

## **Oil spill response and public/media perception**

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### **Abstract**

In the world of 24 hour news, social media and internet lobbying, the way in which oil spill responses are reported is important for the final perception of how the overall response was delivered. This paper examines the media coverage during the *C/V Rena* grounding in New Zealand in 2011 to investigate the media outputs and perceptions relating to the overall oil spill response. We took all media reports available from the main newspaper in New Zealand and analysed whether the report was positive, neutral/fact or negative/concern; what was the overall theme of the media report including salvage (container and vessel), oil response, wildlife, finance, volunteers, public health issues and cultural issues; and the time of the media report in relation to the initial incident and other significant incident events. Results from this analysis indicate the importance of clear media liaison with facts on all aspects of the responses being undertaken. There are clearly areas where media responses are continuously negative despite response activates. In addition there are also areas where media response clearly changes over time as apparently more positive outcomes are achieved. Oils spills are perceived as inherently negative incidents, however this research highlights where increased effort in some response areas, along with running an effective, efficient spill response, can influence media coverage and public perception.

### **Introduction**

Oil spills are perceived as inherently negative incidents. In the world of 24 hour news, internet, mobile devices and social media, oil spill events are covered by the media within hours of them occurring and media interest can be intense and relentless (Molotch & Lester 1975; Daley & O'Neill 1991; Anderson & Marhadour 2007; Starbird et al. 2015). Adding to the media perception are political pressures, public anxieties, wildlife and environmental concerns and interest group lobbying (Smith 1993; Widener & Gunter 2007).

The *C/V Rena* ran aground on the Astrolabe Reef, Bay of Plenty, New Zealand (NZ) at 2.20am on Wednesday the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 2011. Media calls commenced at 6.30am on that day. The first media release made by the response team was at 8am and the first media conference was at 3pm. The story broke in NZ via on-line news websites soon after 6.30am and the first NZ printed newspaper and radio reports were on the same day.

This paper investigates the print media coverage associated with the *C/V Rena* grounding in NZ over a 12 month period from October 2011 to October 2012, with particular focus on the media outputs, perceptions and themes relating to the overall oil spill response.

### **Methods**

To investigate media perception, we analysed all media reports available from the NZ Herald, between the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 2011 and 31 October 2012. The NZ Herald is NZ's largest national

newspaper with a weekday circulation of over 500,000 papers and a weekend circulation of over one million papers. The NZ Herald connects to the largest news websites of NZ with a combined circulation to more than a quarter of the NZ population.

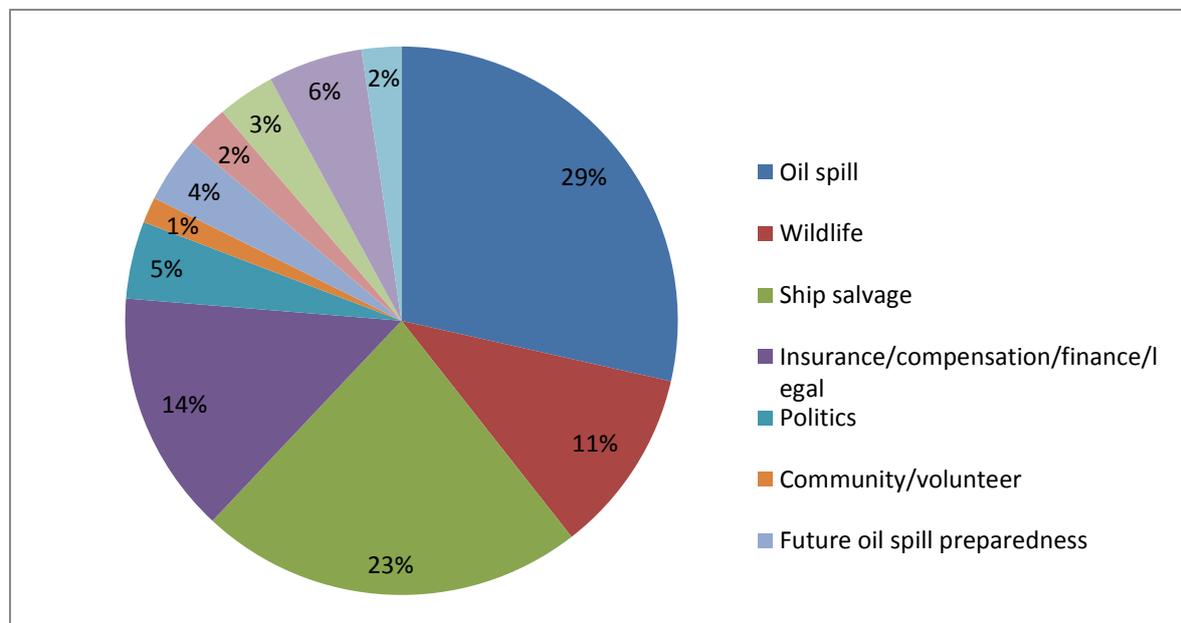
All available NZ Herald newspaper articles on the *C/V Rena* were obtained through the Australia/New Zealand reference centre. Newspaper articles were analysed for: overall theme (i.e. oil spill response, salvage, wildlife, insurance, volunteers, environmental issues, tourism and cultural issues); total words; overall tone (i.e. positive, neutral/fact or negative/concern); timing of themes relating to oil spill events; and sequence of themes within each article.

