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Not the Best: What Rush Limbaugh's Apology to Sandra Fluke Reveals about Image Restoration Strategies on Commercial Radio

Joshua M. Bentley

This study analyzes the rhetorical strategies used by Rush Limbaugh to re-build his public image after he made offensive remarks about law student Sandra Fluke in early 2012. A close reading of Limbaugh's public statements reveals that Limbaugh employed the strategies of evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, and mortification (i.e., apologizing). However, Limbaugh's apology was more of a pseudo-apology than a genuine apology. This article argues that Limbaugh adopted the strategies he did because the nature of political talk radio makes it more important to maintain a good public image with the audience than with political opponents or even advertisers.

Since the 1990s, public apologies seem to be growing in frequency and importance (Cunningham, 1999; Lazare, 2004; Smith, 2008). Apologies have been recognized as an important way to respond to crises (Coombs, 1995) and restore one's public image (Benoit, 1995, 1997). Hearit (2006) analyzed apologies by President Bill Clinton, baseball player John Rocker, historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, as well as organizations like Abercrombie & Fitch, Firestone, and the American Red Cross. An emerging area of research now examines political apologies by governments for historic injustices (e.g., Blatz, Schumann, & Ross, 2009; Harris, Grainger, & Mullany, 2006). Even the Catholic Church, during Pope John Paul II's reign, apologized for ''the Inquisition, the Crusades, the persecution of Jews, the religious wars, and the treatment of women'' (Teitel, 2006, p. 106).

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Along with this proliferation of apologies, some observers have also identified a rise in ''pseudo-apologies'' (Lazare, 2004, p. 85) or ''non-apologies'' (Eisinger, 2011, p. 137). This type of message may include the *words* ''I'm sorry'' or ''I apologize,'' however, pseudo-apologies typically are vague, conditional, passive, misdirected, or insincere.

The present study uses Benoit's (1995, 1997) theory of image restoration and various theories of ethical and effective apologies to analyze a public apology issued by talk radio host Rush Limbaugh in March 2012. As the analysis will show, Limbaugh's apology was closer to a pseudo-apology than to an ideal, genuine apology. Nevertheless, his overall image restoration strategy was likely effective—at least from a certain perspective—due to both the commercial and partisan nature of political talk radio.

This article (1) reviews key literature on image restoration and apologies, (2) briefly summarizes the circumstances surrounding Limbaugh's apology, (3) analyzes Limbaugh's apology and accompanying public statements, and (4) discusses important implications for public apologies in general, and the radio industry in particular.

Image Restoration Theory

According to Benoit (1995), individuals and organizations naturally use communication to maintain their reputation, or public image. However, offensive acts or misdeeds can lead to reputational crises that must be managed (Coombs, 1995; Hearit, 2006). Building upon the work of rhetorical scholars like Aristotle, Burke, Ware, and Linkugel, Benoit (1995, 1997) developed five categories of image restoration strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. If an individual or organization is accused of an offensive act, the response generally will fall into one or more of these categories.

Denial

Denial occurs when a person or organization claims that an offensive act did not happen (Benoit, 1995). A prime example is President Bill Clinton's famous statement, ''I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky: (''The President Under Fire,'' 1998, p. A14). Another type of denial is shifting the blame or *scapegoating* (Benoit, 1995). In the 1980s when the Toshiba Corporation was accused of selling military secrets to the Soviet Union, Toshiba sought to protect itself by placing the blame on one of its subsidiaries (Hearit, 1994). Hearit (2006) observed that denial is often the first response of individuals or organizations accused of misdeeds. Only after denial fails do apologists ''slouch toward a fuller acknowledgement of their wrongdoing'' (p. 120).

Evasion of Responsibility

Those who cannot deny a particular charge may try to evade responsibility for it (Benoit, 1997). This strategy takes various forms. *Provocation* means that someone claims he or she was simply responding to another actor. *Defeasibility* suggests that an offensive act occurred because the actor lacked information or ability. Sometimes people will claim that an offensive act was accidental, or that it was committed with good intentions. In each case, the offensive act is not denied, but various excuses are offered to explain why the actor should not be held fully responsible.

