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Advocacy groups in the wake of Hurricane Katrina: who shapes coverage of wetlands loss

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ADVOCACY GROUPS IN THE WAKE OF HURRICANE KATRINA: WHO SHAPES
COVERAGE OF WETLANDS LOSS?

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agriculture and Mechanical College
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Abstract

Louisiana's coastal wetlands provide a habitat for diverse wildlife, recreational opportunities for Louisiana residents and tourists, and an important natural buffer between communities and powerful hurricanes. Because they are disappearing at a rapid rate, coastal wetlands issues have been prominent in south Louisiana for decades. The catastrophic hurricanes of 2005 and 2008 have given the discussion an increased sense of urgency.

Through this paper, I explore coverage of wetlands loss in local south Louisiana daily newspapers. Specifically, I try to determine how these papers frame the issue and illuminate how sources present in these stories participate in the construction of those frames. I then discuss the advocacy group America's WETLAND's role as a newspaper source, how the group developed and maintains its message, and the relationship between that message and the group's sponsors. Finally, I interview journalists who cover the issue for newspapers in south Louisiana and the managing director of America's WETLAND.

Chapter 1. Introduction

This thesis investigates local newspaper coverage of coastal wetlands loss in south Louisiana, focusing on how news sources contribute to the overall framing of the wetlands issue. I find that advocacy groups play an important part in shaping the way journalists cover wetlands loss. I try to determine what makes one advocacy group more successful than another, whether it is the group's message, communication strategy, or access to resources. I then discuss how these advocacy groups impact the public discussion of wetlands issues through context analysis and interviews with journalists and the president of the most successful (in communication terms) advocacy group. This discussion of advocacy groups centers on America's WETLAND, a very successful advocacy group that receives the majority of its funding from fossil fuel interests related to Louisiana's wetlands.

Background

On August 29, 2005, the costliest natural disaster and fifth deadliest hurricane in United States history struck the Gulf Coast. Hurricane Katrina made landfall on Monday morning as a category-three storm. Later that day, the antiquated levee system in and around New Orleans, Louisiana failed and waters from Lake Pontchartrain and various canals poured into the city. Eighty percent of the city was flooded, as well as vast areas of other coastal communities (Knabb & Brown 2005).

The State of Louisiana reported 1,577 deaths directly caused by Hurricane Katrina. The state's Department of Health and Hospitals used coroner reports from victim identification centers and parish offices to determine the number, though some observers believe that deaths of sick and elderly that occurred in the months after the storm should be taken into account. (Beven,

et al. 2005) Using obituaries published in local papers after the storm, researchers claim that the city of New Orleans saw a forty-seven percent increase in its death rate in a six-month period after Katrina (Stevens, et al. 2007).

Many scientists, advocacy groups, and government organizations do not solely blame the failure of the levees for the flooding of New Orleans. They argue that the loss of Louisiana's coastal wetlands, once a large area of freshwater marsh and cypress forests, placed undue pressure on the levee system and made New Orleans and the other communities in south Louisiana more susceptible to hurricane damage (Costanza, et al. 2008).

South Louisiana's wetlands and coastal barrier islands work as "speed bumps" for hurricanes, decreasing storm surge before it reaches populated communities. But since 1930, Louisiana has lost over 1,900 square miles of swamp and barrier islands. (Bourne, 2004) This loss and the accelerated damage caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita have effectively turned New Orleans into a coastal city (Barras 2006).

Louisiana's wetlands do not only protect the state's coastal communities. Twenty-six percent of the nation's oil and natural gas supply travels through these marshes. That infrastructure also depends on the wetlands and barrier islands for protection and use as a staging area (Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Conservation and Restoration Task Force 2006).

Until 1930, the wetlands expanded every year. The Mississippi River's spring floods spread sediment out and created new land. When the state government constructed a vast levee system after the catastrophic flood of 1927, the floods stopped and the wetlands began to contract. (Bourne, 2004) While Louisiana contains only twenty-five percent of the wetlands in the United States, it is the site of eighty percent of the nation's wetlands loss (Coreil 2004).

Another factor that has accelerated the process of wetlands degradation is the impact of the oil, natural gas, and shipping industries on south Louisiana. Engineers searching for fossil fuels and faster shipping lanes dug over 8,000 miles of canals into the marsh land. These canals bring salt water from the Gulf of Mexico into what were once fresh and brackish water wetlands. This salinity infiltration has both altered the animal population and choked off freshwater plants that normally hold the wetlands together and absorb storm surge, like Louisiana's famous cypress forests (Bourne 2004).

Recent hurricanes like Katrina, Rita, Gustav, and Ike have all accelerated wetlands loss. The loss of this natural protection leaves more of the state exposed to water and winds from stronger hurricanes. This destructive cycle has led to a sense of urgency around the coastal wetlands policy debate and given Louisiana's Congressional delegation the political capital necessary to pass legislation that will direct more resource royalties toward coastal restoration (Landrieu 2006).

There is little debate as to whether coastal erosion affects the lives of Louisiana residents. Information on the issue is vital to citizens' daily lives, especially for use in hurricane and flood preparedness and informing political decisions.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Coastal Issues and Public Opinion

In July and August of 2008, the Louisiana Sea Grant, one of thirty-two Congressionally mandated Sea Grant programs focused on researching and informing the public about coastal issues, funded a survey through Louisiana State University's Public Policy Research Lab. The lab surveyed 628 Louisiana residents who live within thirty miles of the coast. Concerned with coastal residents' awareness of wetlands issues and Louisiana Sea Grant's efforts to inform the public, the survey provides valuable information for studying the role newspapers play in facilitating the conversation about wetlands loss.

