

# *A Media Needs Assessment* *For the Gulf of Mexico Alliance* **Bridging the Gap Between Science and the Media**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Introduction**

Partnering with the media is an important strategy for raising public awareness about the Gulf of Mexico. In order to work effectively with journalists in a multi-media society, the Gulf of Mexico Alliance seeks better understanding of this audience and their needs.

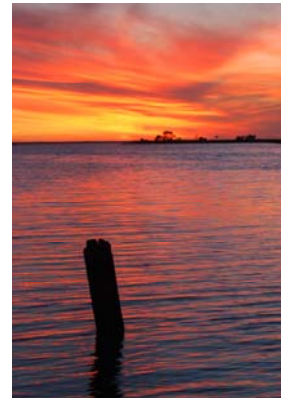


This report includes:

- *A summary of current trends in the media,*
- *A brief analysis of Gulf of Mexico news coverage,*
- *Insights from working science journalists and*
- *Recommendations for the Alliance to raise awareness about the Gulf of Mexico.*

The Gulf of Mexico Alliance is a partnership of the five U.S. Gulf States, 13 U.S. Federal Agencies and Mexico working to promote the ecological and economic health of the Gulf region. Focusing on six priority issues, the Alliance supports environmental education, improved water quality, ecosystem mapping, nutrient reduction in coastal waterways, restoration of wetlands and other coastal habitats, and community resilience.

As traditional science journalism declines, this research suggests that the Alliance continue to support media coverage of science and Gulf-related issues.



### **Trends in the Media**

The number of web visitors to Twitter.com, the social networking site, increased 1,298% between April 2008 and April 2009.<sup>1</sup> How is this rise in digital technology shaping Gulf news coverage? Is science journalism disappearing? This report examined national media trends, and provides recommendations to the Alliance for reaching journalists and the public at large in a rapidly-changing information-based culture. Media trends include:

- Decline in Science Journalism: staff and funding cuts
- Rise in Digital Technology: a corresponding decline in printed information
- Increased use of Blogs: real-time, of-the-moment communication
- Rise in User-Submitted Work: everyone is a journalist, but what's the standard?
- News is No Longer Made of Products with Outputs: is more service-oriented
- News Rooms have become Places of Risk and Innovation: to stay competitive
- Emphasis on Local/Hyper-Local News: less national & regional news

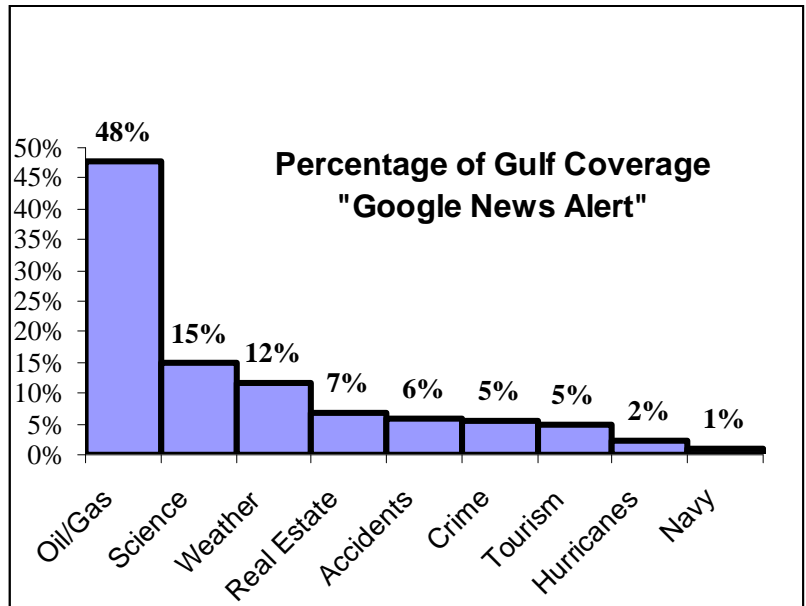


<sup>1</sup> Johnson, Steven, "How Twitter Will Change the Way We Live," TIME, June 15, 2009, p.36.