Reducing Offensiveness

When individuals or organizations cannot deny that they were responsible for an offensive act, there are many ways to make the act seem less offensive (Benoit, 1997). Strategies include *bolstering* (stressing the actor's positive traits), *minimizing* (suggesting that the consequences of the act were not too harmful), *differentiation* (drawing careful distinctions between the alleged act and the actual act), *transcendence* (arguing that an offensive act served a higher purpose), *attacking the accuser* (questioning the integrity or motivations of the one bringing charges), or providing *compensation* (mitigating harm by reimbursing a victim). As Benoit (1995) pointed out, none of these strategies deny responsibility for an offensive act. Instead, they seek to ''reduce unfavorable feelings toward the actor by increasing the audience's esteem for the actor or by decreasing their negative feelings about the act'' (p. 78).

Corrective Action

Corrective action may involve fixing problems caused by an offensive act or making changes to ensure the offensive act does not occur again (Benoit, 1995). For instance, after the explosion of BP's Deepwater Horizon oil-rig caused a massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, BP used social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter to spread the word about its clean-up efforts (Muralidharan, Dillistone, & Shin, 2011).

Mortification

Mortification is another term for apologizing. Kenneth Burke used the word ''mortification'' to describe the act of admitting responsibility for a misdeed and seeking forgiveness (Benoit, 1995, pp. 17–20). However, the act of apologizing has been studied from many other perspectives, including linguistics, (Ogiermann, 2009), sociology (Tavuchis, 1991), psychology (Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991), philosophy (Davis, 2002), psychiatry (Lazare, 2004), and public relations

(Hearit, 2006). The next section explores some of these different perspectives on how apologies work.

Understanding Apologies

In order to understand how apologies function in society, this section will first offer several definitions of apologies, then discuss the essential elements of apologies, how apologies work, and why apologies sometimes fail.

Defining Apologies

Harris et al. (2006) observed, "How an apology is defined is greatly influenced by disciplinary perspectives" (p. 717). According to Goffman, for example, an apology is a symbolic gesture "through which an individual splits himself into two parts, the part that is guilty of an offense and the part that dissociates itself from the delict and affirms a belief in the offended rule" (1971, p. 113). In other words, an apology is a way of differentiating between an offender and the offense, itself.

Lazare (2004) defined an apology as an encounter "between two parties in which one party, the offender, acknowledges responsibility for an offense or grievance and expresses regret or remorse to a second party, the aggrieved" (p. 23). In speech act theory, a phrase like "I'm sorry" or "I apologize" is labeled an "illocutionary force indicating device (IFID)" and is considered just one component of a full-fledge apology (Scher & Darley, 1997, p. 128). In fact, the scholarly consensus is that apologies have several necessary elements. These elements are discussed next.

Elements of Apologies

Tavuchis (1991) outlined three elements of an apology. He explained that when someone apologizes, he or she is "acknowledging ultimate responsibility, expressing genuine sorrow and regret, and pledging henceforth (implicitly or explicitly) to abide by the rules" (p. 8). These three elements can be seen in most other conceptualizations of apologies, as well. Davis (2002) argued that a "Consummate Apology" has "doxastic, affective, and dispositional elements" (p. 170). The doxastic element is the acknowledgment of the offense, the affective element is the feeling of self-reproach, and the dispositional element is the intention not to repeat the offense.

Lazare (2004) agreed that apologies require acknowledgment of the offense and a feeling of remorse, but he identified two other elements: offering an explanation and making reparations. Scher and Darley (1997) argued that explanations are a kind of excuse, not part of an apology. Instead, they listed the IFID (e.g., "I'm sorry"), taking responsibility, offering reparations, and promising forbearance as the four "strategies" that comprise the "apology speech act set" (p. 128). More importantly, Scher and Darley tested these four strategies empirically and found that each one

was a unique and significant predictor of how appropriate people considered an apology to be.

