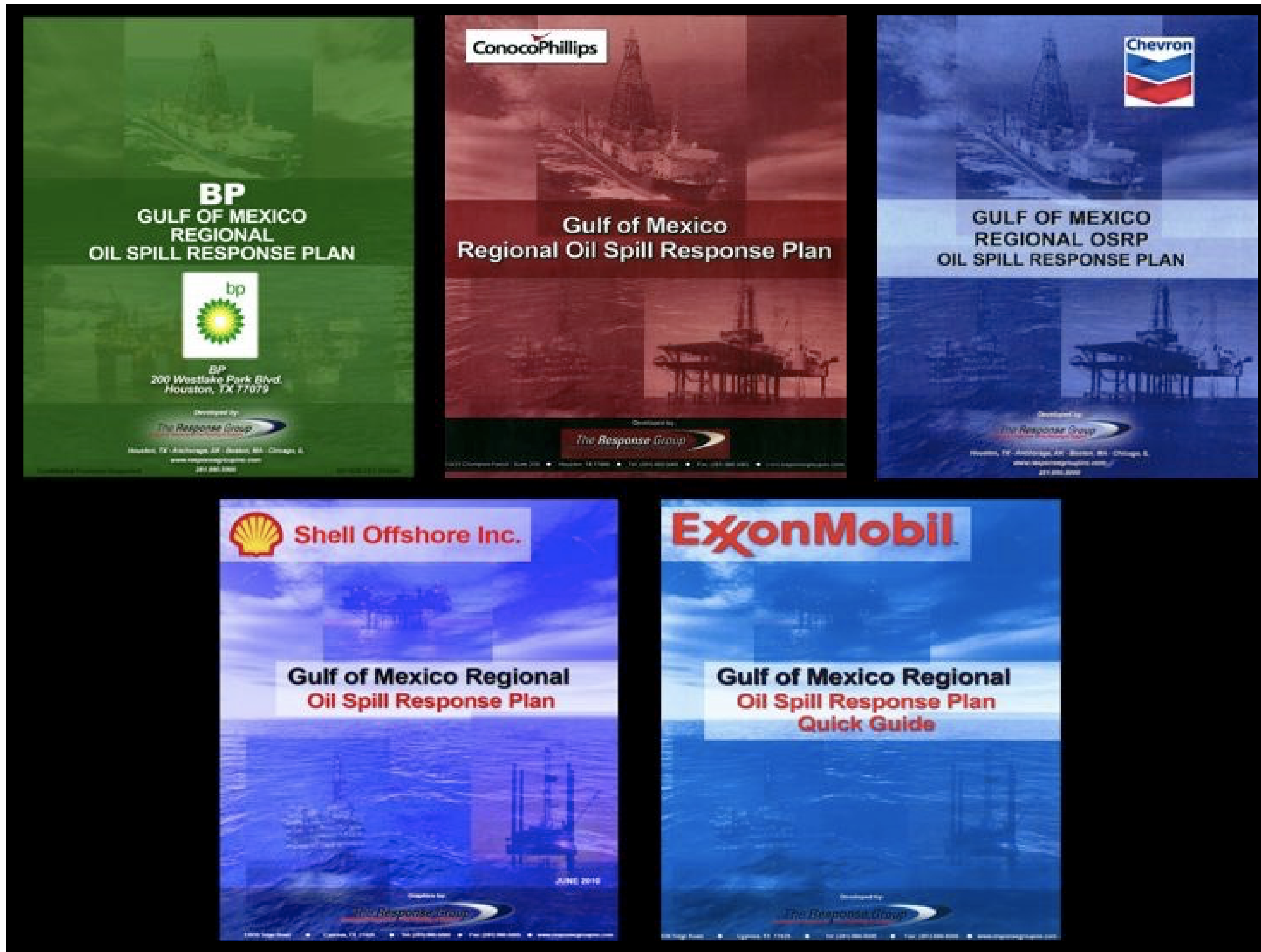


When Oil and Water Mix



Caption

This visualization brings together the environmental impact statements prepared for deep water offshore drilling in the Gulf of Mexico – by British Petroleum, Chevron, Exxon-Mobil, ConocoPhillips and Shell. All look almost exactly the same, though their covers are different colors. Writing in the Huffington Post, Representative Ed Markey (D-MA) reported that “the content is ninety percent identical.” Along with BP, three other companies promised to protect walrus in the Gulf – though there are no walrus in the Gulf of Mexico. The text seems to have been borrowed from planning documents for the Arctic. Along with BP, two other plans are, according to Markey, “such dead ringers for BP’s that they list a phone number for the same expert - a man who has been dead since 2005.” Despite these problems, these reports were accepted without issue by US regulatory agencies.

And despite this comparison and consensus, oil company representatives testifying before Congress claimed that the Deep Water Horizon was an isolated incident: one shouldn’t expect it to happen again. Furthermore (according to industry representatives), the oil industry is difficult if not nearly impossible to regulate because its operations are so variegated. The Bhopal disaster echoes here. “It can’t happen here” was the industry-wide response to concern in the late 1980s that a “worse-case scenario” at a chemical plant – as happened in Bhopal – could occur in the United States. Despite many similarities in plant design and production processes. Representative Markey was right to point to a key interpretive clue: there actually is a deepwater rig, owned by Chevron, called “Blind Faith.”



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ETHNOGRAPHY

Fortun, Kim. 2019. “When Oil and Water Mix.”

In “Toxic Vitalism.” In Visualizing Toxic Subjects, curated by James Adams and Kim Fortun. The Center for Ethnography. May.

<https://tinyurl.com/y6b4yxro>

Design Statement

This visualization is a simple mash-up of found documents, laid side-by-side to point to similarities. These similarities were focused on by the media and in government hearings after the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster. The visualization thus conveys “matters of concern” to the people I study ethnographically -- in a project focused on ways people are worrying about and responding to environmental risk produced by intensely inter-laced scales and systems. This visualization also draws out key aspects of my own analysis: suggesting how the interlacing of different systems -- here commercial and governing systems, powered by high-tech drilling capacity, operating in a difficult environment miles below the surface of the sea -- produces risks that are not held to account.

Project Statement

Vitalism has provided a way of thinking about how systems are discontinuous with themselves -- constituted through the operation of more than one set of laws. Historically (and controversially), vitalism points to ways living systems are more than the result of physicochemical forces and laws, for example. Vitalism also highlights the liveliness of systems -- the way systems can take on a life of their own, so to speak, often beyond what experts planned or expected. I also want to highlight ways vitalism is also, often, toxic, producing inurious outcomes, often unevenly distributed. “Vital systems” can thus be read in multiple ways -- referring to systems on which bodies and societies depend, which have both functional and frightening capacities. In the visualizations that I’ll present in this essay, I hope to convey the nature, dynamics and cascading effects of such vital systems -- systems encoded with many sets of laws, almost inevitably producing unexpected, even run-away reactions -- especially when tightly coupled to other such systems (as when atmospheric systems tangle with ecological, technical and social systems, for example). My visualizations will be drawn from extended ethnographic study of industrial and environmental disasters, fast and slow -- reaching to convey “late industrialism” in motion.

toxic
vitalism