

## Editorial

**Managing editor:** Nick Blackmore  
 nick.blackmore@ihs.com  
**Executive editor:** Paul Gunton  
**Associate editor:** Stephen Spark  
**Staff reporter:** Yannick Guerry  
**Chief sub-editor:** Jonathan Maynard  
**Deputy chief sub-editor:** Cat Conway

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**Senior designer:** Hannah Kidd

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**Director EMEA production services:** David Ward  
**Production manager:** Jane Lawrence  
**Production controller:** Sarah Treacy  
**Image services manager:** Jo Agius

## Advertising and circulation

**Group Advertisement Manager:** Julian Bidlake  
 Tel: +44 (0)208 676 2243 julian.bidlake@ihs.com  
**Ad copy and operations manager:** Delwyn Salter  
**Circulation manager:** Denise Allen

## General

**Publisher:** Jon McGowan  
**Director, EMEA editing and design:** Sara Morgan  
**Group publishing director:** Sean Howe  
**Senior vice president IHS:** Michael Dell

## Subscriptions

**Subscription manager:** Soren Bruun  
 Tel: +44 (0)208 676 2237 soren.bruun@ihs.com.

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## The effects of PR pressure

Nick Blackmore  
 Managing editor



► **The centenary of the *Titanic* disaster** will be marked next month. As we noted in our February issue, the 14–15 April 1912 incident profoundly influenced maritime safety regulation. Another date could prove equally important: 13 January 2012, when the cruise ship *Costa Concordia* hit a rock and capsized off the Italian island of Giglio, leaving 17 people dead and 16 more missing.

The two incidents are scarcely comparable in circumstance or in human cost. But *Titanic* sank decades before there was a television in every home, and almost a century before the influence of Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and the video-equipped smartphone.

The full horror of the *Titanic* sinking took several days to emerge. Thanks to the 24-hour news cycle and the growth in digital media, every facet of the *Costa Concordia* incident had already been explored in days – the British dancer trapped in a magician’s box when disaster struck, the “mysterious Moldovan” companion of master Francesco Schettino, and the captain’s tragicomic exchange with the local coastguard.

Fewer than three weeks after *Costa Concordia* sank, a television documentary was broadcast on the incident, complete with a detailed CGI model of the listing vessel, extensive on-scene video captured by passengers and staged reconstructions filling in the gaps. Time and again, survivors told their interlocutors that the experience had been “like *Titanic*”. It was clear that they were referring to the 1997 film, not the ship itself.

That is a distinction worth noting. This was

an incident so public and emotive that it captured people’s imaginations in the same way as a well-made disaster movie. As with *Titanic*, *Herald of Free Enterprise* and *Deepwater Horizon*, such a visible safety failure demands a grand regulatory gesture to reassure the public. As SAS went to press, three safety reviews had already been announced, and the IMO had promised to address passenger ship safety at MSC 90 in May.

Ship design and evacuation arrangements are certainly worth scrutinising again, but the root cause of this incident is something far too abstract to gain public attention. The mainstream media has no idea what a ship safety management system is. In a world driven by graphic simplicity it is hard to sell the idea that a stack of paperwork represents the shield protecting each vessel from harm.

But if any newspaper editor or television producer had wanted an appropriate visual metaphor for *Costa Concordia*’s SMS, then it was at their fingertips: a photograph of that proud, expensive and sophisticated vessel, lying helplessly on its side with a lump of rock embedded in its hull. It was a symbol of how one simple factor can bring down a flawed system – a symbol of a management failure laid bare. ◀

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