Disasters, Vulnerability, and Resilence
MIT Reading Response
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Kingdon
Kingdon's article begins by discussing indicators and the current emphasis on problems quantifiable problems. He notes, "Constructing an indicator and getting others to agree what it is worth" is a task in which policy makers have been increasingly focused.

Yet translating what the indicators mean can entail heavy, political debate. Because problems are not expressed solely by indicators, often a crisis or a disaster will stimulate a "push" to place the problem on the policy agenda.

Kingdon notes that in order to reach the point where a problem is considered of importance, it must often devolve into a crisis or disaster-like state. Therefore, the more visible an item is on the policy agenda, the less it is considered to be priority. Another factor that influences the visibility of a problem is if whether crises are measured in the aggregate rather than on an individual basis.

What issues receive attention? Kingdon explores whether or not personal factors (such as from the policymakers' themselves) plays into the policy agenda. For example, airline policy receives much attention, since the policymakers often fly for business and pleasure. But he also states that personal factors do not influence the agenda so much as people think; instead the emergency and diffusion of a powerful symbols (e.g. Proposition 13) may matter more in terms of focusing attention on events. He suggests that crises, disasters, and symbols, etc. need reinforcement, before it is considered to be a widespread problem. A series of crises occurring close together, may also spur action.

Birkland
In March of 1989, an Exxon Valdez tanker crashed and spilled 11 million gallons into south-central Alaska. Birkland's article demonstrated how such a focusing event could break a 14-year-old-stalemate in federal pollution legislation and lead to a policy change. Birkland, like Kingdon, states that focusing events are critical because they are "rare, sudden, harmful, and directly or indirectly, affect many."

Birkland notes that the bigger the perceived policy failure is, the more attention is devoted to it. Slower-onset events are less likely to gain attention, unless indisputable evidence is presented. The suddenness of events also contributes to the amount of attention received by policymakers; it is also important, as the public and policymakers learn of the event simultaneously, a chance opens for new interests to voice concerns.

Birkland describes the symbolic power of oil spills ("ecological catastrophe[s]") and the emotions aroused when seeing the damage done to the environment. When such an event occurs, competition among groups arise, related to the causal story and beliefs on what should be done to prevent the next incident. In large oil spills, including Exxon Valdez, it is often debated on whether the spill was an act of nature or of God. Yet Exxon Valdez caused so much outrage because of its symbolic spin. It was easily construed as an act of negligence on behalf of "Big Oil" interests that ruined the "last frontier"—pristine Alaska. Environmental groups were especially outspoken after this incident.

Birkland also discusses the history of legislation dealing with oil spills. After the spill, the federal government more aggressively mandated that responsible parties should pay for the cleanup. However, efforts to create a comprehensive law for oil spills become stalled by the debate concerning federal preemption over state liability. Those in favor of a national standard purported that a standard would help eliminate duplication, would be better aligned with international standards, and would alleviate oil companies' concerns with liability regimes.

In the end, the House adopted the Senate's protection of state liability systems in favor of more strict legislation, which culminated in the Oil Pollution Act (OPA90) in 1990.

Exxon Valdez played a role in reducing the number of oil spills. But, as Birkland notes, more work needs to be done so that the government does not simply react to the latest and most visible disaster. Instead, proactive policies need to be put into place, which may help prevent the next disaster from occurring.

Birkland
This reading dealt with focusing events, group mobilization, and agenda setting much more in-depth. Birkland explains how the differences in interest groups and the nature of events affect group and agenda

dynamics. He studies post-event policy making (in the aftermath of earthquakes, hurricanes, oil spills, and nuclear power plant accidents) and examines four elements of post-event mobilization: "change in the dominant issues on the agenda; change in dominant issues in a policy domain; evidence of event-driven group mobilization; and evidence of group attempts to expand or contain issues."

After defining focusing events, Birkland examines interest groups and issue expansion. As greater (and more negative) attention is devoted to an issue, it influences powerful actors, who in turn, seek to change policy. Such an event can open opportunities for pro-change groups, which must overcome obstacles placed by aggressive status-quo proponent groups. Media also plays a role by perpetuating symbolic messages, and can assist pro-change groups in expanding an issue, recruiting help, etc. The suddenness of a disaster may also assist pro-change groups.

These pro-change groups mobilize through membership drives, appeals for donations, etc. The opposition, however, will most likely respond defensively, minimizing the importance of the event, claiming that existing policy is sufficient, and any new policy introduced would be ineffective or counterproductive. Focusing events can lead to changes in the dominant topic of discussion and changes in policy attitudes.

Next, Birkland points out similarities between oil spills and nuclear power plant accidents. Because both are technically complex, these accidents are likely to be blamed on "human and corporate malfeasance" than because they are "acts of God." In policy domains that are characterized by sudden, dramatic events, two dominant topics are evident—those that dominate inter-event periods and periods where an issue dominates the agenda directly after a recent event.