Some theories of ideal apologies are even more detailed. Smith's (2008) ''categorical apology'' (pp. 28–107) includes a remarkable 11 elements: (1) corroborating facts, (2) accepting blame, (3) identifying each harm, (4), identifying the moral principle *behind* each harm, (5) expressing support for each of those moral principles, (6), recognizing the victim as a moral interlocutor, (7) expressing regret, (8) performing the actual apology—not just thinking or feeling it, (9) promising not to repeat the offense and offering reparations, (10), apologizing with the proper intentions, and (11) displaying proper emotions. According to Hearit (2006, pp. 64–73), the *manner* of an apology should be truthful, sincere, timely, voluntary, should address all stakeholders, and should be performed in an appropriate context. The *content* of an apology should include acknowledging wrongdoing, accepting responsibility, expressing regret, identifying with injured stakeholders, asking for forgiveness, seeking reconciliation, disclosing relevant information, providing legitimate explanations, offering to perform corrective action, and offering appropriate compensation.

The preceding examples suggest what elements should be included in an apology, but not how an apology works. That question is addressed next.

How Apologies Work

To be effective, a genuine apology should at least *begin* the process of reconciliation between an offender and a victim. In the diverse literature on apologies, there are four primary ways in which apologies are thought to function. First, apologies symbolize the rejection of misdeeds and the commitment to be a different person. Second, apologies promote healing by meeting psychological needs within victims. Third, apologies influence the attributions other people make about the offender's motives and identity. Fourth, apologies invite victims to empathize with the offender and thus move toward forgiveness.

Symbolism.

As mentioned already, Goffman (1971) saw apologies as a way of symbolically dividing oneself into ''a blameworthy part and a part that stands back and sympathizes with the blame giving'' (p. 113). Hearit (2006) described apologies as pubic rituals to atone for wrongdoing. This perspective emphasizes the fact that apologies require people to humble themselves and do a certain penance for violating social rules or norms. If people perform the ritual properly, they prove that they deserve to be ''brought back into the fold'' (Goffman, 1971, p. 113).

In their work on forgiveness, McCullough, Root, Tabak, and Witvliet (2009), argued that victims must come to see their offenders as ''safe,'' ''careworthy,'' and offering ''expected value'' (p. 428). Offenders who are willing to perform the symbolic ritual of apologizing can establish themselves as all three of these things, thus increasing the chance they will be forgiven. Even if forgiveness is

withheld, Hearit (1994) suggested that in a public relations context, apologies may still "complete the ritualistic cycle of transgression and absolution. In so functioning, apologiae deprive journalists of a continuing story and, thus, limit the damage done to corporate images" (p. 122).

Psychological Needs.

As a trained psychiatrist, Lazare (2004) emphasized the clinical and psychological benefits of apologizing. He identified seven needs victims have that can be addressed through apologies. These needs are:

> [R]estoration of self-respect and dignity, assurance that both parties have shared values, assurance that the offenses were not their fault, assurance of safety in their relationships, seeing the offender suffer, reparation for the harm caused by the offense, [and] having meaningful dialogues with the offenders. (p. 44)

There is some overlap between Lazare's list and McCullough et al.'s (2009) list, discussed above. Perhaps these two perspectives are related, and the symbolism in an apology communicates to victims in a way that meets their psychological needs.

Attribution.

According to attribution theory (Weiner, 1986, 1995), there are three dimensions of causality: locus, stability, and controllability. The cause of an action may be internal or external to the actor (locus), it may be stable or changeable, and it may be under the actor's volitional control or not. People judge an action more critically if they believe the action reflects *who the actor is*—in other words, if they attribute the cause to internal, stable, and controllable forces. Proper apologies can help offenders show that their bad behavior is not *who they are*, but is more external, more variable over time, and less intentional. In a series of experimental studies, Weiner et al. (1991) found that apologies did change the way people perceived the moral character of an offender. Offenders who admitted their guilt were generally evaluated more positively than those who tried to deny it.

Empathy.

Instead of attributions, McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal (1997) argued that "empathy for the offending partner is the central facilitative condition that leads to forgiving" (p. 322). Victims who can take the perspective of their offender are more likely to forgive their offenders, less likely to seek revenge, and less likely to avoid their offenders. Structural equation modeling has been used to demonstrate that feelings of empathy mediate the relationship between apologies and forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1997, 1998).

Although there are various theories about how apologies work, experience reveals that not all apologies are effective. Possible explanations for the failure of apologies are discussed next.

