

Relevant HETORIC

The Rhetoric of Persuasive Attack: Continuing the Development of a Taxonomy of Attack Strategies and Tactics



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A candidate for the 2016 Republican Party nomination:

- Questioned Ted Cruz’s “temperament”
- Said: “Truly weird Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky reminds me of a spoiled brat without a properly functioning brain. He was terrible at DEBATE!”
- Tweeted: “@GovernorPerry failed on the border. He should be forced to take an IQ test before being allowed to enter the GOP debate”
- Asserted: “What people don’t know about Kasich- he was a managing partner of the horrendous Lehman Brothers when it totally destroyed the economy!”
- Repeatedly insulted Jeb Bush as “low energy.”



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Donald Trump may represent a new era of unrestrained persuasive attack in our public communication. Although attacks against others’ actions or character have been around for as long as people have disagreed with one another, the development of the Internet, especially social media sites such as Twitter and Reddit, combined with our ongoing culture wars and highly polarized politics, have created an environment rife with persuasive attacks. It is clear that we need a stronger understanding of the rhetoric of persuasive attack if we are to fully understand our current cultural and political dialogue.

This article will briefly describe the previous research on persuasive attack, focusing on a taxonomy of attack strategies originally put forth by Benoit and Dorries¹ and refined by Legge, DiSanza, Gribas, and Shiffler.² We will then apply that taxonomy to critically analyze the persuasive attacks made by Keith Olbermann against the National Football League and Atlantic County New Jersey District Attorney’s Office during the 2015 Ray Rice domestic abuse incident. Our goal is to further refine the taxonomy, making the theory more useful for analyzing persuasive attack in an era that is dominated by this rhetorical genre.

The Rhetoric of Persuasive Attack

Although there is a significant amount of literature on the persuasive defense, sometimes referred to as image repair, there has been much less work on persuasive attack. The rhetorical theorist Walter Fisher.³ suggested that the rhetoric of attack was one of four motivations for human communication. Kathleen Jamieson’s book, *Dirty Politics*, argues that political attacks include two general approaches, association and opposition, but the book did not explore specific tactics for accomplishing these goals.⁴ Arguably the most influential work on attack rhetoric

is from Andrew King and Floyd Douglas Anderson who developed a rhetoric of polarization, defined as “persuasive messages that an attacker can use to coalesce a large and diversified public into two contrasting and competing groups.” The first group, of which the rhetor is a member, is cast as good and moral through the use of affirmation messages, and the other is attacked as an immoral enemy through subversion messages that undermine the “enemy” group’s leaders, ideologies, and actions.⁵



King and Anderson applied these concepts to examine Richard Nixon’s use of affirmation messages that materialized and linked himself to the “Silent Majority.” He also used subversion messages to create an external enemy, frequently referred to as the “Radical Liberal,” and attack opponents by linking them to that enemy and its ideology. Later, Raum and Measell explored several strategies that George Wallace used to polarize the audience and attack opponents, including the use of “Devil-terms” that labeled enemies and characterized them as “rabblies,” “militants,” “activists,” “revolutionaries,” and “anarchists.”⁶

By far, the most extensive typology of attack rhetoric was produced by Benoit and Dorries, who used elements of attribution theory and persuasive defense theory (image repair) to construct a typology of persuasive attack tactics.⁷ For Benoit and Dorries, persuasive attacks focus on two things. First, an offensive act is believed by the accused to be perceived negatively by a salient audience. Only if the target of the attack believes his or her reputation will suffer does an attack constitute a threat to his or her image. Second, the accused must be perceived to be responsible, wholly or partially, for the wrongful act.

Nancy Legge, James DiSanza, John Gribas, and Aubrey Shiffler applied the Benoit and Dorries taxonomy to the attacks against Rush Limbaugh during the Sandra Fluke controversy.⁸ They found, however, that a substantial portion of the attacks could not be classified. To solve this problem, they added three new tactics to the taxonomy, which appears in Table 1.

