Gary Condit’s image repair strategies: determined denial and differentiation

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Abstract

U.S. Congressman Gary Condit came under scrutiny following the disappearance of a Washington intern, Chandra Levy, in May 2001. Suspicions arose about his relationship with Levy, whether he was involved in her disappearance, and how fully he cooperated with the police investigation. In August 2001, Condit broke his silence by releasing an explanatory letter to his constituents and appearing on a nationwide broadcast. Analysis of these texts using an Image Repair Theory framework [Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies, State University of New York, Albany, 1995] reveals that Condit’s apparent lack of candor, unpersuasive denials, and failure to shoulder responsibility for any mistakes, doomed his efforts to failure. Implications for implementing image repair strategies stemming from this analysis are addressed.

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1. Introduction

On May 6, 2001, Richard and Susan Levy reported that their daughter Chandra Levy, a former intern for the Federal Bureau of Prisons, was missing. However, this was no routine missing-persons case because it involved a U.S. Congressman from California, Gary Condit.
Early signs of public reputation problems for U.S. Rep. Gary Condit were evident by mid-May when The Washington Post reported that Condit referred to missing former Washington intern Chandra Levy as “a great person and good friend” (Santana, 2001a). Suspicion about Condit’s involvement with the missing woman grew even as Condit’s West coast spokesperson Michael Lynch denied that a romance had existed between Condit and the 24-year-old Levy. Mike Dayton, the congressman’s Washington spokesperson, explained why Levy had visited the congressman’s office (Santana, 2001b).

By June, Chandra Levy’s disappearance continued unresolved. Scrutiny intensified when the Levys went on national television to plead publicly for Condit to reveal what he knew about their daughter’s disappearance. The implication was that Condit was not being forthcoming. Mrs. Levy indicated that in a conversation she had had with the Congressman, he had denied having a personal relationship with her daughter (Dvorak & Lengel, 2001b).

By early July 2001, rumor was confirmed when the police revealed that Condit had admitted to a relationship with Levy (Sherman, 2001). Condit faced a serious threat to his reputation—Condit had admitted that the young woman reported missing in May “had spent the night at his Adams Morgan apartment” (Dvorak & Lengel, 2001a, p. B1). In addition, Chandra Levy’s aunt, Linda Zamsky, came forth with an account of Condit’s relationship with Levy (Lengel & Dvorak, 2001a). Furthermore, five women who were purported to have had affairs with the married congressman were summoned by police for questioning (DePaulo, 2001).

Despite the efforts of Condit’s team to draw attention away from Condit, by August 12, Condit’s hometown newspaper called for him to resign (Editorial, 2001: Condit, 2001, ¶ 2, 3), noting, “Still Condit has offered no explanation, no defense, no remorse. For 15 weeks, Condit put his own interests ahead of the effort to find Levy.” The newspaper charged that Condit had (¶ 4) “spun, stalled and stonewalled, refusing to face the media and constituents,” as well as (¶ 3) “hindered—if not obstructed—the police investigation into her [Chandra Levy’s] disappearance, letting the trail grow cold.” The threat to Condit’s image was quite serious.

To defend himself from accusations and suspicions, Condit decided to speak publicly. He did this by sending (and releasing to the media) a letter to his constituents and by appearing in a nationally televised interview with Connie Chung on ABC’s “PrimeTime” (He also spoke to People and Newsweek magazines, but those interviews added little to his defense.).

This paper will examine Gary A. Condit’s image repair strategies using Benoit’s Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1995, 1997a, 1997b, 2000). This analysis adds to our understanding of image repair discourse by examining how Condit addressed the charges endangering his reputation.

2. Literature review: image repair theory

The theory of Image Repair Discourse conceptualizes options available to rhetors who need to conduct an apologia, or self-defense. The theory assumes that communication is goal-driven and that one’s reputation is so valuable that those accused of wrongdoing are motivated to repair their tattered reputations (Benoit, 1995). Benoit notes that image repair apologia is necessary when:

1. An offensive act has occurred, and
2. An individual or organization has been accused of being responsible for that act.

