

MYTH OR REALITY? HAS IMPROVED PERFORMANCE HAD A POSITIVE EFFECT ON POLITICAL, MEDIA, ENVIRONMENTAL, AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS?

The media, environmental interest groups, and the public harbour a deep-rooted suspicion of the oil industry. Although it is not the purpose of this paper to analyse the reasons for this suspicion, this suspicion requires some examination because it makes it difficult for the oil and spill response industries to present their viewpoints positively.

In the eyes of the public, oil tankers are an integral and inseparable part of the oil industry. Thus, when a tanker accident occurs, public outrage frequently is directed against oil companies, despite only a minority of oil tankers being owned by oil companies and the legal liability for a spill resting with a shipowner. It is very difficult to put a positive spin on the position of companies that, by their own admission, have sold their oil tankers to avoid liability and save money. This is perceived as an avoidance of responsibility, which deepens suspicion. If another objective was to protect the companies' reputations, it may fail.

Whether out of fear, ignorance, or apathy, government and industry partners in response seem to have failed to inform the public effectively about the realities of oil spill response:

- Spills will continue to happen.
- Oil will come ashore.
- Aggressive shoreline cleanup in sensitive areas may be the worst response option.
- Doing nothing may be preferable.

Neither politicians and government agencies dependent on public funding nor oil companies for commercial reasons typically espouse such technically correct but unpopular views publicly. Long-term educational programmes are needed to change the public's attitudes and perceptions about spill impacts and response capabilities. Such programmes will be difficult to implement, given the public's general misperception and deep-rooted suspicion of both government and industry. The public reluctantly accepts that the price of the automobile culture is congestion, air pollution, and road casualties but

does not accept that this price also includes large-scale oil transport at sea with inevitable tanker accidents, however rarely they occur. The public also does not understand that the proportion of oil spilled to oil carried is minute, and seafarers are human and, therefore, prone to error. The public does not accept that oil cannot be cleaned up at sea completely, and environmental effects of a spill normally are short term. Media and environmental interest groups continue to perpetuate incorrect and misleading views, and the oil industry seems unable or unwilling to refute them.

4.1 HAS IMPROVED PERFORMANCE HAD A POSITIVE EFFECT ON POLITICAL PERCEPTIONS OF OIL SPILLS?

Probably only in the US has an oil spill (*Exxon Valdez*) had such a major political impact. The slowness and inadequacy of the initial response in an area of unspoiled natural beauty (Prince William Sound, Alaska) must have affected the national psyche profoundly. Such events usually elicit a swift political reaction. In the US, that response was OPA 90. Other countries' reactions were more measured. Although the OPRC Convention was adopted by the IMO in 1990, the provisions are being implemented slowly worldwide. The provisions were never headline news or high-profile issues. Even in the UK following the *Braer* and *Sea Empress* spills in remote and beautiful areas, the political reaction was muted.

In the US, Europe, and Australia, government civil servants, rather than appointed or elected ministers and politicians, have reacted positively to efforts by the oil and spill response industries to co-operate with national administrations in establishing and maintaining adequate response capabilities, such as the OSRL base in the UK and AMOSC in Australia. The IMO-IPIECA Global Initiative (discussed in Section 3.2) has had a positive effect on administrations in regions where seminars

have been held on response planning. In the US, PREP, which was jointly designed by government and industry, has had a similar positive effect on federal and state authorities and their relations with industry.

4.2 HAS IMPROVED PERFORMANCE HAD A POSITIVE EFFECT ON MEDIA PERCEPTIONS OF OIL SPILLS?

Media response to an oil spill varies and is unpredictable. Some spills, including those from the *Amoco Cadiz*, *Exxon Valdez*, and *Braer*, attract massive and protracted international media interest. For others, such as the *Aegean Sea* spill, the international media interest fades quickly. Sometimes, media interest is almost non-existent, such as at the *Aragon* spill that oiled the tourist island of Porto Santo in the Canary Islands during winter.

The media may have little to say about the responsibility for a spill. At the *Braer* spill, Ultramar escaped virtually unscathed; yet, at the *Sea Empress* spill, the following headline appeared 1 week into the response:

“Built in Spain; owned by a Norwegian; registered in Cyprus; managed from Glasgow; chartered by the French; crewed by Russians; flying a Liberian flag; carrying an American cargo; and pouring oil onto the Welsh coast. But who takes the blame?” (Cusick *et al.*, 1996)

The reality is that the way a response is presented by the media does matter, as shown in the following example:

“*Exxon Valdez* is used by other oil companies as an example of how not to deal with the media.”

“The company’s [Exxon’s] public relations performance at the time of the [Valdez] disaster was dismal. Mr. Larry Rawl, the then Chairman, declined to visit the site, saying that it would make no difference to the cleanup operation. That led to scathing treatment in the press, to the extent that the *Exxon Valdez* incident is used by other oil companies as an example of how not to deal with the media in the aftermath of oil spills” (Corzine and Waters, 1994).

Companies’ response performance as reported in the media and commented on by environmental interest groups can determine public reaction and influence political opinion. Adverse reporting, therefore, may lead to reactive legislation imposing additional, possibly unnecessary, regulations and costs on the oil and shipping industries. A sound media response policy is essential.

The media do not normally notice any improvement in spill response capabilities because the availability of such capabili-

ties is not news. Local media may run stories about the expansion of facilities at a nearby response base, but this will not reach the world media, even if the response base is international. In a major oil spill, the existence of response resources may be mentioned, but reports rarely acknowledge any improvement in resources. The media are more interested in apportioning blame. Unless oil is prevented from reaching the shore, response has failed in the media’s perception. Occasionally, however, a response will get good press because numerous response resources were used on a small spill, even though the response was not especially effective, such as during the *Kure* spill. In a telling comment, the *Kure*’s P&I Club said, “Our spill management got good press, and satisfied the Unified Command” (OSIR, 1997d), but there was no mention of protecting the environment. Has “good press” become the top priority? If so, there will never be any chance of a sensible scale for reasonable response cost containment.

