Spillcam

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On 19 May 2010 the public gained access, via internet live feed, to the sea floor of the Gulf of Mexico. The feed was focused on a site nearly 5,000 feet below the water's surface: at the Macondo Prospect, 66 km off the south-east coast of Louisiana, on the sea floor of Mississippi Canyon Block 252, an oil well was leaking into the Gulf. The image in Figure 3.1 is a still-capture from this feed showing the steady plume of oil that resulted from the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig. On 20 April 2010, just prior to the well’s being sealed for later extraction, a methane gas bubble travelled up the drilling column and ignited at the platform. The blowout resulted in a day-long fire and the eventual sinking of the rig. On 24 April 2010 an unencumbered stream of oil, gas and mud was discovered flowing from the well. Nearly five million barrels of oil were released into the Gulf basin until the well was capped, eighty-seven days after the initial event.

Many media forms and media outlets captured the unfolding disaster. News agencies, artists, activists, environmental monitors, as well as government and corporate actors circulated video footage, still images, reports, graphs and measurements documenting what was happening in the Gulf. Moreover, the affected sites and enduring effects of the Deepwater Horizon disaster, to this day, continue to be mediated through blockbuster movies, documentary productions, ongoing monitoring and information leaks, amongst a variety of other forms. This reflection focuses on just one of these enduring mediations – Spillcam – and asks how the operations of capital and its imperial entanglements can be glimpsed through this real-time feed, a century and a half after the first still image of an oil well.
was circulated (see Lassiter, Chapter 2). Whose interests are served by making visible the aftermath of an extractive disaster? Can real-time feeds of extractive operations and their failures produce accountability, or merely shore up ‘business as usual’?

Mediating the spill

While news media regularly featured aerial footage of the burning rig, video coverage of the clean-up efforts, images of oil-slicked beaches and maps of spill projections, the public was without images of the leak – at its source on the sea floor – for the first twenty-three days following the disaster. Real-time access to the site resulted from a request made by then US Congressional representative Edward Markey to BP (formerly British Petroleum) following suspicions that the company had severely underestimated the flowrate of the leaking well. By 3 June 2010, BP provided twelve different views of the site, accessible to the public via the US Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming website. Observation via Spillcam’s multiple vantage points allowed for new flowrate estimates from government officials, engineers and independent scientists totalling anywhere from 25,000 to upwards of 80,000
barrels per day (bpd), far above the initial 1,000, then 5,000, bpd estimates reported by BP during the first weeks of the spill.

Near the end of 2010 ‘Spillcam’ was announced as one of Global Language Monitor’s top words, phrases and names of the year. The wide use of the feed’s name across social media, journalism and news coverage also placed ‘spill-cam’ on the New York Times’s list of top words – though Meriam Webster opted for ‘austerity’ instead, and the American Dialect Society only referenced the events in short-listing ‘spillion’ and ‘spillionaire’ for ‘most creative’ words of 2010. Spillcam’s livestream of the leak became a common element of television news chyrons and was eventually featured on more than 3,000 websites receiving several million views over the feed’s life.

The Deepwater Horizon disaster itself provides a fruitful opportunity to critically engage the forces at work in the creation of capital, commodities and legacies of empire. While Spillcam might appear to offer a means for accountability, I argue that it upholds a notion of responsibility entangled in processes of financialization, risk mitigation, capitalism and exploitation. The livestream of the leaking well gives the impression that BP’s responsibility for the disaster in the Gulf is finite and measurable, and thus the damages of the spill are within industry’s own ability to reconcile, control and mitigate. The gushing well of oil and gas into the Gulf of Mexico was a material manifestation of violent flows of empire, regardless of how, and if, the spill was ever witnessed – the documentation of the leaking well, and its eventual sealing, did not simply allow us to witness the disaster as it unfolded at the sea floor and alert us to the risks of resource extraction, but it also helped BP to cultivate an aesthetic of accountability.

Extractive economies are speculative economies – they require speculation on geological sites and commodity prices – deploying an arithmetic that operates without regard for social, cultural and environmental risks, or, at best, accounts for these factors by assigning them a cost-value. This speculation of profit potential and risk utilizes financial instruments and other technologies of imagination to propagate an imagined future of worthwhile resource extraction. And while theorists such as Anna Tsing (2000) and Paul Gilbert (2020) have demonstrated the necessity of cultivating these imagined futures for the promotion of exploration-phase extraction projects, mediations of completed and ongoing projects, even when disastrous,
can render risk as limited and tolerable. Mediations of catastrophes of capital are just as integral for animating speculative activities (Gilbert 2020). To these ends, I argue that Spillcam is a technology of imagination. In capturing the eventual sealing of the Macondo project well and then eventually going offline, Spillcam allowed the public to envision themselves as overseeing the remediation of the spill, but it also acted as a means for industry to impress on us its ability to mitigate its own risks. Though the opportunities and threats that come along with extractive industries are always already implicated in the long history of colonial logics and resource exploitation, so too are the media that facilitate them – here we must consider how technologies of mediation are utilized as technologies of imagination in the name of capital.