## Results

During the *C/V Rena* response, Maritime New Zealand’s media team had a number of media initiatives including a dedicated 24 hour hotline for media and public questions, 12 *C/V Rena* media site visits, 238 media releases and approximately 90 press conferences in the first two months of the response.

Our media analysis included 323 newspaper articles with an average of 518 words per article and 11 themes (Figure 1). Overall, the four major themes addressed were ‘Oil spill response’ (n=165 articles; 51%), ‘Ship salvage’ (n = 160; 49.5%); ‘Wildlife’ (n=102; 32%) and ‘Insurance/compensation /finance/legal’ (n=75; 23%). Word counts for these four themes varied considerably: overall 29% of words were dedicated to ‘Oil spill response’, 23% to ‘Ship salvage’, 14% to ‘Insurance/compensation /finance/legal’, and 11% to ‘Wildlife’ (Figure 1).

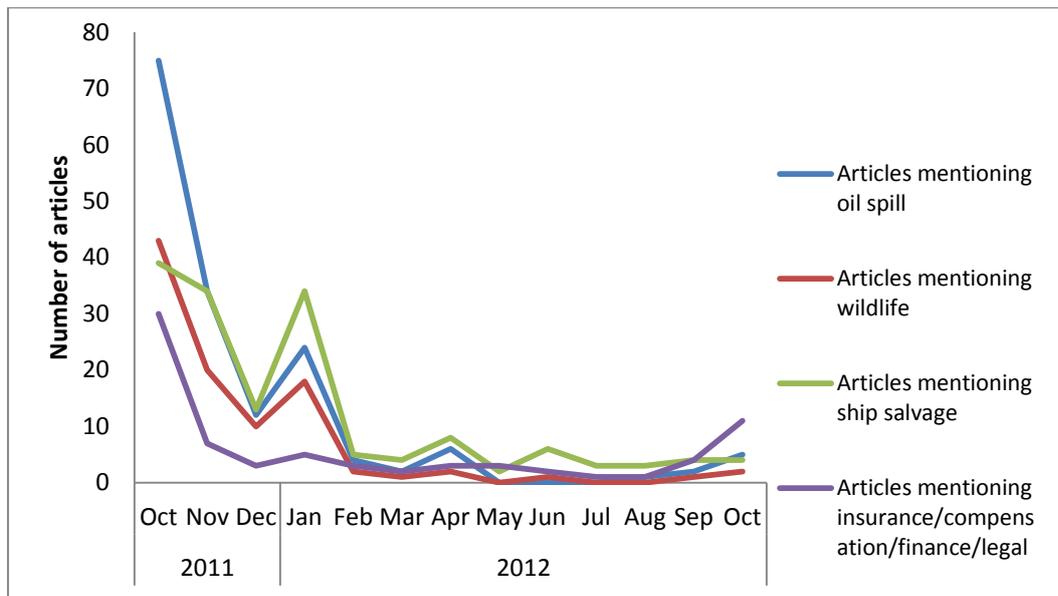
Figure 1 Themes covered in printed media on the *C/V Rena* oil spill - October 2011 to October 2012. Percentages represent the word counts for each theme.



