DOMINATING DISCOURSE: AN EVALUATION OF THE RHETORIC AND PUBLIC RELATIONS EFFECTIVENESS OF THE OBAMACARE CAMPAIGN VERSUS THE ANTI-OBAMACARE CAMPAIGN

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ABSTRACT

Public relations is crucial to the success of a business, as it is a function by which organizations can both disseminate essential information and monitor public opinion, while establishing relationships and dialogue among key audiences and stakeholders. As a legislation that marked an unprecedented era in national health care policy and administration, the federal Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), established in 2010, and the corresponding HealthCare.gov website were received extremely poorly in national media and opinion, resulting in a largely negative, and potentially inaccurate reputation. This can be partially attributed to the public relations campaign for the Affordable Care Act, which has been overwhelmingly deemed a massive failure, and the scrutiny by the opposing “Anti-ObamaCare” campaign that led to further opposition in the media and among the general American public. Nonetheless, millions of Americans have purchased health care under the legislation. To understand how the campaign was considered a failure despite the high enrollment statistics, as well as the mechanisms of dominant discourse that resulted from the Anti-ObamaCare campaigns and the subsequent effects on public relations use in government, it is necessary to first outline the facets of a public relations campaign based on the theoretical and methodological approaches used in the industry by professionals and practitioners, with an emphasis on the use of rhetoric and language in creating and executing public relations messages, and in the formation of a dominant discourse. To measure the success or failure of public relations efforts, this thesis will include a quantitative analysis on the number of citizens who visited and signed up for health care under the ACA, as well as a qualitative examination of media and public perception through a brief exploration of the messages disseminated about the ACA, considering form and tone of media coverage regarding the campaign and legislation. This will be used in turn to determine what the dominant discourse surrounding the legislation is, and how it has been shaped over time. Lastly, the thesis explores how this event has changed the rhetoric within, and about government public relations efforts, and will predict possible directions in which public relations tactics for government may steer in the future.
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Chapter 1

Affordable Care Act Overview

Legislation and Reception

President Barack Obama signed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA), also known as the Affordable Care Act (ACA), or “ObamaCare”, into law on March 23, 2010, establishing it as a United States federal statute that would change the way citizens search for and receive health care insurance plans, while simultaneously regulating the health insurance industry. The goal of the ACA was to enable widespread health care options for all Americans, including and especially those who faced issues receiving health care under the current system due to pre-existing medical conditions that resulted in unwarranted and discriminatory upcharges in insurance rates based on uncontrollable factors such as gender and current health status, as well as those living below the poverty line who were unable to afford or obtain private, employer-based health care coverage. In a broad sense, the ACA would regulate the complex and cluttered system that is the American health care industry with the aim of improving the ability of citizens to receive health care, and thus, improving the health of the nation by reducing the rate of uninsured Americans. Under the statute, all American citizens would ideally have accessibility to a range of affordable health care options from both private and public insurance providers.

The legislation itself was implemented in several phases beginning in 2010 to allow multiple changes to take place across a variety of aspects of the health care industry, including the government-financed public health care options, Medicare, Medicaid, and the Veterans Administration (VA), and would allow for current health care customers already enrolled in coverage plans to be grandfathered into the new system. By 2022, the ACA will reach full implementation with many of the major changes having occurred in 2014. One major component of the ACA was the HealthCare.gov website, which
serves as a federally established marketplace for citizens to learn about and purchase various health insurance plans. Other health insurance marketplace exchange websites operated by state governments were also established as part of the legislation to enable individuals and small businesses to purchase health insurance plans. In 2014, 8 million Americans enrolled in a marketplace plan, and an additional 9 million are expected to enroll in 2015. Before the ACA, “roughly 85% of Americans were covered and 15% were uninsured” (Emanuel). President Obama and his administration expect that number of uninsured Americans to reduce steadily over the next five to ten years with the help of the ACA.

The language of the 966-page legislation is complex and encompasses a number of facets dealing with government interactions and regulations on private health care companies, as well as the way in which citizens interact with and obtain health care coverage. Though for the majority of Americans, “the ACA constitutes a big improvement”, making health care coverage available at more reasonable prices, especially for young adults, many Americans continue to feel uncertain as to whether the legislation helps or hurts their current insurance coverage, and whether the ACA and HealthCare.gov are as beneficial as purported by the Obama administration (Emanuel, 218). The potential benefits of such a legislation that seeks to better the rate of health insurance coverage among Americans were muddled within the rhetoric and legal jargon of the legislation and explanations by President Obama and the federal government, leaving many to wonder what the ACA actually does and means for them on an individual basis. Countless books and guides were published within the first year of its enactment to explain the legislation in more straightforward terms, however reception to the ACA was already poor. Media coverage of the implementation of the legislation was prodigiously negative, and the ACA continues to receive negative treatment in public opinion. Many citizens are still slow to adapt to the new system, and the ACA still remains unfavorable to a large portion of the population for a wide range of reasons.