Fifty-two percent of residents polled reported that they use newspapers as their primary source of information about coastal issues. The internet was second with 35.3 percent. This supports the contention that newspapers play a leading role in informing public opinion (McCombs 2004).

Another aspect of the Sea Grant survey that proves useful for this study is the attention it gives to respondents' trust of various sources. Fifty-seven percent of those polled had "a great deal of trust" in LSU scientists regarding coastal issues, while less than 17 percent place "a great deal of trust" in news and media reports. This illustrates the importance of newspapers as a facilitating agent. News consumers may not place a great amount of trust in those reporting on the news, but they do trust specific sources, in this case LSU scientists, that reporters cite in their stories. These data demonstrate the role of news frames in informing the public. Even though news consumers place more faith in experts than reporters, those reporters decide what quotes and other content provided by those experts to use in their stories. As Hallahan suggests,

“although media are not necessarily effective in telling people what to think, media can be strikingly effective in telling people what to think about—and how to think about it” (1999).

While most respondents trusted LSU scientists and educators, only 11.5 percent put a great deal of trust in government sources. This may mean that an expert’s credibility is directly related to her perceived independence.

Eighty percent of respondents reported that coastal policy issues were “very important” to them and their families. However, only 8.8 percent reported that they were “very informed” about coastal issues. The fact that the majority of respondents use newspapers as their primary source of information about coastal issues and so few of them feel “very informed” may reflect on the public’s perception of the quality of information about coastal issues provided by newspapers.

When asked what they can do to help protect coastal communities, 49.8 percent of respondents replied with a specific action. This was followed by 18.4 percent who said that staying informed, aware, and educated can help protect coastal communities. This study evaluates the construction of the news stories that so many coastal residents rely on for their information about Louisiana’s coastal issues.

What Makes Louisiana Different?

Louisiana is not the only state suffering from significant and rapid coastal erosion. The Florida Everglades have receded at a comparable rate. The similar geography of these two coastal southern states means that they suffer from many of the same geographical problems. The difference lies in how citizens and officials address those problems.

Even though the two states’ wetlands loss occurred in a similar fashion, their advocacy and policy responses diverged nearly a century ago. In the 1920s, Florida conservationists began

drawing attention to the Everglades, and in 1934 Everglades National Park was created. In the 1920s, Louisiana residents and government officials focused more on development of on and off shore natural resources and controlling the flooding of the Mississippi River. In 1923, new seismic exploration technology allowed for increased exploration and production of oil and natural gas resources. For the next several decades Louisiana's coast functioned primarily as a staging platform for offshore oil and gas development. Florida's coastal policies, while often destructive, were much more tourism-oriented. Preserving the integrity of the Everglades became an economic priority.

We can conclude that the policy difference between Louisiana and Florida concerning coastal erosion is heavily dictated by each state's revenue-producing industries. Because Florida's tourism industry creates sizeable state revenue, preserving the aesthetics of its coastal area is a priority. Visitors to Florida annually pay \$3.9 million in state sales taxes, allowing the state to function without a personal income tax. The tourism industry in Florida also employs just under one million people ("Visitor Spending" 2009). Because Louisiana's oil and gas industry creates a large portion of the state's revenue (in 2008 the industry provided the state with \$2.1 billion in tax revenue), its coastal area has been primarily used for exploration and drilling, often at the expense of the environment (Caffey & Schexnayder 2003).

Chapter 3. Method

Theoretical Framework

Newspaper journalists covering Louisiana's wetlands loss rely heavily on government experts, independent experts, and advocacy groups when writing stories. The selection of sources and content plays an important part in how journalists frame coastal erosion.

Lee, McLeod, and Shah define a news frame as "a particular logic or organizing principle with which a given policy conflict is described in media reports, suggesting particular themes, interpretations, and terms by which such conflict should be understood" (2008). This organizing principle sets the boundaries for debate (Gameson 1992).

A large amount of media research accepts the existence of news frames and seeks to understand their effect on news consumers. (Beck 2002; Newton 1999; Scheufele 1999) Other research, however, treats the creation of news frames as the dependent variable, a product of various pressures and structures under which commercial journalism operates (Scheufele 1999; Fair & Astroff 1991; Rohlinger 2002).

Entman (1993) provided a succinct outline of framing in his review of the literature. This study focuses on the fundamentals of Entman's model: selection and salience in the construction of news frames. Journalists define the problem and its causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. Journalists provide the boundaries for public debate of the issues that they cover. The selection of sources plays an important part in this. Journalists select certain sources for many different reasons; these include deadline pressure, access to resources, and professional norms and routines.

“Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to *select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in the communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described. Frames, then, *define* problems—determine what a causal agent is doing and costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of cultural values; *diagnose* causes—identify the forces creating the problem; *make moral judgments*—evaluate causal agents and their effects; and *suggest remedies*—offer and justify treatments for the problem and predict their likely effects.” (p.55)

Because of scarce resources and deadline pressure, journalists tend to rely on official or “legitimate” sources while working their news beats. Government and business entities have offices designed to give quick, often pre-packaged responses to a journalist’s questions. The prominence of these sources help to provide a story with an aura of legitimacy (Gans 1979). Thirty years ago, Gaye Tuchman stated, “today’s news net is intended for big fish” (Tuchman 1978 p. 21). That statement remains true for the current norms and routines of newsgathering.