There were 120 articles in the first month after the *C/V Rena* grounding, dropping to 54 and 22 in the following two months, and then increasing back to 45 in January 2012, coinciding with the wreck breaking up. Article numbers remained steady for the next seven months before increasing at the

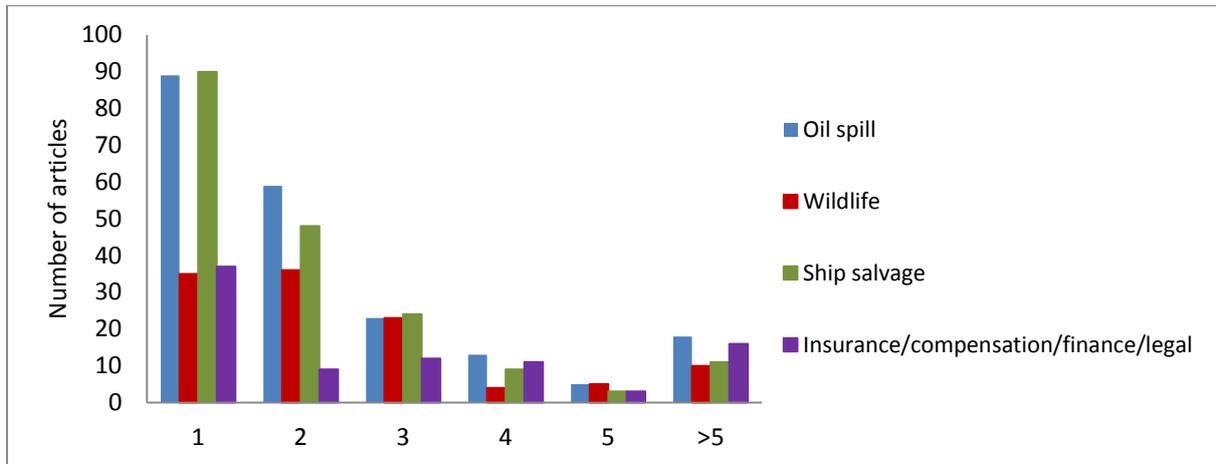
one year anniversary, which corresponded to an increased interest in the theme of 'Insurance/compensation/finance/legal' (Figure 2). A similar pattern was also seen in the number of words written about each major theme. Initially all four main themes were reported, with the themes of 'Oil spill response' and 'Wildlife' being mentioned the most in the first month. As the spill response continued and the *C/V Rena* broke apart, ship salvage became the theme mentioned in most articles. At the one year anniversary, as the cost and consequences of the spill were remembered, 'Insurance/compensation/finance/legal' became the most commonly mentioned theme.

Figure 2: The number of articles covering the main topics over time from the *C/V Rena* oil spill - October 2011 to October 2012.



When assessing the sequence of themes, 'Oil spill response' and 'Ship salvage' were the first to be mentioned in 50% of all articles, while wildlife and 'Insurance/compensation/finance/legal' were first in 30% of all articles. 'Oil spill response', 'Ship salvage' and 'Wildlife' were mentioned second in over 30% of all articles analysed (Figure 3).

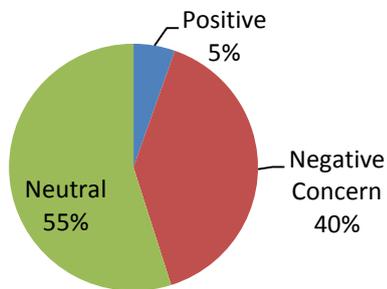
Figure 3: The sequence of themes reported in C/V Rena oil spill articles - October 2011 to October 2012.