2 It was not until late August that Condit’s second attorney, Abbe Lowell, argued that Condit had not approved the statements provided by Lynch and Dayton (Millegan, 2001).
The theory offers five general defense strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification.

2.1. Denial

According to image repair theory, there are two types of denial. Simple denial asserts that the offensive act did not occur, or the accused did not commit the act, or that the act created no harm. Shifting the blame identifies the “real” culprit, assigning responsibility for the offensive act elsewhere.

2.2. Evasion of responsibility

This can be used by “those who are unable to deny performing the act in question.” (Benoit, 1995, p. 76) The four strategies of evasion—provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions—can lessen the amount of blame assigned to the accused. By employing the strategy of provocation, the accused claims that he or she was simply responding to a prior offense and therefore is providing a reasonable response. Defeasibility is used when the accused argues that he or she had no control over the offensive act (e.g. Greyhound bus lines may claim it is not responsible for the consequences of actions of deranged passengers). A rhetor can also lessen responsibility if he or she claims that the act was an accident. For an act to be an accident it must seldom occur and the rhetor must show that there was no intent to commit the act. Lastly, the rhetor can diminish responsibility by asserting that he or she engaged in the offensive behavior because he or she had good intentions that went awry (e.g. an automobile manufacturer may offer free safety inspections, but not prepare for the flood of people that show up that it cannot effectively service).

2.3. Reducing offensiveness

The third general strategy is an attempt to “reduce the degree of ill feeling experienced by the audience” (Benoit, 1995, p. 77). This strategy has six subcategories: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking one’s accusers, and compensation. Bolstering refers to discussing the positive attributes and actions of the accused as a means to offset the offensiveness of the act. The strategy of minimization suggests that the consequences or severity of the act were exaggerated. Differentiation is used to place the act in a context with other more offensive acts (perhaps, committed by others) and is used to argue that the act committed pales by comparison (e.g. “I didn’t steal your car; I only borrowed it”). The strategy of transcendence pertains to placing the act in a broader, often moral, context so that the end justifies the means (e.g. Throwing paint on someone wearing a fur coat is justified in the broader scheme of things if corporate policy is changed to protect animals or if people stop buying their “coats.”). Attacking one’s accusers is similar to blaming the victim or the press for the offensive act (e.g. “If the press hadn’t hounded me, I might have come forward earlier.”). This strategy may also function to limit the persuasiveness of an attack by undermining the attacker’s credibility. Lastly, compensation is used to reduce offensiveness by providing a monetary or similar form of remuneration for the victim of the offensive act.

2.4. Corrective action

The fourth main strategy can take two forms. First, corrective action can repair damage caused by the offensive act. Second, it can propose steps to ensure that the offensive act does not occur again.
Mortification, a term borrowed from Burke (1970), is the final strategy and refers to utterances used to accept responsibility for the offensive act, apologize, and ask for forgiveness. Statements of remorse and regret fall into this category as well.

Previous theories of apologia, or self-defense oratory, were rather more descriptive than prescriptive. Benoit’s theory, through its application across a variety of case studies, shows that there are general principles that can be applied to understanding how the different strategies for apologia can and should be used to be effective. To measure the effectiveness of these strategies, Benoit also uses polling data and financial reports to substantiate his rhetorical evaluations of the image repair discourse.

Some of the general findings from across Benoit’s (1997a) studies are: avoid false claims, provide support for themes, and know that some arguments may backfire. Benoit also suggested that it is probably best to come out right away and admit culpability if one is guilty.

Benoit (1997a) has specifically addressed how the political context influences the circumstances that often face politicians engaged in apologia. First, Benoit noted that political actors must often contend with challenges from members of the opposing political party, who will often try to sustain press coverage on the politician’s vulnerabilities for as long as possible. Secondly, Benoit observed that politicians are held accountable to the public for their actions because they represent the people, and are particularly accountable to their local constituents. Lastly, Benoit suggested that mortification, or taking responsibility and asking for forgiveness, may be more difficult for politicians because the stakes are higher (as opposed to others, e.g. entertainers).