Norms of the newsroom also require a story to contain a certain amount of “newsworthiness.” It must have a hook to grab the reader’s attention (Gans 1979). This provides a tool to grassroots and foundation funded advocacy groups to get into the mainstream news and influence frames. If an unofficial source can sufficiently demonstrate to a journalist the “newsworthiness” of his perspective, he has a better chance of influencing the news frame. Once a journalist uses an advocacy group’s spokesperson as a source, a relationship of trust and mutual benefit may form, greatly enhancing that group’s ability to influence news frames. The advocacy group becomes a trusted source, and the journalist treats it as a valuable and convenient part of the news beat (Rohlinger 2002).

While both journalists and conventional news sources like company spokespersons, government organizations, and advocacy groups benefit from this relationship, it functions as

one of conflict and compromise. As Hallahan describes it, “Exchanges between sources and journalists are essentially *frame negotiations* in which adroit sources play on journalists' schematically organized knowledge about news to propose stories that follow conventions of storytelling, fit certain formulaic categories of content, and resonate with a journalist's notions of popular culture” (1999).

During a news interview, sources try to influence the news frame by only providing information favorable to their own interests, and journalists try to answer questions that they believe concern the society at large and jibe with their professional routines. The compromise that results from this frame negotiation becomes the news story that then shapes public understanding of the issue at hand. It is difficult to overstate the influence of official spokespersons in shaping news coverage; studies have shown that public relations practitioners provide almost half of the content in news stories (Cutlip 1989).

Carragee and Roefs critique framing studies in their review of the literature, claiming that media scholars largely ignore questions of power in their research. They argue that framing research should “contribute to an understanding of the interaction between social movements and the news media.” (1999) They argue that scholars have reduced framing research to a subsidiary of media effects research and that they ignore the central questions of hegemony that can be explored through study of the formation of news frames. Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony can provide theoretical ground for framing research, as it seeks to explain how powerful elites influence public opinion in order to create and manage consent to the political establishment by producing and disseminating meanings and values. Carragee and Roefs (1999) argue that study of frame sponsorship and the evolution of concepts and ideology present in news frames can address central questions of this hegemonic process.

Most corporations are aware of the potential for shaping news coverage inherent in an effective public relations strategy. News frames can directly influence public opinion, as Hallahan addressed when he explained that while frames do not tell us what to think, they do tell us what to think about (1999). In theory, a corporation with an effective public relations strategy could influence a news frame heavily enough to dictate what facts the journalist includes or excludes.

This leads us to the term “greenwashing.” *Webster’s* dictionary defines greenwashing as “the practice of promoting environmentally friendly programs to deflect attention from an organization's environmentally unfriendly or less savory activities” (2009). Many chemical and fossil fuel companies have the incentive to greenwash environmental issues that implicate their practices when those practices would be too costly to address otherwise. Greenwashing “consists of any advertising, marketing or public relations actions by corporations to project an image of being an environmentally-minded organization, even when their business practices are destructive.” The organization hopes that the impact of a greenwashing campaign on public opinion will be great enough to relieve public pressure and dissuade policymakers from targeting whatever practice that corporation sees as vulnerable (Jenner 2005).

I introduce greenwashing here because of a concern about one of Louisiana’s most prominent environmental groups. America’s WETLAND Foundation, begun by the state in 2001 but functioning now as an independent non-profit coastal advocacy group, receives its major funding from Shell, Chevron, American Petroleum Institute, AECOM Coastal, BP, British Gas, and Citgo, among other major energy/fossil fuel companies (America’s WETLAND n.d.). This organization’s source of funding gives it incentive to downplay any impact that oil and gas companies have had on the deterioration of Louisiana’s wetlands.

While many scholars view it as a negative, undemocratic phenomenon, (Gonzalez 1999; Jenner 2005), the controversy surrounding the idea of greenwashing may be slightly overblown. The public relations firms of organizations participate in the construction of reality in the media marketplace, and ideally their efforts compete and collaborate with the reality presented by other sources (Hallahan 1999).

Communications professionals naturally seek to portray their employers in a positive light, and though ignoring negatives while highlighting positives will sometimes occur as “greenwashing,” the communications function does not differ for any other industry. This places the question not necessarily with the companies who greenwash, but with the society whose public discussion is determined by commercial enterprise. Because the actions of energy companies often negatively impact the environment, studying their communications strategies highlights the disconnect between a profit-motivated communications culture and the best interest of the society at large.

The importance of newspapers in informing Louisiana residents about coastal erosion and the competing frames that different environmental advocacy groups present to news media make this a good issue through which to study the role that advocacy groups and other sources play in the construction of news frames. This leads us to the following research questions:

RQ 1: What frame dominates Louisiana newspaper coverage of coastal wetlands loss?

RQ 2: What environmental advocacy group is most effective in influencing that frame, and why?

Data Collection

For the purposes of this study, I considered the interaction of “themes, interpretation, and terms” (Lee et al. 2008) to place the frames of local in-state newspaper stories concerning the erosion of Louisiana’s wetlands into three distinct categories.

I used three frames: *info*, *call to action*, and *responsibility*. The main message of stories labeled *info* is to inform the reader about the state of the wetlands and/or the rate of wetlands loss without prescribing a solution or assigning blame.

Stories coded as *call to action* suggest ways that the government and citizens can address the issue of wetlands loss. While most *call to action* stories have informative aspects, the focus on solutions brings it to the present category.