Why Apologies Fail

According to Hearit (2006), there are at least three reasons an apology may not be accepted. First, the person issuing the apology may seem insincere. Second, the offensive act may be too heinous to forgive (e.g., the Holocaust). Third, there may be no one with the authority to forgive the offensive act (e.g., as in the case of some environmental disasters).

Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero, and Vas (2004) demonstrated that apologies without corrective action are less likely to be effective. Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, and Shirvani (2008) found that when an offensive act is obviously intentional, apologizing can be counterproductive. Weiner et al. (1991) observed that if someone who was not suspected of any wrongdoing confessed unexpectedly, other people had more negative reactions than when the person kept silent.

Another reason apologies may fail is because they do not meet the requirements of genuine apologies. Lazare (2004) argued that pseudo-apologies are distinguished from genuine apologies by:

> 1) offering a vague and incomplete acknowledgement; 2) using the passive voice; 3) making the offense conditional; 4) questioning whether the victim was damaged; 5) minimizing the offense; 6) using the empathic ''I'm sorry''; 7) apologizing to the wrong party; and 8) apologizing for the wrong offense. (p. 86)

If the goal is to mend relationships and achieve forgiveness, pseudo-apologies are unlikely to work. However, Eisinger (2011) found than pseudo-apologies can help politicians hold on to elected office. When U.S. congressmen and senators were formally disciplined, those who issued denials or pseudo-apologies were *more* likely to be reelected than those who issued genuine apologies. Following cognitive dissonance theory, Tavris and Aronson (2007) have suggested that people who support a politician will look for excuses to keep supporting him or her. Pseudo-apologies facilitate such excuse-making better than genuine apologies—however ethical the latter may be. Thus, while pseudo-apologies are likely to fail as apologies *qua* apologies, they may work as alternative image restoration strategies.

With this theoretical background in mind, we can move on to consider the specific case of Rush Limbaugh's public apology in March 2012.

The Case of Rush Limbaugh and Sandra Fluke

Few media personalities are as polarizing as Rush Limbaugh. Ronald Reagan once called him the ''Number Once voice for conservatism in our Country'' (Bowman, 1993, p. 44). Critics have labeled him a right-wing extremist (Dionne, 2009), a conservative firebrand (Strauss, 2011), a demagogue (Larson, 1997), and even ''the most dangerous man in America'' (Wilson, 2011). However, Limbaugh's influence on radio as a medium, and on political talk radio as a format, is undeniable. His audience is estimated to be over 14 million listeners (Farhi, 2009) and the industry

magazine *Talkers* ranks Limbaugh first on its list of the ''Heaviest Hundred'' talk show hosts of all time (Hinckley, 2010).

As noted by Cappella, Turow, and Jamieson (1996), many talk radio hosts incorporate outrageous and, at times, offensive content into their programs. Limbaugh has engaged in his share of tasteless antics. For instance, at different points in his career, he has placed a condom over his microphone to ''engage in 'safe talk' '' and used a vacuum cleaner sound effect to ''abort callers'' (Cappella et al., 1996, p. 52). However, the present case is somewhat unique because it involves especially personal attacks against a private citizen.

The Offensive Act

In February 2012, a debate was raging between the Obama administration and several conservative and religious groups over contraception (Kliff, 2012). Republican Congressman Darrell Issa called a hearing of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee to investigate the administration's plan to ensure that employees of faith-based organizations (e.g., religious colleges and universities) had birth control covered in their health insurance plans. Democrats on the committee wanted a Georgetown law student named Sandra Fluke to testify, but Issa refused (Kliff, 2012). In response, congressional Democrats staged a mock committee hearing on February 23rd and invited Fluke to speak (Milbank, 2012). Fluke told of friends and classmates who had experienced health problems such as ovarian cysts because they could not afford birth control and because contraception was not covered by their student insurance plans.

On February 29, during his radio program, Rush Limbaugh criticized Fluke for wanting other people to pay for her to have sex. ''What does that make her?'' Limbaugh asked. ''It makes her a slut, right? It makes her a prostitute'' (Weisman, 2012, p. A1). The next day Limbaugh added, ''If we're going to pay for your contraceptives and thus pay for you to have sex, we want something for it. We want you to post the videos online so we can all watch'' (Weisman, 2012, p. A1).