Image repair theory has been applied to apologia used by political actors in the cases of former U.S. President Richard Nixon’s announcement of sending troops into Cambodia (Benoit, 1995), former U.S. President Ronald Reagan’s defense of the Iran–Contra affair (Benoit, Guillifor, & Panici, 1991), U.S. Special Prosecutor Kenneth Starr’s defense of his actions pertaining to former U.S. President Bill Clinton’s impeachment (Benoit & McHale, 1999), U.S. Supreme Court Justice nominee Clarence Thomas’s defense against Anita Hill (Benoit & Nill, 1998), Bill Clinton’s image repair (Blaney & Benoit, 2001), and U.S. Congressman Newt Gingrich’s book deal (Kennedy & Benoit, 1997).

Results of these studies suggest that bolstering is best used when the attempt to enhance one’s reputation is related in some way to lessening the offensive act (Benoit, 1995). For example, in his apologia, Nixon tried to associate himself with Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy because they had given war addresses in the same room, and their military actions were successful. However, this reasoning was not compelling enough to lead the public to believe Nixon’s plan to send troops to Cambodia would prove fruitful, especially given that the U.S.’s involvement in Vietnam had not been victorious.

Benoit and McHale (1999) found that it is important to provide support for denials or claims. For example, Starr repeatedly stressed that his investigation of President Clinton was about perjury, and not about sex. However, Starr evaded news anchor Diane Sawyer’s questions that called for him to provide support for his claim.

An examination of President Reagan’s defense of his involvement in the Iran–Contra affair also suggested that politicians are accountable for acting consistently with the public positions they espouse (Benoit et al., 1991). Reagan was held accountable for trading arms for hostages partly because he had publicly eschewed any notion of negotiating with terrorists.

In addition, a critical analysis of U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy’s apologia in the wake of the Chappaquiddick accident indicated that remaining silent in the face of charges raises suspicions, that media speculation can serve as kategoria (a formal attack against one’s actions or character), and that mortification, or a genuine apology, lessens the ability of opponents to attack lest they come off as vicious (Benoit, 1997a).
Moreover, Benoit pointed out that wrongdoing could be addressed in terms of both what is legally proper and what is morally correct.

### 3. Research questions

Based on image restoration theory, and previous studies on apologia, two key research questions are posed for this analysis:

RQ1: What are the predominant image repair strategies used in Condit’s apologia discourse?

RQ2: How effective was Condit’s apologia in repairing his reputation?

### 4. Accusations against Condit

Condit faced the challenge of public accountability to his constituents for his actions, especially because Chandra Levy was from his congressional district. Condit, a conservative Democrat, enjoyed support from the Bush White House and therefore may have suffered fewer challenges from the opposing party. However, Condit faced sustained media attention because the Levy family continually mentioned to the press in interviews that Condit was uncooperative, lied, and did not disclose important information in a timely manner. Condit may have also sustained media attention because he did not come forward to address the public immediately.

The three main accusations against Condit were:

1. Condit had an affair with Chandra Levy (which includes questions about affairs with other women, whether he attempted to deceive Mrs. Levy about his relationship with her daughter, and whether he tried to secretly dispose of evidence of their relationship),
2. Condit was involved in Chandra Levy’s disappearance, and
3. Condit did not fully cooperate with the investigation into Chandra Levy’s disappearance.

The first accusation, that he had engaged in an affair with Levy, was relatively straightforward. This charge also included indications that Condit had dated several women during his marriage.

The second accusation concerned the fact that Levy had left behind her wallet and identification, a behavior former Condit girlfriends had said were rules of behavior that Condit required from the women he dated (DePaulo, 2001). These reports raised suspicions that Chandra had gone to meet Condit when she disappeared. This allegation was fueled by the fact that Condit did not provide a solid alibi for the time of Levy’s disappearance (Marshall, 2001).