We will define and explain each of these strategies and tactics. First, if attackers believe that the accused committed, encouraged, or provoked an untoward act, or believe the accused permitted a negative act to occur through inaction, they might employ persuasive attacks that work to increase the target’s perceived responsibility for that act. As you can see in Table 1, there are several methods by which an attacker may increase a target’s perceived responsibility. First, the attacker may accuse the target of committing the act in the past. An audience may assign increased blame if a target repeatedly commits the same negative act. An attacker may also claim that the target planned the negative act in advance. This increases the target’s responsibility because a planned act cannot have been an accident. In addition, a persuasive attacker may claim that the accused knew the likely consequences of the act. Those who commit wrongdoing knowing that others will be harmed or injured will probably be viewed less favorably than those who could not foresee harmful consequences. Lastly, if the accused committed a negative act in order to gain materially, that may lead to harsher judgments from an audience than if a person did not receive any gain from the act.

A Taxonomy of Attack Strategies and Tactics

Increasing the Target’s Perceived Responsibility for the Act

Accused Committed the Act Before:	Specifically stating that the accused committed similar acts in the past.
Accused Planned the Act:	Emphasizing the intentionality of the act and/or emphasizing that the act could not have been accidental or unintentional.
Accused Knew Likely Consequences of the Act:	Pointing out that the accused knew the negative consequences prior to committing the act.
Accused Benefitted from the Act:	Highlighting that the accused acquired material or financial gain from the harmful.

Increasing the Perceived Offensiveness of the Act

Extent of the Damage:	Magnifying the size or extent of the actual damage created by the offensive act.
Persistence of the Negative Effects:	Highlighting the duration or long-lasting nature of the effects of the offensive act.
Effects on the Audience:	Emphasizing the relevance of the negative effects of the offensive act to a broader audience.
Inconsistency:	An explicit charge that the words and deeds of the accused are inconsistent.
Victims are Innocent/Helpless:	Charge that the harms or damage created by the offensive act were inflicted on the innocent or the helpless.
Obligation to Protect Victims:	Leveling a charge that the accused had a special obligation to protect victims.
*Victims are Dignified/Honorable/Noble:	Charge that the harms or damage created by the offensive act were unjustly inflicted on those that are dignified, honorable, or noble.
*Pejorative Labeling:	Increasing the perceived offensiveness of the act through the application of negative, detrimental, or disparaging definitions.
*Identification with Particular Values or Ideology:	Identifying the act with pernicious values or ideology.

*Represents tactics added by Legge, DiSanza, Gribas, and Shiffler.

Table 1. A Taxonomy of Attack Strategies and Tactics

Second, the damage to the accused may increase if an attacker can develop or embellish the offensiveness of the act in the minds of the audience. One method of accomplishing this is to highlight or magnify the extent of the actual damage created by the offensive act. When describing the persistence of the negative effects, the attacker highlights the long-lasting duration of the negative effects of the act. Long-standing effects will be perceived more negatively by an audience than effects that are short-lived. When attackers explain the effects on the audience, they accentuate the relevance of the negative effects to a broader audience. This has the effect of decreasing the distance between the negative effects and the audience. In pointing out inconsistencies, the attacker charges that the words and deeds of the accused are inconsistent.



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A persuasive attacker may claim that the victims are innocent/and helpless. Harms inflicted on the innocent are worse to most audiences than if victims are strong and can take care of themselves. In some cases, a persuasive attacker may highlight that the accused had an obligation to protect victims. For example, when priests are accused of injuring children, the offense is perceived as worse because these people have a professional obligation to protect and nurture young people. At other times, if the victims of a negative action are talked-up as dignified, honorable, or noble, the perpetrator's actions will be viewed more negatively than if the victims were more "deserving" of a negative fate. An attacker may wish to increase the perceived negativity of an act through the application of pejorative labels. Pejorative labels refer to the act that is the subject of the attack, not the individual performing the act. Finally, an attacker may wish to identify or link a target with a pernicious set of values. With this summary of the taxonomy of persuasive attack, we will apply the theory to a case study.



Keith Olbermann's Persuasive Attack on the NFL and Atlantic County Prosecutors

On September 10, 2014, Keith Olbermann, an ESPN analyst, registered a harsh criticism against one of its own sports properties, the NFL, and its commissioner, Roger Goodell. In his commentary, Olbermann said that "Mr. Roger Goodell is an enabler of men who beat women."⁹ How did Olbermann arrive at this conclusion?

