

Reaction Paper Jenny Suckale

The three examples that Birkland uses to describe the interaction of business and political considerations are very convincing. In the case of the Exxon Valdez incident I found it particularly interesting how interest groups that did not have broad public support prior to the catastrophe managed to take collective action to exert pressure. The role of the media was without doubt crucial for the success of these initiatives. Contrary to the other two examples, the JetValue crash and the Jack in the Box food poisoning, human life was not immediately threatened, but the images conveyed by the media were strong enough to arouse broad concern about the extent of damage. It would have been interesting to compare the Exxon Valdez example to other disasters during which the media was a less involved advocate, such as the recent train accident at the Chinese boarder to which journalist did not have access and about which little information has become available even weeks later. Therefore, despite the great potential that the involvement of the media might have for advocacy groups, it could also be a tool to marginalize catastrophes. It would have been interesting to learn more about to what extent that has happened and if there are alternative approaches to exhibit pressure if media fails to play that role. Similarly I wonder whether companies tried to directly influence reports about catastrophes and if they were successful in doing so.

The most interesting aspect of the Jack in the Box bacteria outbreak is how the company itself succeeded in becoming one of the leading advocates for a stricter regulation of food quality controls. Birkland's article compares the company's policy to the JetValue case and argues convincingly that JetValue could not have implemented the same strategy successfully, because the image of the company was already eroded at the time of the incident in terms of focusing on cost cutting rather than passenger safety. However, it remained unclear to me why Exxon did not try to take action along similar lines, instead of the rather unfortunate response that worsened their image on a long-term basis. Also, a comparison of other oil company's public attitudes towards similar oil spills after the Exxon Valdez accident would be enlightening. Did the Exxon Valdez catastrophe have a considerable impact outside of the United States?

With the increasing tendency to outsource production to developing and less regulated countries, the improved regulation within certain countries might increase the risk in others. Also, given the discussed role of the media which is without doubt much less present in most of the developing world, both aspects might add up in increasing the risk of industrial catastrophes. Is there any indication that this possible development is taking place?