research suggests that local news coverage of

environmental disasters differs greatly from national coverage; while national news focuses on the disaster narrative and less on the clean-up efforts, local news is more likely to deal with legislative issues and the effect on local communities. We also know from a preliminary analysis of public opinion data that local Gulf Coast residents had very different views about the spill compared to a national sample. Between May 6th and May 9th, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, conducted a nationwide survey among 994 adults. Their results are remarkably different than the survey conducted by LSU's Public Policy Research Lab (PPRL) of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida coastal residents during a similar time period. For example, Pew Research Center found that 41 percent of respondents thought that major oil spills were inevitable. . The PPRL's survey asked respondents whether they believed the oil spill was a mechanical failure that can be corrected with better engineering. Only 9.4 percent of respondents disagreed with that statement and 80.6 percent either strongly agreed (29.1) or agreed (51.5). Pew also found that 38 percent of the national sample approved of President Obama's response to the spill while PPRL found that less than 30 percent rated his response as either "excellent" or "good."

But the polling data only gives us half of the story. While we know that most Americans were following the media coverage of the oil spill - 57 percent of Americans report following news about the oil spill very closely (Pew Research Center) compared to the 66 percent of local respondents (PPRL) -, we do not know what type of coverage they received. In this paper, we attempt to shed light on the media environment surrounding the 2010 Gulf Coast oil spill, first examining differences in coverage between national and local news outlets and, second, examining differences across local environments. We find that not only is local coverage different from national coverage but there is significant variation across local markets depending on proximity to the spill and local economic considerations. We contend this finding is important given how

framing in coverage of disasters and events influences public opinion, political behavior, and the degree to which citizens are able to hold governments accountable (Iyengar 1990).

Literature Review

While media coverage of oil spills is not a frequent topic in extant research, it has been examined in a few rare occurrences- namely in the wake of the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster (Daley and O'Neill, 1991) and the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill (Molotch and Lester, 1975). Despite a fairly limited body of existing research, several other well-studied research areas helped develop expectations regarding media coverage of the 2010 Gulf oil spill. First, this project assumes that there is a strong and measurable relationship between the press and the public. In doing so, we rely on a significant amount of literature on the media's agenda-setting and framing ability (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, 1993; Zaller, 1992). In addition to this, we describe how previous literature also guides our expectations of how local media coverage may be different than the national media attention based on market pressures and local audience demands (Kaniss, 1991; McManus, 1995; Hamilton, 2004; Johnson et al. 2005).

The Relationship between the Press and the Public

Research has clearly established that the media have an effect on their audiences. This effect can manifest itself in several different ways. First, the perceived salience of an issue or event is directly affected by how much media attention it garners. Described as the media's agenda-setting ability, the public believes that issues receiving the most coverage in the media are the most important issues (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Baumgartner and Jones, 1995; Zaller, 1992). Agenda-setting theory is typically considered as the media's ability to tell us "what to think about." However, as McCombs and Shaw (1993) explain, the media's agenda-setting ability can also refer to the media's ability to tell us "how to think about it."

Both the selection of objects for attention and the selection of frames for thinking about these objects are powerful agenda-setting tools. Central to the news agenda and its daily routines, are the perspectives that journalists (and as McCombs and Shaw point out- subsequently, members of the public) employ to think about each story (McCombs, 1992). These perspectives direct attention toward certain attributes and away from others. The generic name for these journalistic perspectives is newsworthiness. But newsworthy objects are discussedin a wide variety of ways. Weaver (2007) explains that the focusing on the most salient or prominent aspect of an issue is another important agenda-setting ability of the media. Typically referred to as second level agenda-setting (McCombs, 2005), the media emphasize a certain attribute of a story, making it the most salient for news audiences. These attribute objects, which may be extremely narrow or more general, serve several important functions. First, it provides heuristic shortcuts for audiences on how to interpret a particular story or issue. Secondly, these attributes can also influence how audiences think about the issue, story, or individual. As McCombs (2002) explains, previous research has demonstrated significant evidence that both the salience of issues on the media agenda, as well as the salience of specific attribute objects, can serve as the basis for public opinion about issues, public leaders, and campaign performances.

Local vs. National News: Differences and Implications

A large area of research has demonstrated that local television news is the dominant source of local public affairs information (Hess, 1991; Roper-Starch, 1994; Gilliam et al., 2002). And while the media environment is rapidly changing and growing, local television news is still a dominant force. In a recent Pew Research Center study examining how individuals learn about their communities, 89 percent of adults say they get local information from local television news. Fifty-eight percent of adults say they turn to local television for weather information; 55 percent named local television as their top source for breaking news. And while Internet is another important

source for local news, it still averages more than 25 percentage points behind local television news in the frequency of adults' reliance for specific news about local issues (32 percent for weather and 16 percent for breaking news). Despite this, local news is often not included in current studies of media content, but the exceptions (Poindexter et al., 2003; Dunaway et al., 2011) find that local news coverage is strongly connected to local issues and local audiences. Arnold (2004) argues that local media are understudied despite being important because citizen monitoring of local leaders; he attributes the dearth of studies on local TV news to problems of cost, sampling, and access.