The HealthCare.gov website, which provides citizens with readily available information and purchasing options related to various health care plans operated by the federal government, was also considered a massive disaster by the general public. The initial rollout date of the site when Americans
could log on to view and purchase plans was marred when the site crashed. Even after it had been fixed, others had difficulty navigating and operating the website, creating a negative experience that generated a contemptible reputation for HealthCare.gov. The confusion and complexities of the website were associated with those of the legislation, thereby augmenting the negativity surrounding the ACA itself. Both were criticized openly in media, and public outcry ensued. Skepticism about the government’s credibility and qualification for imposing such heavy involvement in health care grew as a result, overwhelming the positive aspects of the legislation and leaving the general American public feeling uneasy and unwelcoming toward the ACA. The ACA has already begun to revolutionize the way in which health care is obtained and the way in which coverage profits the American people, therefore it is crucial to understand public perception of this legislation with relation to the way in which the American people interact with it.

Studies have been, and continue to be, conducted to determine the impact of the ACA on not only the changes within the health insurance industry, the economic effects, the cost of insurance coverage, and the health of American citizens, but also the legislation’s public reception, which appears to be of utmost concern in media coverage. While much of the unfavorable public reaction to the ACA can be attributed to the legislation itself, another great portion can be attributed to the public relations campaign for the Affordable Care Act, which has been universally deemed a massive failure, both by professionals in the communications field, and by the general public. Of key significance is the rhetoric involved in the public relations campaign efforts of the ACA to inform and establish dialogue with audiences, which in this case is the entirety of American citizens, and how effective that campaign has been, particularly in the past four years since its initial enactment, in gaining the support and positive responses of Americans. The use of certain tactics for the ACA campaign additionally marks an era of new public relations tactics employed by the United States government, and an innovative direction for informing and maintaining relationships with citizens across the nation.
Anti-ObamaCare and Dominant Discourse

As a federal statute that entirely altered the fifth-largest industry in the United States, the ACA received a vast amount of political and economic controversy. While liberals regarded President Obama’s reform of the health care system as a step toward “universal health care” that is a “fundamental human right”, conservatives advocated for a free market system and reduced government involvement in the health care industry (Faguet, 79). A large amount of the negativity surrounding the ACA and its campaign can be credited to these inherent political differences and agendas. Republican Party and Tea Party members were among the most vocal about their dislike and distrust of the new health care reform, and budgeted large local and national campaigns against it. Those campaigns were expressively derisive, bashing the legislation from a political standpoint. In states operating marketplace exchanges, many senatorial and congressional election campaigns focused on the flaws of the ACA and the need to work toward its repeal. On a national scale, a number of groups released television, radio and Internet campaign advertisements about unfavorable effects of the legislation, such as how it has inhibited some individuals from maintaining their current health care coverage plans as promised, leading to high premiums and expensive bills paid out of pocket. “Anti-ObamaCare” speeches, press conferences and public service announcements inundated traditional news and social media to gain Americans’ support for the annulment of the ACA.

This type of messaging led to even greater scrutiny in media outlets regarding the Affordable Care Act and its public relations campaign, as well as the shaky rollout of the HealthCare.gov site. Trusted news outlets, such as CNN and NBC, and bloggers and social media users alike all contributed to the enormously adverse discourse surrounding the entirety of the ACA. This created a vicious cycle of increased negativity in tone and attitude about the ACA and its public relations efforts, which were by some deemed even greater of a failure than the legislation itself. Tweets, Facebook posts and YouTube videos published by opposing political party members and news sources fueled the negative attitudes of American citizens, which in turn fueled continued arguments against the ACA by political parties and
news sources. The spiraling effect led to a dominant attitude and rhetoric surrounding the legislation that was, therefore, nearly unanimously negative. At a certain point, even President Obama took to referencing the ACA as “ObamaCare”, which was initially used as a derogatory term by opponents criticizing the Act.

Despite this sweeping negative attitude about the legislation, reports on the number of Americans signing up for health care coverage plans under the Affordable Care Act and through the HealthCare.gov website and state marketplace exchanges exceeded initial expectations. According to statistical data on the number of enrollees, the percentage of uninsured individuals ages 19 to 64 declined from 20% between the July-to-September period in 2013 to 15% in the April-to-June period in 2014. By May of 2014, over 20 million Americans had searched for, and acquired health insurance plans since the legislation’s enactment. Toward the end of 2014, many news outlets began reporting that the efforts of political opponents of the ACA had backfired, unintentionally increasing awareness about the ACA and motivating more Americans to research and understand its benefits, eventually leading to more enrollments, rather than more objections to the legislation.

**Exploration**

This phenomenon of the success of the Affordable Care Act despite the massively negative dominant discourse and rhetoric surrounding it raises several questions to be explored, which are as follows:

1. Based on the battle between the Affordable Care Act campaign and the opposing “Anti-ObamaCare” campaign to establish a certain dominant discourse and public attitude about the ACA, what has the dominant discourse around the legislation been, and how has it developed since 2010?
2. What constitutes the success or failure of a public relations campaign?
3. How is a dominant discourse established, and how does it function and affect a public relations campaign?

4. If rhetoric around a campaign is largely negative, does that help or hurt the organization and its campaign? Is all publicity good publicity?

