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We're all to blame for the oil spill

It's our addiction to cheap fuel that drives the high-risk, poorly regulated sector producing business models like BP's



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Who's to blame for the [Gulf oil spill](#)? Many commentators point the finger at BP and the United States government. This focus is understandable – but gives an incomplete picture of how moral responsibility is distributed in this kind of case. Getting a better idea of distribution is important for blame and punishment but also for prevention: we don't want this to happen again.

Ascribing responsibility here can be knotty, owing to the wide range of actors involved in oil production.

What BP does in this context depends on other corporate actors. Oil companies tend to work with subcontractors, which increases the parties involved. BP works with [Transocean](#), Halliburton, Cameron International, and other outfits. It will be difficult to evaluate if and to what extent they share responsibility for the disaster.

But apart from the companies at large and their managers, there's a category that usually remains out of sight: the engineers and other people directly involved in well control and related operations before, during, and after an accident.

Research on a near disaster with a platform in the Norwegian Sea, the [Snorre A blowout](#), shows that it is useful to pay attention to the capabilities people should have in order to deal successfully with a crisis. Ger Wackers and I have argued that in the Sorre A case, the crew managed to recover the platform partly by using their imagination to try to understand what was happening and decide what to do. For instance, the crew had to improvise when trying to control the well. Improvisation is intrinsic to good engineering and management: it's not free-floating fantasy but depends on knowledge, skills, and experience.

If we want to prevent similar disasters, then, companies and regulators need to support structures that promote the exercise of imagination by those who are involved with the operation and management of oil platforms. They need to invest more in the people need to cope with such crises.

However, there's more than the management and engineering side of the disaster. Responsibility spills over to the financial and business dimension of oil production. As previous contributors have argued, multinationals such as BP seem to go for [fast growth and shareholder returns](#), making profit [without carrying the real environmental and other costs of their actions](#). These financial choices and ways of doing business can be detrimental to safety – right down to drilling rig level. Mix continuous underinvestment in maintenance and safety with insufficient regulation and you get an accident that is waiting to happen.

Moreover, and perhaps most important, we should not only consider responsibility for

oil production but also for oil consumption. Business and finance are not isolated from our own choices. Companies such as BP can only do what they do because we want what they sell. We're all too happy with cheap oil.

As citizens, many of us support politicians and political parties who continue to stimulate oil production and the related financial and economic structures. Politicians generally pay lip service to green economics but let people do business as usual. So far, President Barack Obama is no exception, and neither are most leading politicians in the UK and the rest of Europe. But who voted for them?

As consumers, we continue to depend on oil in various ways and therefore maintain the oil-hungry system that makes oil companies drill in deep water and undertake other risky activities. Addicted to oil, we are directly responsible since we continue to drive cars with combustion engines and travel by plane. Indirectly we also rely on oil as we buy goods and services that depend on oil for their production and transportation. If we discuss oil production disasters, therefore, we should also discuss how we live. Safety is not the main issue here, sustainability is.

If we are eager to blame BP and the US government for the disaster and their shortcomings in dealing with it, we should remind ourselves that these actors can only operate and govern in this way because we, as citizens and consumers, support them and help maintain the structural environment in which they operate. The oil stain is a local problem; the responsibility stain spreads out all over the world.

This brief analysis is not a substitute for more precise legal investigations and public inquiries that will follow in the wake of the disaster. However, it can inform these investigations by reminding us that the problem is not just far away in the Gulf. The real disaster is of a global nature, and has firm roots in our lifestyle and the political choices we make as individuals and as a society. Their spill, therefore, is also our responsibility.

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