Democrats condemned Limbaugh's language and a number of Republicans offered their own criticism (Lemire, 2012; Nakamura & Kane, 2012). President Obama called Fluke on March 2nd to express his support for her (Weisman, 2012). *Rolling Stone* reported that several musicians, including Peter Gabriel, wanted Limbaugh stop using their music during his program (Perpetua, 2012). Activists at the Daily Kos and Media Matters urged advertisers to boycott Limbaugh's show, and several did (Stelter, 2012a, 2012b). Two radio stations, one in Hawaii and one in Massachusetts also dropped the program.

The Apology

On Saturday, March 3, 2012, Limbaugh posted the following apology on his website:

For over 20 years, I have illustrated the absurd with absurdity, three hours a day, five days a week. In this instance, I chose the wrong words in my analogy of the situation. I did not mean a personal attack on Ms. Fluke.

I think it is absolutely absurd that during these very serious political times, we are discussing personal sexual recreational activities before members of Congress. I personally do not agree that American citizens should pay for these social activities. What happened to personal responsibility and accountability? Where do we draw the line? If this is accepted as the norm, what will follow? Will we be debating if taxpayers should pay for new sneakers for all students that are interested in running to keep fit? In my monologue, I posited that it is not our business whatsoever to know what is going on in anyone's bedroom nor do I think it is a topic that should reach a Presidential level.

My choice of words was not the best, and in the attempt to be humorous, I created a national stir. I sincerely apologize to Ms. Fluke for the insulting word choices. (Limbaugh, 2012a).

Two days later, on his March 5th program, Limbaugh devoted most of the first hour to discussing the situation (Limbaugh, 2012b, 2012c). He argued that his real mistake was becoming like his political opponents:

Against my own instincts, against my own knowledge, against everything I know to be right and wrong I descended to their level when I used those two words to describe Sandra Fluke. That was my error. I became like them, and I feel very badly about that. I've always tried to maintain a very high degree of integrity and independence on this program. Nevertheless, those two words were inappropriate. They were uncalled for. They distracted from the point that I was actually trying to make, and I again sincerely apologize to Ms. Fluke for using those two words to describe her. I do not think she is either of those two words. I did not think last week that she is either of those two words. (Limbaugh, 2012c, para. 4)

Limbaugh went on to comment on the advertisers who had left his program:

They've decided they don't want you or your business anymore.

So be it.

For me, this program is always about you. You talk to anybody that knows me who asks me about this program, and I always say, ''It's all for the audience,'' because if you're not there, all the rest of this is academic. This show is about you. It's not about the advertisers. (paras. 2–4)

The Reaction

Fluke appeared on ABC's *The View* on March 5th where she was asked if she accepted Limbaugh's apology. ''I don't think that a statement like this, issued saying that his 'choice of words was not the best,' changes anything,'' she replied (De

Moraes, 2012, p. C01). Fluke also noted that Limbaugh's apology came only after advertisers began withdrawing their support (Moore, 2012).

Other observers were similarly unconvinced by Limbaugh's apology. *Slate's* Emily Yoffe called it "a textbook example of what not to say" (Yoffe, 2012). Erik Wemple from *The Washington Post* said Limbaugh had "added to the bulging archive of inadequate apologies issued by celebrities and media figures whose egos just won't allow for contrition" (Wemple, 2012, para. 1). A Rasmussen survey found that only 29% of likely voters thought Limbaugh's apology was sincere (Rasmussen Reports, 2012).

Despite these criticisms, Limbaugh's situation began to improve. Conservatives began accusing liberals of selective outrage. Republican Congresswoman Michelle Bachman told CNN's Piers Morgan, "I have never seen the level of outrage on the left about what left-leaning commentators said about me" (Moore, 2012, p. 1D). Both Limbaugh's syndicator Premiere Radio Networks and its parent company Clear Channel Communications expressed support for Limbaugh (Farhi, 2012). In fact, just one month after the controversy began, a reporter observed, "stations are standing by [Limbaugh], advertisers are trickling back to his program and the news media have moved on" (Farhi, 2012, p. C03).