Local television popularity can largely be attributed to its ability to focus on audience demand. Because while local television news programs can cover the world, their primary focus is to remain local, including local weather, sports, crimes, and accidents. As Hamilton (2004) argues, this also means that some of the story selection will be influenced by what the local director believes local viewers need to know. And if local news directors decide what is news based on audience demands, local news should be very catered and predictable based on local audiences (Hamilton 2004). In addition to the type of stories that local television news covers, research has also demonstrated that there is a relationship between the proximity of an event and whether it is covered by local news. According to this literature, events that occur "close to home" receive more coverage than events occurring farther away (Branton and Dunaway, 2009; Molotch and Lester, 1975). A primary reason for this is that news is a product largely dependent on consumer demand (McManus, 1994) and there is a larger audience demand for local events. Because local media outlets know that their profit depends on meeting the preferences of their audiences, perceptions of audience preferences influence the news product (Hamilton 2004).

In Kaniss' (1991) examination of the production and product of local news, she finds that a number of institutional and organization forces influence local television news' coverage. Kaniss (1991) argues that the strongest influences on local television news are the market and the

continuous economic motives of media owners. These economic pressures have resulted in a sensationalized news product, with little ability to properly inform local news audiences on important policy decisions.

However, what happens when a local story is also a national story? Palmgreen and Clarke (1977) analyzed what local factors influence the preferences of media coverage of national political issues as opposed to local issues (such as strength of intercommunication networks and type of issue), and Johnson et al. (2005) examine differences in national and local coverage of the 2002 gubernatorial recall in California. Yet, there has been surprisingly less analysis comparing local and national coverage of the same issue or event, especially in terms of a crisis with both local and national effects. For example, in Molotch and Lester's (1975) examination of the Santa Barbara oil spill, they found that local and national media covered the event very differently. National newspapers relied on national sources and reported on events that could be framed as "national events," while local coverage contained information that was important to the local Santa Barbara area. This study adds to this literature by comparing the national and local television coverage of the 2010 Gulf Coast oil spill.

Theory and Hypotheses

Story Prominence and Tone

As a story with direct local impact, we would expect the Gulf Oil Spill to be prominently positioned in news coverage, but that prominence should be directly related to proximity to the spill and the impact on local economies. On a related note, we would also expect the tone of coverage to vary by proximity to the spill and local impact. This leads to our first set of hypotheses:

H1a: The volume of oil spill stories should be inversely related to distance between media market state and distance from the Deepwater Horizon Rig.

H1b: The prominence of oil spill stories should be inversely related to distance between media market state and distance from the Deepwater Horizon Rig.

H2: Negativity of oil spill stories should be inversely related to the distance between a media market's state and the Deepwater Horizon Rig.

Newsmakers and sourcing

The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (2010) found that the primary newsmaker in the national media's oil spill coverage was President Obama (12 percent) with BP CEO Tony Hayward receiving 4 percent of the coverage. The national media's focus on national figures make sense according to Tuchman (1974); it is more convenient for reporters to focus on federal officials and corporation heads than to spend their time hunting up local leaders for alternative storylines and quotes. In addition to this, as Molotch and Lester (1975) explain, when the President speaks, it can be argued that he is speaking on behalf of all the country. Therefore, it is likely that he will be sourced more frequently than local leaders. However, what happens in local news coverage? Local television stations have greater access to local leaders and frequently rely on them for their elite sourcing (Kaniss, 1991). Therefore, our next hypotheses examine whether local news follows the national news example and focuses on national figures or if they focus on local leaders.

H3: National figures and politicians should be featured more often in national news relative to local news.

H4: Local figures and politicians should be featured more often in local news relative to national news.

The Influence of Local Audiences and Interests

The final research hypotheses deal with the impact of local economic contexts on news coverage. Specifically, the Louisiana economy is more closely connected to offshore drilling and

fishing and seafood than tourism. The reverse is true for Florida. Related, public opinion polls reveal significant differences between national opinion polls and local Gulf Coast states polls on offshore drilling issues. In addition, support for offshore drilling varies across the Gulf Coast states with the support strongest in Louisiana and weakest in Florida. Local media's success depends heavily on their ability to meet their audience preferences (Hamilton, 2004), therefore, we would expect for Louisiana's coverage of offshore drilling issues to be more positive than the other Gulf Coast states.

H3: Local television news coverage of industries affected by spill will be positively related to the proportion of the states' economies comprised of said industries.

H4: Favorable tone in local coverage regarding offshore drilling issues will be positively related to proportion of state's economy related to oil and gas.

H5: Local television news coverage will focus on offshore drilling more frequently than the national news coverage due to proximity of Gulf Coast states to spill.

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative content analysis in order to examine the tone, newsmakers, and frames used in local television news coverage of the 2010 Gulf oil spill. To examine the media content, we collected and coded 1215 news stories from 14 different local television news stations in five different Gulf Coast states: Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. The local television news stations represent a variety of metropolitan areas directly affected by the oil spill and all three broadcast networks. While multiple cities were chosen for each state's sample, because New Orleans' broadcasting area covered the entire Louisiana region affected by the spill only New Orleans was used in the Louisiana sample. A complete list of the stations analyzed is found in Appendix A.