On February 15, 2014, Ray Rice, a football player on the NFL's Baltimore Ravens, was arrested in Atlantic County, New Jersey, for what his lawyer described as a "minor physical altercation" with his then fiancée, Janay Palmer, in a Revel Casino elevator. Two days later, TMZ released security video from the hallway of Rice dragging Palmer's limp body out of the elevator by her shoulders. In May, prosecutors allowed Rice to enter a pretrial intervention program that allowed him to avoid a trial. Such programs are typically reserved for nonviolent, victimless crimes. In June, now

married, Rice and Palmer were together in a discipline hearing with Roger Goodell, the NFL’s commissioner, officials from the Baltimore Ravens, the lead council for the NFL, and the NFL VP for labor relations. On July 24, the NFL suspended Rice for two games. The suspension was roundly condemned as too lenient by commentators across the country.¹⁰ By late August, still under fire for the perceived leniency of its punishment, the NFL admitted it made a mistake and announced revisions to its domestic violence policy.

On September 8, TMZ released video from inside the elevator of Ray Rice delivering a vicious left hook to Palmer’s face, and her head hitting the elevator rail as she falls unconscious to the floor. The NFL and the Ravens claimed they were not able to obtain the in-elevator video despite the fact that TMZ said they received it simply by asking for it. On September 8, Rice was suspended indefinitely by the NFL.¹¹

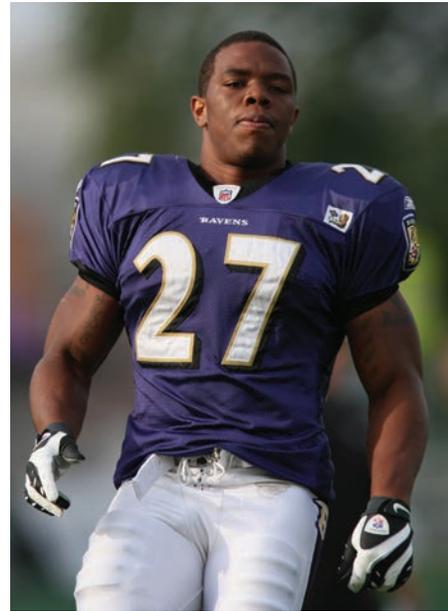


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On September 9, Keith Olbermann, sports commentator made a statement about the case on ESPN. In his statement, he attacked the Atlantic County, New Jersey District Attorney’s Office, the NFL (especially commissioner Roger Goodell), the owners and management of the Baltimore Ravens, and Ray Rice himself.

Keith Olbermann’s Persuasive Attack
<p>The transcript of Olbermann’s statement can be found at: http://deadspin.com/keith-olbermann-on-goodell-an-enabler-of-men-wh-1632150757.</p> <p>The video can be viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5R5zzVFptw4</p>

Table 2. Keith Olbermann’s Persuasive Attack

Applying the modified typology of persuasive attack in Table 1, we identified six persuasive attack tactics in Olbermann’s statement: pejorative labeling, extent of the damage, accused benefited from the act, accused planned the act, inconsistency, and obligation to protect victims.

Pejorative Labeling

Throughout the opinion piece, Olbermann took pains to apply *pejorative labels* to the behavior of Ray Rice and NFL commissioner Roger Goodell. In his initial comments, Olbermann labeled Ray Rice’s punch as a “brutal assault” on his then fiancée. Later, Olbermann argued that the NFL commissioner’s office is now symbolized by Ray Rice’s “brutal left hand” striking his fiancée. Olbermann reminded the audience of Ray Rice’s “brutal and potentially deadly assault.” Olbermann also labeled Ray Rice’s attempt at contrition as a “pious, self-serving, insincere, cynical, devious, ma-

nipulative, unapologetic performance.” Notice that the pejorative labels are applied to Rice’s acts, not to the person of Ray Rice. For example, Olbermann’s consistent labeling of Rice’s actions as “brutal” provides a particular interpretive framework for understanding the event. In this case, it is to suggest that Rice’s assault was beyond the pale in its viciousness.

In another place, Olbermann accused Goodell of conducting a “kangaroo court” by interviewing Janay Palmer-Rice with Ray Rice present. The label “kangaroo court” suggested a trial conducted with no regard to common judicial standards and procedures. In other places, Olbermann labeled the actions of the prosecutors and the NFL as a “white wash” and labeled the two game suspension as “ludicrous.” These language choices reflect pejorative labeling that might influence perceptions against Rice, Goodell, and the NFL.