Research Questions

Based on the preceding literature review and background information, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

RQ$_1$: What image restoration strategies did Limbaugh use following his attacks on Sandra Fluke?

RQ$_2$: Why did Limbaugh choose to use the image restoration strategies he did?

Methodology

This study uses close readings of Limbaugh's public apology, as well as transcripts of his March 5th program to analyze the image repair strategies Limbaugh used and assess their appropriateness. Close reading is a research methodology derived from literary scholarship. As Bass and Linkon (2008) explained, close reading combines (a) inquiry, (b) texts, (c) theory, and (d) argument. The process starts with questions about a text and ultimately leads to an argument about the meaning or significance of that text. These arguments "gain validity when they are grounded in careful attention to texts and engaged with theory" (p. 247).

The two texts analyzed here are (1) Limbaugh's public apology on March 3, 2012 posted to his website and (2) the transcript of Limbaugh's March 5, 2012 radio show also available on his website.

Findings

RQ₁

The first research question asked what image restoration strategies Limbaugh used following his attacks on Sandra Fluke. Following Benoit's (1995, 1997) theory, it is clear that Limbaugh used three primary strategies: evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, and mortification. Each of these strategies is considered next.

Evading Responsibility.

According to Benoit (1997), claiming that an offensive act was provoked or committed with good intentions are both ways of evading responsibility. In his initial apology Limbaugh wrote, ''My choice of words was not the best, and in the attempt to be humorous, I created a national stir.'' (Limbaugh, 2012a, para. 3). This statement suggests that Limbaugh's intention was to be funny, not hurtful. Limbaugh also claimed, ''I did not mean a personal attack on Ms. Fluke'' (para. 1).

In his March 5th broadcast, Limbaugh strongly implied that his enemies on the Left had provoked him to use the offensive language he did. He told his audience:

> I don't expect—and I know you don't either— morality or intellectual honesty from the left. They've demonstrated over and over a willingness to say or do anything to advance their agenda. It's what they do. It's what we fight against here every day. But this is the mistake I made. In fighting them on this issue last week, I became like them. (Limbaugh, 2012c, para. 3)

Here Limbaugh portrayed himself as fighting the Left and suggested that it was the Left's lack of morality and honesty that led him to attack Fluke. Although he admitted he made a mistake, he clearly wanted his audience to believe that his political enemies started the fight. At one point Limbaugh warned his listeners not to expect any apologies from the Democrats. ''You won't get apologies from people like Bill Maher or all the other leftists who have said some of the most horrible, despicable things about us, and people like Sarah Palin'' (Limbaugh, 2012b, para. 9).

Reducing Offensiveness.

Perhaps realizing he could not evade all responsibility for his words, Limbaugh also sought to reduce the offensiveness of his behavior through bolstering and transcendence. Limbaugh's written apology highlighted his long career by saying, ''For over 20 years, I have illustrated the absurd with absurdity, three hours a day, five days a week. In this instance, I chose the wrong words in my analogy of the situation'' (Limbaugh, 2012a, para. 1). By contrasting his many hours on the radio with ''this instance,'' Limbaugh's argument is that one offensive act is not characteristic of how he normally conducts himself.

Limbaugh made the same point more directly on his March 5th broadcast when he said his apology was for ''using inappropriate words in a way *I never do* [emphasis

added]'' (Limbaugh, 2012c, para. 5). Later he drew a distinction between himself and his opponents by saying, ''Never, ever, do any of us on our side of the aisle try to suppress the speech or the voices of those with whom we disagree, and we never will'' (Limbaugh, 2012b, para. 8). Factual or not, this claim seeks to bolster Limbaugh and his supporters as more respectful of free speech than those on the Left.

In both texts, Limbaugh reiterated his objections to Fluke's position on contraceptives. This strategy is best categorized as transcendence. Limbaugh did not claim directly that his higher purpose justified the offensive rhetoric, but he also did not let his audience forget the political issue at hand.

Mortification.

