

Corporate media downplays Gulf oil spill

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In the wake of the temporary capping of the Deepwater Horizon well, the American media has begun to shift its focus from the catastrophe in the Gulf, while a number of significant commentaries have begun to downplay its impact and scope, essentially raising the question: what was all the fuss about?

These articles are part of a concerted effort by BP, the Obama administration, and the corporate media to minimize the effects of the spill, purge the event from the consciousness of the American people, and return to business as usual.

On April 20, an explosion at the Deepwater Horizon rig killed 11 workers. Significant evidence has come forth that the lives of the workers on board and the safety of the rig equipment were disregarded by BP for the sake of maximizing profits. Subsequent to the explosion on April 20, over 200 million gallons of oil gushed out of the broken well one mile below the surface of the water. The oil has spread throughout the Gulf, affecting the physical and economic wellbeing of workers in at least six states. By all accounts, this was the most devastating environmental disaster in American history.

These are the facts that recent efforts by the corporate media wish to minimize.

In a recent *Washington Post* article, David A. Fahrenthold and Leslie Tamura pose the question whether Tony Hayward's initial optimism was correct, after all. Fahrenthold and Tamura use rough estimations and optimistic words from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) chief Jane Lubchenco to present a somewhat rosy picture.

They begin by explaining that of the 220 million gallons spilled into the Gulf, an estimated 50 million have been siphoned, burned or skimmed. This leaves, they say, nearly 170 million gallons unaccounted for. Lubchenco's analysis is that the Gulf ecosystem has

proved resilient, and that much of the remaining oil has dissolved into microscopic, dilute droplets deep in the water. The best-case scenario, say the authors, is that "oil-munching microbes" can take care of the remaining oil.

To clarify the picture, WSWWS spoke with Dr. George Crozier, the executive director of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab in southern Alabama and asked him to discuss some of the issues.

Crozier responded to these types of analyses by saying: "I think that the tone that we're seeing in the press—that it's gone off the surface, it's over, there's no more threat to the beaches and marshes and estuaries—that's mainly true. The problem is that it leaves a large amount of oil unaccounted for and still present. But I don't think we know what that volume is with much accuracy at this point."

When asked how the "oil-munching microbes" may factor into the process of ridding the Gulf of poisonous material, Crozier described the long-term effects that Fahrenthold and Tamura fail to bring into the analysis.

"At least some of the remaining amount happens to be polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH). The reason there is a concern for the PAHs is because they are bioaccumulatable," Crozier explained. "It doesn't matter how small the concentration may be that NOAA is reporting. The low concentration levels mean nothing because they can be magnified in the human food chains. Something is going to eat the bacteria [that consume the PAHs], and then something is going to eat the animal that ate those bacteria—that is what bioaccumulation means. The biological food chain can take a very small, non-toxic, concentration and turn it into something that *is* a human problem. The food chain can bring it back up to a concentration that does become a problem."

Also representative of the recent efforts by the media is Michael Grunwald's *Time* article "The BP Spill: Has

the Damage Been Exaggerated?” Grunwald admits that “it’s important to acknowledge that the long-term potential danger is simply unknowable for an underwater event that took place three months ago,” but his entire article is designed to do just the opposite—to provide evidence to support the dubious claim that the spill in the Gulf “does not seem to be inflicting severe environmental damage.”

Grunwald begins the article by citing Rush Limbaugh, the ultraconservative radio commentator who maintains that hype over “the leak” in the Gulf is some type of environmentalist plot. He suggests that “Rush has a point,” that the environment in the Gulf is not taking as severe a beating as some thought it might.

Grunwald raises two main pieces of evidence to support his argument. The first, that fewer birds and mammals are dying compared to the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill. And the second, that the spill’s effects on the marshes of Louisiana are miniscule in comparison to the regular annual loss of wetlands that are lost in Louisiana.

Asked about this claim, George Crozier emphasized the possible long-term effects, but he also discussed the importance of the short-term effects, which still may not be precisely measurable.

“The smaller compounds that we’ve talked about—the benzene, toluene—that kills stuff and causes cancer in humans,” he told the WSWS. “What is happening with that stuff also is that it is killing eggs and fish where the concentrations are high enough to do it. [One of the short-term issues] will be the impact in the fisheries where the susceptible life stages were affected by the spill. This impact will be seen in the coming months and 1-2 year impacts in fishing harvests.”

Grunwald combines his “evidence” with statements like those from marine scientist Ivor Van Heerden, who said: “there’s just no data to suggest this is an environmental disaster. I have no interest in making BP look good—I think they lied about the spill—but we’re not seeing catastrophic impacts.”

It is true that there is, as yet, little scientific data to suggest this is an environmental disaster. That is in part because BP has made efforts to recruit scientists as consultants, stipulating that all data they accumulate must remain private and proprietary. Many independent scientists have been denied access to the affected parts of the Gulf, and those who did get access have not been

able to draw extensive conclusions from the samples they have taken already.

The WSWS asked Crozier about the problems scientists have had in obtaining data to analyze and understand the problems in the Gulf.

“Part of the problem that the community is having right now is the tortured process that NOAA is going through to vet the data that they’re collecting and is being given to them, and this has delayed some of the federal decisions being made—but they will be debated in the peer-reviewed literature,” he said.

“The complaints that have been so rampant in the past weeks is as it becomes clear that BP is filling their notebooks with their data and their position, and the government is filling their notebook with their data and their position, the academics who don’t care about going to court are caught in the middle because nobody wants to share their data.

“It’s hard enough to get data now because of technical differences, but the difficulty is if we don’t have an opportunity to do that, it keeps us in the position of not being able to answer the questions even a third of the way into the process—the only thing I can give you is an unending list of uncertainties and things we don’t know. The harder it is to get the data, the harder it is for the academic community to be forthcoming.”

As the comments of Crozier show, commentaries like those appearing in *Time* and the *Washington Post* drop any pretense of making an objective investigation. They are following the lead of BP and the Obama administration, which hope they can combine the capping of the well with the capping of any serious examination of what devastation the oil spill has already caused, and may still cause.



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