



President Barack Obama's image repair on HealthCare.gov



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ABSTRACT

Obama's health care initiative HealthCare.gov went live on October 1, 2013. It was plagued with problems. Furthermore, the President promised that if people liked their current health care plan, they could keep it. People were shocked when they started to receive cancellation notices from their insurance companies. Republicans seized on the opportunity to savage the president, his administration, and his health care program. Obama's approval rating was anemic and on November 7, he was interviewed by Chuck Todd and on November 14, 2013, Obama held a press conference to try to mend his image. His defense relied heavily on mortification, corrective action, and minimization but also contained instances of defeasibility, bolstering, and transcendence. This essay uses Image Repair theory to analyze and evaluate the President's image repair effort.

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1. Introduction

The webpage for Obama's signature health insurance initiative, HealthCare.gov, which went live on October 1, 2013, experienced problems from the very start:

The government website launched this week to sell health insurance was overwhelmed by up to five times as many users as it was designed to handle . . . Glitches . . . have frustrated millions of consumers who have tried to enter the site or complete applications for health insurance under the Affordable Care Act. (Mullaney, 2013)

Republicans, who for the most part had opposed this act, gleefully savaged the President and his administration. For example, Weisman and Stolberg (2013) reported that

The memo distributed to House Republicans this week was concise and blunt, listing talking points and marching orders: "Because of Obamacare, I Lost My Insurance." "Obamacare Increases Health Costs." "The Exchanges May Not Be Secure, Putting Personal Information at Risk." "Continue Collecting Constituent Stories."

This memo was part of an "organized Republican attack" on Obamacare (Weisman & Stolberg, 2013). The GOP demanded that Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius tender her resignation (Payne, Smith, & Cohen, 2013). The Republican National Committee instigated "robocalls and targeted Facebook posts against 11 Democratic Senate candidates" declaring that these candidates and President Obama "lied" when they and Barack Obama said people could keep their health insurance if they liked it." Reince Priebus, Chair of the Republican National Committee, pointedly attacked the president when he said that "We now know the president's repeated promises that Americans could keep their insurance plans if they liked them was a blatant lie" (Alpert, 2013). Adding insult to injury, the HealthCare.gov website went down during Health and

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Table 1
Image repair strategies.

General strategy	Tactic	Example
Denial	Simple denial	I did not embezzle money.
	Shift blame	Steve took your wallet, not me.
Evade responsibility	Provocation	I insulted you but only after you criticized me.
	Defeasability	I was late because traffic delayed me.
	Accident	Our collision was an accident.
	Good intentions	I did not tell you because I hoped to fix the problem first.
Reduce offensiveness	Bolstering	Think of all of the times I helped you.
	Minimization	I broke your vase but it was not an expensive one.
	Differentiation	I borrowed your laptop without asking, I did not steal it.
	Transcendence	Searching travelers at the airport is an inconvenience but it protects against terrorism.
	Attack accuser	Joe says I embezzled money but he is a chronic liar.
	Compensation	Because the waiter spilled a drink on your clothes, we'll give you desert free.
Corrective action		Because the waiter spilled a drink on your suit, we'll have it dry cleaned.
Mortification		I am so sorry I offended you. I regret hurting your feelings and I apologize.

Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius's testimony before the House Energy and Commerce Committee (Millman, 2013). Obama's approval rating hit a low of 42% in November, 2013 (Jackson, 2014).

The threat to the President's image hinged on two key accusations: (1) the Healthcare.gov webpage was not working, and (2) Obama promised that people could keep their current health care plan if they liked it. The President was interviewed by Chuck Todd on November 7; excerpts were broadcast on the *NBC Nightly News* and then on *Today*. Obama also held a press conference on November 14, 2013 to respond to these accusations and repair his image. This essay applies the theory of Image Repair (Benoit, 2015) to Obama's discourse. First, the method will be explained. Then Obama's defense will be analyzed using the Theory of Image Repair Discourse. His defense will be evaluated and then implications will be discussed.

2. Method: image repair discourse

Image Repair Theory argues that image, face, or reputation is extremely important for individuals and organizations (Benoit, 2015). Five general strategies for image repair messages have been identified, three with specific variants or tactics (see Table 1). Each of these fourteen image repair strategies will be discussed in this section.

2.1. Denial

Simple denial can take several forms. Those accused of wrong-doing may deny that the offensive act occurred, deny that they performed the objectionable act, or deny that the act is actually harmful. Any of these forms of denial, if accepted by the intended audience, can conceivably repair the rhetor's reputation. Furthermore, a rhetor may also try to shift the blame. If another person (or group, or organization) actually committed the offensive act, the accused cannot reasonably be held responsible for that offensive act.

2.2. Evade responsibility

This general image repair strategy can be divided into four distinct tactics. A rhetor may allege the offensive act was simply a response to someone else's offensive act (typically an action by the alleged victim), and so the rhetor's response was a reasonable reaction to that provocation. Defeasibility claims that the rhetor lacked the knowledge or ability to avoid committing the offensive act. An accused may also argue that the offense occurred by accident. Fourth, the rhetor can claim that the act was actually performed with good intentions.

2.3. Reduce offensiveness

Six different forms (tactics) of attempting to reduce the apparent offensiveness of the act have been identified in the literature. First, one accused of wrong-doing can bolster his or her own image in an attempt to strengthen the audience's positive feelings toward him or her. Hopefully this will offset the negative feelings that arose from the offensive act. The tactic of minimization suggests that the act in question is not really as offensive as it seems. Differentiation tries to distinguish the act in question from other similar but more offensive actions. In comparison, the act performed by the rhetor may not appear so bad. Transcendence attempts to justify the act by placing it in a more favorable context. The accused can attempt to attack the accusers, so as to reduce the credibility of the accusations (or suggest that the victim deserved what happened).

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