Responsibility stories specifically assign blame to human action including the levee system and exploratory canals dug by shipping, oil, and natural gas companies. So a story that contains information about this issue might be coded as *call to action*, and a story suggesting a solution might be coded as *responsibility* depending on the rest of the article content.

In constructing the frames for this study, I relied heavily on the methodology used in Trumbo’s study on media coverage of climate change (1996). I incorporated two of his frames into one (*diagnose causes* and *make moral judgments* roughly approximate the *responsibility* frame), and altered the language to more accurately reflect frames that became apparent in preliminary reading of stories sampled. This study most significantly differs from Trumbo’s in that it is not a longitudinal study but attempts to establish patterns in the nature of coverage over a three-year span.

For each story coded, I recorded the dominant source of information, if any was apparent. As Trumbo states, “it is in the source that the broader authority of the story resides. Attribution

is the first lesson in journalism” (1996). If advocacy groups and other sources are effective in conveying their message through the earned media of a newspaper story, then there should be a moderate to strong correlation between the dominant sources and the frames of the stories.

I sampled stories from the five local newspapers in south Louisiana with the highest circulation. Those include the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, the Lake Charles *American-Press*, the Baton Rouge *Advocate*, the Lafayette *Advertiser*, and the Houma *Courier*. A keyword search of “wetlands, coastal erosion” conducted for the time period from August 29, 2005, the landfall of Hurricane Katrina, to April 1, 2009, provided a population of 5,423 stories. I collected a sample of about nine percent the size of the population, totaling 493 stories. The sample will roughly represent each paper proportionally to its volume of stories, though due to its overwhelming proportion of the population (71 percent), I under sampled the *Times-Picayune* in order to form a picture of the frames prominent in the other newspaper markets. In order to represent each year proportionally, I divided the population by year. I randomly selected stories from August 31 to December 31, 2005 that make up twelve and a half percent, all of 2006 that make up twenty-five percent, all of 2007 that will make up twenty-five percent, all of 2008 that make up twenty-five percent, and January 1 to April 1, 2009 that make up twelve and a half percent of the sample.

I supplemented this framing data by interviewing journalists who have covered Louisiana’s coastal issues for in-state and national newspapers. These interviews focused on the journalist’s relationship with sources, credibility assigned to “legitimate” sources versus independent sources, and how the journalists select what information provided by the sources to include in an article. These interviews help to gain insight into the construction of news frames

and provide a good way to see if the data collected for this study resonates with the experiences of professional journalists.

I hypothesize that government spokespersons and experts will be more likely to garner media attention than corporate funded and grassroots advocacy groups. They will most likely advocate action, but in some cases may assign responsibility.

Corporate-funded advocacy groups should receive less media attention and will be less likely than government sources to assign responsibility.

Grassroots groups and independent experts are expected to appear in the fewest number of newspaper stories but should speak more than the previous sources about the role that government and oil and gas companies have played in the deterioration of Louisiana's wetlands.

I expect that articles that appear without explicit sources, such as some editorials and opinion pieces, will be the most likely to assign responsibility to government and oil, gas, and shipping industries.

I performed a pilot study for this thesis by applying a similar coding structure to national stories about coastal erosion in Louisiana between August 25, 2005 (when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans) and December 2, 2008. The time period provided a surprisingly small population size of fifty-nine stories, though the data still contained a visible pattern that can be used to direct further study.

In the pilot study, I grouped government-and corporate-funded sources together and grassroots groups and independent experts separately. The results approximate my hypothesis for this study: eleven and a half percent of government and corporate funded sources assigned responsibility for wetlands loss while seventy-five percent of stories with grassroots groups, fifty-seven percent of stories with no explicit source, and forty percent of stories citing

independent experts assigned responsibility to the shipping industry, the oil and gas industry, and the government.

The pilot study prompted me to split government and corporate-funded sources for this project, because multiple articles that used government sources spoke of the energy industry's roles in wetlands deterioration. Forty-four percent of the articles also fell under the government/corporate category, so dividing it into separate groups may help to achieve a more normal distribution.

Chapter 4. Results

Newspapers

Of the 493 stories coded, sixty percent had a *Call to Action* frame, twenty-four percent had an *Info* frame, and fifteen percent had a *Responsibility* frame. The overwhelming number of frames that advocate action or describe action that has been taken points to a consensus among all sources: residents and government must take action to limit, stop, or reverse coastal erosion in south Louisiana.

Much of the coverage, most notably in the Baton Rouge *Advocate* and New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, cover local and state government meetings, bills, and resolutions, which almost never use the *Responsibility* frame. Other than the 2006 Congressional battle to acquire for the state a percentage of oil and gas royalties from drilling activity in federal waters off Louisiana's coast, newspapers covering the activities of public office holders focused on the issue of wetlands loss and what can be done or will be done about it.

Divided by year, the breakdown of frames generally resembles the overall distribution, though the amount of *Responsibility* frames decreases every year from 2005 to 2008. This may be attributable to increased coverage of legislation and campaign promises and decreased coverage of angry finger pointing immediately after hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The way each newspaper framed the issue varies. The New Orleans *Times Picayune* dominates coastal erosion coverage in south Louisiana newspaper markets and makes up forty-one percent of this study's sample. Like the other papers, the *Call to Action* frame appears more than both the *Info* and *Responsibility* frames combined. The *Call to Action* frame occurred 120

times (59%), the *Info* frame occurred fifty-six times (28%), and twenty-six stories (13%) received the *Responsibility* frame. While this approaches the overall distribution, the amount of stories coded *Responsibility* from the *Times Picayune* sample is thirteen percent, which is two percent less than the proportion of stories coded with the *Responsibility* frame from the overall sample.