The final accusation entails reports of Condit’s uncooperativeness with police and the Levy family, his unwillingness to take an FBI-administered lie detector test, disposing of a watch box given to him by Joleen McKay, and his involvement in asking Ann Marie Smith to sign an affidavit indicating she did not have a relationship with Condit. Condit’s actions made it seem as if he put his career ahead of finding Levy.

We consider the first accusation to be the least serious: Bill Clinton had shown that in the current climate a politician could survive accusations of this nature. The second and third accusations were most...
important. A Gallup Poll (Squitieri, 2001a) taken before his defense (August 3–5, 2001) revealed that 65% of respondents believed it was likely that Condit was involved in Levy’s disappearance. The severity of the threat to his image was revealed by a second question: 43% of the people believed Condit should resign from Congress immediately (i.e. before any sort of trial or further inquiry).

5. Condit’s defense

Overall the analysis shows that Condit’s team relied heavily on denial/shifting the blame, bolstering, attacking one’s accuser, and differentiation as defense strategies. We will examine his letter to constituents and the interview with Connie Chung.

5.1. Letter to constituents

On August 22, 2001, Condit sent a short 25-sentence letter to constituents in order to address the accusations against him (all excerpts from the letter are from Condit, 2001). The letter employed the image repair strategies of denial/shifting the blame, bolstering, attacking one’s accuser, and transcendence. He does say that he is “sorry,” (¶ 2) but this is sympathy for the family (“I’m sorry that the pain the Levy family and Chandra’s friends are feeling has grown worse with each passing day.”) rather than mortification (Condit does not express sorrow or regret for any of his actions).

5.2. Denial/shifting blame

Condit denies the charge that he was uncooperative. Condit asserted (¶ 4) “... I have cooperated and worked with law enforcement to find Chandra.” He also wrote (¶ 6, 7) “I have not been silent with those in charge of finding Chandra. I have answered every single question asked by the police and FBI.” If accepted, this statement rejects the accusation that he has not cooperated with the police and FBI investigation into Levy’s disappearance.

Condit also directly denied the accusation that he was involved in Levy’s disappearance. His letter declared (¶ 9) “Some suggest that not talking with the media could mean I had something to do with Chandra’s disappearance. I did not.” He then used a variant of denial, shifting the blame (¶ 9): “I pray that she has not met the same fate as the other young women who have disappeared from the same neighborhood.” The clear implication is that some unknown person, not Condit, was responsible for Levy’s disappearance.

5.3. Bolstering

Condit’s letter to his constituents primarily consists of attempts to bolster his image. He starts the letter by explaining how he took action to set up a reward fund for Levy. Condit (¶ 17) goes on to acclaim his past record of working for his constituents and closes by reassuring them that he will continue to address their needs. “For now, I want my work in Congress to improve our communities. Please know that you can still bring me your concerns and your problems.” Thus, Condit attempted to bolster his image by acclaiming his past achievements.
5.4. Attacking one’s accuser

In the letter, Condit attacked the media for their inaccuracy resulting in his public relations predicament. He wrote that (¶ 8) “Tabloids turned the tragedy of Chandra’s disappearance into a spectacle and rumors were reported as facts.” Clearly, this portrays his media accusers in an unfavorable light.

5.5. Transcendence

Condit argued that his private life was not the public’s business, employing transcendence (that his right to privacy, and that of his family, is more important than public curiosity): “I decided that I would not discuss my private life in the media.” Condit is making an effort to convey that he has chosen the higher moral ground; he will not discuss his personal affairs.