## Gulf of Mexico News Coverage

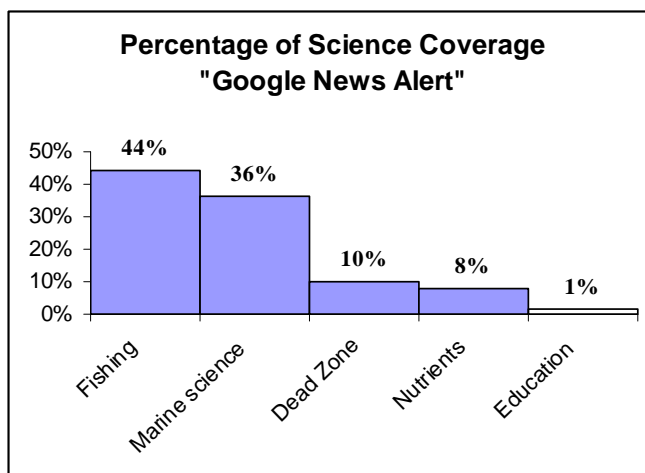
Is the Gulf of Mexico currently covered in the news? *Yes*. Five months of Google News Alerts related to the Gulf of Mexico (10/16/08-2/16/09) were collected and reviewed for the purposes of this report. Nearly 1,000 Gulf of Mexico news stories were categorized into the following topics: oil/gas and energy infrastructure, science, weather, tourism, crime, real estate and development, accidents, hurricanes, and the navy.

Of all news stories related to the Gulf of Mexico, nearly half (48%) were about oil and gas or Gulf energy infrastructure. The second most popular category was science, accounting for only 15% of the news stories. Of the 140 science-related stories, nearly half were focused on fisheries (62 stories). About 10% of the science stories were focused on the Dead Zone (14 stories), 8% were about nutrients (11 stories), and 51, or 36%, of science stories were related to general marine science, listed below. The corresponding numbers indicate how many times these marine science topics appeared in the news.



### Marine Science Topics Appearing in Gulf News Stories

Sea turtles (6)	Environmental educ. (2)	Dolphin monitoring (1)
Whale sharks (4)	Red tide research (2)	Rare bird sighting (1)
Migratory songbirds (4)	Squid (1)	Mercury toxicity (1)
Small crustaceans (4)	Jellyfish swarms (1)	Manatees (1)
Marine sanctuary (3)	Gulf currents (1)	Bald eagles (1)
Shipwreck/archaeology (2)	Sea level rise (1)	Rays (1)
Erosion (2)	Comet (1)	Climate change (1)
Killer whales (2)	Shark populations (1)	
Hummingbirds (2)	Deepwater corals (1)	
Drinking Gulf water (2)	Watershed group (1)	
Energy coast (2)	"Traveling Tuna" (1)	



This Table illustrates the distribution of topics within the general science category, accounting for 15% of total Gulf of Mexico news coverage in the news analysis (as shown in the above Table).

Note: The Gulf of Mexico Alliance was mentioned once and the Gulf of Mexico Program was mentioned four times in the list of nearly 1,000 Gulf-related news stories.

## Journalist Interviews

Ten newspaper and radio journalists from Florida's Gulf Coast region were interviewed for this report. Journalists represented the following media outlets: *The Key West Citizen Daily*, *The Naples Daily News*, *The News-Press* (Fort Myers), *The Herald Tribune* (Sarasota), *The St. Petersburg Times*, WUSF Radio in Tampa, *The Apalachicola/Carabelle Times*, *The Panama City News Herald*, and Oyster Radio (Apalachicola and Franklin County).

Journalists were asked twelve open-ended questions about covering science, covering Gulf-related news, and where they get their information during brief telephone interviews. Although many used press releases for information and story ideas, surprisingly, most journalists cited people ("tips from the community," or "my contacts call me") as the most common sources of story ideas. Journalists also cited the following sources: email lists, blogs, police scanners, public meetings, nonprofit organizations, and local fishermen.