The framing of stories from the Baton Rouge *Advocate* sample approximates the *Times-Picayune* result. Thirty percent of the stories received an *Info* frame, fifty-seven and a half percent received a *Call to Action* frame, and twelve and a half percent received a *Responsibility* frame. The *Advocate* may contain more *Info* stories because it covers legislation and campaigns centralized in the state capital.

The Lafayette *Advertiser* frames stories similarly, but with a heavier emphasis on action that can or is being taken to stop wetlands loss. Sixty-three percent of stories coded from the *Advertiser* employed the *Call to Action* frame, the *Info* frame appeared in twenty-six percent, and eleven percent fit into the *Responsibility* frame. The *Advertiser* sample contains the lowest proportion of *Responsibility* framed stories. This may be because Lafayette is located near the Atchafalaya River, and the Atchafalaya River Basin is the only area in coastal Louisiana that is actually building new wetlands (“Achafalaya Basin” n.d.).

While the framing of stories from the *Times Picayune*, the *Advocate*, and the *Advertiser* are roughly similar to the overall distribution, the Houma *Courier* and the Lake Charles *American Press* buck the trend. Both papers have a higher percentage of stories coded *Responsibility* than *Info*. Nineteen percent of the *Courier*'s stories employed the *Responsibility* frame while seventeen percent received the *Info* frame. Twenty-one percent of the *American Press* stories sampled received the *Responsibility* frame while only fifteen percent were coded *Info*.

The Houma *Courier* had the second highest number of stories about wetlands loss during the period under study. Even though it has a lower circulation number than the Baton Rouge *Advocate*, the *Courier*'s proximity to the coast makes coastal erosion one of the most important issues facing residents in the paper's market area. Many of the *Courier*'s readers' homes have become uninhabitable since the 2005 hurricanes, and much of the land surrounding other residences is undergoing rapid change. This makes coastal erosion the subject of government, community, and special interest stories, while the *Advocate*, located in the state capital Baton Rouge, usually covers wetlands loss as a policy issue.

The *Courier*'s geographic location may also explain why journalists employ the *Responsibility* frame more often than the journalists of any of the other newspapers under study. The direct threat to the homes of so many readers may lead more people to look for someone to blame for wetlands loss, and many of the always-widening drainage and shipping canals are visible from residents' homes and major highways, which reminds residents and community leaders of the role that humans play in wetlands loss. The proliferation of oil and gas companies as employers and customers of residents also makes the industry a visible player in every aspect of society, as both a benefactor and a source of problems.

The Lake Charles *American Press* made up a significantly smaller portion of the sampled stories than the *Courier* and the *Times-Picayune*, but its sample included the largest percentage of *Responsibility* framed stories. The reason for the smaller total number of stories covering wetlands loss in the *American Press* may be because restoration efforts are concentrated in the southeastern part of the state, a fact that both the *American Press* and *Lafayette Advertiser* lament in opinion pieces. The high percentage of *Responsibility* frames in the *American Press* may be because of its close proximity to the coastline. Lake Charles and Houma house the two

newspapers with the highest percentage of *Responsibility* frames, and they are also the cities closest to the coast.

The differences in frame tendencies for the different papers may be associated with the geographic locations of their offices. A paper like the Houma *Courier* whose primary market spans the area of Louisiana most affected by coastal erosion is likely to treat the issue differently than the Baton Rouge *Advocate*, which generally treats the issue as a policy concern. More active advocacy groups reside in New Orleans than many other areas of the state, so the *Times-Picayune* may deal with different sources and information than papers without the same group input.

Advocacy Groups

By far, the group most successful in earning newspaper coverage is America's WETLAND. Of the 493 stories coded, 150 mentioned or quoted a named advocacy group. Forty-eight of those stories sourced or mentioned the America's WETLAND organization. Of those forty-eight, forty-four percent fit into the *Info* frame, fifty percent were coded *Call to Action*, and six percent, three stories, received a *Responsibility* frame. Stories that used America's WETLAND as a source discussed the role that shipping, oil, and natural gas interests played in the destruction of the wetlands at a rate one fifth of the total sample. There is a statistically significant relationship (Chi-square = 1; $p = .013$) between stories that sourced America's WETLAND and stories that do not employ the *Responsibility* frame.

The stories that source America's WETLAND, while largely avoiding placing any blame on oil and gas companies, do speak about how important Louisiana's wetlands are to the oil and gas industry and the energy security of the nation.

Val Marmillion, head of Marmillion Co., the communications firm that runs America's WETLAND, was quoted in a December 19, 2007 Houma *Courier* story as saying of Louisiana, "We were seen as people that didn't protect our own land, that we invited the oil industry in." The story entitled "Why isn't La.'s coastal crisis a higher priority for some environmentalists?" portrays the state as an unrepentant martyr for the nation's energy security. Marmillion states in this article that Louisiana has trouble securing federal funding needed to restore wetlands because the state would rather help America "protect itself from the volatility of foreign (oil) supplies" than protect its ever-disappearing wetlands. The Marmillion quote, "We're willing to let the land be pulled off the longest pipeline complex in the world," follows the statement that he "believes the industry can be a good steward of the land and fuel the nation at the same time." The words "We're willing" imply that the average Louisiana resident accepts as justifiable wetlands degradation in the name of resource exploitation, even when that degradation makes homes, livelihoods, and native cultures more vulnerable to storms, flooding, and destruction.