Positive media reaction is possible and potentially important to every spill response. Significant effort, therefore, should be devoted to media issues during both contingency planning and response. This effort should focus on ensuring actions that can foster positive media reaction, such as the following:

1. open but decisive management, particularly early in a spill;
2. a well-prepared contingency plan;
3. a well-conducted cleanup operation, which should not be confused with a technically and environmentally unsound overreaction;
4. a well-thought out and -reasoned media response strategy;
5. consistent, honest, factual accounts of operations by senior response managers;
6. clear evidence of good co-operation among various agencies involved in a response;
7. prompt release of factual information;
8. involvement of local community and environmental interest organisations in the contingency planning process, which should help to educate potentially antagonistic groups about the realities of spill response and environmental damage and recovery, and assist in reducing sources of public criticism; and
9. serious, well-advertised, cost-effective spill prevention programmes to help assuage public attitudes.

4.3 HAS IMPROVED PERFORMANCE HAD A POSITIVE EFFECT ON ENVIRONMENTAL INTEREST GROUPS’ PERCEPTIONS OF OIL SPILLS?

Environmental interest groups mobilise and easily prejudice public opinion against the best scientific and technical oil spill response solutions. These groups exert influence on political

opinion as well. This is not to decry their usefulness: environmental interest groups have raised general environmental awareness. This, in turn, has helped to raise performance standards, often against strong industrial opposition. Perhaps as George Bernard Shaw observed "All progress depends on the unreasonable man."

Currently, environmental interest groups in the UK are less vociferous. At the *Braer* spill, Greenpeace was active with an information desk in the press centre; in contrast, at the *Sea Empress* spill, Greenpeace activities were less obvious. Scientific evidence shows that oil spills are not the long-term environmental disasters as once predicted, and some environmental interest groups acknowledge this. Immediately after the *Braer* spill, under the headline "Worse things happen on land," Friends of the Earth stated that other environmental matters should command a higher priority because "however horrendous the short-term impacts, damage from such an oil spill is reversible. Which is more than can be said of [the permanent loss of] unique habitats" (Porritt, 1993). At the *Kirki* spill in Australia, the author observed a Greenpeace representative being shouted down by local fishermen for being critical and negative, by arriving late, and not offering assistance. She was compared adversely to government responders who had kept the fishermen informed and involved in the response. At the Edinburgh International Television Festival, it was reported that "television news executives are to take more care over the future reporting of Greenpeace activities" since the executives were "embarrassed and exploited by the pressure group over the *Brent Spar* story" (Brown, 1995). The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) will no longer use film taken by environmental interest groups because footage may be selective and partial (Panton, 1998).

In Europe, some environmental interest groups may be less powerful now than in the 1980s. This may change, particularly with new political alliances in power (for example, the inclusion of the Green Party in the German government after the 1998 elections). These groups' reduced importance does not seem to have occurred in the US, where interest groups exert a powerful influence over public opinion, politics, and regulations. If environmental interest groups can make spills into issues and, hence, raise funds, then it is a myth that improved response performance will influence these groups in the long term.

4.4 HAS IMPROVED PERFORMANCE HAD A POSITIVE EFFECT ON PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF OIL SPILLS?

It appears to be a late twentieth century phenomenon in the developed world that certain situations are exaggerated. When the *Sea Empress* spill was described as a "spreading tide of ecological devastation" (1996), the public had no other sources against which to verify this information. Unbalanced media reporting stimulates already offended public sensibilities,

which feeds the media frenzy in an ever-increasing spiral. This can cause unwarranted economic effects, for example, on the tourist industries of many coastal areas. At the *Aragon* spill in the Canary Islands, the Portuguese government ensured that the media took little or no interest in the spill because of the economic damage that could have been caused by irresponsible, dramatic reporting. By the tourist season, the beaches were "clean" again. Likewise, the Singapore government played down the *Evoikos* spill because there was minimal effect on the shoreline.

Perceptions also can be formed from the actions of environmental interest groups. Ordinary people throughout the world are outraged by oil spills and offended by the images of dead or dying creatures. They cannot understand why oil cannot be removed completely or environmental damage cannot be prevented. In particular, it is said that Americans find it difficult to accept that the nation that put a man on the moon cannot clean up an oil spill better than anyone else does. The public has unreasonably high expectations of what can be achieved during a spill response. Well-meaning but ill-informed public opinion is susceptible to environmental interest groups and the media. Being unaware of response improvements and suspicious of oil companies prevents improvements from having a positive impact on public opinion.

4.5 POSITIVE PERCEPTION CONCLUSIONS

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As far as it can be ascertained, it is a myth that increased response capabilities have had significant impact on media, environmental, or public perceptions. In the political arena, some progress has been made in creating the necessary climate of trust and cooperation in many areas of the world.

To overcome the suspicion of the media, environmental interest groups, and the public, an education campaign is necessary, which may take a generation to have an effect. It must begin with a universal international determination to ensure that only the highest quality designed, built, maintained, and manned tankers are used for oil transport. The realities of spill response must be explained, and oil spills must be placed in perspective compared to other accidents. Perhaps this process should start in the schools, where impressions formed can last a lifetime. Until this message is well understood, the expectations of what can be achieved in an oil spill cleanup will remain unrealistically high, and no response will be perceived as successful.