Along with evading responsibility and reducing offensiveness, Limbaugh also tried to employ a strategy of mortification, or apologizing for his offensive act. However, close readings of his statements reveal that Limbaugh's apologies were closer to pseudo-apologies than ideal, genuine apologies. Lazare's (2004) first characteristic of a pseudo-apology is a vague and incomplete acknowledgement of the offense. While Limbaugh admitted to using words that were ''not the best,'' (Limbaugh, 2012a, para. 3), he never apologized for the underlying sexism in his rhetoric.

Limbaugh avoided most of the other marks of a pseudo-apology (e.g., passive voice, making the offense conditional, or questioning whether Fluke was damaged). However, he also failed to incorporate most of the elements of an ideal apology. His expression of remorse was tepid, at best. He certainly did not identify the moral principles he had violated, as Smith (2008) recommends. Nor did his apology follow the method prescribed by Hearit (2006). Limbaugh was not completely truthful (e.g., his claim that he did not mean to attack Fluke personally strains credulity), instead of apologizing voluntarily, he did so only after losing several advertisers, and he chose his own website as the context for his apology instead of contacting Fluke directly by phone or mail.

Probably the greatest shortcoming in Limbaugh's mortification strategy was his failure to take corrective action. Not only does Benoit (1995) identify corrective action as a key image restoration strategy, but every theory of the ideal or ethical apology calls for some form of corrective action, as well. Nowhere in his public statements did Limbaugh offer Fluke anything to mitigate her emotional suffering or describe what steps he would take to prevent a repeat incident. As Zechmeister et al. (2004) found, apologies need to be accompanied by corrective action if they are to produce forgiveness.

This description of Limbaugh's image restoration strategies addresses the first research question. The second research question is answered next.

RQ₂

The second research question in this study asked why Limbaugh chose to use the image restoration strategies he did. Based on the texts of his apologies we can see

at least three reasons for Limbaugh's strategy. First, he was not concerned about Sandra Fluke's perception of him. Second, he was concerned about his audience's perception of him. Third, he believed that his advertisers' perception of him would ultimately follow his audience's perception.

Fluke's Perception.

Based on his public statements, Limbaugh was not concerned about trying to heal any emotional wounds he had inflicted upon Fluke. There is no evidence that Limbaugh was interested in restoring Fluke's dignity, or assuring her that he and she had shared values (Lazare, 2004). In fact, on his radio program Limbaugh told his listeners ''I descended to their level. Don't be mad at them [liberals] or mad at her [Fluke]. Everybody here was being true to their nature except me'' (Limbaugh, 2012c, para. 20). With this statement, Limbaugh seems to be reasserting his moral superiority over his political opponents. He is claiming to hold himself to a higher standard than the standard to which he holds people on the Left.

Fluke spent several years as an activist for women's rights issues before being called to Capitol Hill in February 2012 (Johnson, 2012). For this reason, Limbaugh likely saw Fluke as a political enemy from the beginning and would have regarded any expression of hurt or outrage from her as a ploy to score political points. Limbaugh would have assumed that trying to improve Fluke's perception of him was impossible.

Audience Perception

Even if he did not care what Fluke thought of him, Limbaugh seems to have cared a great deal about his audience's perception during the controversy. This is logical, given the highly partisan nature of political talk radio. Because Limbaugh's audience skews male, conservative, and Republican (Bennett, 2009), we may assume most listeners shared his opposition to any government program that would expand access to birth control. However, Limbaugh probably has religious members of his audience who would be offended by words like ''slut'' and ''prostitute'' or jokes about posting sex videos on the Internet. Christie (2007) argued that value equivalence (i.e., when the audience's values match the values associated with a given medium) helps explain why certain people listen to talk radio. To match the values of his listeners, Limbaugh's image restoration strategy needed to distance himself from his offensive rhetoric without making it seem that he had capitulated on the political issues. For this reason, his apology emphasized that he had used the wrong words to express himself, but reiterated his earlier views about Fluke's testimony and the contraception issue.

If this analysis is correct, it means the intended audience for Limbaugh's apology to Fluke was not Fluke, at all. In their seminal book on rhetoric, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) define an audience as ''the ensemble of those whom the speaker wishes to influence by his [sic] argumentation'' (p. 19). The authors note that politicians often speak to large groups of people, but may disregard their political

opponents as beyond persuasion. That is what Limbaugh seems to have done in this case.

