



Sex, lies, and post-trial publicity: The reputation repair strategies of Dominique Strauss-Kahn

Jordi Xifra*

Department of Communication, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 December 2011

Received in revised form 22 February 2012

Accepted 9 March 2012

Keywords:

Dominique Strauss-Kahn

Dramaturgy

Image repair strategies

Post-trial publicity

ABSTRACT

The object of this investigation is the only interview given so far by the former Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, Dominique Strauss-Kahn (DSK), after being declared innocent of sexual assault charges brought against him by New York's District Attorney. During his television appearance, DSK used some rhetorical and, more precisely, dramaturgical image repair strategies, but also combined them with other communication strategies. This article analyzes said strategies and suggests that image repair theory researchers must include other analytical elements, strategic as well as contextual, when researching responses to crises. Furthermore, this study also discusses the role of culture and post-trial publicity in image repair strategies.

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1. Introduction

According to a study by [Sheldon and Sallot \(2009\)](#) on image repair in politics, there is good and bad news for the politician in crisis. The good news is that strategies and tactics can in fact improve a tarnished image. The bad news is that apologizing and admitting fault may win the public's acceptance of their accounts and their supportive behavior, but may not restore the politician's reputation. The above authors argue that future research should be conducted to explore effects of other communication strategies politicians may choose in the midst of a crisis and whether a damaged politician may never fully recover from a crisis. The alternatives are to construct and carry on with a new public image ([Burns & Bruner, 2000](#)) or abandon politics altogether. The case of Dominique Strauss-Kahn (DSK) offers a good opportunity to explore these new approaches to image repair in politics.

Additionally, this paper analyzes the role of post-trial publicity in image repair strategies. Post-trial publicity can be defined as media relations efforts to find a middle ground between a judicial ruling and public acceptance. By coming after the legal decision, post-trial publicity does not form part of litigation public relations strategies, but is rather an extension of them, seeking to reduce negative effects or reinforce positive effects on the reputation of the person object of the lawsuit.

2. Background: New York vs. Strauss-Kahn

On 14 May 2011, a 32 year-old maid at the Sofitel New York Hotel, Nafissatou Diallo, alleged that DSK had sexually assaulted her after she entered his suite. DSK was formally indicted on 18 May and granted \$1 million bail, plus a \$5 million bond, the following day. He was ordered to remain confined to a New York apartment under guard. A semen sample was found on the maid's shirt, and on May 24 it was reported that DNA tests showed a match to a DNA sample submitted by DSK. He was arraigned on June 6, 2011, and pleaded not guilty. On June 30, 2011, the New York Times reported that the

* Tel.: +34 935 42 14 84.

E-mail address: jordi.xifra@upf.edu

case was on the “verge of collapse” due to problems with the credibility of the alleged victim, who had, according to sources within the New York City Police Department, repeatedly lied to the police since making her first statement. According to prosecutors, the accuser admitted that she had lied to a grand jury about the events surrounding the alleged attack. Diallo claims, however, that on June 28, 2011 the translator had misunderstood her. DSK was released from house arrest on 1 July.

After completing a lengthy investigation, prosecutors filed a motion to drop all charges against DSK, stating that they were not convinced of his culpability beyond reasonable doubt due to serious issues in the complainant’s credibility and inconclusive physical evidence, meaning they could not ask a jury to believe in it. The motion was granted by judge Michael J. Obus in a hearing on August 23, 2011.

In a TV interview on September 18 (shown on the French channel TF1 prime time news), DSK admitted that his sexual encounter with the maid was “a moral fault” and described it as “inappropriate”, but added that it “did not involve violence, constraint or aggression”. The purpose of this paper is to analyze this interview (the only one granted until now) from a reputation repair approach.

3. Context

As Kauffman (2008) pointed out, in assessing the effectiveness of a speaker’s rhetorical choices, “the critic must understand the context in which a speaker operated and the audience to whom the speaker addressed his or her message” (p. 259). Furthermore, Burns and Bruner (2000) conclude that the theory of image restoration strategies must consider the impact of structural factors.

DSK was quite aware of the different contexts and structural factors involved in his interview, the political context being foremost among them. DSK confirmed what everyone knew during his appearance on TV: that he wanted to be the French Socialist Party candidate for the presidency of France. That is why he included the French among the group of people who, according to him, he had failed.

He was also aware of the legal context. The New York District Attorney had already declared him innocent of a sexual crime. However, at the time of granting the interview he had another case pending in France, also for a sexual crime against the writer Tristane Banon. When asked about this, he denied Banon’s accusations, alleging that the matter was still under judicial review, and opting to say nothing more in this respect so as not to interfere with said review.

This legal context was essential to DSK’s image repair strategy, as, since the case of *New York vs. Strauss-Kahn* had been dismissed, the French politician continuously used the DA’s report as an instrument to legitimize his statements. Namely, he asserted that: (1) “Nafissatou Diallo lied about everything”, (2) there was no evidence, (3) there were economic interests involved, and (4) there were hidden aspects, such as someone giving information to the maid’s attorney. This is the logical strategy in such cases, which we could call “legitimization”, where the acts have not been declared criminal, but there is a public opinion that doubts innocence, affecting the image of the person that allegedly committed the crime.

Thus, legitimization is of strategic interest in such cases where there are differences in criteria between the court of justice (which does not consider the act punishable, for whatever reasons), and the court of public opinion (which considers it punishable). This strategy will have different rhetorical implications depending on the causes that led to the accused being declared innocent. If it was due to a technicality, a greater rhetorical effort will be needed to justify that the accused is truly innocent of the act itself.

Therefore, having been declared innocent due to a lack of evidence and contradictions in the alleged victim’s account, DSK needed only resort to the report by the prosecuting attorney, Jack Vance, Jr., which he brought with him to the interview and presented more than once to endorse the contents of his argument.

On the other hand, in the interview DSK stated that he regretted the damage he had caused his wife, adding “but she would not have been by my side if she had not been sure of my innocence.” In other words, DSK told us that if his wife considered him innocent of a sexual act with a third person (as the DA did), it is because he is innocent. This is another form of legitimization, psychological rather than legal.

The context in reference to the news is also essential. He was interviewed on the network on which his wife, Anne Sinclair, became famous. What is more, he was interviewed by a reporter, Claire Chazal, who had stated three months earlier in an interview for *TV Magazine* that “she thought a lot about her [Anne Sinclair], and that they frequently sent each other cute and endearing messages” (Garrigos & Roberts, 2011, p. 4). This media context influenced the development of DSK’s public relations strategy, as we shall see later.

Finally, personal circumstance can also be considered one of the contexts referred to by Kauffman (2008). Indeed, one of the best-known quotations from the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset is that man is man and his circumstance – “I am I and my circumstance” (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p. 43). One such circumstance is the reputation of the leader wanting to repair his reputation. As stated by the psychiatrist Serge Hefez: “The French are not like the Americans. They are totally capable of tolerating someone with an intense sex life as long as there is no abuse of power or violence” (in Serafini, 2011, p. 4). However, DSK did not take into account one of the elements that make up his reputation, his capacity for seducing women: “If he had accepted his role as a seducer he would have been more convincing” (Hefez, in Serafini, 2011, p. 4).

Image repair discourse theory must include the different contexts in which strategies are developed. Analyzing practical examples will help to advance this line of research and determine the relationship between these contexts and the use of these strategies.

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