Extent of the Damage

Olbermann made a number of *extent of the damage* attacks on the Atlantic County District Attorney’s Office and the NFL, as represented by its commissioner, Roger Goodell. For example, Olbermann said this about each official involved in the case:

Each body, each leading individual involved, came to a judicial conclusion about what had happened to Janay Palmer and what should happen to Ray Rice. . .And each. . .damaged the efforts of every man and every woman in this country seeking to merely slow down the murderous epidemic of domestic violence, and made a mockery of the process by which those who batter those who they claim to love, are to be brought to justice.

In this attack, Olbermann accused the Atlantic County district attorney and the NFL of damaging the credibility of the justice system as it relates to domestic violence and, thereby, damaging the cause of ending domestic violence across the country.

In another *extent of the damage* attack, Olbermann argues that the inaction of Mr. Casse and Mr. Newsome, of the Baltimore Ravens—their refusal to suspend Ray Rice, beyond the NFL’s two games—not only threatened the safety of Janay Palmer, “but every woman in the country now threatened by a man who, because of how they covered for Ray Rice, is a little more confident that he can get away with it.” Later, Olbermann argued that the NFL’s inept handling of the incident has “comforted the violent and afflicted the victim.” In other words, violent spousal abusers might feel more secure in their justification for their acts. Olbermann’s attacks magnified the size and extent of the damage beyond what was experienced by Janay Palmer. He argued that the response to the incident has harmed the campaign against domestic violence and put women across the country at risk.

Accused Benefitted from the Act

In two places, Olbermann accused NFL officials of benefitting from the light treatment of Rice: “Mr. Casse and Mr. Newsome put the meaninglessness of their own team’s financial and on-field success ahead of the safety and well-being of not only Janay Palmer, but of every women in the country. . .” The light treatment for Mr. Rice might be judged more harshly by Olbermann’s audience if he can persuade us this was done to advance selfish personal interests. In addition, Olbermann reminded us that these interests are “meaningless” in the much larger and far more important context of spousal abuse.



In another portion of his comments, Olbermann contended that Rice’s own *mea culpa* was little more than an attempt to “protect his job and his money at the expense of the truth, at the expense of the public, at the expense of the next woman he brutalizes.” Thus, Olbermann judged Mr. Rice’s attempt to clear his name harshly—merely as an attempt to protect his money and his job with the Ravens.

Accused Planned the Act

Early in his comments, Olbermann says that “[t]he league, the team, the prosecutors either white washed Ray Rice’s brutal assault without ever having seen this video, or they saw the video and white washed Rice’s brutal assault anyway.” In either case, the use of the pejorative label “white washing” clearly suggests that the *actions were planned* and could not have been done by accident.

Inconsistency

In one place, Olbermann compared the punishment Rice received for assaulting his fiancée to penalties for repeat drug offenders. “His push to increase NFL punishment of domestic abusers to roughly one third that of repeat pot smokers, his decision today to suspend Rice indefinitely, after the Ravens had fired him, are elements of classic tragedy, wherein the right thing is finally done only after it is too late to matter.” In this comment, Olbermann suggested that Goodall’s statements about the importance of preventing domestic violence were *inconsistent* with his minimal actions and the higher penalties for relatively minor drug violations.

Obligation to Protect Victims

Finally, Olbermann lambasted Goodall for failing to protect the victim of the assault, Janay Palmer-Rice, despite the fact that he had an obligation to do so. “Putting Janay Palmer in a position to plead for her husband’s career, perhaps being at the risk of being beaten again if she failed. . .that Roger Goodell did.”

Through the typology, we come to understand the various attacks that Olbermann employs, including two tactics under increasing the target's perceived responsibility for the act (Accused Planned the Act and Accused Benefitted from the Act), and four tactics from the increasing the perceived offensiveness of the act category (Pejorative Labeling, Extent of the Damage, Inconsistency, and Obligation to Protect Victims). However, the typology only accounts for a portion of the attacks that Olbermann made. Several important claims cannot be classified based on the current typology. For example, Olbermann said that not one of the individuals in the NFL "have any remaining credibility, and each must leave or be expelled from their current positions," and that the state of New Jersey should begin an inquiry into "whether or not the failures of McClane, Rupert, and Donio are mere incompetence, or if their actions rose to the level of criminal malfeasance." These attacks are important to Olbermann's overall case, but because they are direct attacks on the character of the individuals involved, they do not fit the current taxonomy.



