

BP and government authorities collude to suppress reality of oil spill

David Walsh
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Numerous media accounts confirm that oil giant BP, in collusion with the Obama administration and various federal agencies, is attempting to block information about the extent of the damage wreaked on the Gulf Coast and other areas.

The *New York Times* reported Wednesday (“Efforts to Limit the Flow of Spill News”) that “Journalists struggling to document the impact of the oil rig explosion have repeatedly found themselves turned away from public areas affected by the spill, and not only by BP and its contractors, but by local law enforcement, the Coast Guard and government officials.”

The *Times* article describes the media “being kept at bay” is merely “another example of a broader problem of officials’ filtering what images of the spill the public sees,” adding that “Scientists, too, have complained about the trickle of information that has emerged from BP and government sources.”

Essentially, BP and the authorities are trying to suppress information about the oil spill just as the US military, with the complicity of the American media, has done in Iraq and Afghanistan. From Vietnam came images of wounded and dying soldiers, which had a significant impact on public opinion; from the *Exxon Valdez* spill in 1989, notes *Newsweek* magazine, “pictures of dead otters, fish, and birds, as well as oil-covered shorelines, ignited nationwide outrage and led to a backlash against Exxon.” The Pentagon and the corporate elite have learned a simple lesson: by whatever means necessary, prevent the population from learning the truth.

The *Times* observes, “Michael Oreskes, senior managing editor at the Associated Press, likened the situation to reporters being embedded with the military in Afghanistan. ‘There is a continued effort to keep

control over the access,’ Mr. Oreskes said. ‘And even in places where the government is cooperating with us to provide access, it’s still a problem because it’s still access obtained through the government.’”

Indeed CNN has described its correspondent, Kyra Phillips, as “embedded” with US Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen.

There are numerous examples of BP and the government blocking media coverage of the oil spill. A CBS television crew was threatened in late May with arrest for attempting to film an oil-covered beach in Louisiana. A vessel carrying BP contractors and Coast Guard officials stopped the crew, and the pilot told CBS reporters, “This is BP rules, it’s not ours.”

A reporter from *Mother Jones* recounted in detail how local deputies, at the behest of BP, prevented journalists from reaching Elmer’s Island Wildlife Refuge, also in Louisiana. An oil company representative told the reporter, “BP’s in charge because ‘it’s BP’s oil.’”

An airplane pilot planning to carry a New Orleans *Times-Picayune* reporter over the oil slick was denied permission for the flight. “We were questioned extensively. Who was on the aircraft? Who did they work for?” recalled Rhonda Panepinto, who owns Southern Seaplane with her husband, Lyle. “The minute we mentioned media, the answer was: ‘Not allowed.’”

When Associated Press photographer Gerald Herbert attempted to accompany Jean-Michel Cousteau, son of Jacques Cousteau, on a trip to Breton Island, a national wildlife refuge off the barrier islands of Louisiana, the US Coast Guard intervened. *Newsweek* reports, “Upon approaching the island, a Coast Guard boat stopped them. ‘The first question was, ‘Is there any press with you?’ says Herbert.’ They answered yes, and the Coast

Guard said they couldn't be there. 'I had to bite my tongue. That should have no bearing.'"

Newsweek comments: "Photographers who have traveled to the Gulf commonly say they believe that BP has exerted more control over coverage of the spill with the cooperation of the federal government and local law enforcement. 'It's a running joke among the journalists covering the story that the words 'Coast Guard' affixed to any vehicle, vessel, or plane should be prefixed with 'BP,'" says Charlie Varley, a Louisiana-based photographer. 'It would be funny if it were not so serious.'"

At 10 pm the evening before a scheduled trip by Senator Bill Nelson, Democrat of Florida, along with a group of journalists, on the Gulf of Mexico, reports the *New York Times*, "someone from the Department of Homeland Security's legislative affairs office called the senator's office to tell them that no journalists would be allowed.

"They said it was the Department of Homeland Security's response-wide policy not to allow elected officials and media on the same 'federal asset,'" said Bryan Gulley, a spokesman for the senator. 'No further elaboration' was given, Mr. Gulley added."

A reporter and photographer from the *New York Daily News* were told by a BP contractor that they could not have access to a public beach on Grand Isle, Louisiana. A local sheriff, brought in by the BP employee, told the reporter that "news media had to fill out paperwork and then be escorted by a BP official to get access to the beach." (*New York Times*)

The stories go on and on, underscoring, on the one hand, the determination of BP to conceal the catastrophe by suppressing images of the spill on land and sea. Financial questions are at the heart of this. The extent of the devastation has a bearing on the immediate fate of BP's share price, as well as the amount of the damages eventually levied against the oil giant.

On the other hand, the collusion of the Coast Guard, the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Aviation Administration and other institutions with the censorship efforts of a private corporation reveals something about the character of the Obama administration and all levels of the government in the US: they are entirely subservient to the interests of big business and equally hostile to the interests of the

American population.



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