Advertisers' Perceptions.

Although losing program sponsors must have concerned Limbaugh, his public statements reflected his view that there will always be advertisers for programs with good ratings. On March 5th he told his listeners, ''No radio broadcast will succeed by putting business ahead of the needs of its loyal audience, and that audience is you. My success has come from you. My focus has always been, and always will be, on you'' (Limbaugh, 2012b, para. 4). Limbaugh seemed to be saying he would not compromise program content or values just to please advertisers. Because of the way commercial radio is structured, this approach makes sense strategically.

At the same time, Limbaugh's pseudo-apology made it easier for advertisers to distance themselves from his offensive rhetoric while continuing to sponsor his program. After the apology, a spokesman for one of Limbaugh's advertisers was quoted as saying, ''Rush apologized for comments that went over the line, and that should be enough'' (Moore, 2012, p. 1D). The apology allowed both Limbaugh and his advertisers to put the controversy behind them.

In summary, Limbaugh chose the image restoration strategies he did because he understood that in a partisan business like talk radio, maintaining a good image with one's supporters is more profitable than trying to mend fences with one's opponents. He also recognized that no matter how offended some advertisers were by his words, he would always be able to find more advertisers as long as his audience remained loyal.

Discussion

This study used close readings of two texts to explore and critique the image restoration strategies Rush Limbaugh employed following his offensive comments about Sandra Fluke. Limbaugh's strategies included evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, and mortification, although Limbaugh's apology was really more of a pseudo-apology than a full, ideal apology. Limbaugh's reasoning for these strategies seems to be based on the partisan nature and commercial structure of talk radio. This section discusses the implications of these findings.

Theoretical Implications

As mentioned earlier, one perspective on apologies is that apologies function as symbolic rituals to separate an actor from an offensive act (Goffman, 1971; Hearit, 2006). In Limbaugh's case, even when the ritual was performed rather poorly, it was still effective in helping him put his offensive act behind him (Farhi, 2012). Although

forgiveness seems vitally important in the context of interpersonal relationships, perhaps the mortification ritual, itself, is more important in the context of image management. Alternatively, it may be that pseudo-apologies only work well when a public figure or organizations has a built-in base of partisans who are looking for any excuse to relieve their cognitive dissonance (see Tavris & Aronson, 2007).

These possibilities raise ethical concerns. What are the social costs of pseudo-apologies? What are the moral obligations of a guilty party in terms of mortification and corrective action? Do those obligations change if the victim of an offensive act is a partisan opponent? It is beyond the scope of the present study to answer such questions, but future research should address them. Just because public figures are able to achieve their goals through pseudo-apologies does not mean such an approach is desirable.

Practical Implications

Limbaugh's image restoration strategy did not satisfy all of his critics, but it did allow him to move past the controversy. Consistent with Eisinger's (2011) findings, pseudo-apologies seem to be effective image restoration tools, at least in some circumstances. In the specific context of commercial talk radio, maintaining a good relationship with the audience seems to be paramount. There will always be advertisers for programs with large loyal audiences. Furthermore, trying to appease certain critics may be a hopeless endeavor that only alienates the audience. Successful radio personalities are those who can consistently meet the expectations of their listeners.

Limitations and Future Research

Close reading is a method of applying theory to texts in order to formulate arguments about the meaning and significance of those texts. As such, close reading is a helpful way to understand the rhetoric Limbaugh used in his public apology. However, this approach cannot say with certainty what Limbaugh, himself, intended by his words. Nor can it tell precisely how Limbaugh's audience, advertisers, or Sandra Fluke herself, made sense of the statements. Survey or interview data would help round out the picture of how all the parties involved understood the image restoration discourse.

Given the controversial, often outrageous nature of political talk radio, there can be little doubt that Rush Limbaugh's apology to Sandra Fluke is not the last time a talk show host will be forced to rebuild his or her public image. Understanding the present case will help scholars and radio professionals think through the theoretical, ethical, and practical implications of apologies and pseudo-apologies so they can respond effectively to the next incident or controversy.

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