The sample was selected from a database compiled by Walker Communications Search Company. Using News Data Service (NDS), the Walker Company was able to search local television affiliates using guided search terms. NDS is made up of a total of 44 affiliates throughout the US. The role of each affiliate is to "monitor" different markets, which includes capturing the closed caption text from the station and recording the programming from that station. The search terms used in order to develop the database were "gulf," "oil," "spill," "rig," "BP," "Deepwater Horizon," and "explosion."

For this project, thirteen weeks of local coverage was examined beginning on the day of the explosion, April 20th until July 16th, 2010, one day following the successful capping of the busted pipeline. For each of the 13 weeks, all of the stores from each of the stations was collected and totaled. Then using a sampling method of every third story from the 14 different stations, (typically representing 30 percent of the population) until approximately 84 stories were selected for each constructed week.[1] For a complete timeline of the oil spill storylines broken down by weeks analyzed, see Appendix B. It is important to note the events occurring during each of the weeks in order to make sense of the coding data. For example, during week 7, there is a higher percentage of stories on the local Texas stations about local Representative Joe Barton than during any other week. While this could be misinterpreted as the Texas stations using a local official for a local angle, it is actually a result of congressional testimony and a widely reported statement made by Rep. Barton. The results section seeks to explain any of these data abnormalities that can be attributed to specific contexts.

Articles were coded on multiple levels. First, the story was coded for placement. Was it the lead story of the broadcast or not? This was determined by looking at the time stamp on the

[1] There are two exceptions to this, week 4 and week 5. Because the sampling method used was to collect a sample that was a percentage of the population of the stories for each specific week, weeks 4 and 5 have a larger sample because their population was much higher than in the other weeks. Because more attention was given to the oil spill story during these weeks, there are more stories coded during these weeks. However, the stories included in the sample still only represent 30% of the population.

transcript. As Entman (2006) explains, the placement of a story (whether it is the lead story or not) gives specific insight into the media's agenda-setting, "heightened media attention creates more opportunities for audience contact with messages reinforcing the news narrative" (p. 10).

The overall storyline was coded as well as the tone of the story. Eight of the storylines included in the coding guide were from the Pew's national-level coding guide. An additional storyline, "initial explosion/oilrig workers" was added to the coding scheme in order to capture stories about the explosion and missing workers. Tone was coded as positive, negative, or neutral.

The coders also had to identify the primary newsmaker of the story and the tone towards that newsmaker. Once again, the list of primary newsmakers was taken from the Pew's coding scheme and included many national and local level officials. The story was also coded for whether it supported or opposed or was neutral towards the offshore drilling moratorium imposed by President Obama on June 7th, 2010, or more generally, offshore drilling.

There were three coders who did the coding for this project. All coders received training and. inter-coder agreement for all of the variables was measured using Krippendorff's alpha index, largely considered one of the better measures of intercoder reliability (Lombard and Snyder-Duch, et al., 2002). All of the coded variables had a strong level of reliability: lead story (.843), primary newsmaker (.726), primary storyline (.699), tone (.747), moratorium (.763), and offshore drilling (.701).

This paper makes use of four distinct datasets. The first is the content analysis of the local television coverage discussed above. In order to compare these results with a national dataset, this study also includes a content analysis conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism. Their analysis of national television coverage of the Gulf Oil spill is found in PEJ's weekly News Coverage Index (NCI), "100 Days of Gushing Oil: Eight Things to Know About How the Media Covered the Gulf Disaster" and is based on aggregated data collected by the Pew Research Center from April 20,

2010 through July 28, 2010. As part of their analysis, they collected network television news coverage of the oil spill. The analysis includes ABC, CBS, and NBC's daily national general interest news shows (the magazine genre of programs are not included in the universe both because in most cases they are not daily-except for Nightline-and because they are not devoted predictably to covering the news of the day) as well as "the Newshour with Jim Lehrer" on PBS. For the commercial evening newscasts, the study codes the entire program. For the morning programs, it codes the news segments that appear during the first 30 minutes of the broadcast, including the national news inserts but not local inserts. This results in either 2 or 2.5 hours of programming each day.[2] In addition to the content analyses, two sets of survey data (a national sample and local Gulf Coast-specific sample) are also included in this project.

The first set of public opinion data is a local Gulf Coast survey conducted by LSU's Public Policy Research Lab between May 21 and June 12, 2010. The results discussed are from a telephone survey of 924 randomly selected adult residents from Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. The survey was designed to provide a representative sample of Louisiana coastal parishes (N=499) and other Gulf Coast states (N=425). A total of 499 participants were chosen from the six Louisiana parishes (total population of 1,208,910) and 425 from the Mississippi, Alabama, or Florida counties (total population of 1,689,037). The margin of error for the overall survey is +/- 3.2 percentage points. The margin of error for the Louisiana sample is +/- 4.4 percentage points while the margin of error for the other Gulf Coast states is +/- 4.8 percentage points.[3]

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[2] Pew reports it's coding scheme as the following: Commercial Evening News: Entire 30 minutes of 2 out of 3 programs each day (60 minutes) Commercial Morning News: 1st 30 minutes of 2 out of 3 programs each day (60 minutes) PBS NewsHour: Rotate to code the 1st 30 minutes one day, the 2nd 30 minutes the next day and then skip. For more information, visit http://www.journalism.org/about_news_index/methodology.