There is justification in previous literature for considering persuasive attacks aimed at individual credibility. King and Anderson argue that the strategy of subversion is always "concerned with a careful selection of those images that will undermine the ethos of competing groups, ideologies, or institutions."¹² Monica Brasted's study of MoveOn's rhetoric of polarization notes that MoveOn spent an extensive amount of time attempting to weaken or damage the credibility of George W. Bush and his administration.¹³ Finally, Ryan suggests that attacks could take place "against a person's actions or *their character*."¹⁴ [emphasis added]

Therefore, we propose the addition of a third category of persuasive attack: attempts to weaken or damage a target's credibility in relation to the offensive act. To understand the specific tactics in this category it is necessary to understand the factors that make up a person's credibility. Credibility includes the components of character, sagacity, goodwill, and dynamism. Attacks on credibility, then, focus on damaging one or more of these factors, thereby damaging the overall image of the individual in question.

Attacks on Ethos or Credibility

Aristotle discussed three modes of proof or ways that we are persuaded—ethos, pathos, and logos. Logos appeals focus on reason, pathos appeals are based on emotion, and ethos appeals are based on the character of the speaker. In other words, an idea may be accepted because



the audience trusts or believes the person who presents the idea. Aristotle said this was the most compelling mode of proof:

Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided. . . his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses.¹⁵



According to Aristotle, one can derive ethos by displaying sagacity (mental habits), virtue or character (moral habits), and good will (emotional habits). A fourth component of ethos, dynamism was articulated by 20th century social scientists.

Sagacity

A person who displays sagacity is a wise or intelligent person who shows keen perception or the knowledge and experience to make good judgments. Persons who are knowledgeable about their points of discussion and whose claims are supported by credible evidence display sagacity. Another way to reflect sagacity is to demonstrate tact and moderation. Tact and moderation are evidenced in language choices and in ways that opposing viewpoints are discussed. Speakers who display sagacity through tact and moderation use language that elevates ideas rather degrades them and portrays opposing viewpoints with respect, benevolence, and civility. Finally, a rhetor can display sagacity by displaying good taste. A person with taste pays attention to details, and is aware of and attentive to issues of propriety. One should not be ridiculous or indecent, Aristotle contends.¹⁶ If speakers seek to develop ethos by demonstrating sagacity, they display intelligence, common sense, tact, moderation, and good taste.



Character

Aristotle suggests that a speaker may demonstrate the component of virtue or good moral character in several ways. First, rhetors may associate themselves with things that are virtuous. Think about values—or virtues—that we hold in high regard: courage, fairness, temperance, kindness, patience, and so on. Rhetors who exemplify these characteristics in their actions will help audiences see them as having a strong character. Aristotle also suggested that connecting one's opponent with non-virtuous traits would diminish the opposition's ethos and/or enhance your

own. In addition, a person who is sincere in presenting his/her ideas is someone who derives positive ethos because we conclude that the rhetor believes what s/he is saying.

Good Will

A third way to derive ethos is to establish good will, or develop positive rapport between the audience and the speaker. People will be viewed positively if they show respect toward the audience, an understanding of the audience’s beliefs, problems, and goals, and if they are candid and straightforward. Audiences respect people who are honest rather than manipulative, and who are able to create a strong sense of identification with the audience.

Dynamism

A final way to derive ethos is by displaying dynamism. Dynamic people are energetic, natural, conversational, and fluid in their interactions with others. Audiences will notice a speaker’s gestures, posture, eye contact, and appearance. Those who convey confidence, energy, enthusiasm, authority, and connection with the audience are likely to be judged as credible.¹⁷



It makes sense that these characteristics of ethos also form the basis of attacks that can be made against an individual. If you attack a person as ignorant, for example, you are attacking his/her sagacity. Attacks on a person’s character can be persuasive because if one’s ethos is undermined, their position is also undermined. The attacker’s case, therefore, is stronger. Table 3 summarizes the attacks that can be made against an individual’s credibility.

A Taxonomy of Credibility Attack Strategies	
Attacking a target’s credibility	
Attacks on the Target’s Sagacity:	Attacking the target’s intelligence, knowledge, experience, tact/moderation, or good taste.
Attacks on the Target’s Character:	Attacking the target’s moral character by attacking the target’s values, morals, or sincerity.
Attacks on the Target’s Goodwill:	Attacking the target’s respect for the audience and honesty.
Attacks on the Target’s Dynamism:	Attacking the target’s strength, energy, and persistence.

