

Exxon Valdez 2014: Does media coverage of manmade disasters contribute to consumer complacency?

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Twenty-five years ago, the Exxon Valdez spilled 11 million gallons of oil into Alaska's Prince William Sound. Americans found themselves cleaning up another giant oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, news coverage of environmental disasters serves to calm our immediate anxieties instead of catalyzing changes in the way fossil fuels are used.

"We found that the national news media coverage of these two events helped to resolve many of the cultural anxieties that resulted, explaining what many environmental activists have labeled 'oil spill amnesia,'" write authors Ashlee Humphreys (Northwestern University) and Craig J. Thompson (University of Wisconsin, Madison).

The authors identified four distinct narratives in the [news coverage](#) that create what they term the disaster myth, or the act of directing consumer attention toward the company responsible for the disaster, and then providing a dramatic closure to the crisis. The narratives include: segregation (separating oil from nature), exception (the disaster was unforeseeable), punishment (how the responsible company is penalized), and restoration (describing how the damage will be undone).

While news coverage of an environmental disaster may negatively impact the bottom line of the company responsible for the disaster for some time, it also diverts the general public's attention away from the

risks involved in fossil fuel extraction. This research helps us understand the cultural inertia that follows an environmental disaster and the role of the news media in shaping consumer behavior and perceptions of risk.

"Consumers seldom think about systemic risks that are inherent to many aspects of everyday life. Instead, they exhibit a tacit trust that these threats are being sufficiently monitored and controlled. It's important to understand how this trust can be disrupted and then repaired in order to grasp how consumer practices—particularly those related to the environment—can be changed over time," the authors conclude.

More information: Ashlee Humphreys and Craig J. Thompson. "Branding Disaster: Reestablishing Trust through the Ideological Containment of Systemic Risk Anxieties." *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2014.

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