[3] For information about PPRL surveys, please visit www.survey.lsu.edu.

The final dataset is a national level public opinion survey conducted by The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. Results for this survey are based on telephone interviews conducted under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International among a national sample of 994 adults living in the continental United States, 18 years of age or older, from May 6-9, 2010 (662 respondents were interviewed on a landline telephone, and 332 were interviewed on a cell phone, including 123 who had no landline telephone). Both the landline and cell phone samples were provided by Survey Sampling International.[4] The margin of error is +/- 4 percentage points.

Results

The results of this analysis can be found in Table 1 and Figures 1-7. Table 1 reports the frequency distribution for the local television news content analysis. As seen in Table 1, the oil spill remained a prominent story throughout the 13 weeks with 45.1 percent of the stories coded being the lead story of the broadcast. The majority of stories were negative in tone (57percent) as compared to 37.7 percent neutral and only 5.3 percent positive. The most frequent storyline across all of the local broadcast stations was about environmental containment, clean-up. This attribute object accounted for 42.1 percent of all of the local broadcast stories. Stories highlighting local business impact were also frequent in the local broadcasts. Over 16 percent of the stories highlighted the oil spill's impact on tourism and 15.1 percent focused on the impact on the fishing and seafood industry. Overall, President Obama was the most frequent primary newsmaker representing 7.6 percent of all of the stories. This is consistent with the national sample conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, which reported that President Obama was the primary newsmaker in 11.6 percent of the national sample. However, unlike the PEJ study, other newsmakers also receive considerable coverage in the local news broadcasts including Tony

[4] For more information about the Pew's survey methodology, see http://people-press.org/methodology/.

Hayward (3.9 percent), Governor Bobby Jindal (4.4 percent), and Governor Haley Barbour (2.2 percent).

(Insert Table 1 here)

But how does coverage differ across local television news markets? To begin, we consider the tone of coverage across these various Gulf Coast news markets. We would expect to see significantly more negative news coverage in those markets closest to the spill. As can be seen in Figure 1, this indeed happens: Louisiana has the most negative coverage followed by Mississippi and then the remaining states. The differences, however, are not particularly large and are not statistically significant at a .05 level ($x^2(8) = 11.6, p = .169$). Thus, while the pattern is in the expected direction, we find insufficient support for our first hypothesis.

(Insert Figure 1 here)

Hypothesis 1b involves the prominence of local stories. Specifically, we expect that oil spill stories in Louisiana would receive greater prominence given its proximity to the spill. As can be seen in Figure 2, this is clearly the case: Prominence of news stories significantly differs across these local markets ($x^2(8) = 28.3, p < .01$These result provide sufficient evidence to support our second hypothesis. More than half of the news stories in the Louisiana local markets were lead stories compared to only 34.7 percent of stories in Texas. Notably, however, Florida local news markets - and not Mississippi or Alabama - also gave the story greater prominence. Fifty percent of stories in the Florida news markets were the lead story compared to 44.9 percent in Alabama and 39.6 in Mississippi. Florida with an economy deeply rooted in tourism, and Louisiana, with its dependence on seafood and oil and gas industries, were most threatened by the oil spill, a fact reflected in the prominence of local television news coverage.

(Insert Figure 2 here)

This project also deals with the question of how news stories were portrayed and who was the primary newsmaker. It is well known that presidents play an important role in interpreting breaking events and crises. In the Project for Excellence in Journalism study, President Obama was the primary newsmaker in 11.6 percent of stories, far surpassing any other newsmaker. We find similarly that President Obama was the primary newsmaker in local television news coverage of the Gulf Oil Spill. President Obama was mentioned in just under a third of news stories (30.5 percent) that included an official source (or 7.9 percent of all stories).

Looking across local markets, however, local officials have the capacity to challenge the president's dominance as a newsmaker. Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, for example, was the primary newsmaker in 43 percent of the stories in Louisiana news markets, while President Obama was the primary source in 32 percent of these stories. Likewise, in Mississippi and Alabama, Governors Haley Barber (39.7 percent) and Bob Riley (37.9 percent) were considerably more prominent in news coverage than President Obama who was the primary newsmaker in 19 percent of television news stories in Mississippi and 24.1 percent in Alabama, respectively (see Figure 3). Differences in coverage for the respective governors ($x^2(4) = 42.6, p < .01$) and and President Obama ($x^2(4) = 15.2, p < .01$) are significant at the .05 level. At least at the local level, statewide elected officials have a unique opportunity to present a counter-narrative to the interpretation provided by the White House.