Table 3. A Taxonomy of Credibility Attack Strategies

Keith Olbermann's Credibility Attacks

Keith Olbermann leveled many credibility attacks on the Atlantic County district attorney's office, the Baltimore Ravens' management team, and the NFL, most frequently in the person of Roger Goodell. We quote several of these attacks below and then analyze them.

1. I accuse prosecutors McLane and Rupert and Judge Donio, even with the full weight of the law behind them, of failing to obtain or failing to act upon that in-elevator video, of failing to put Ray Rice in jail where he belongs.
2. I accuse President Cass and general manager Newsome of Baltimore of failing to act internally after the ludicrousness of the Rice two-game suspension should have become apparent, even to them. They [Cass and Newsome] have had six weeks to add a team suspension to Rice's token league punishment, to try and make the scales of justice slightly less out of all balance. They did nothing until they terminated Rice's contract today after all of them failed to get away with it.
3. I accuse Roger Goodell of conducting a kangaroo court by interviewing Janay Palmer-Rice with Ray Rice present, in contradiction of all recommended practices when dealing with victims of domestic abuse, thus virtually guaranteeing that whatever testimony she gave them of the events of February 15th, they had the validity of a video made by a hostage with a gun to her head.
4. Mr. Goodell's ineptitude has not merely rendered this football season meaningless and irrelevant by contrast. . .



Photo credit: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/marriageequality/3592522946/>
By Freedom To Marry posted at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Keith_Olbermann-1.jpg

Although there are other character attacks in the editorial, these are representative of the rest and provide a useful illustration of the new tactics of character attack.

In the first paragraph above, Olbermann accused the prosecutors of failing to act despite having "the full weight of the law behind them." Given that the tools necessary for action were available to these people, Olbermann implies that their failures must involve poor moral character. They simply did not do the right and moral thing.

In the second excerpt, Olbermann accused the management of the Ravens of failing to act internally to add to Rice's suspension, when the "ludicrousness of the Rice two-game suspension" should have been apparent "even to them." When they finally suspended Rice after, as Olbermann said, "failing to get away with it" he suggested the poor character of the Ravens' management team.



In the third excerpt, Olbermann accused Roger Goodell of conducting “kangaroo court” (pejorative labeling) wherein Janay Palmer-Rice was interviewed with Ray Rice present in “contradiction of all recommended practices when dealing with victims of domestic abuse.” In this, Olbermann attacked Goodell for lacking common sense and basic knowledge (sagacity) about how to deal with the survivor of domestic abuse. It is common sense, Olbermann suggested, that you don’t interview the victim at the same time and in the same room as the perpetrator. This also represents a character attack in that Goodell further compromised Palmer-Rice, the victim, through this process. In the final quote, Olbermann said that Roger Goodell is inept, a clear attack on his sagacity.

It is clear that without the addition of the character attack strategy, a large portion of the commentary could not be classified or understood. In the conclusion, we address how persuasive attack operated within the Olbermann commentary.

Implications: Credibility Attacks

Although this is a single case study, we have noticed several patterns in Olbermann’s character attacks that are worth exploring. First, unlike attacks that are designed to increase the target’s perceived responsibility for the act or increase the perceived offensiveness of the act, character attacks are rarely discrete entities. As we attempted to categorize tactics under the modified Benoit and Dorres taxonomy, it was relatively easy—with some conversation between the two authors—to place a comment or phrase under the label “effects on the audience,” or “pejorative labeling,” or “the accused benefitted from the act.” As Olbermann demonstrates, attacks on a target’s credibility are sometimes singular in nature, i.e., an attack on Roger Goodell’s sagacity. But they can also be combined attacks on, for example, character and goodwill, or sagacity and character. It may be common for attackers to denigrate multiple flaws in another person’s credibility and these multiple attacks may be included in the same utterance.



A second implication from this case study suggests that character attacks may be combined with increasing the responsibility or offensiveness of the act. For example, when referring to each of the three bodies involved in the Ray Rice incident (Atlantic County, the Ravens, and the NFL), Olbermann says that “each, through deception or incompetence, misled the public, damaged the efforts of every man and every woman in this country seeking to merely slow down the murderous epidemic of domestic violence, made a mockery of the process by which those who batter those who they claim to love, are to be brought to justice.” In this case, after accusing the parties of lying (character attack) or incompetence (sagacity attack), Olbermann goes on to extend the damage of their acts by explaining how their actions have harmed every man and woman attempting to stem the tide of domestic abuse. The combination of attacks on ethos and extending the damage of the acts serves to heighten the severity of the act.