6. ABC NEWS PrimeTime Thursday—Chung interview

Condit’s nationally televised interview was a much-anticipated media event. In fact, Condit’s decision to write a letter to his constituents—and release it to the media—seems calculated to increase the size of his audience. An estimated 23 million viewers tuned in to watch Chung’s interview with Condit (Heyman, 2001), which meant the potential impact was vast. The Condit team required the interview be only a “half-hour, live to tape, with no opportunities for edits or later follow-up questions” (Bauder, 2001, ¶ 7). This format allowed for control over the message, but also forced a perfect performance for both Chung and Condit. Condit relied heavily on simple denial, but he also employed differentiation (a form of “weaseling”) when his denials failed, attacking the accuser, and transcendence. Several questions he simply refused to answer.

6.1. Simple denial

Chung began her interview with Condit by asking him if he knew what had happened to Chandra Levy, whether he had anything to do with Chandra’s disappearance, if he had said anything to her to make her disappear from sight, if he had wanted to harm her, and if he killed Levy. Condit directly and explicitly denied all knowledge of or involvement in Levy’s disappearance: “No I didn’t,” “No,” “I did not” (all excerpts from the interview are from Doss, 2001). Denials of these accusations were repeated throughout the interview.

Chung questioned Condit if he was in love with Chandra, and he said, “I was not in love with her.” He denied he had strong feelings for Chandra or had planned to leave his wife. He denied assertions by Chandra’s aunt that he and Chandra had developed a five-year plan. Referring to his wife, Condit said, “I intend to stay married to that woman as long as she’ll have me.” In effect, this utterance functioned to deny he had a romantic relationship with Levy.

Condit also denied that he was uncooperative. When Chung asked Condit why he had not revealed his relationship with Levy until his third interview with police investigators, Condit simply responded, “I’m just saying to you that I answered every question asked of me by the police department on every occasion.” He also explained that “I allowed them [the police] to search my home, where they ripped
up my carpet, they took the paint off the walls, they put the drains down the, the pipes [sic.].” Thus, his statement directly and explicitly rejected this accusation.

6.2. Differentiation

In several cases Condit issued a denial. Then, when confronted with contradictory evidence, he backtracked and employed differentiation. In one place, Chung asked whether Levy had “called you repeatedly on that date” (April 24, 2001). First Condit responded, “No, that’s not true.” Then Chung noted, “Her phone records show that.” Caught, he shifted to saying that “she might have left a message.” Chung insisted, “her phone records show that she called you repeatedly.” Then Condit shifted to deny the “quality” of her calls: “She didn’t make frantic phone calls.” Unable to sustain his initial denial that she called him repeatedly, he first retreated to answering machine messages and then to denying that she made “frantic” calls (an accusation which, incidentally, Chung never advanced).

Another part of Condit’s denial was the statement that “I didn’t ask anyone to lie about anything. I did not ask Ann Marie not to cooperate with law enforcement. That’s an absolute lie.” Chung then produced a statement which Condit’s attorneys asked Ann Marie Smith to sign: “This is a statement that, uh, your lawyers gave to her and it says, ‘I do not and have not had a romantic relationship with Congressman Condit.’” Condit then tried to explain that this was merely “a lawyer-to-lawyer statement.” He also protested that his lawyers did this without any authorization from him: “I did not have anything to do with that.” Once again, his blanket denial shrank as he was confronted with facts that did not permit him to sustain his broad denial.

Still on the question of whether he concealed evidence, Chung asked why Condit threw away the watch box given to him by Joleen McKay. Condit first said that the watch box was from his office, and not his apartment (the police had searched his apartment). Condit argued that because the watch box was from his office and not his home, it was not relevant. Chung asked, “But why throw it in a dumpster uh, somewhere, instead of just throwing it in the trash can in your office?” His response to this query was “the watch box had nothing to do with Chandra Levy” and that “I threw it in a trash can,” not a dumpster. He began by suggesting he was not hiding evidence, but then suggested that it was not wrongful because it did not concern Levy. He never provided a reasonable explanation for disposing of this gift from a woman in that peculiar fashion.