(Insert Figure 3 here)

When it comes to the focus of coverage, we see important differences across markets as well. While the environmental storyline was the most common narrative across states, there were significant differences across local markets, $x^2(32) = 231.8, p < .05$. Across Gulf Coast states, the environmental storyline was the focus of 40.3 percent of all stories, while nationally the environmental storyline was the focus of 47.4 percent of all coverage and 64 percent of national

network news coverage. Environmental concerns appear to be downplayed in local coverage; or they may be played up at the national level due to federal policy jurisdictions and the national salience of environmental policy issues.

The second-most frequent storyline in Texas was corporate responsibility and culpability (15.9 percent). This was similarly, the second most common frame in the national-level coverage (26.9 percent of all coverage and 19.2 percent of network coverage). In every other Gulf Coast state, the corporate responsibility storyline was downplayed with coverage placing greater emphasis on the impact of the spill on local economies. In Louisiana, the local impact on the fishing and seafood industry was the second most common storyline, while the impact on tourism was much less common (7.3 percent). In Florida, this picture is reversed. The local impact on tourism was the focus of 35.9 percent of the news stories while the impact on seafood and fishing was much less common (10.2 percent of stories). In Mississippi (21.1 percent) and Alabama (24.7 percent), the local impact on tourism was the second-most frequent story. Figure 4 illustrates the relationship of the local business impact frames (fishing/seafood v. tourism) between states. Thus, we see substantial support for our fifth hypothesis.

(Insert Figure 4 here)

The final set of hypotheses specifically examines offshore drilling- an issue directly connected to the Louisiana and Florida economies. According to the PPRL survey of Gulf Coast residents, 59 percent of Louisiana's coastal residents strongly favor (20 percent) or favor (39 percent) offshore drilling compared to 45 percent of coastal residents in other states. This is on par with the national average, in which 54 percent support offshore drilling in U.S. coastal areas (Pew Research Center, May 2010). It appears that while offshore drilling receives fairly strong support nationally, local support for offshore drilling is rooted in the economies that are dependent on the oil and gas industry. Given this context, we would expect Louisiana television coverage of offshore

drilling issues to be more positive than the coverage in Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. Likewise, we would expect coverage to be clearly more anti-moratorium in Louisiana than in the remaining Gulf Coast states. As can be seen in Table 2, while most of the coverage is neutral, we find that coverage in Louisiana is decidedly more pro-drilling and more anti-moratorium than in the remaining states and that these differences are statistically significant ($x^2(8) = 105.1$, $p < .01$). Specifically, 12.4 percent of coverage in Louisiana was pro-offshore drilling compared to 3.1 percent in Texas and 0.9 percent in Mississippi. Alabama and Florida had no television news stories that were positive on the offshore drilling issue.

(Insert Table 2 here)

Similarly, as can be seen in Table 2, coverage of the moratorium depended largely on where one resided. In Louisiana, coverage was decidedly more negative with 9.3 percent of stories classified as anti-moratorium and 4.1 percent as pro-moratorium. In Florida, coverage was even more unbalanced: 12.3 percent of the stories were pro-moratorium while no stories were anti-moratorium.

Discussion

The 2010 Gulf Coast oil spill was a monumental news event that added much-needed complexity to the current literature on oil spill media coverage. Previous research demonstrated that oil spill coverage was heavily concentrated during the first week of the disaster but faded quickly from the media spotlight. Additionally, Molotch and Lester's (1975) analysis on the 1969 oil spill argues that while oil spills have local consequences, the media coverage is typically focused on national newsmakers and officials. The 2010 Gulf Coast oil spill, however, remained in the media's attention and subsequently the public's attention throughout the summer. In addition, while the national media focused coverage on President Obama, local television stations frequently sourced local officials. And while it took crews longer to cap the wellhead causing the 2010 oil spill than it

took crews during the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, the overarching narratives are not significantly different. Both spills required significant numbers of clean up crews, caused detrimental effects on local economies and environments, prompted presidential visits and drilling moratoriums, and influenced policy decisions on oil drilling. Therefore, our project significantly adds to the current body of oil spill research.

However, the results of this study provide understanding far beyond oil spill coverage. This paper contributes to the prior literature on media coverage in two important ways. First, it illustrates important differences in local versus national news coverage. Local audiences see a very different picture of national events than national audiences. If it is important to understand how affected communities respond to national events, it is critical to understand local news coverage and how the story is being interpreted and who is giving it meaning. The President remains as the primary newsmaker to national audiences but our results indicate that in affected communities local officials have the opportunity to challenge the president's role in interpreting events. Second, local news differs significantly across markets even in those areas most directly affected by the spill. Two factors appear to be critically important: (1) proximity to the spill and (2) the local economic base. Those local markets closest to the spill gave the story greater prominence than markets further away. Louisiana news coverage emphasized the impact on seafood and fishing industry while also providing a pro-drilling and anti-moratorium slant to their coverage. In Florida, the opposite was true: Florida news coverage emphasized the impact on tourism and provided an anti-drilling and pro-moratorium slant.