**Framing business as usual**

Spillcam represents a particular means through which finance capital can be glimpsed. Visual evidence of leaks may provide opportunities to witness dynamics that often elude us – the ecological toll of capitalism, the banality of disaster in late modernity and the unaccountability of private enterprise. Sprung leaks are often indications of poorly functioning systems – they can call into question an entire network of pipelines, flows and currents and are rarely isolated occurrences. And while the live feed of BP’s defunct well represents a distinctive moment in imagining the unseen, a literal vantage point that is often invisible to the public, Spillcam also captured and reified the reality of ‘business as usual’. The feed scrutinized a single site and a sole endeavour – the execution of a ‘top kill’ procedure that would secure the oil in reserve.

While the feed allowed for a degree of public scrutiny, it did little to clarify the complex layers of extractive networks. More, it rendered them simple – the risk and threat of extractive capitalism was simply the uncontrollable escape of the commodity from the well. The live feed of the leaking well is, in some sense, antithetical to capturing the enduring effects of exploitation. In spite of this limitation, there is a potential offered through Spillcam for a more radical figuration of accountability. If we look closely, at play in Spillcam is a constellation of actors: natural, technological and political. Through its
images, we see the literal entanglement of elements, technologies and a range of actors. Spillcam does not merely capture these dynamics in all of their significance, but it does provide a diagram through which these assemblages can be traced.

While Spillcam allowed the public the opportunity to witness the incredible volume of oil flowing from the Macondo well, it also shored up an overly simple image of accountability. The live feed of the oil geyser enabled several seemingly contradictory narratives. On one hand, Spillcam helped us to visualize the real risk of resource extraction and the impotence of corporate responsibility, but, on the other, it operationalized an aesthetics of accountability that collapses the act of ‘making visible’ with public-facing corporate responsibility. This is not to suggest that the end of Spillcam’s live feed was the end of accountability measures faced by BP – indeed, as of early 2020 the company had paid out more than US$50 billion dollars in settlements and fines for its role in the disaster – but, rather, that Spillcam was, literally, a limited frame of capital’s exploitation of the Gulf, and one that suggested a symbolic exchange that concluded with the sealing of the well.

The problem of a ‘limited frame’ is of course not unique to the operation of Spillcam but, rather, a concern of media more generally. The role of media in the witnessing of events, as well as media’s entanglement with notions of evidence, further complicates the power dynamics that underlie certain forms of representation. From the role of aerial photography in the First and Second World Wars, to the framing of the war in Vietnam as the first televised war, media’s potential to capture and evidence has long been a fruitful exploration for scholars and journalists as well as for governments, policy makers and legal councils, especially with regard to accountability. Like the decades before, the 2000s marked new capabilities for information and communication technologies – benefiting from expanded network infrastructures throughout the 1990s and 2000s, real-time media and live-feed video were increasingly common by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. While closed-circuit television had long allowed for the surveilling of property, employees and the public by specific entities, live feeds hosted online seemingly provided an opportunity for publics to return this gaze. However, the use of video for acts of witnessing requires particular attention to the way concepts such as objectivity, veracity and evidence are cultivated and communicated (Gates 2013).
The aesthetics of accountability

While activism and art practice have developed means for using media to critical ends, media often operate through the same colonial logics that enabled imperial domination, extractive industries and real violences. From mapping and charting to photography and networked technologies, many media share roots in colonial pursuit, warfare and domination. In fact, Spillcam, as a technological assemblage, was born as a device of extraction. Spillcam was not a single ‘cam’ but, rather, the feed that shared the leak to the public. The components that captured the images of the well, the plume of oil and the many attempts to cap it were the figurative eyes of a series of remotely operated underwater vehicles (ROVs). While the livefeed of the ROVs’ cameras allowed for the government, the scientific community and the public to observe the status of the well, these technological capabilities were also those that facilitated the site to be found, the placement of extractive equipment and the drilling of the well in the first place. Moreover, it is the same technology utilized in surveillance, target location and remote bombing. Arguing that this material history is relevant to media’s presents and futures is not to suggest that media cannot be used counter to their designed purpose, but is simply a reminder that the ability to ‘make visible’ is as integral to colonial pursuits and extraction as it is to evidencing and accountability. While ROVs are utilized to at once develop oil and gas exploration and facilitate the accountability of these industries, so too are the fibre optic networks that make their video feeds accessible to the public. As Nicole Starosielski demonstrates in *The Undersea Network* (2015), these cable technologies allow for measurement and observation of the effects of climate change, while aiding the oil and gas sectors in the very activities that drive global warming. This feedback loop between capital, its violent effects and media technologies cannot be neglected when considering the relationship between documentation, mediation and accountability.