6.3. Attacking one’s accuser

When Chung questioned Condit about flight attendant Ann Marie Smith, Condit suggested that Smith was an opportunist out for publicity and implied that she was not relevant to the Levy investigation. Hence, Condit attacked Smith instead of addressing allegations as to whether he had encouraged her to perjure herself. Chung also queried Condit about whether he’d lied to Mrs. Levy about his relationship with Chandra, Condit denied lying and said, “I’m sorry if she misunderstood the conversations,” thus questioning the veracity of his accuser, Ms. Levy.

6.4. Refusal to answer

Condit simply refused to answer some questions. When Connie Chung asked about the nature of his relationship with Chandra Levy, Condit responded with what appeared to be a memorized answer:
Well, Connie, I’ve been married for 34 years, and I’ve not been a . . . a perfect man, and I’ve made my share of mistakes. But, um, out of respect for my family, and out of a specific request from the Levy family, I think it’s best that I not get into those details, uh, about Chandra Levy.

Initially, this sounds like transcendence: his family’s privacy, and the Levy family’s privacy, are more important than public interest in his answer. However, later Chung followed up in two ways. First, she tried this approach: “I’m not asking you details. I’m simply asking you if it was more than just a friendship.” He refused to answer this question: It was not only details that he refused to provide. Later in the interview, she returned to Condit’s statement that he has made mistakes: “What mistakes are you talking about?” Again, Condit refused to explain his statement.

Chung asked Condit how often Levy came to visit Condit at his apartment. “Well, I provided all those details to uh, the appropriate people, the law enforcement people. They have that. And uh, it would be uh . . . best not to get.” Chung asked why he wouldn’t answer if there was nothing wrong. First he said “I don’t know the amount of time off the top of my head.” Chung then requested a “general idea,” and Condit invoked the family privacy and said “I just don’t . . . can’t go there.” Thus, there were several occasions when he adopted a strategy of simply refusing to provide an answer.

7. Evaluation

Both of Condit’s defenses relied heavily on denial. His letter made a brief attempt to shift the blame to an unknown criminal. In the television interview, when Chung confronted Condit with facts contradicting his denials, he retreated to differentiation (first she did not call me repeatedly; then she left a message; then she called repeatedly but not frantically). He also attacked Levy’s mother in the “PrimeTime” interview. Nowhere was mortification in evidence. Everywhere was an attempt to stonewall, to evade. At times he weaseled and at other times he simply refused to answer. When that occurred, at times he attempted to use transcendence (respecting the Levy’s privacy).

This was anything but an effective defense. It is important to note that (some of) these strategies were plausible choices: Condit’s instantiation of them in the discourse was unpersuasive. The lack of mortification, any real admission of wrongdoing and remorse, and his weaseling and refusal to answer questions were egregious mistakes. The accusation that Condit had not fully cooperated with the investigation was, ironically, strengthened rather than dispelled by his defense.

How did the audience react to his defense? Clearly, they saw the same sorts of weaknesses we identify. An NBC/Zogby poll revealed that 71% of the people thought he was hiding something, and 93% believed he was motivated more by concern for his career than concern for Levy (Farhi, 2001, p. C1). A USA Today/CNN/Gallup poll found that 60% believed he was involved in Levy’s disappearance and “most also believe he obstructed the investigation and is immoral, dishonest, and uncaring” (Squitieri, 2001b, p. 1A). An NBC poll reported that 84% were “very unsatisfied” by Condit’s statements about Chandra Levy (Dineen, 2001, p. 1).

His discourse did not help his political career, either. An August 2001 NBC poll surveying the general public found that 80% of respondents would not vote for Condit (Miga, 2001, p. 2). A poll conducted in Condit’s congressional district was little better: “about two-thirds of the 539 people interviewed said they approved of the job Condit was doing, but only 27% said they would vote for him again” (Lengel & Dvorak, 2001b, p. B3). At the same time, the Modesto Bee, the largest newspaper in Condit’s congressional
district, called for his resignation (Squitieri, 2001b). Thus, viewers nationally and in Condit’s own district reacted very unfavorably to his image restoration effort.