5. How can a negative dominant discourse be fought and altered in favor of an organization?

6. Does the size of the budget for a campaign matter in the success of a campaign and in the face of a certain dominant discourse, both for the organization fighting a dominant discourse and for the frontrunners of that discourse?
Chapter 2

Public Relations Methods Overview

Abraham Lincoln once said, “With public opinion on its side, everything succeeds; with public opinion against it, nothing succeeds” (Bernays, 183). Public relations is crucial to the success of a business, as it is a function by which organizations can both disseminate essential information and monitor public opinion, while establishing relationships and dialogue among key audiences and stakeholders. Any business or organization requires the use of strategic public relations campaigns planned according to specific needs and goals, and catering to target audiences to effectively spread awareness, influence behavior, and to accomplish financial and business objectives. Public relations has been afforded several varying definitions by practitioners, industry leaders, theorists, and scholars. Many often falsely relate the practice of public relations to propaganda and publicity techniques, however the field delves far deeper than mere persuasion. Edward Bernays, the supposed father of modern public relations, classifies public relations as having three meanings: “information given to the public”, “persuasion directed at the public to modify attitudes and actions”, and “efforts to integrate attitudes and actions of an institution with its publics and of publics with that institution” (3).

Most other official definitions agree upon the fact that the overall goal of public relations is to generate awareness both credibly and ethically, while engendering and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics; to accomplish this goal requires certain tactics that are specific to the industry, whether by tradition, by norms, or by technological availability. According to Bernays, the philosophical necessity of public relations maintains that “modern social science has found that the adjustment of individuals, groups, and institutions to life is necessary for the well-being of all” (3). To use public relations is to accept the coinciding of private and public interest, and to benefit society in some manner through persuasive and informational methods. It is a field that “evaluates the potential impacts of public opinion and can act to meet the given situation”, allowing for the improvement of the
mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics through better understanding and informing (8).

Public relations theorist, Pat Curtin, states that “public relations is largely about creating and recreating ideas and generating meaning”, an ideal that can relate to the communications industry as a whole (Curtin, 6). The condition for the existence of public relations and its creation of messages with meaning is that of the two-way symmetrical flow of communication, a model developed by Paul Lazarsfeld in the 1950s, which allows for the organization and its publics to interact and engage in a meaningful, productive manner. This model enables relationships to be formed, and flexibility to remain in the subsequent actions and reactions stemming from the communications process. Public relations centered on active engagement is “a necessity, not an option” for businesses, organizations and any individual looking to build upon a reputation and generate significant connections with stakeholders through campaign and promotional tactics (Curtin, 11).

A public relations campaign refers to the strategic planning, creating, development, and execution processes involved in generating awareness about an organization, or its goods and services. Special emphasis must be placed, however, on the term “strategic”, given the fact success is dependent on efficiency and effectiveness of the campaign, which are in turn dependent on careful maneuvers to reach key audiences within which the public relations message would resonate most significantly. Strategy in public relations is derived from theory and a long history of research about what messages resonate best with whom, through which media, and with what effect. It is a multifaceted science rooted in sociology, psychology, rhetoric, and statistics, among many other areas of study, which provides a stepping-stone for professionals to create effective campaigns, and thereby successfully achieve the public relations goals. Consistent within every approach to public relations is the dissection of historic public relations and communications theories and methods, which form the standard model for the campaign process.
Theories and Methods

Theory is an essential framework for the understanding and application of public relations, as it enables organizations to better predict, plan and evaluate public relations efforts with an organization’s overall goal in mind. This provides insight as to the way in which communications functions between sender and receiver, as well as the types of messages, formats, frequencies, and outlets that are generally more successful in implementing and fulfilling a communications plan. There are a number of widely accepted theories and methods within the industry, though no single customary formula is required. Nonetheless, the information circulated by public relations professionals has merit in that it is grounded in research and implemented recurrently, often with effectiveness. Several particular methods and theories have constituted the broad foundation for public relations practices over the past few decades, from which additional methods and theories have stemmed to produce a comprehensive and extensive field.

One method that is largely accepted by the industry is the “R.A.C.E.” model, which outlines the Research, Action, Communication, and Evaluation components involved in the overall process of creating a public relations campaign. Research refers to the practice of uncovering and assessing the background knowledge related to the organization and its current, past and proposed future situations, as well as the environment in which a campaign is to be implemented. The Action stage requires analyzing the research and formulating the goals of a new campaign and a strategic plan for the campaign based on those goals, the target audience, the necessary message channels, and timing of the messages. The Communication stage is the point at which execution and placement of the campaign messages occurs. Lastly, Evaluation proceeds after the campaign has been implemented. Research is again conducted at this stage to determine the outcomes of the campaign, and calculate its overall effectiveness with relation to the desired results.

Research often begins by classifying and understanding the regulations in place on a society based on existing legislations and culture to establish the limitations and freedoms an organization may have in its campaign efforts and messages. The next major step involves environmental monitoring, which examines interactions between the organization developing the campaign and its key stakeholders,
which are groups of influential, and potentially influential, individuals that may have a role within the organization, or one that significantly affects, or is affected by, the organization. The organization should define its stakeholders during this stage. It is also necessary to be aware of, and prepared to handle any events or situations that may focus public attention on a negative issue related to the organization or campaign, and away from the intended message. Such situations are not always immediately recognizable or predictable, thus the organization will generally look to common sources of information, such as social media and news outlets, where mentions of a negative situation or reputation may be present.