Additionally, Olbermann accuses the NFL of contravening every practice of common procedure when dealing with victims of spousal abuse. He notes that the NFL interviewed Janay Palmer-Rice with her husband present, reinforcing the seriousness of this act by labeling it “kangaroo court.” Finally, Olbermann accuses Goodell of “ineptitude” that, in the end, “has comforted the violent and afflicted the victim,” which is an example of extending the damage. Structurally, Olbermann tends to combine character attacks with various tactics under increasing the offensiveness of the act. It may be more difficult for an individual or entity to respond to layered attacks.



Finally, the data suggests that character attacks are enthymematic. That is, the attacks require (assume) that the audience will supply the major premise of the argument: that if one lacks sagacity, then the person is unethical (or incompetent, or otherwise unworthy of respect). Although there has been some discussion of the traits of enthymemes, a general understanding is that the speaker omits some of the argument, and an audience supplies some of that argument so that it makes sense; this is “self-persuasion,” a critical component for effective persuasion.¹⁸ Olbermann argues “I accuse prosecutors McLane and Rupert and Judge Donio...of failing to put Ray Rice in jail where he belongs.” We contend that this is a character attack, but the audience must supply the missing premise in order for that attack to work. The complete argument is:

- Major Premise: If legal officials fail to carry out justice, they lack moral character.
- Minor Premise: McLane, Rupert, and Donio failed to put Ray Rice in jail where he belongs.
- Conclusion: McLane, Rupert, and Donio lack moral character.



Olbermann’s argument is enthymematic because, for it to work, the audience must supply the connection between moral character and the specific actions he identifies as being unethical. Olbermann’s language—“I accuse...” calls the audience to consider the attack. He then explains that the individual committed a questionable act or acted stupidly, and the audience considers the accusation. The audience must agree with the unstated premise that failing to do one’s job is a sign of lacking moral character.

In another argument, Olbermann asserts, “I accuse Roger Goodell of conducting a kangaroo court by interviewing Janay Palmer-Rice with Ray Rice present, in contradiction of all recommended practices when dealing with victims of domestic abuse...” The fully structured argument could look like this:

Major Premise: If officials violate known procedures for interviewing victims, they lack intelligence/sagacity.

Minor Premise: Roger Goodell violated known practices when he interviewed Janay Palmer—Rice with Ray Rice present.

Conclusion: Roger Goodell lacks intelligence/sagacity.

Olbermann's persuasive attack on Goodell's intelligence supplies only the minor premise. His argument assumes that the audience will fill in the rest of the argument and conclude that Goodell lacks intelligence because he doesn't follow basic procedures.

That persuasive attacks on character function enthymematically adds to their power. If Olbermann's persuasive attack required him to lay out each premise, it may take him too long to construct his attack. But, by supplying a portion of the argument, Olbermann requires the audience to supply some of the information for the argument to make sense. The audience, then, brings their own reasoning to the argument, and hence, become "self-persuaded." The short-handed enthymeme of persuasive attacks on character connects to audiences' assumptions that character, sagacity, good will, and dynamism are important traits. This point can also be seen in the examples from the introduction about the 2016 Republican nominees. When Donald Trump claims that Jeb Bush is "low energy," for the audience to understand that as an attack on his ethos, the audience must understand that to be credible, one must demonstrate energy and passion (dynamism). When Trump insults Ted Cruz for being "sleazy" and being "dishonest," he connects to the audience assumptions that such traits reflect a lack of moral character.¹⁹ Persuasive attacks on character gain footing because they effectively relate to assumptions that are easy for us to understand and supply. Additional research on persuasive attacks is clearly warranted.



Endnotes

- ¹ William L. Benoit, and Bruce D. Dorries. "Dateline NBC's persuasive attack on Wal-Mart." *Communication Quarterly* 44 (1996): 463-477.
- ² Nancy J. Legge, James R. DiSanza, John Gribas, and Aubrey Shiffler. "'He sounded like a vile, disgusting pervert...': An analysis of persuasive attacks on Rush Limbaugh during the Sandra Fluke controversy." *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 19 (2012): 173-205.
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