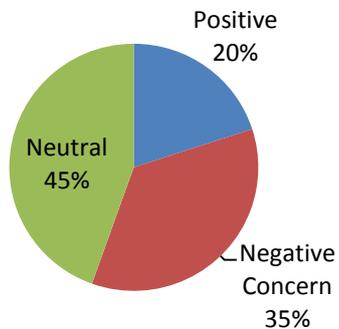
Of the four major themes reported, the tone of the majority of the articles was either neutral/fact or negative/concern (Figure 4). Wildlife was the only topic with a higher percentage of positive tone (20%; Figure 4). Of the other major themes, less than 5% of the articles contained a positive tone.

Figure 4: Article tone by theme for the C/V Rena oil spill - October 2011 to October 2012: (A) Oil spill response; (B) Wildlife; (C) Ship salvage; (D) Insurance/finance/compensation /legal

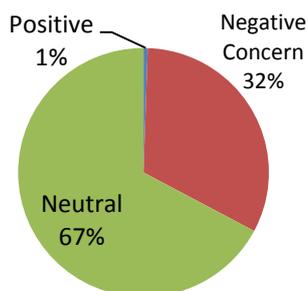
A) Oil Spill Response



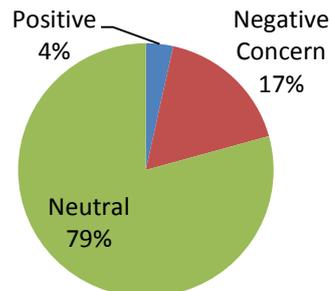
B) Wildlife



C) Ship salvage

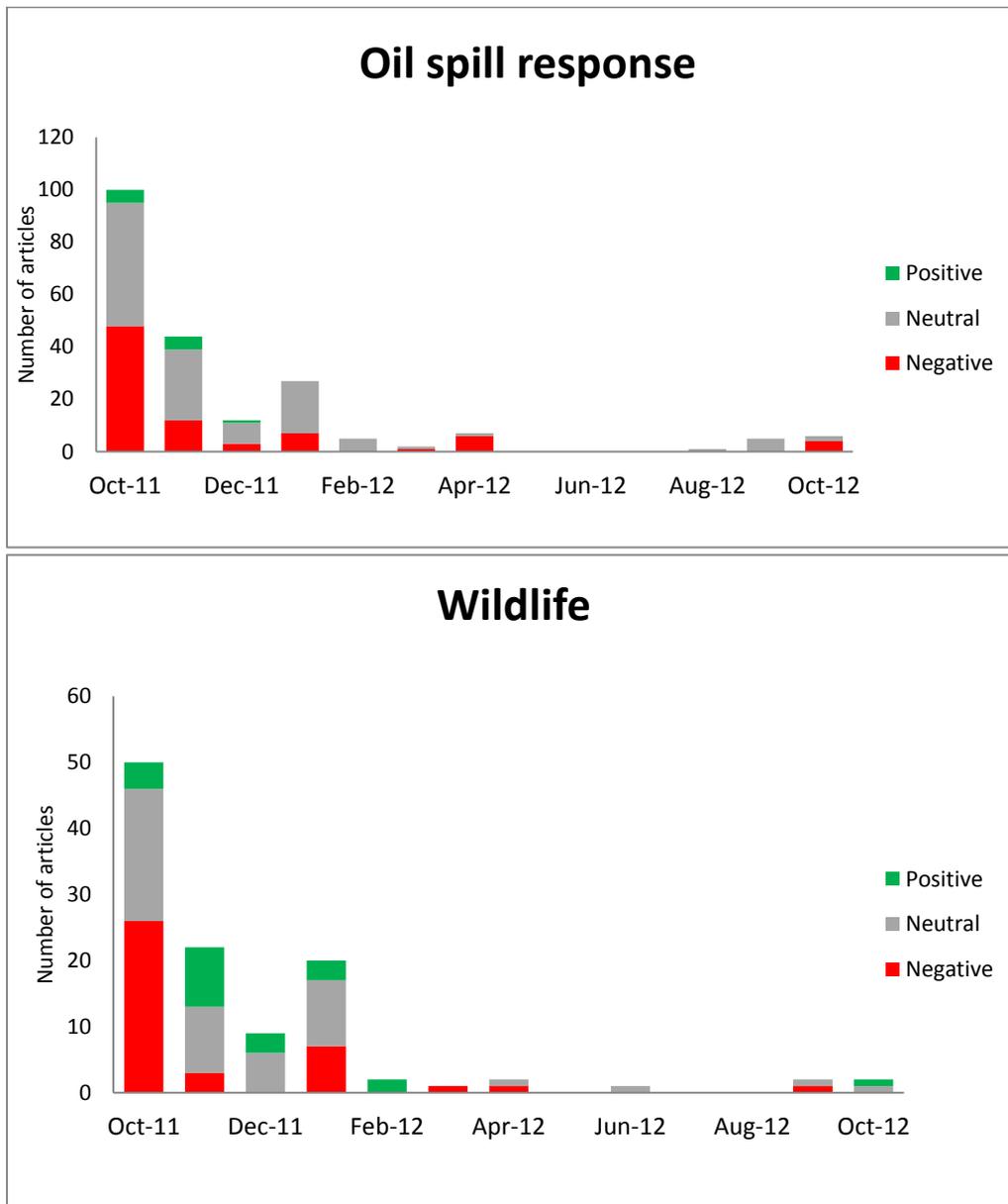


D) Insurance/Finance/Compensation/Legal



For the 12 month period of article assessment, wildlife sustained a higher positive tone, particularly when compared to the oil spill response theme that did not have any positive tone articles after the first three months (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Article tone over time for the C/V Rena oil spill for oil spill response and wildlife themes - October 2011 to October 2012.



## Discussion

Oil spills and the associated clean-up response attain high media attention. The public's perception of how an overall incident response is delivered is often determined by reports and opinions portrayed through online news or social media.

For the *C/V Rena* grounding and associated clean-up operations, the media perception was influenced by the slow breakup of the ship, protracted oil leaks and extended response duration. As the grounding occurred seven weeks prior to New Zealand's national governmental election, enhanced political influence was placed on the spill response, and broader associated issues such as offshore oil exploration and disaster response were highlighted by media and lobby groups.

Results from this research show there was immediate and extensive coverage of many themes relating to the incident in the NZ media. The predominant themes were oil spill response, ship salvage, wildlife and legal/financial issues. Oil spill response and ship salvage were usually the first two themes addressed in the articles examined, however these two themes were predominately neutrally or negatively toned, with less than 5% of all