Notice in particular that the Modesto Bee survey found that barely one-quarter were inclined to vote to re-elect Condit even though about two-thirds gave him a positive job approval rating. Clearly, his demeanor and his poor public relations strategies outweighed his job performance. After his interviews, the lack of support by his own constituents may have served to reinforce national public opinion.

His lack of forthrightness eventually cost him the March 2002 Democratic primary in his district, according to news reports (Gold & Boxall, 2002; Merl & Gold, 2002; Ritter, 2002). Condit lost to his challenger, and former aide, State Assemblyman Dennis Cardoza by an 18% margin. An article in USA Today proclaimed, “Voters indicated that a more contrite Condit might have won” (Ritter, 2002, p. 3A). An article in the Los Angeles Times noted, “Condit’s equivocal answers about their [Condit–Levy] relationship angered many” (Gold & Boxall, 2002, sec. 2, p. 1). The press broadcast reports of public sentiment indicated that Condit’s behavior concerning the investigation into Levy’s disappearance was unacceptable to voters.

In fact, one lesson learned regarding political self-defense discourse was that not only do members of the opposing party attack the individual embroiled in scandal, but political leaders from the same party do so as well to avoid getting tainted. For instance, Condit lost the public support of California Governor Gray Davis. Also, the Democratic Party tried to distance itself from Condit by making it more difficult for Condit to regain his seat. Merl and Gold (2002) noted, “State legislators even redrew his [Condit’s] district to make it harder for him to win the Democratic nomination” (sec. A, p. 18). Ritter (2002) further observed that in the redrawn district, “Four in 10 voters Tuesday had never seen Condit’s name on the ballot” (p. 3A). Therefore, not only did Condit’s poor public relations performance hurt him with voters—it also damaged his relations with those in his political party.

We would also like to note that there are some obvious parallels between Condit (and Chandra Levy) and Bill Clinton (and former White House intern Monica Lewinsky). Both were elected government officials; both (apparently) had affairs with young government interns while married. However, these similarities turn out to be superficial.

First, Clinton (eventually) apologized for both an inappropriate relationship with Ms. Lewinsky and for misleading the public. His image repair effort was relatively successful (Blaney & Benoit, 2001). Despite having this case as a model, Condit refused to apologize or admit any wrongdoing whatsoever. Worse, the accusations facing Condit (that he participated in Levy’s disappearance; that he did not cooperate fully with the investigation into her disappearance) were much more serious than those facing the President. Yet Condit stonewalled. He denied, differentiated, and even attacked Ms. Levy’s mother. It would have been difficult for viewers to watch him evade many of Connie Chung’s questions and believe his assertions that he had answered all of the investigators’ questions.

8. Implications

This case study shows again that mortification can be vital to image restoration efforts (Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Benoit et al., 1991). Denial appears to be a preferred response. Initially, former U.S. President Reagan denied that the U.S. was trading arms for hostages. His ratings only improved when he apologized and instituted corrective action (Benoit et al., 1991). AT&T initially attempted to shift the blame for a long-distance service interruption. The company’s image repair efforts were much more
effective when it apologized and, again, instituted corrective action (Benoit & Brinson, 1994). Clinton initially denied having an affair with “that woman,” but managed to avoid conviction in the House when he confessed (and apologized; Blaney & Benoit, 2001). Condit, however, never conceded any wrongdoing, never apologized, and that was a huge mistake.

He apparently thought he could bluster and weasel his way through the interview. Perhaps he assumed Chung would not ask the hard questions. In any event, he completely squandered his chance to repair his reputation. Arguably, he made his own situation worse. And, because his camp insisted the interview be live and unedited, he had no one to blame but himself (he could not protest that all of his “good” answers were edited out of the interview). It appears that the public saw the “real” Gary Condit, and did not like what it saw.

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