The Non-coupled Environment: Environmental Disaster Response Performance and Outcomes

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Pipeline spills often provide scarring images. Neither river nor marsh, bird or man is safe from oil slicks, fumes, fires or explosions. Symptoms of gasoline poisoning include e.g., vision loss, dizziness, extreme fatigue, and vomiting. Loss of consciousness can also occur–in 1999 an 18-yer-old suffocated after he lost consciousness and fell face-first into a creek as the result of a gasoline spill in Bellingham, Washington.[1]. The haunting images and stories of pipeline spills stand in stark contrast to reports produced by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA). These official documents usually are not overtly concerned with the human or environmental tragedy that has taken place, but rather discuss the actions that the response crew has taken, and the results they have achieved.

With regard to disaster response, there is a potential conflict between how these organizations' goals and how measure performance. Their mission is to protect the environment as well as human health.[2]. The EPA's and PHMSA's activities include documentation of pipeline spills as well as spill response. For PHMSA, documenting spills is mostly a "passive" activity–the PHMSA compiles the data that is provided to the agency and makes it accessible to the public. Therefore, the PHMSA represents itself as an agency that engages in safety initiatives. The EPA on the other hand produces many documents on disaster response and ecological restoration. The annual report of the EPA emphasizes the outcomes of their remediation and enforcement efforts.[3]

Organizations typically assess their performance on the basis of indicators that they (at least in theory) can influence (March & Cyert 1963). In the case of the EPA and the PHMSA this leads to a potential conflict. The organization's task is to address environmental pollution–but both the EPA and the PHMSA have a motivation to present to the regulator a positive picture of environmental remediation as evidence of their good performance. Ironically though, bad news would spur regulatory action, and thus contribute to the EPA's and PHMSA's goal. But bad news might be taken as a sign of bad performance of these actors (although the two of them can hardly have the power to control environmental outcomes).

The key to this process is the action taken by the EPA and the PHMSA on the ground, when their crews respond to a disaster and later engage in, or enforce,

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[1] He was one of three victims of the incident.

[2] `https://www.epa.gov/aboutepa/our-mission-and-what-we-do` & `https://www.phmsa.dot.gov/about-phmsa/phmsas-mission`, accessed 2020-06-18

[3] `https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2020-03/documents/fy21-cj-13-program-performance.pdf`, accessed 2020-06-18. To highlight the significance or this decision, one could also expect the EPA to provide a "state of the environment"–or in other words emphasize the need for the organization to receive funding in the first place, rather than highlighting the organization's efficient use of money.

remediation. How do the positive reports of the EPA and the PHMSA come to be? How do the agencies develop positive reports, even if the events that unfold are intrinsically negative? Over the course of a few weeks or months, a process unfolds on the micro-level that is aggregated to the organizations' reports on its performance on the macro-level. Actors on the ground translate the traumatic experiences that they make on the ground when they first arrive on site into stories of success and human perseverance, within a few days. This process we can witness first hand.

References

March, J. G., & Cyert, R. M. (1963). A Specific Price and Output Model. In *A behavioural theory of the firm* (pp. 128–149). Englewood Cliffs, NJ.