Science coverage and coverage related to the Gulf of Mexico varied by region. Most of the journalists said they cover science at least once or twice per week. For example, a Florida Keys journalist explained that he covers science daily, and talks with scientists on a regular basis, because he lives and works within the National Marine Sanctuary. His science reporting is mostly focused on the local environment, covering topics such as water quality, whales, dolphins, corals, fisheries, lobsters, and stone crabs. In Panama City, the journalist interviewed covers science topics at least weekly, focusing on groundwater supplies for drinking water, drilling in the Gulf, and the Apalachicola-Atlanta water wars. The *St. Petersburg Times* journalist was the only one interviewed who covers statewide environmental issues. He has published a special report and book on Florida's wetlands, and also co-writes a blog called "The Fueling Station," focused on renewable energy.

A Fort Myers journalist has covered a large amount of Gulf- and estuary-related news in his 19 years with the *News-Press*. He writes often about water quality in the Gulf, including Lake Okeechobee's effects on local estuaries, and possible contributions to eutrophication, red tide, and fish kills. Apalachicola journalists focus their science writing on the local wildlife, including black bears, alligators, bald eagles, and sea turtles. They often receive tips or entire articles from local fishermen. A radio journalist at WUSF in Tampa covers an annual scientific update on red tide and the Dead Zone, and reports at least once a month on fishing crises, offshore drilling, climate change, sea level rise, and other science-related issues.



Florida's Gulf Coast journalists said the following features in an online Gulf of Mexico Media Center would be helpful to them in their reporting: photos (including underwater or aerial), maps, charts, scientific databases, consistent red tide updates, and story ideas or topics. When asked, journalists said they would like to learn more about the following Gulf-related topics: economics and commercial fishing, shellfish harvesting rules, ocean acidification, Gulf currents, global warming, offshore drilling, and marine life.

## Recommendations for the Alliance

### • *Support More Science News Around the Gulf*

As traditional science news declines, the Alliance can fill a gap by supporting science news around the Gulf. Creating databases, forums or events for connecting journalists and scientists according to their areas of interest can lead to published stories and improve accuracy. Also providing resources for covering specific Gulf-related topics may be helpful.

### • *Develop Partnerships*

Partnerships are increasingly important in the media. The larger news networks rely heavily on their partnerships – including social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter - to stay afloat in difficult economic times. The Alliance can create partnerships with local, regional or national media outlets or with other organizations, such as Earth Gauge or BLUE Ocean Film Fest to gain access and contribute information.



### • *Support Sound Journalism*

With an increased prevalence of minute-by-minute news updates, user-submitted work, and nearly un-edited blogs as sources of information, the Alliance can benefit from supporting accurate, unbiased, well-documented sound journalism, as defined in The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect. For example, sound journalism principles include having an obligation to the truth and a loyalty to citizens.

### • *Develop Personal Relationships with Journalists*

When interviewed for this report, most journalists said they refer to “people in the community,” “their contacts,” or “tips from around town” for their story ideas and information. Encouraging and facilitating Alliance members and partners, including their organizations and governments, to develop personal relationships with journalists will likely result in increased Gulf coverage.

### • *Develop Multi-Lingual Resources*

Ethnic media is on the rise and U.S. demographics are changing. Developing tools in Spanish, or other languages as regionally appropriate, will be increasingly important for reaching diverse media outlets and underserved and under-represented audiences. Partnering with organizations like the Southwest Florida Latino Environmental Education Network, Telemundo and others, will help the Alliance develop appropriate tools.

### • *Increase Fisheries Information*

Both the Gulf of Mexico Google News Alert results and interviews demonstrate that fisheries are an important Gulf issue for coastal residents, central to both the economic and environmental health of the Gulf of Mexico. Media outlets will benefit from articles, scientific reports, data, community updates, and photos related to fisheries.



### • *Develop Multimedia Tools*

Websites, radio spots, podcasts, Gulf-related films and film festivals, blogs, vlogs, and web videos can all reach journalists and other target audiences effectively. Media trends suggest a multimedia approach is most effective for reaching a broader audience around the Gulf of Mexico watershed, including a younger, more tech-savvy generation.

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