Spillcam should not be read as a neutral agent ‘making visible’ the effects of extractive capitalism – rather, extractive capital (BP) made Spillcam visible as a means to appear effective in the eyes of the public. It is in this regard that I frame Spillcam as a practice in an aesthetics of accountability. An aesthetics of accountability operates on the neoliberal premise that ‘bearing witness’ is a sufficient measure
for assigning responsibility – it seeks to deliver proof that industry, capital and institutions can effectively address the outcomes, risks and consequences of their own contradictions. Certainly, solutions such as the one witnessed by Spillcam – the eventual capping of the well – are imperative for remediation, but they also serve to maintain broken systems. The permitted observation of these ‘fixes’ facilitated by capital’s beneficiaries do not function to instigate further redress or the rejection of the system altogether. In fact, observation is as much about keeping systems functioning as they are, as it is a means of facilitating critique. To these ends, it is worth interrogating how devices such as Spillcam play into French philosopher Michel Foucault’s (1995) assertion that ‘visibility is a trap’.

The socio-technological developments leading up to the capability for real-time public access to Spillcam are particularly important for considering the material and discursive functions of this variety of accountability measures. While I gestured earlier to the intersections between media and war, what has yet to be accounted for here is the particular nature of media, communication technologies and accountability in the 1990s, especially in relation to the (Persian) Gulf War. The US mission to protect oil reserves in light of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait was the first combat to be broadcast in near real time. The use of media outlets to strategically illustrate a perfect campaign was integral in the US’ attempt to secure positive public opinion for their first Gulf War. And while media theorists have pointed to the Gulf War as an example of a new real-time politics, the socio-economic conditions of the 1990s were such that capital, too, could benefit from the neoliberal imaginaries being operationalized by real-time mediation.

The aesthetics of accountability at play in Spillcam, however, can be traced and radicalized. The shifting entanglements of politics, capital and media and information technologies in the 1990s did not mark the end of the modernity rooted in imperialism, colonial pursuits and exploitation, as theorists such as Francis Fukuyama (2002) have suggested, but, rather, obscured them as phenomena such as globalization. The neoliberal, post-Cold War world imagines accountability and good governance as being derived from individuals’ ability to participate in networks regardless of outcome – an underlying argument of Thomas L. Friedman’s *The World Is Flat* (2005). The aesthetics of accountability, then, facilitates the sensation that
individuals can participate equally – in this case, by logging on to bear witness of what was happening on the ocean floor of the Gulf. But what is obscured in this interaction is the absence of an ability to participate – to verify or further demand that the interests beyond capital are being attended to. The material realities of real time and livestreaming counter the impression of inclusion that these technologies sometimes seem to convey. Only capital can reach the Macondo prospect, only capital can drill that reserve and only capital can harvest from a hydrocarbon target 130,000 feet beneath the sea floor. Here, we can be invited to bear witness only to whether capital will succeed in protecting itself.

**Glimpsing capital, debt and empire**

So, how might capital, debt and its empire be glimpsed through Spillcam? The specific frame in Figure 3.1 is from the camera of one of the ROVs for the *Skandi Neptune*, a multipurpose offshore support vessel owned by DOF Subsea and operated by Subsea. *Skandi Neptune* was a component part of the technological assemblage that was Spillcam; however, it was also a component part of the standard operations of extractive industries. This is true also of the other actors and objects entangled in the Spillcam feed, such as Oceaneering International’s Satellite ROV *Sea Maxx* that was operated on board a vessel they leased from Island Offshore. All of these components and entities serve to maintain the functioning of the offshore oil and gas industry, literally, through offshore support services. While noting a handful of the deep sea oil exploration entities involved in imaging the leaking well may not be a spectacular revelation, it troubles the impression of Spillcam as a measure for accountability. Spillcam can serve to remind us that there is no such thing as an inherently critical gaze. BP’s agreement to provide the stream for hosting on the US Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming website was a strategic decision to make themselves appear answerable to the American public and not just their shareholders. What Spillcam made visible was the severity of the leaking well which we would not have otherwise seen – but it, in itself, did not facilitate a radical witnessing. Rather, where we might derive a real potential is not from the act of witnessing but from
the recognition of what ‘business as usual’ looks like through the eyes of capital. In the chapter by Szeman (Chapter 1), we see how important the domestication of oil infrastructure can be in creating a sense of ordinariness and safety, in contrast to the toxic leakiness that often accompanies oil infrastructure and the violent eruptions that characterize briefly visible moments of failure. To these ends Spillcam offers us an example of a representational frame of what an aesthetics of accountability might look like. In this, we might be able to cultivate scepticism to the totalizing narratives and aesthetics offered to us by capital.

**Further resources**


**Works cited**