Public relations audits are also commonly used to study the public perception of an organization on both an internal and external level. This functions to establish stakeholders and their attitudes regarding the organization through interviews with officials in the profession, and also usually through content analyses of internal and external communications. The public relations practitioner may measure the organization’s current standing against an “ideal” organization as defined by the stakeholders to better understand the areas in which improvements should be made. In general, any research conducted may “indicate the necessity to modify original objectives, to enlarge or contract the planned goal, or to change actions and methods” (Bernays, 164-165). The organization can then begin to reshape its image and campaign strategy to rearticulate more positive accomplishments, values and objectives. The overall goal of public relations audits and environmental monitoring is to gain a sense of the current public perception and rhetoric surrounding the organization, so as to anticipate how campaign efforts might be received in the public sphere, and thus tailor the campaign to be better received; research may, therefore, be continuous throughout the remainder of the campaign process.

After initial research has been completed, this information can be used in the Action stage, during which public relations goals are formulated. The goals may involve promoting a product or service to gain interest and certain responses, generating awareness about a topic or issue, influencing attitudes and behavior toward an organization, or building trust among key publics, along with many other possibilities. Bernays states that there are three fundamental goals in approaching publics, which are first, to “intensify
an existing favorable attitude”, to “negate an unfavorable attitude”, or to “convert a passive attitude into an active one”, in order to gain some mutually beneficial result (Bernays, 216). Essentially, the goals set for the public relations efforts will prescribe themes for the campaign that “must appeal to the motives of the public”, and therefore must also tailor to the overall goals of the organization or business (165). The goals will also depend on the type of organization or business implementing the campaign. A non-profit, government-owned institution may have certain objectives in mind that its operations depend upon, such as, for example, gaining votes or inciting civic action; a for-profit corporation, on the other hand, may be focused on generating brand awareness to increase revenue. Research may reveal a particular aspect toward which the goals may need to be pointed, such as altering a preexisting negative public opinion based on some event that took place prior to the campaign. The rest of the campaign process will center on the specific goal, or goals, established during this stage.

During the Communication stage, messages for the campaign are encoded and created in physical form to be disseminated to audiences. In the course of encoding, public relations professionals imbue a message with a desired meaning through the planned coordination of a message’s content, format and distribution. Encoding involves a number of elements, including choosing types and forms of language, determining the scope of the message, selecting language and images that will resonate with the audience, and indicating the proper medium for the message to be sent and received. Using the goals generated during the previous stage of the model, public relations practitioners will determine what form, media and audience the campaign’s messages need to take.

There are two overall categories into which campaigns can be classified based on methods and purpose. The first category is that of informational campaigns, which are one-directional in terms of the flow of communication, and do not seek to establish dialogue between an organization and its publics. Communication campaigns, on the other hand, encourage interaction and participation between an organization and its publics, establishing dialogue and operating a two-way flow of communication. Both types are acceptable based on the needs of a given organization, as well as its publics and the intended
message. Communication campaigns can be subdivided into further categories, including, for example, commercial campaigns, which are used to promote a company’s products, and reputation campaigns, which are aimed at improving an organization’s image in the mind of its publics.

For all types of campaigns, materials often employ both traditional public relations methods, and new social media methods. The balance of traditional and social media methods in itself is an interesting study, in that as social media methods grow in popularity and effectiveness, traditional methods remain a foundation for public relations practices throughout the industry. Traditional public relations techniques involve reaching established, trusted news outlets, such as journals and television news sources, through materials such as news releases, press conferences, fact sheets, and video and radio news releases, among a variety of other tactics. Even in the age of technology and digital media, journals and television news sources remain highly credible and trustworthy in public opinion over new media sources due to the regulation and scrutiny involved in the custom of filtering news stories and coverage by those traditional sources.

One of the primary traditional methods that continues to be used heavily in the industry is that of the news release. This formal promotional and informational document is mutually beneficial for both news outlets and organizations because it provides journalists with new and important material to cover in the news cycle, while disseminating information that will direct the attention of target audiences toward the organization and its efforts. The news release can be used as a story on its own, or a journalist may write a story based on the information covered in the release. The most important factor in delivering a news release is ensuring that it reach the proper outlet to gain the appropriate coverage. Strong relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists improves not only the likelihood of the news release being featured in a news story, but also the likelihood that that story will reach the desired target audience. The formality, timeliness, verifiability, and standardization of the news release all contribute to the level of trust and value placed on this public relations tool in a campaign.
The press conferences is another traditional public relations method similarly designed to garner attention for an organization, albeit typically for larger events or announcements that require engendering a greater impression or reaction, and therefore they are reserved for specific occasions. For newsworthy and more complicated statements than would generally be covered in a news release, press conferences are great instruments of producing breaking news and increasing media attention while providing the opportunity to also include visual elements that enhance the information being shared. One additional major advantage of the press conference is the ability to incite open dialogue directly between the organization and the media, establishing a precedent for the tone and type of media coverage for the announcement. Again, formality, verifiability and timeliness make the press conference a productive instrument for delivering announcements of a larger scale in a campaign.