At the end of the article, the journalist states that "America's Wetland is privately funded, mostly through donations." Here, the writer uncritically accepts Marmillion as the sole source of his story without seeking an alternate perspective. He is the only source and is able to portray the residents of Louisiana as willfull supporters of the energy industry at the expense of its land, waterways, and biodiversity. The statement that America's WETLAND "is privately funded, mostly through donations," leads the reader to believe that the state's residents fund the organization and support its message, even though the "sponsor" page on the organization's website lists every major national and international oil and gas company with interests on and off Louisiana's shore. (America's WETLAND n.d.)

A Houma *Courier* story from 2008 critically examines America's WETLAND's role in shaping public discussion of coastal erosion in Louisiana. On November 20, the *Courier* published a WWL-TV story entitled "Big oil hurt coast, so why shouldn't it pay for repairs?" The story featured Louisiana Mid-Continental Oil and Gas Association president and former Congressman Chris John as a source within the industry. When asked if the industry should do more to help restore Louisiana's wetlands, John calls attention to the fact that oil and gas companies pay state taxes, and says "They are paying in so many ways . . . I mean, this American Wetlands initiative, where all of the oil-and-gas companies have partnered."

Dennis Woltering, the author of the story, consulted Tulane environmental law professor and coastal restoration advocate Oliver Houck to rebut Chris John's statement. Houck called America's WETLAND "an industry lobby to get taxpayers to take the industry off the hook."

No official America's WETLAND spokesperson is present in this story, which may be why the *Responsibility* frame dominates. Chris John, while representing the Mid-Continental Oil and Gas Association, is obviously not coordinating communication strategies with America's WETLAND. Not only is his defense of the industry awkward, he does not even refer to the organization by its correct name. The breakdown of the communication hierarchy makes the organization more vulnerable to criticism and less effective in determining the news frame. A communications structure organized to provide journalists with newsworthy information can often control the frame of a story, and this example of an industry spokesperson being caught off guard and clumsily mentioning an organization and its objectives highlights the importance of top-down message control for these organizations.

Another story that included America's WETLAND and received a *Responsibility* frame is a New Orleans *Times-Picayune* story published on May 18, 2006, entitled "Author talks to

students about coastal erosion.” The story features children’s book author Wendy Wilson Billiot, who wrote a book called “Before the Saltwater Came.” The book chronicles how the life of an imaginary talking otter would have changed as shipping canals were dug and salt water intruded into the marsh. This story received a *Responsibility* frame because of the blame that Billiot puts on shipping canals in destruction of the wetlands. Billiot simply mentioned that she was involved with America’s WETLAND; she is not a part of its official communications infrastructure. Though her interaction with the journalist was considerably more pleasant than Chris John’s in the “Big oil hurt coast, so why shouldn’t it pay for repairs?” story, Billiot similarly represents America’s WETLAND in an unofficial capacity and strays off-message.

The only other story that received a *Responsibility* frame and mentions America’s WETLAND is a July 16, 2007, Baton Rouge *Advocate* article entitled “Saving coast a long battle.” The story reports the death of Mike Dunne, an author, reporter for the Baton Rouge *Advocate*, and coastal restoration activist. It mentions that Dunne received the America’s WETLAND Conservationist of the Year award the previous spring, and then goes on to cover an unrelated roundtable discussion about coastal wetlands loss during which University of New Orleans geology professor Denise Reed speaks of the role that channels dug into the marsh play in increasing coastal erosion. America’s WETLAND does not function as a source in this story, but is simply mentioned. This explains why the organization had no control over the story’s frame.

During the period under study, America’s WETLAND effectively controls the frame of newspaper stories that use its official communications infrastructure as an information source. Whether the story is about legislation, an America’s WETLAND event, or simply a published press release from the organization, the frame that the organization practically dictates to the

journalist portrays its major sponsors, the oil and gas industry, in a positive light. Some of these stories characterize the organization as an advocacy group funded by residents of Louisiana. These stories make the group seem more objective in its participation in the coastal restoration debate while ignoring its incentive to protect its major patrons.

In other stories, the organization portrays itself as proof that the oil and gas industry is dedicated to protecting and restoring Louisiana's wetlands, while avoiding concerns that the industry has and continues to compromise the integrity of those wetlands. Stories discussing the organization's Gulf state sub-campaign, "America's Energy Coast," openly acknowledge the organization's link to oil and gas companies and highlight the industry's reliance on coastal wetlands, and how the integrity of the wetlands directly relates to economic security along the Gulf Coast and the energy security of the entire nation. Armed with statistics detailing the importance of oil and gas operations on the Gulf Coast to the lives of all Americans, America's Energy Coast representatives argue that these companies should be part of the public debate about wetlands loss, mitigation, and restoration.

America's WETLAND is by far the most successful group when it comes to earning media coverage. It seems to function as a "go-to" source for journalists in south Louisiana looking for a quote from an environmental advocacy group.

