

THE EVOLUTION OF A BEAT: A CASE STUDY OF CHANGES IN ENVIRONMENTAL
REPORTING FROM THE 1970'S TO TODAY AS EVIDENT IN COVERAGE OF THREE
DISASTROUS OIL SPILLS

Tamsyn Jones

Dr. Lee Wilkins, Thesis Chair

ABSTRACT

The field of environmental journalism has significantly advanced since environmental issues emerged as topics of social and journalistic importance in the 1970's. Environmental reporters have become essential investigators of the human-environment relationship at a time when global environmental problems have become acutely complex. Yet, despite noticeable improvements, environmental reporters continue to wrestle with some of the same reporting challenges afflicting the beat since the beginning – especially in the area of environmental disaster reporting. Society is now approaching a critical juncture when the decisions and actions of people on the planet today will determine the quality of life for generations to come. Conveying the importance of these problems requires highly competent reporting capable of dealing with the unique issue complexities.

To assess how environmental reporters have adapted to the changing rigors of environmental news, this thesis analyzes how environmental reporting has changed over three decades. Three disastrous oil spills throughout the beat's history are qualitatively analyzed via comprehensive textual analysis in two quality newspapers, the *Seattle Times* and the *UK Guardian*. The chosen spills include: the 1978 *Amoco Cadiz*; the 1989 *Exxon Valdez*; and the 2002 *Prestige*. Oil spills are inherently complex, and thus are ideal as models of how environmental reporters dealt with a complex problem. Results indicate a significant improvement in quality of coverage between 1978 and 1989 in both newspapers, including a shift to focusing on systemic causes and local perspectives. Easy journalistic templates were abandoned in favor of probing independent reporting. Fostering of regional identities emerged as related to higher quality reporting. Quality reporting persisted through 2002, including additional efforts to improve, suggesting that papers can improve dramatically if attentive to reporting practices.