With the onset of the digital age, technology and social media have grown to become some of the most popular outlets for news and information for the world at large. The ease and accessibility of the Internet, and the global interconnectedness it provides, give public relations professionals the unique opportunity to reach new audiences and target even more specific groups than was previously possible. The creation and maintenance of websites by organizations allows for easier and more comprehensive brand management, and for the publication of valuable information for customers, investors, partners, and other stakeholders. Effective websites are current, user-friendly, clear, and explanatory. Many websites for organizations will also include a public relations page, where news releases and other essential information can be found by anyone at any time. The advantage of this is the ability for any user with any interest or involvement in the organization to engage quickly and receive accurate information from anywhere in the world in a timely manner. To maintain good public relations through websites, however, requires careful maintenance and accuracy by the organization; inaccurate or outdated information can lead to a poor reputation, loss of customers, and, in more extreme cases, legal trouble. To maintain a website with a public relations page alone does not necessarily fulfill the public relations goal of establishing relationships and dialogue. Certainly the website may be a substantial location for public
relations practitioners to “serve as cultural intermediaries” in an informational sense, however additional efforts to include elements that facilitate relationship building based on “public scrutiny” of how that relationship building must occur may be of further benefit (Curtin, 80).

Social media is the most profound and rapidly growing of the digital tools available for public relations purposes. The number of active monthly Twitter and Facebook users has increased exponentially in the past decade alone. Over 250 million users worldwide post and view tweets, and Facebook now hosts over 1 billion personal profile pages, and over 25 million business pages. Facebook and Twitter, along with other social media outlets including Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube, allow for a new depth to the concept of a two-way flow of communication, in that the immediate nature of reaching out and responding facilitates greater interactivity between an organization and its publics than ever before. A prime example of the leverage of social media for a business is the Coca-Cola Facebook page, which has over 90 million “likes”, or followers, and receives thousands of posts and comments from Facebook users on a daily basis. Users can share content and advertisements published by Coca-Cola to their own personal pages, reaching even more audiences that may not already be following the official Coca-Cola page. Such social media outlets are therefore highly advantageous for organizations and companies in creating a brand identity, and reaching and engaging with publics in a more immediate and regular fashion. Data from social media and Internet users, furthermore, allows organizations to collect valuable insight about those groups that would help improve the public relations efforts and alter messages to better resonate with its primary audiences.

Nonetheless, the popularity and use of social media present a double-edged sword for public relations. The “Web 2.0” era that began around 2005 was the onset of the age of “user-generated content”, in which corporations, organizations and governments were no longer the sole publishers of online material; rather the Internet became dominated by the masses through sites like Facebook and YouTube. The implication of this was that while organizations could create their own websites and release certain information at specific times, users who posted their own opinions and experiences with an organization...
could influence peoples’ beliefs and attitudes about that organization across the globe quite rapidly. Furthermore, negative publicity of any kind could now spread like wildfire across the web, reaching thousands, if not millions, of people in a relatively short amount of time. Again, however, the immediacy of the Internet then allows for public relations professionals to address such issues swiftly and to a large audience. The paradoxical nature of the Internet and social media can make these implements difficult to comprehend and use effectively in some cases, and of course, requires a great deal of tact and careful planning in application. Still, the advantages outweigh the risks in many ways. The positive public reaction to organizations’ use of the web for public relations purposes, and the large number and types of followers and engagements between organizations and users on a regular basis demonstrate its value in communication purposes.

Language, being the means by which communication primarily takes place, is central to the formation and execution of a message, and therefore should be vigilantly considered during this stage of the process. The nature of language can either impede or facilitate meaning, depending on whether it is used properly and efficiently. The effectiveness of language is first contingent on the languages used to relay a message. Choosing the right languages will, on a very basic level, ensure that the campaign reaches and resonates within the intended audiences. For example, a campaign disseminated across the United States may feature both English and Spanish, the primary dominant languages nationwide. A more targeted campaign may need to consider colloquial gradations in word choice and syntax specific to geographic regions or cultural groups that would enable the messages to better correspond to the audience.

Rhetoric is a component of language that works toward the facilitation of meaning. The traditional interpretation of rhetoric is complex, but at its heart lies the study of the effectiveness of persuasion and argumentative qualities in directed conversation; that is to say, the ability of a speaker to present a set of opinions, often against that of another, and consciously steer the opponent into thinking or acting in a desired way, or to successfully change the opponent’s stance on a matter. Some of the more
influential theories of rhetoric include rhetorical appeals and fallacies, scope, tone, syntactical structure, and dialectic relationships. Rhetoric is crucial to public relations in the persuasive techniques involved, and in its enablement of the translation and consumption of messages systematically through language, along with the formation of dialogue. Rhetoric is ultimately what helps differentiate public relations from mere publicity, where publicity is simply creating awareness, and public relations is establishing relationships through dialogue with publics via the functions of language (Bobbit, 3).