Groups not funded by oil and gas interests, such as the Gulf Restoration Network, Environmental Defense Fund, Louisiana Environmental Action Network, Voice of the Wetlands, Save our Wetlands, Coastal Roots, and the Houma Indian Tribe of southern Terrebonne Parish are much less successful at earning newspaper coverage than America's WETLAND. After America's WETLAND, present in forty-eight stories, second most effective is the educational group Coastal Roots with five. Many of these organizations point to the role that oil and gas

interests have played in the destruction of the wetlands and call on them to pay for damage caused, but when the second most effective organization is ten percent as popular a news source as America's WETLAND, these groups can do little to shape the overall framing of wetlands coverage.

Chapter 5. Discussion

What Makes America's WETLAND so Successful?

Journalists interviewed for this project generally view America's WETLAND differently than they view other environmental advocacy groups such as Environmental Defense, the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation, and the Louisiana Environmental Action Network. Mark Schleifstein, environmental reporter for the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* described the group as "an organization created to handle public relations originally on behalf of the state . . . they are now attempting to reposition themselves to heighten awareness on behalf of both the state and the coastal states and the energy industry within those states."

Nikky Buskey, environmental reporter for the Houma *Courier*, said that she prefers to use scientific sources when covering wetlands issues, and views America's WETLAND as a public relations arm of the state and oil and gas companies. She prefers "to take a more scientific approach and talk to people who are on the ground, rather than people who are just working in lobbying in PR, so I do see the inherent bias and it influences when I choose to call them." She generally contacts them when they are involved in an event or directly involved in a project. According to Buskey, America's WETLAND is successful because they have more resources than other advocacy groups and use those resources to fund a skilled PR team.

The environmental reporter for the Lafayette *Advertiser*, Claire Taylor, cites America's WETLANDS public relations skills and the fact that one of their members, John Hill, was

formerly Gannett News Service's capital bureau chief in Baton Rouge. The *Advertiser* is also a Gannett paper, and Taylor claims that Hill uses his knowledge of the norms and routines of a Gannett paper and his contacts within the business to earn coverage from other Gannett papers. Taylor says she is not too concerned about the energy industry's funding of America's WETLAND, because "we've taken our shots at the oil and gas industry, and we try to point out that part of the problem with erosion is what they did in the past, and pointedly ask them those questions and report it." So because the *Advertiser* has written stories about the impact of the energy industry in Louisiana on wetlands loss, the paper generally accepts America's WETLAND's statements without thoroughly critiquing any bias that may exist because of their funding.

Through these interviews, journalists indicated that many groups do not reach certain papers because of their geographical focus. After Katrina, many organizations formed in New Orleans to bring attention to wetlands and levee issues. While some received coverage in the *Times-Picayune* and limited coverage in other papers, their issues generally focused on local issues affecting New Orleans specifically. America's WETLAND, designed by the state and funded by organizations working throughout the state and the Gulf Coast, addresses concerns in all of Louisiana's coastal areas. According to journalists interviews, America's WETLAND's focus is to raise awareness about wetlands issues, not to address specific, geographically limited policy concerns. This, along with the organization's highly effective communications staff, contributes to the group's success in influencing news coverage across south Louisiana.

Val Marmillion, director of Marmillion and Company, the communications firm that runs America's WETLAND, credited America's WETLAND's strict adherence to its founding goals

for the group's success. The foundation's six-year progress report, outlines its five strategic goals. They are:

- “1. Design a powerful, consistent and effective identity and brand along with images and core messages to define the problem and the impact of the loss of Louisiana's wetlands.
2. Create outreach opportunities and utilize comprehensive print and electronic media strategies to increase news coverage, educate the public and engender campaign support.
3. Develop a strong and active “Cooperating Organizations” network to support dissemination of campaign messages and information to key audiences.
4. Build an education infrastructure through opportunities to engage youth and adults about coastal Louisiana issues.
5. Develop funding opportunities to support the campaign and long-term restoration activities” (“America's WETLAND” n.d.).

The goal of the organization was to create awareness of wetlands issues among the general public both in Louisiana and nationally. It issues press releases, produces documentary films, takes out ads in newspapers, rents billboard space and makes members available for broadcast interviews. It has published advertisements and received earned news coverage in many of the most highly regarded national publications, including the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Time*, and *National Geographic*. It has also appeared in publications such as *Roll Call*, and *The Hill* that target national officeholders in Washington. (“America's WETLAND” n.d.)

The articles under study anecdotally show that the organization may have achieved one of its major goals, branding Louisiana's coast as “America's wetland.” Many stories that reference Louisiana's coast use the term “America's wetland,” even though they are apparently not talking about the organization. In a 2006 opinion piece published in the Lake Charles

American Press entitled “Vote Democrat and support a frivolous, dying party,” columnist Ann Coulter claimed that “the only way to get Democrats to focus on terrorists would be to convince them that the terrorists are interfering with a woman’s right to choose or that commercial jetliners exploding in midair are a threat to America’s wetlands.” The appearance of the term “America’s wetlands” in such a polemical statement illustrates the organization’s success in both branding the coast as America’s wetland and making it a national issue, even if that means it will be occasionally ridiculed.

Events also play an important part in America’s WETLAND Foundation’s campaign strategy. At the beginning of hurricane season in 2005, the organization draped Royal Street in the New Orleans French Quarter with a blue tarp, predicting that if a category five hurricane hit the city, the area would be under eighteen feet of water. Marmillion explained that this event helped news outlets to make the connection between coastal wetlands and the vulnerability of New Orleans to hurricane damage.

America’s WETLAND was so successful in attaching its name to the wetlands loss and hurricane issues that, according to Marmillion, news media outlets contacted Marmillion and Company’s offices in Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles, California, when the state’s communication’s structure was less available after hurricanes Katrina and Rita. This claim supports the contention that the foundation was the dominant group discussing wetlands issues prior to the time period under study.