Previous research indicates that local television stations are largely dependent on audience demand and content reflects these demands; the same seems to hold true in the unique case of the 2010 Gulf oil spill. Local television stations, while using similar storylines as national television news,

catered their coverage to their local audiences by relying on local officials as the primary newsmakers and dealt with issues that most directly affected their local communities.

Do differences in coverage between national media and local media matter? We think so. Studying difference in national and local coverage of specific events is important in two key ways. First, an important literature exists on whether and how citizens appropriately attribute responsibility to various levels of government in general (Arceneaux 2006) and in the wake of disasters specifically (Arceneaux and Stein 2006). Yet, this work has yet to examine whether and how the mediated information environment influences citizens' ability to do this. One obvious answer is that it may depend on their choice of source for information about news and politics – if local news more regularly features local leaders and national news features national leaders - local news reliance may foster attribution to local and state leaders; national news reliance may lead to attribution to national leaders. Second, Media coverage is key in defining the scope of conflict around policy issues and is critical to issue and policy definitions. Thus – if local media adopt variable policy frames (from each other and national media) in the wake of an event like the Deepwater Horizon explosion – their audiences may have variable understandings of issues overall and perceptions of winners and losers as a result of policy. If so, these differences may be key in our understanding of unexplained differences in citizen voting behavior across states, localities, and levels of office.

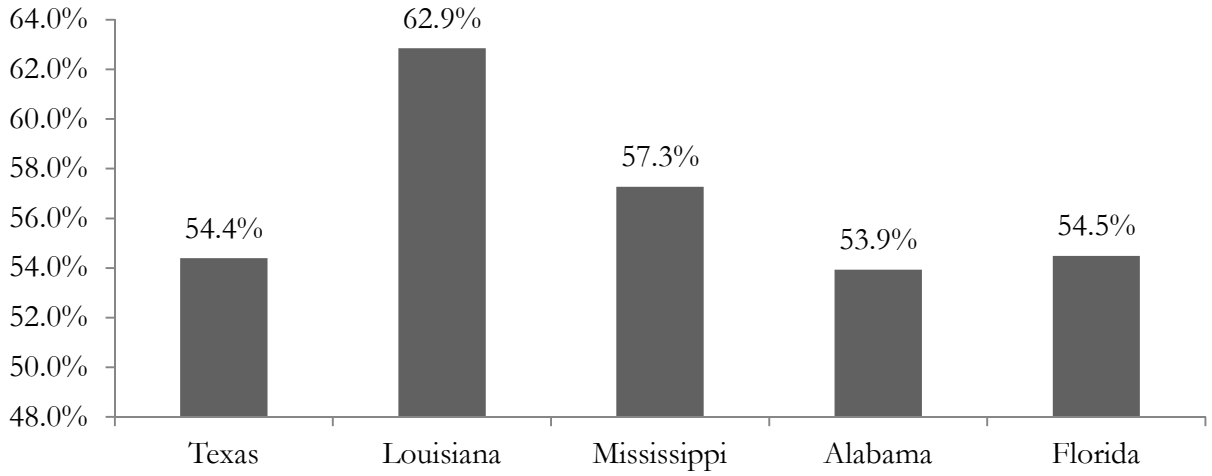
Table 1: Frequency Distributions of Local Television Broadcasts

	Percent of Stories (Number of Stories)
By State	
Louisiana	25.9% (315)
Texas	19.7% (239)
Mississippi	18.7% (227)
Alabama	22.0% (267)
Florida	13.7% (167)
By Tone	
Positive	5.3% (64)
Negative	57.0% (693)
Neutral	37.7% (458)
By Lead Story	
Lead story in broadcast	45.1% (548)
Not the lead story	54.9% (667)
By Storyline	
Environmental Containment, Clean-up	42.1% (511)
Corporate Responsibility	9.6% (117)
Government/Politician Impact	1.7% (21)
Effect of Weather/Storms on Clean-up	2.3% (28)
Offshore Drilling Issues	7.4% (90)
Local Politician's Response	1.4% (17)
Local Business Impact- Tourism	16.4% (199)
Local Business Impact- Fishing and Seafood	15.1% (183)
Initial Explosion/ Oilrig workers	4.0% (49)
By Primary Newsmaker	
President Obama	7.6% (92)
Tony Hayward	3.9% (47)
Governor Jindal	4.4% (53)
Rep. Barton	0.9% (11)
Governor Barbour	2.2% (27)
Governor Crist	0.4% (5)
Governor Perry	0.1% (1)
Governor Riley	1.9% (23)

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Coverage of Drilling Issues

	Pro-Drilling Stories	Anti-Drilling Stories	Pro-Moratorium Stories	Anti-Moratorium Stories
Louisiana	12.4%	4.5%	4.1%	9.3%
Florida	0.0%	10.7%	11.9%	0.0%
Alabama	0.0%	10.8%	5.2%	0.0%
Texas	3.1%	1.3%	1.3%	1.8%
Mississippi	0.9%	3.3%	3.3%	0.9%

