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## Why don't news outlets call BP's huge oil 'spill' a gusher?

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BILOXI, Miss. — Media consumers want to know why news outlets call the gusher in the Gulf an oil spill.

Oil spill fits in a headline or sound bite, but fails to capture what started April 20 in the Gulf and how life is changing as a result.

How do we quantify the damage to animals, humans and the ocean from oil that pulses every second, like a living being, from the Deepwater Horizon's broken wellhead?

A sociologist who studies disaster, a grammarian, a Coast mayor, a Tulane University energy professor and a BP representative offered their thoughts.

"Catastrophe is a word that springs instantly to mind," said wordsmith James J. Kilpatrick, a retired journalist who lives in the Washington area and previously authored a popular syndicated column, "The Writer's Art."

"Catastrophe is about as bad as it gets," he said. "Debauch is something, but debauch carries a different connotation from catastrophe or calamity. Those are good words. Is a catastrophe worse than a calamity? I'd have to think it over."

"This is on an unprecedented scale, so it would be an exercise in semantics to fish around and find the worst adjective there is or the worst noun for it. My family on my father's side came from down there in New Orleans way back in the early part of the 19th century, so I'm feeling this acutely. I have cousins and so forth who still live down there on the Gulf Coast. It's a catastrophe, sure enough, for them."

Sociologist Steven Picou has studied disasters for the past 30 years. The University of South Alabama professor has focused intently on the Exxon Valdez oil spill for 21 years. A "technological disaster," he calls it.

"For technological disasters, unlike natural disasters, we see long-term impacts to communities, families and individuals," Picou said. "It relates to the chronic uncertainty with regards to ecological impacts. For example, the herring fishery in Prince William Sound crashed in 1993 and never has recovered."

"In natural disasters, people are rescued and there's an inventory of damages and then there's restoration and recovery. For technological disasters, there's a warning, there's a threat, there's an impact and then there's blame. There's no rescue or inventory, so recovery is very hard. People get caught in this cycle of continuing uncertainty and economic loss, which in turn causes serious problems for communities, families and individuals."

This BP oil gusher could be labeled a life-altering catastrophe. Although little if any oil has reached Mississippi shores, Pass Christian Mayor Chipper McDermott said the commercial fishing that fuels his community has already come to a virtual halt. It's shrimp season, but shrimpers have gone to work for BP's Vessels of Opportunity. They can make more money mopping up oil.

The catastrophe for wildlife has been tragically evident since the first pictures of tarred pelicans appeared. Reese Halter, a biologist who recently visited the coast, burst into tears when he talked about the suffering animals have already endured from what he calls a "global ecological disaster."

"It's beyond a crime scene," he said. "It makes me cry. We're washing the animals off and they've already eaten all that poison. They will die a slow and painful death."

BP did not come up with the term "oil spill" to minimize what is happening in the Gulf, spokeswoman Lisa Houghton said. She offered what has become BP's familiar refrain: "For us, it's about response and getting it taken care of."

She thought a minute before adding: "There's been a lot of terms, just across the board. I've heard people call it lots of different things. What's happening, it's really unprecedented. It's different from what you might see with a tanker, different from what you might see with a pipeline. Where there's a problem with a pipeline, they typically call that a rupture .... Really, it's just so unprecedented. Perhaps oil spill is what's been used most frequently because that's just sort of what people have referred to in the history of time."

Eric Smith, chemical engineer and associate director of Tulane University's Energy Institute, said the oil industry is famous for jargon and nicknames — ROV for remote operating vehicle and blowout preventer, to name a couple.

“Big mess comes to mind,” he said. Seriously, he added, “People keep using gush and spew and all these descriptors. I’m getting a little tired of it. It’s a disaster and I think that’s an accurate thing to call it.”

He said 65 percent of U.S. oil spills are from tankers or barges, with only 19 percent from rigs. Shutting down deepwater rigs will potentially increase the risk of tanker accidents.

“Leak sounds a little deminutus, which is Latin for too small,” Smith said. “Spill sounds like something that’s finite that you dump out of a bowl, but that’s the only terms I’ve seen used.”

What do the folks who deal with these catastrophes call them? Boots and Coots seemed a good place to turn for answers. The well-control company is named after the original owners, Boots Hansen and Coots Matthews, who trained under legendary wild-well buster Red Adair.

Boots and Coots spokeswoman Jennifer Twitten said, “We are really not speaking to this because BP is one of our customers.”

Their toll-free number, however, provides a clue. It is 1-800-BLOWOUT.