Rhetorical appeals and fallacies constitute in a large part the methods of generating meaning and persuasion through language. The traditional rhetorical appeals derive from Aristotle, who categorized them by function: Ethos, being the credibility and characteristics of a speaker; pathos, being the emotional appeal of a message; and logos, being the logical appeal of a message. Ethos, at its core, convinces audiences of a speaker’s stance through the level of credibility of the speaker’s character based on the notion that audiences tend to believe and accept messages from people who are deemed respectable and worthy. From a public relations stance, ethos is the projection of the opinion that the organization distributing a message or campaign is worth listening to because it has credibility and authority. In addition, ethos relies on likeability; audiences have an even higher probability of listening and responding to an authority that they can connect with on a personal level. Likeability with regard to ethos stems from the speaker’s characteristics of goodwill toward society and toward the audience. Thus in a campaign message, it is often typical to use ethos to establish the organization as a likeable authority on the subject of the campaign, or to use authoritative figures with positive reputations to deliver messages. Language that asserts authority and also establishes the speaker’s good will toward both society and the audience is key. Terms that reflect expertise in a particular industry or field while communicating in an easily digestible manner for those who may be unfamiliar with jargon are also essential. Likewise, the speaker must use language that generates the sense of being open to the audience and keeping society’s best interests in mind; highlighting the mutually beneficial aspects of the campaign can be a useful means of
doing so. Ultimately, however, ethos resides in the audience, which determines whether a speaker has the reputation and authority to make listening worthwhile.

Pathos, the second rhetorical appeal, involves using language to affect the emotions of an audience. Choice wording can produce a certain type of emotional response to enhance an argument or bring the audience onto the desired side of the argument. Pathos is commonly used in advertising, where a product is usually tied to a positive emotional response in the audience. Pathos is also seen to a large extent in public service announcements, particularly featuring vocabulary that incites sentiments of fear or sorrow to prevent a type of behavior, such as drunk driving. Using words or phrases that are emotionally charged, especially ones that have either a strongly positive or strongly negative connotation, is another facet of this rhetorical appeal. Heavily loaded language that sways too far in either a positive or negative direction is generally regarded as a rhetorical fallacy to avoid, however, as it diverts attention away from the argument itself. Studies on the use of pathos in advertising and public relations have proven it to be fairly effective at generating desired emotional responses that impact attitudes and behavior in anticipated ways, however excessive pathos can lead to adverse effects relating to too severe a reaction in the audience, causing the audience to ignore or turn away from the message altogether; therefore this practice should be kept in careful moderation, especially in public relations where informing publics is essential.

Logos is the third of the rhetorical appeals, which deals with the logic of an argument and persuasion through reasoning. Clarity is a fundamental factor in logos; the more well defined and direct an argument, the better the audience will logically comprehend, and the greater the argument’s logos. Forms of inductive and deductive reasoning help to establish a logical flow of information that simplifies observations with relation to a general theory or statement. Deductive reasoning, which draws truth from a hypothesis by examining a set of observations, is generally more narrow, but is easier for audiences to grasp in an argument because of its top-down approach, compared to inductive reasoning, which more broadly draws a proposition from a set of observations. While inductive reasoning fits more appropriately to exploratory arguments, deductive reasoning is stronger in an argument overall due to its confirmative
tone and nature. Messages that use deductive reasoning to properly assert a truth about a proposition within an argument can improve that argument’s logos. This, along with the other rhetorical appeals, should be used strategically to support the argument.

Rhetorical fallacies are means of manipulating the audience in various ways to divert attention away from the argument, and are typically marks of weak or inconsistent reasoning that diminish the logical flow of ideas. The categories of rhetorical fallacies include appeals to the mind and to the emotions, faulty deduction, manipulation, improper cause and effect statements, circular logic, and attacks on elements other than a claim or the argument itself. These lessen the level of logos, and potentially the credibility of the speaker should the audience become aware of the fallacies. Overall, general avoidance of fallacies will enable the argument to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the audience, which will thereby contribute to the argument’s success in persuading the audience through the functions of the appeals.

The weight of each of the three rhetorical appeals is believed to vary based on the purpose of the argument, which in this case is the communications objective or public relations campaign goal. Many theorists believe that overall, logos is the most necessary of the rhetorical appeals for campaigns regarding essential goods or services that people rely upon, such as food, doctors or medicine, whereas pathos is more effective in campaigns for goods and services that people desire, such as cars, clothing or personal technological devices. In most cases, however, campaigns will include a mix of the three, accepting that the human mind is complex, and that the appeals that work for some audiences may not work as effectively for others. Choosing which appeal to emphasize more in a public relations message will depend upon the type of organization and campaign, as well as the mindset of the defined audience.