Figure 1: Percent of Negative News Stories by Local News Market



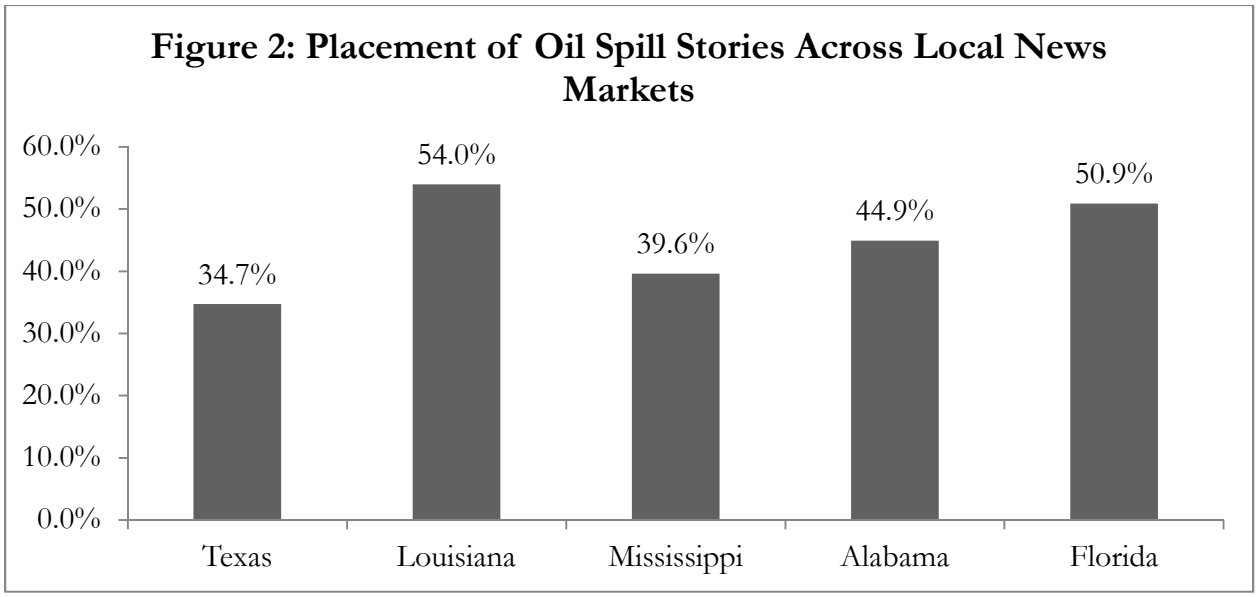


Figure 2: Placement of Oil Spill Stories Across Local News Markets
60.0%
50.0%
40.0%
30.0%
20.0%
10.0%
0.0%
34.7%
54.0%
39.6%
44.9%
50.9%
Texas
Louisiana
Mississippi
Alabama
Florida