articles demonstrating any positive aspects. Articles that had neutral tones were those that were predominantly derived from the numerous factual press releases produced through the official oil spill response media team. This indicates the importance of clear media liaison and official press releases on all aspects of the response to encourage factual and neutral media coverage.

With the exception of wildlife, the tone of reporting of all themes became more negative over the twelve months analysed for this study. In contrast, Wildlife was consistently reported positively. Of the neutral/fact and negative/concern tones, all articles presented factual information released through official press releases, regarding numbers of animals coming in from the spill and processed through the wildlife facilities, and local and national concerns for the impact on wildlife. The wildlife theme was the only theme that continued to be more positive based throughout the year. For the *C/V Rena* wildlife response, success rate of little blue penguin rehabilitation (95% of penguins admitted to the oiled wildlife facility were publically released back into the wild) was a key positive message in an otherwise negative media response.

Although oils spills are perceived as inherently negative incidents, this research highlights that successful media liaison, controlled release of factual information through official channels, and emphasis of positive response efforts such as wildlife response, can influence media coverage and public perception.

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### **For talk**

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Astrolabe Reef is 12 Nm offshore so limited personal filming or photographs could be taken, limiting initial uninformed pictures and online stories. The spill has been described as New Zealand's worst maritime environmental disaster. The ship was carrying 1,368 containers, eight of which contained hazardous materials, as well as 1,700 tonnes of heavy fuel oil and 200 tonnes of marine diesel oil. By Sunday, 9 October 2011, a 5 kilometres (3.1 mi) oil slick threatened. Oil from *Rena* began washing ashore at Mount Maunganui beach on 10 October 2011. In January 2012, the *Rena* completely broke in half and the stern slipped off of the reef and began sinking.