

# After the Gulf Oil Spill: How the Media Addressed Seafood Safety

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## BP Gulf Oil Spill 68,000 Square Miles

A year after the explosion on the Deepwater Horizon the cost of the human and environmental disaster is still being counted. For BP, the company at the heart of the disaster, the effects have had a deep and widespread impact.

No one has celebrated BP's safety record since. This year's annual letter to shareholders had Mr Svanberg strike a very different tone.

He said that "after a very troubled and demanding 12 months BP is a changed company." In fact the company has become synonymous with everything that is dangerous about the beginning of an oil exploration.

four to five million barrels of oil that were spilled into the ocean, live on TV.

Such was the immediate harm to its reputation that many began to question whether the company could survive in America in its existing form.

A former cabinet secretary called for BP's US operations to be nationalized. Congress passed legislation restricting BP's business here and many expected a sale of its assets in the Gulf of Mexico was on the cards. Like the facts of the oil spill itself, there are

## Gulf Oil Sheen

As the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico unfolded, the effects have had a deep and widespread impact. On the eve of the explosion BP's chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg had a letter for shareholders. It was a "revised" BP's safety record.

### Guard Says Oil Sheen Is Too Dispersed to Be Recovered

One might start with the loss of one barrel. Before the spill BP's CEO, Tony Hayward, was getting praise for BP's financial strength and its improved safety record. One of the biggest costs could be the fine levied by the Environmental Protection Agency as the EPA sets its fines on a per-barrel basis. So BP will be fined between \$1100 and \$4300 for every barrel that was spilled. Once everyone's agreed on how many barrels that was

## Bird Habitats Threatened by Oil Spill

is a changed company." In fact the cost of the environmental disaster is still being counted. And that is just the beginning of the damage to its reputation. Never mind the mud. In America, BP's name sometimes seems to have been dragged through each one of the four to five million barrels of oil that were spilled into the ocean, live on TV. Such was the immediate harm to its reputation that many began to question whether the company could survive in America in its existing form.

### Millions of Gallons

While it's true it might cover all the costs, a very well might not with the meter is still running, particularly on the legal fees. One of the biggest costs could be the fine levied by the Environmental Protection Agency as the EPA sets its fines on a per-barrel basis. So BP will be fined between \$1100 and \$4300 for every barrel that was spilled. Once everyone's agreed on how many barrels that was

## How well do the media report on the connection between environmental disruption and human health?

question whether the company had finished dumping its toxic load onto America's shores. Mr Hayward was the most vilified business leader anyone could remember. Once everyone's agreed on how many barrels that was



The Gulf of Mexico region produces most of the shrimp, oysters, and crayfish eaten in the U.S. In April 2010, the Deepwater Horizon, an oil rig owned by British Petroleum (BP), exploded in the Gulf, causing an oil leak that lasted for 91 days. This was the largest offshore oil spill in U.S. history. One of the possible results of this catastrophe was the contamination of fish in the Gulf with oil, in particular chemicals in the oil known as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which can be carcinogenic.

In the weeks following the oil spill, and around its anniversary, the media sometimes covered the issue of seafood safety, but news articles that focused solely on seafood safety were rare. More often, messages about seafood safety were combined with concerns about economic and environmental effects. The messages were confusing, some emphasizing that the seafood was safe, others expressing concern. The public was provided conflicting information, and there was a paucity of constructive advice about how to manage risk. In addition, media coverage of seafood safety failed to make an explicit connection that ecological disasters (such as the BP Deepwater explosion) can lead to human health risks by impacting the food supply.

## Key Findings

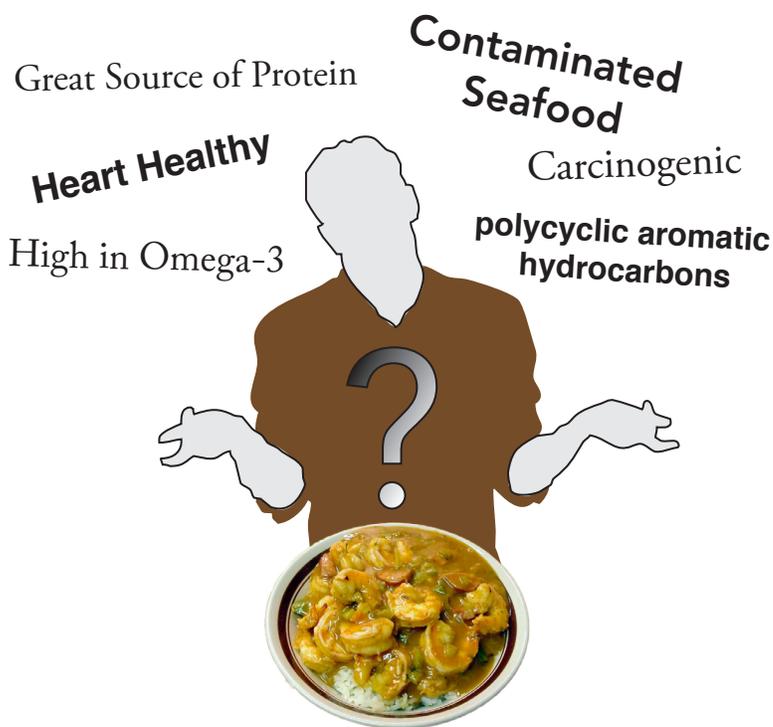
- In the aftermath of the BP oil spill of 2010, seafood safety was covered mostly in local newspapers rather than those with national circulation.
- Few articles linked British Petroleum with responsibility for seafood safety; instead, government agencies were linked with that responsibility.
- Of 315 articles, only 28 offered guidance on how consumers could take steps to reduce any risk associated with eating Gulf seafood.
- Most often, government officials offered a reassuring message, while other stakeholders (residents, fishing industry owners, etc.) addressed risk.

## Public Health Concerns

- In the aftermath of the BP oil spill of 2010, the public was given conflicting information about seafood safety, and little advice about how to manage risk.
- Every article that discussed risk neglected to mention the known health benefits of eating seafood.
- Few articles helped readers to connect the dots between ecological disruptions and human health.

## Who We Are

Based within the Bloomberg School of Public Health, The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) is an academic center that conducts and promotes research and communicates information about the complex inter-relationships among food production, diet, environment and human health.



## Study Summary

Researchers analyzed 315 articles that covered the British Petroleum oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010, looking specifically for how journalists addressed the issue of seafood safety. (Most of the shrimp, oysters, and crayfish caught in the U.S. come from the Gulf.)

The articles analyzed were selected in the weeks directly following the spill, and during a four-week period surrounding the one-year anniversary of the spill.

## Tactics for the Media

- Journalists should consult with public health advisers when reporting on environmental disruption.
- When addressing food safety, articles should offer advice about how to manage risk, in addition to reporting all relevant risk information.
- Coverage of food safety issues should provide context about the food, balancing risk information with information about known health benefits and sources of the food. For example, most of the seafood eaten in the U.S. comes from international sources.

**Full Title:**  
**Reassuring or risky? The presentation of seafood safety in the aftermath of the British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill**

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