Figure 3: President Obama and State Governors as Newsmakers

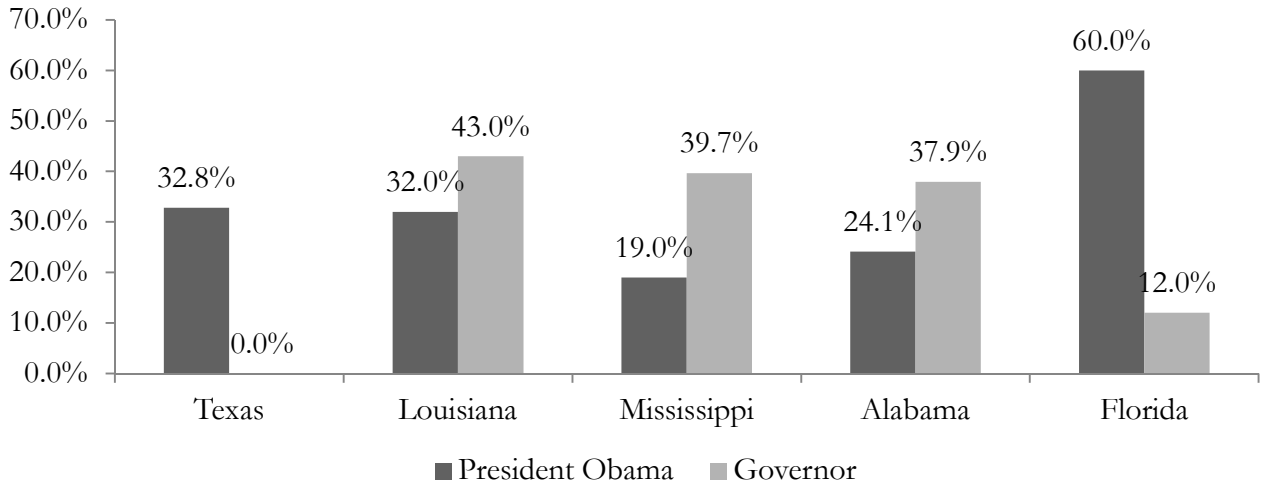
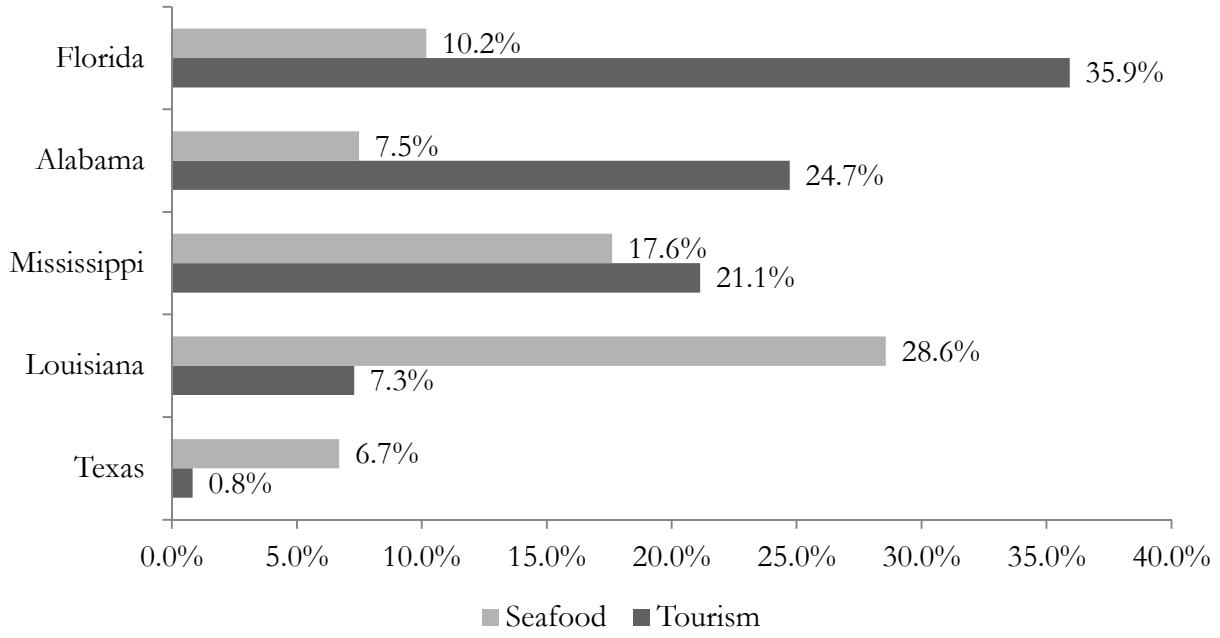


Figure 4: News Articles Containing a Local Business Impact Storyline



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Appendix A

Texas:	KBMT-ABC Beaumont-Port Arthur
	KJAC-NBC Beaumont-Port Arthur
	KHOU-CBS Houston
Louisiana:	WDSU-NBC New Orleans
	WGNO-ABC New Orleans
	WWL-CBS New Orleans
Mississippi:	WAPT-ABC Jackson
	WLBT-NBC Jackson NBC
	WLOX-ABC Biloxi-Gulfport
Alabama:	WSFA-NBC Montgomery-Selma
	WKRG-CBS Mobile - Pensacola[5]
	WPMI-NBC Mobile – Pensacola
Florida:	WJHG-NBC Panama City
	WMBB- ABC Panama City

[5] While Mobile's markets include Pensacola, Florida, a preliminary analysis of the content indicated that the coverage was considerably different than Panama City's coverage. Therefore, the Mobile-Pensacola market was included in the Alabama sample.

Appendix B

Week	Storyline
Week 1	Deepwater Horizon explodes, 11 workers go missing
Week 1	Rig sinks, no chance of survivors, U.S. Coast Guard says no oil is leaking
Week 1	U.S. Coast Guard says 1,000 barrels of oil are leaking per day
Week 2	U.S. Coast Guard says 5,000 barrels of oil are leaking per day
	Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal issues emergency declaration
	Admiral Thad Allen chosen to direct oil spill response
	President Obama makes first coastal visit
Week 3	B.P. announces it will pay for total cost of cleanup
Week 4	Oil reaches shore off Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana
Week 5	19 percent of the Gulf of Mexico is closed to fishing
	Oil found near mouth of Mississippi River
	Oyster bays are closed
	First beaches are closed in Grand Isle, Louisiana
Week 6	A fishery disaster is declared
	President Obama makes his second visit and tours Grand Isle, Port Fourchon
	EPA announces that the Gulf oil spill is the nation's largest environmental disaster
Week 7	BP announces that the "vast majority" of oil is being captured
Week 8	Exploratory deepwater rigs are shut down due to the drilling moratorium
	First tar balls was ashore in Orange Beach, Alabama
Week 9	President Obama demands BP to create escrow account
	Texas Rep. Joe Barton apologizes to BP during congressional hearings
Week 10	Louisiana judge blocks Gulf offshore drilling moratorium
	Pensacola Beach, Florida is closed
	Pensacola Beach, Florida reopens
Week 11	Hurricane Alex displaces boom and damages some oil spill barriers
	Whale sharks spotted swimming in oil
Week 12	Nearly 1,700 pounds of oil captured in Lake Pontchartrain
Week 13	BP says it has placed a containment cap on the well.