One of the main ingredients to any campaign is the target audience. Determining the individuals to whom a campaign will be directed occurs during the Research and Action stages. A target audience refers to the group or demographic the organization strategically selects and plans to reach because that group is deemed most likely to have “some common interest” in the message, organization or offers
(Bernays, 163). The reasoning behind the necessity of a target audience is that to disseminate a message to all people everywhere and through every platform would be costly and prove highly ineffective due to the fact that only some groups of people will be interested in what the company or organization has to say. Moreover, coverage of a campaign in all major media does not guarantee that all audiences will be paying attention to the organization’s message at all times. A much more efficient tactic that ensures the right people will be listening at the right times is to determine a target audience for a message or campaign based on research as to which groups are most likely to take interest in an organization or message, and to make that message present regularly in the form of media that is most often consumed by that group.

Public relations efforts are thus most effective and more likely to achieve the desired goal of the campaign when directed toward smaller, more specific audiences. A target audience can be based on any number of criteria, but is primarily segmented by type of person or profession. Geography, age, personality characteristics, professional industry, associations, and gender are all valid conditions for selecting a target audience. Censuses and market research are indispensable methods for selecting the audiences of a campaign. An organization can learn a great deal about the types and locations of the people that are apt to receive certain public relations messages, and can then tailor the language and forms of those messages to resonate more highly within the defined groups. Also taken into consideration are media criteria, specifically the means by which the target audience gains information, whether digitally or through traditional news sources such as daily newspapers. The general principle is to always cater to the target audience and the methods, messages and outlets that are most convenient or preferred by that group. Accommodating the audience’s needs before some of those of the company or organization will ensure the best possible outcome for a public relations campaign, because it is the audience that is necessary for a campaign to achieve its intended purpose, and therefore to achieve success.

During the Communication stage, the campaign is implemented and disseminated to the desired audiences. Organizations will also work toward establishing dialogue with target audiences to build
relationships among stakeholders, which is one of the primary goals of public relations overall. Creating and operating a two-way symmetrical flow of communication, through which both the organization and audience participate in dialogue to the advantage of both groups, is ideal in the industry, especially given the digital age in which most organizations and audiences are capable of communicating with one another quickly and directly. The two-way symmetrical model of public relations focuses on mutual respect, understanding and betterment with compromise, accommodation and negotiation at the core. Engaging in honest, open dialogue enables an organization to gain a sense of its publics’ needs, and make the proper adjustments. The model requires organizations to be proactive in engagement, and also implies willingness on behalf of the organization and its publics to cooperate with one another for their mutual benefit. Many criticize the model in that it suggests an equal balance between organizations and publics that is not consistently found in reality. In many cases, the scale may be tilted to some extent, leaving organizations slightly more on top and in control of the dialogue given the role as the informer and the decider as to what information is disseminated where, how and to whom. However, publics in modern society are more capable of, and interested in engaging with organizations for personal and social welfare, slightly balancing the scale back out.

Engaging audiences is a key component to the message-decoding phase in the model and Communication stage of the process. Many practitioners consider the encoding and decoding phases to be separate actions, however a more interrelated relationship should be considered. Meaning is not fully realized until the consumer actively decodes and interprets the message, implying that public relations practitioners and their respective organizations have only limited control over the actual reception and understanding of the public relations messages disseminated. The processes of decoding deal in part with several psychological theories relating to public relations and the capacity for human perception of messages. A variety of theories in the fields of sociology and public relations can be studied and applied in order to better comprehend and predict the audience’s reaction and construal of messages, resulting in
the creation and use of a better message or format that will resonate with increased intensity within the audience.

One of the primary theories regarding media consumption and decoding is the linear transmission model, which was established by Howard Laswell in 1948, and represents communication as a process of “who says what to whom, in what channel, and with what effect”. This model holds that the audience is passive, and either receives the correct message, or does not, due to external interference in the communication process. Since its publication, the model has been altered slightly by several other theorists that believe that audiences have a more active role in the overall process. Pierre Bourdieu, in *The Love of Art*, claims that audiences consume and respond according to their own personal background, particularly social class status. This theory disregards the possibility of other factors that may have an effect on the way in which audiences consume and respond to messages, although it takes a step toward a more dynamic view of the Communication phase. Michel de Certeau’s theory asserts that consumption occurs within the context of content production, in that public relations practitioners will intentionally design messages with a certain desired interpretation and a certain target audience in mind. Thus if the context encoded in the message, such as demographics, political influences, cultural nuances, and socioeconomic factors, matches the context of the target audience’s own personal life experiences and psychological semantics, the audience will generally interpret the message as the practitioners had intended.

Naturally, if the context of the message does not match the audience’s own personal context, then the message can be misconstrued, causing cognitive dissonance, which is defined as a general feeling of discomfort an individual experiences when an inconsistency in that individual’s beliefs, attitudes and behaviors occurs, leading the individual to seek some course of action to reach resolution and restore balance (Festinger, 132). Thus if a viewer experiences cognitive dissonance as an effect of a message or format that challenges their beliefs, attitudes or behaviors, his or her consumption of that message may be unpredictable, and an unintended interpretation could result. Moreover, a consumer can create new
meaning from a message that may not have existed in the encoding of the message in the first place. Curtin states that “understanding and misunderstanding are narrowly separated”, and that “new understandings are possible” during audience consumption (Curtin, 80). The implication is an added importance of the organization’s awareness of potential meanings that may arise out of the publics’ contexts.