Is America’s WETLAND a Greenwashing Operation?

The organization’s current chairman, R. King Milling, was president of Whitney Bank and sat on the board of Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana when, at a 2001 forum hosted by then-Governor Mike Foster, Milling used economics to make the case for saving and restoring

the wetlands. He spoke of the economic loss that follows land loss. While many argue for land conservation to maintain ecological integrity, Milling used a perhaps more-universal incentive to lend weight to the issue. If people understood the issue as a threat to their economic and energy security, then Milling felt that they would be more willing to act. This foreshadowed the model for the way America's WETLAND Foundation advocates for its cause. ("America's WETLAND" n.d.)

Governor Foster commissioned a board of community, business, and environmental leaders to design the structure, goals, and strategy of the America's WETLAND Foundation over a seven-month period in 2001. While public funds paid for this commission, this board designed the organization to fund itself through private and foundation support. The commission planned to garner a large portion of support from the energy industry active in the state. ("America's WETLAND" n.d.)

The foundation designed its goals and strategies with this in mind. If it worked as an organization that advocates for coastal restoration because of the oil and gas companies and not in spite of them, then these companies would be more willing to voluntarily support the organization and its projects.

In this way, America's WETLAND Foundation proactively meets the interests of the energy companies in order to gain their support. These corporations do not apply pressure to the foundation in order to shape its message to their liking, the organization anticipates the needs of these sponsors and makes that step unnecessary.

This is a two part question: Is this greenwashing, and is greenwashing necessarily bad? America's WETLAND has demonstrated through its own research that a much larger percentage of Louisiana's residents are aware of the urgency of coastal issues now than they were before the

organization began. Even before hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the federal government began to recognize the enormity of the problem by allocating federal dollars for restoration projects.

(“America’s WETLAND” n.d.)

While there are too many intervening variables to assume that America’s WETLAND Foundation is responsible for the huge uptick in citizen engagement on coastal issues, I posit that the group’s unprecedented public relations effort for the state’s coastline funded by a steady and impressive list of sponsors likely has had a major impact on coastal wetlands awareness.

While the organization’s impact raises awareness, it also sidesteps important aspects of the conversation. Stories that cite the foundation almost never mention the impact of the oil and gas industry. Because of its impressive communications successes and dominance compared to other groups and advocates, a large part of the public discussion about wetlands loss excludes this point.

The America’s WETLAND Foundation uses the economic and political power of large energy corporations to broadcast its message of coastal advocacy to more people and policymakers than any other coastal advocacy group in Louisiana. It designed its message in order to attain that power, and because of it has been able to produce the largest public education campaign ever conducted in the state of Louisiana (“America’s WETLAND” n.d.)

Limitations and Future Research

The scope of this study is limited in both time frame and the media outlets considered. Because our news structure changes with rapidly evolving communication technologies, newspapers are less important as a facilitator for public discussion than they once were. A comprehensive study of radio, television, Internet, and newspaper coverage would provide a more complete picture of the public debate over wetlands loss.

The time frame of the study limits the conclusions that we can draw from the data collected. While the landfall of Hurricane Katrina marks an important historical moment in Louisiana and U.S. history that may have focused national and local attention to the issue, we cannot know this without comparing this data to coverage preceding the storm. Also, because America's WETLAND Foundation makes up such a large part of this paper, examining coverage dating back to the organization's founding in 2001 would provide us with a better understanding of the organization's impact and campaign execution.

Surprisingly, the term "global warming" only appeared in twelve of the 493 stories in this sample. A further investigation into why global warming is largely neglected in newspaper coverage of wetlands loss, an issue deeply impacted by sea level rise, could illuminate additional interesting aspects of this issue. A comparison between local and national coverage of Gulf Coast wetlands may show that global warming is more of a national issue than a local issue.

Another interesting research topic would be to gauge the success of America's WETLAND's branding efforts by identifying news articles that use the term without referencing the organization, and then interviewing the speaker or writer to learn where the term entered his or her vocabulary.

Chapter 6. Conclusion and Practical Implications

My first research question addressed the overall framing of newspaper coverage of wetlands loss, and my second research question addressed the dominant advocacy group providing information to news stories. The fact that the frames of stories including the dominant group, America's WETLAND Foundation, vary so widely from the overall distribution leads me to believe that while important, advocacy groups are not the most sought after sources in these stories. In my interviews with the journalists covering the issue, I found that scientists and policymakers generally receive more legitimacy than advocacy groups because of their perceived independence from sponsors and ideology.

According to these journalists, the most important tools in achieving earned news coverage are the organization's mastery of the statistics, plans, and nuances of the issue and the reputation of the organization's active membership. If a journalist sees a group's members regularly attend public meetings about the coast and its representatives can speak competently about the issue, then they are more likely to become sources. Likewise, if a group puts on a stunt that is newsworthy in itself, journalists will cover it. But the group will only receive positive coverage for its issues if it backs up the stunt with obvious knowledge of the subject at hand and a focused, well-laid-out message.

Still, advocacy groups are often thought of as representatives of public opinion (Berry, 1999). America's WETLAND frequently utilizes this perception to represent itself as a citizen advocacy group despite its energy industry-driven, top-down message management. Journalists using groups like America's WETLAND as sources should acknowledge their sources of funding and seek out more sources to present a broader viewpoint.

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Vita

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