



## Sorry sorries: Image repair after regretted apologies



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### ABSTRACT

Regretted apologies create a unique rhetorical situation, possibly leading to an apology for an apology. This essay draws on the work of Benoit's (1995) image repair typology to survey attempts to repair image when the offense is an earlier attempt at image repair. Two case studies are offered—one in politics and one in entertainment—to assess image repair efforts after regretted apologies. Implications for image repair analyses are offered, as well as suggestions for further work to add nuance to image repair theory.

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## 1. Introduction

When image is damaged, people turn to rhetorical strategies to repair it (Benoit, 1995), in politics (e.g., Benoit, 2006), public relations (e.g., Compton, 2014), sports (e.g., Brazeal, 2008) religion (e.g., Miller, 2002), entertainment (e.g., Compton and Miller, 2011), and other contexts. Decades of image repair scholarship, including theory-led analyses of case studies, add nuance to how image repair functions in specific contexts and after specific infractions, and during the past twenty years, much of this work builds on William Benoit's typology of image repair strategies (Benoit, 1995).

This current project turns from image repair scholarship in specific contexts and after specific infractions and instead, looks at image repair against a specific type of offense: a regretted apology, or when a rhetor tries to "take back" a public apology. Focusing on this specific type of rhetorical incident offers a number of benefits. First, such a focus contributes to a recent line of image theory analyses that moves toward image repair associated with types of expressions, such as outbursts (Compton & Miller, 2015). Second, regretted apologies are fairly common—at least, in degrees. Even if an apologizer does not regret an apology in its entirety, it is reasonable to conclude that apologizers often regret specific word choices, awkward phrasing, or timing. Finally, this specific focus on regretted apologies offers a point of departure from conventional case study analyses, which have received criticism for their limitations in image repair scholarship in particular (e.g., Coombs and Holladay, 2008).

## 2. Image repair

Building off of work in *apologia* (e.g., Ware and Linkugel, 1973) accounts (Scott and Lyman, 1968), and related areas, Benoit developed a typology of image repair strategies. The typology makes a valuable contribution to image repair research, as

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it offers clarity through classification. When someone (or, some entity, such as a business) experiences a loss of positive image by doing something that others find objectionable, that person can turn to rhetorical strategies in an attempt to repair damaged image. Two criteria must be met for image repair to be warranted: perceived responsibility for the act and perceived offensiveness of the act (Benoit, 1995). Benoit's typology consists of five primary image repair strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. A number of these basic strategies are further divided into specific tactics, as explained next.

*Denial* can be argued in two ways. First, one can simply claim that the offensive act in question did not occur (*simple denial*). A second option is to deny personal responsibility for the act by indicting someone else for the act in question (*shifting the blame*). *Evading responsibility* involves an acknowledgement that an act occurred, but a rejection of accountability for the act. Evading responsibility has four possible tactics: *provocation* (the act was committed, but it was in response to another wrong act), *defeasibility* (the act was committed, but the accused could not help it; it was beyond one's control), *accident* (the act was committed, but it was an accident), and *good intentions* (the act was committed, and it had negative consequences, but the accused meant well). An important theme links these four tactics: the offensive act occurred. *Reducing offensiveness* involves an acknowledgement that the accused did the act, but coupled with claims that the act was not actually (as) offensive. Reducing offensiveness has six tactics: *bolstering* (the accused did this offensive act, but the accused has also done a number of positive things, or has a number of positive attributes), *minimization* (the act was not as bad as critics make it out to be), *differentiation* (the act was not as bad as other bad acts), *transcendence* (the act can be excused in the context of higher considerations), *attacking the accuser* (the act is being characterized by someone who cannot be trusted, etc.), and *compensation* (the accused tries to reimburse those hurt by the act). *Corrective action* occurs when the accused promises to fix the problem, restore the situation, or in some way amend the consequences of the offense. *Mortification* (a term also used by Burke) is a statement of regret for a wrongdoing (see Benoit, 1995; for thorough treatments of these strategies and tactics).

Mortification—expressing regret—is often successful in image repair, a conclusion supported by empirical investigations (Benoit and Drew, 1997) and rhetorical analyses of case studies (e.g., Benoit and Hanczor, 1994; Brinson & Benoit, 1996; but see Coombs and Holladay, 2008), and especially when mortification is combined with corrective action (e.g., Brinson and Benoit, 1996). But how would mortification (or any of the other strategies) fare when the offense itself is an expression of mortification, or a regretted apology. How does one repair an image when the offense is an image repair strategy? Under such circumstances, should one attempt a conventional mortification and/or corrective action image repair approach—even when mortification created the need for image repair in the first place?

Successfully apologizing for an apology would seem to demand a deft rhetorical touch. The implied message would be: I did not mean my earlier apology, but I do mean *this* apology. With regretted apologies, would a rhetor try to apologize for apologizing? If not, what other strategies or tactics would be used when an apology goes awry, and would these attempts be more consistent with conventional image repair calculus? This analysis considers such questions through two applied case studies: one related to image and politics and another to image and entertainment.

### 3. Methodology

The method of this survey is rhetorical analysis, building from the theoretical framework proposed by Benoit (1995). This typology offers a way to identify and then analyze efforts to repair an image and has been used across contexts and issues (e.g., Benoit, 1997; Dewberry & Fox, 2012; Kennedy and Benoit, 1997: politics; Compton and Miller, 2011: entertainment). As a point of departure from conventional image repair analyses, this project turns from specific incidents as episodes for analysis to a *type* of image offense—the regretted apology. That is, the research was guided by a specific rhetorical occurrence, not a specific, single image offense, with results that may prove more generalizable in similar rhetorical occurrences (i.e., regretted apologies). Texts of apologies were retrieved from media interviews and statements, and then, the author engaged in repeated careful readings of the apologies to identify strategies, using Benoit (1995) typology as a guide and rhetorical tool.

The two cases were selected based on their shared rhetorical situation: a rhetor apologized, and then later, regretted the apology. Despite many other differences between the two cases—in contexts (political and entertainment), media reaction, audience expectations, nature of apologies—this key shared characteristic of a regretted apology allows a consideration of image repair that moves beyond a single case study and single context.

### 4. Regretted apologies in politics

Image repair in the context of politics is challenging. Party and political ideology can polarize an appraising audience (Benoit, 1997, 2006), and opponents often sustain image attacks (Benoit, 1997). To compound the challenge, mortification—a successful strategy in many instances (Benoit, 1995)—is often more difficult to use in politics, as “potential future consequences can seem quite serious” (Benoit, 1997, p. 255). As an example of apologizing for apologizing in politics, this essay turns to a case study: Joe Barton, R-Texas, and his apology for apologizing in the wake of the BP oil spill during the summer of 2010. Barton's apologies—both of them—were explicit. Indeed, he said the word “apologize” five times in a matter of hours.

**Rep. Joe Barton and the BP Oil Spill.** During the summer of 2010, Tony Hayward, BP's CEO, appeared before the House Energy and Commerce Committee in televised hearings about the disastrous oil spill. The day before, the White House had

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