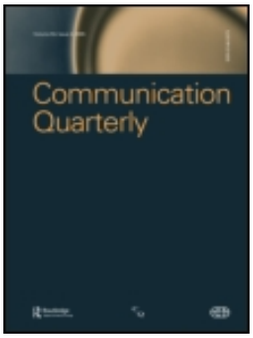

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Another Visit to the Theory of Image Restoration Strategies

William L. Benoit

KEY CONCEPTS Image restoration, corporate apoligy, rhetorical theory, social leviathans

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I view the essay by Burns and Bruner as generally sympathetic to my work. They offer a number of important and thought-provoking insights. They appropriately note that I acknowledged that I have not written the final word on this topic. Indeed, I now tend to prefer image "repair" to image "restoration" because "restoration" might imply that one's image has been restored to its prior state. Sometimes one has to settle for repairs (or "patches;" and of course image restoration/ repair may not work at all). Nor do I assume my writing is always as clear as I might hope. When one works on a variety of topics with multiple co-authors, one's focus necessarily varies. Still, I want to point out a few places where I have anticipated some of authors' concerns or disagree with their analysis.

Burns and Bruner reveal that their goal is "to emphasize and develop a more audience(s)-oriented point of view, to ameliorate the constraints of the theory's apparent focus on what seems to be a discrete source, a typology of the source's strategies, and an understanding of 'text' as something developed and delivered by the source" (p. #). I do present a menu of options for those who feel the need to engage in image repair (and I am trying to develop some guidelines for how sources can choose from those options). Thus, my work inevitably focuses on the source, on the source's options, and on discourse (texts) from sources. However, I do acknowledge the importance of the audience in several ways.

First, I have always considered audience perceptions to be important. In discussing the two components of a persuasive attack (offensive act, blame for that act), I observed (1995) that "The key point here, of course, is not whether *in fact* the actor caused the damage, but whether the relevant audience *believes* the actor to be the source of the reprehensible act" (p. 72, emphasis original). I have defined "image" as "the *perception* of a person (or group, or organization) *held by the audience*, shaped by the words and actions of that person, as well as by the discourse and behavior of other relevant actors" (1997a, p. 251, emphasis added; see also Benoit, 1997b, p. 178). Image is in the eye of the beholder; perhaps, though, it would have been better to include this definition in everything I've written. Note also that I explicitly acknowledge that

image is influenced by "the discourse and behavior of other relevant actors," not focusing exclusively on the text of the person or organization engaging in image repair.

Second, in a section on "Image Restoration and the Audience," I explain (1995) that there are potentially multiple audiences. Elsewhere (1997b), I offer an illustration of this claim:

> It is vital to clearly identify the salient audience(s).... For example, suppose a company is accused of dumping waste. At least five potential audiences can be identified in this situation. First, the company may, of course, wish to assuage the concerns of the attackers, the environmentalists. However, the opinions of its stockholders are important, if they are aware of the controversy. Governmental regulators may fine or otherwise sanction the company. If customers decide to boycott the company because of the attacks, consumers are another potential audience. Local voters could conceivably pass laws restricting the company's business practices. The interests of these groups differ widely. . and thus message appeals that might be effective with one group could be worthless with another. (pp 182-183)

Thus, I explicitly acknowledge that it is "vital" for us to realize that there can be multiple audiences with different interests and that this fact has important implications for invention.

Third, our applications of the theory of image restoration discourse to situated discourse attempt to determine the audience's (or audiences') likely reaction to the discourse. For example, in our Texaco essay (Brinson & Benoit, 1999), we examine factors such as media attention, boycott activity, and stock prices, concluding that "This is not to say that Texaco had managed to eradicate all suspicion of corporate racism, but the firestorm of criticism that erupted had passed by, leaving Texaco largely intact. The company had successfully weathered the storm" (p. 503). The audience holds an important place in Image Restoration Theory and in our research, despite an emphasis on rhetors who feel the need to repair their images.