Birkland's research highlighted that there is a mobilizing effect for earthquake and oil spill domains, which is not as pronounced for hurricanes. The well-organized earthquake community, for example, is dominated by a single advocacy group comprised of experts and government officials that work to improve hazard-related policy and that may testify before Congress. In the hurricane domain, the dominant issue is disaster relief. Unlike the earthquake domain, no obvious advocacy coalition remains, and as a result, national hurricane policy suffers. Birkland's point is that the organization of a policy community may influence post-event policy making.

Finally, Birkland highlights the differences between industrial accidents such as TMI and Exxon Valdez. The arguments over what went wrong from TMI differed widely from that of Exxon Valdez in that it was symbol-poor (the media could not capitalize on images) and highly technical. Because the harm of nuclear accidents was ambiguous, and the events were invisible, TMI did not yield group mobilization in the way that oil spills have.

Birkland concludes with a few key messages: 1. Focusing events mobilize groups, where they are available for mobilization; 2. Group politics are important in setting the agenda and advancing policy ideas; and 3. The politics of focusing events vary depending on domain.

Birkland and Nath:
The final Birkland and Nath reading deals with how businesses manage the political effects of disasters or "public affairs crises." The authors define "business disasters" as events that "leads to deaths or injuries of people, property damage, or environmental damage for which a business firm is brought to account." The challenge that exists for a business post-disaster is to tell a story of the disaster as unintentional, unguided event, which will be believed widely and work to benefit the firm.

The authors focus briefly on three case studies: the Exxon Valdez oil spill; E.. Coli food contamination outbreak at Jack in the Box restaurants; and the ValuJet crash. The Exxon Valdez case repeated many elements of Birkland's previous articles, but also mentioned Exxon's silence and eventual response ("media and legal blitz") that moderated some of the more extreme liability and tanker construction requirements. In the aftermath of the ValuJet crash, ValuJet tried to spin a casual story of SabreTech's neglect, but ultimately failed and did not receive support from the industry. Finally, in the Jack in the Box case, the company first asserted that the outbreak was not confined to Jack in the Box restaurants, but then recalled all hamburger meat, and accepted some responsibility for the outbreak. In contrast to Exxon and Valujet, Jack in the Box's casual story was helped by its actions in taking care of those sick, suing its meat provider, and accepting responsibility.

The authors explain how all three companies attempted to affix blame to others. For example, the media assisted in framing the Exxon Valdez case as one of Big Oil versus the Environment rather than an "act of God" and Exxon Valdez was ultimately discredited; ValuJet's tried to depict its accident as "machines run

amok," but was defeated by the NTSB, which fixed a measure of direct responsibility on ValuJet's management; and Jack in the Box shifted blame to Vons and USDA, which ultimately served as credible stories. In contrast to the arguments made by ValuJet and Exxon, Jack in the Box's causal story of being "a victim" was ambiguous. Coupled with actions to assume responsibility for the incident, however, the company created a degree of trust between it and the public.

Groups that seek policy change will attempt, "to move issues higher on the institutional agenda by telling a countervailing causal stories, while firms…keep the issue off the institutional agenda." During a crisis, firms should maintain strong ties with information flows to and from stakeholders. Firms must also plan how to respond to focusing events amidst negative publicity.

The authors postulate that globalization (and the export of democracy and group mobilization) has created a demand for American-style crisis management. They cite the media coverage of Coca Cola in France and Belgium and Bridgestone's problems in recalling tires from various countries.

Political factors that influence crisis management and the manageability of business disasters include visibility speed of onset of the crisis, harms done, extent of media coverage, scope, stakeholders, and extent of countervailing groups, the nature of the industry group or sector, and the causal story.

The authors conclude by revealing misunderstandings: 1. the failure to understand public policy implications of a crisis; 2. the belief that business disasters are internal business matters that must be "managed;" 3. the belief that firms need to practice "self-defense against activist groups with agendas," or that opposition groups are malicious.

Personal response
These readings were particularly interesting to me as a student studying public policy. Birkland made me think more deeply about how certain issues get placed as a higher priority on the political agenda than others. He makes a good point that it is often negative attention, coupled with the focusing effect that prompts policymakers to act. This is somewhat disturbing to me, as reacting to the "disaster of the day," does not appeal to me. I agree that rather we need more responsive policies that help to prevent the disaster from occurring, and to identify root causes of the disaster, instead of being retroactive and responsive, only concentrating on disaster relief versus prevention.

What was encouraging news to me was that within focusing events, groups that ordinarily do not get heard, get the chance to speak. Public policy jargon often entails such concepts as "windows of opportunity" and pushing an agenda through an "action channel." It was interesting to see similar concepts in the context of disasters.

My favorite reading, however, was Birkland and Nash's that related to successful and unsuccessful practices in mitigating a "business disaster." I thought that the argument that acting responsibly, as in the case of Jack in the Box, could actually help a company weather such a crisis. I disagreed with their beliefs on democracy and that countries are more readily adopting "American-style crisis management." It seems that linking the concept of greater democratic participation (between stakeholders) and attributing that phenomena to "American-style crisis management" is not quite correct. I did, however, appreciate the notions of corporate social responsibility that was underlying, but not explicitly stated in the article.