Burns and Bruner also are concerned that my work uses "language that seems to reflect a more static or linear view of rhetoric. For example, a dynamic notion of 'attack-defense' easily can be confused with the most static concept of 'exigence-response' based on Bitzer's (1968) analysis of the rhetorical situation" (p. #). Yes, others may misunderstand (confuse) this issue (see Benoit, 1994, for my views on Bitzer's rhetorical situation). Of course, at times image repair does occur as a particular discursive response to a specific rhetorical attack. However, I analyzed over 40 advertisements by Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola spanning the period of 1/22/90 through 12/21/92, to show how their conflicting themes were developed in multiple messages over time (1995). My analysis reveals how these messages initiated and repeated several attacks and defenses: There was no single attack which provoked a solitary defense in these discourses. The static view they worry about is clearly not inherent in my work.

They also express concerns about assessing effectiveness. They correctly note that attributing causation to rhetorical discourse is very difficult. Edwards (1996) and Stromer-Galley and Schiappa (1998) argue this point even more forcefully. I believe that a rhetorical critic who is interested in effectiveness (and, of course, critics have a variety of concerns) ought to first make a judgment about whether the discourse was

well-developed or appropriate and then look to see whether available external evidence supports that evaluation. I do not believe that evidence of effects should substitute for the critic's assessment; neither do I believe critics who assess effectiveness should ignore evidence of audience effects.

We have employed a variety of evidence to corroborate our judgments of effectiveness in our research. Burns and Bruner, for example, suggested that "In the Texaco case, conducting public opinion polls and comparing sales data are appropriate methods for providing some solid backing for a claim that strategies cause or are correlated with subsequent phenomena (p. 35). We did not have the resources to conduct our own public opinion polls about Texaco; we sought both public opinion data and sales figures; neither kind of data were available to us when we wrote about Texaco (we have used both public opinion poll data and sales in other analyses when those data were available). We provided the external evidence that we were able to locate.

Incidentally, Burns and Bruner criticize our use of a decline in negative newspaper coverage on Texaco (one of several indicators of effects we employed) because "newspaper coverage of an issue can decline for many reasons" (p. 35). This objection seems somewhat odd given the fact that they offer numbers of newspaper articles about Texaco located via Lexis-Nexis as "a proven method for documenting effects" (p. 36). Finding external evidence to support (corroborate, test) critical assessments of effectiveness is difficult, but we make arguments that readers can accept or reject.

I would also like to note that we have developed other suggestions for use of these strategies beyond the few excerpts they cite (see Benoit, 1997a). My statement that "denial and shifting the blame are not considered by those who are injured by the action to be as appropriate or effective as other image restoration strategies" is not a blanket conclusion, but the result of one experimental study (Benoit & Drew, 1997). Furthermore, this statement should *not* be taken to mean that denial or shifting the blame necessarily will be considered inappropriate or ineffective by other audiences besides the injured parties.

I want to end this essay on a positive note. I agree with most of the ideas Burns and Bruner have developed in their essay. We should always keep in mind that "a corporation's image is not unitary or homogeneous" (p. 29). We must remember the important role of audiences and their perceptions. We should realize that image is dynamic and almost certainly cannot be "restored" to exactly its state before the offensive act. I embrace their call for rhetorical critics to consider "slogans, ideographs, truncated, arguments, and the nonverbal aspects of image recreation" (p. 32). I do not dispute the importance of context, although I will note that every study must have bounds or it cannot be completed. I agree that the audience may "watch" to see if promises of corrective action actually yield fruit. Indeed, my analysis of the *Valdez* oil spill (1995) argued that Exxon's deeds did not match its words: "Consider the claim that Exxon's cleanup efforts were swift and competent. Evidence reaching the public from non-company sources dramatically denies these assertions, revealing that its actions were neither swift nor competent" (p. 126). I agree that ethnographic research would make a useful contribution to the current primary method (rhetorical criticism). I also embrace their call for experimental research into image restoration theory, which is relatively uncommon (see Benoit & Drew, 1997; and McCleary's (1983) experimental study of Ware & Linkugel's theory of *apologia*). I appreciate their careful efforts to refine my theory and, like them, I "look forward with anticipation to

further developments both in theory and application" (p. 38).

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