Sociology also plays a major role in the consumption of media. Understanding how the human mind works and interacts with the surrounding environment and other people is crucial to understanding how messages are decoded. Given that people are predisposed to certain interpretations of certain messages, taking a step back to analyze how those interpretations come into existence based on external and internal factors of individuals within an audience proves highly useful in planning messages and campaigns. The following theories merge sociology with communications to better understand the consumption process and the models that have been set forth.

Thinking styles vary among individuals and groups, and explain how audiences evaluate and respond to different messages and situations based on patterns of analysis and reasoning. Though thinking styles may vary by individual, generally, large groups tend to have similar, or the same thinking style. There are two main categories of thinking styles, which are often associated with Eastern and Western cultures. The holistic thinking pattern, which derives from Eastern tradition and thought, considers context and external factors in a given situation. Thinkers of this style are generally less impacted by negative messages and publicity due to their tendency to analyze the situation as a whole with a range of potential influences, rather than attribute negative factors or failures to one individual or organization. Analytic thinkers of Western cultures, on the other hand, attribute causality or blame to an individual or organization and ignore external factors; analytic thinkers are more likely to be impacted by negative messages and publicity. Knowing the thinking style of a target audience can be a strategic advantage, especially in the face of negative publicity, by helping frame an event or issue based on internal or external factors depending on the type of thinking style of the audience.
People are shown to have a tendency to shape their own personal thinking styles after those of the people around them; therefore it is not uncommon for thinking styles to be shared across populations. This can lead to herd mentality, by which people consume a service or product simply because of the perception that others are doing so. In public relations, herd mentality can be an advantage when “buzz” is created around a service or product, and people contribute to the attention it receives because of the attention given to it by others. Bernays states that herd mentality and “group cohesion” enable a public relations professional to “awaken public interest most speedily and constructively” (Bernays, 164).

Crucial to the herd mentality theory is the concept of “in-group” and “out-group”. An in-group is one in which members share similar age, race, socioeconomic status, gender, or any other distinguishing factor that helps individuals define their identity and environment. An out-group, then, is anyone not sharing those similar qualities. Public relations campaigns and advertisements work to form an in-group based on the premise of those who engage in or consume the organization’s service or product, and therefore form an out-group, as well, based on those who do not. The obvious objective is to cultivate and encourage the desire in out-group members to be a part of the in-group by consuming the service or product offered.

Within groups, people aim to achieve a balance between integration and individuality, striving to be similar when they feel different, but striving to feel different when they feel too similar. Thus campaigns look to achieve that balance for group members, providing an element of uniqueness to the act of engaging with the organization or consuming the service or product, and highlighting the factors of the organization, service or product that will make one part of the in-group. Furthermore, in some cases, campaigns that inform an in-group audience about out-group members could encourage mutual acceptance, and help integrate the groups. Herd mentality can be an advantage to public relations, allowing buzz to arise around a message that will bring positive attention and results to the campaign. It can also be a major disadvantage if the larger group rejects the campaign message. Either way, identifying and defining an in-group and out-group can be useful to the planning and implementation of a campaign with its consumption in mind.
One of the dangers that can occur with thinking styles and herd mentality is known as groupthink, by which the desire for consensus within a group leads to the suppression of alternative viewpoints and poor decision-making processes. When a high-level of cohesion or the desire to cohere exists within a group, and outside pressures, for example, from budgets, bosses or other group members, are intense, discussion can be stifled and decisions that may affect attitudes and behaviors toward a specific campaign may be influenced. Avoiding groupthink in audiences is difficult for public relations practitioners, because it requires that the audience already have a process in place to fight against groupthink tendencies. A campaign might encourage discussion, or present information in such a way that fosters open-mindedness toward new products or ideas.

Theories regarding processes of media adoption also help to explain audience interpretation and reaction to media. The availability bias theory states that the popularity of an object, event or idea is determined by the ease with which the mind can recall that object, event or idea. Essentially, the more an audience is exposed to something, the more likely they are to be able to recall it, and therefore the brain will interpret the object to which they are exposed as important. This theory is particularly evident in advertising and news. An advertisement that is played with higher frequency within a designated amount of viewing time will be seen by a given audience more often, and the audience will be able to recall that product or company more easily. Subsequently, the audience will theoretically be more likely to choose that product or company in the event of a purchase decision. With news, the more often a story is played within a 24-hour news cycle, the more important that news story is deemed to be by the audience, and therefore it will receive more attention by other sources and audiences. Public relations is often a combination of both the advertising and news elements and effects with relation to this theory. Naturally, an organization will aim for a public relations campaign to have a high frequency of visibility to audiences for the purposes of increasing the level of importance of the campaign and organization in the minds of audiences, and also increasing favorability in terms of audiences’ later decisions that will contribute to the purpose of the campaign.
Agenda setting is yet another crucial theory of communications, whereby the press and media do not reflect reality as it is, but rather filter and shape it based on the stories and events taking place. Focus in the media on a handful of issues and subjects causes the public to believe those issues to be more important than others. Different media may have different agenda setting goals or powers, depending on the outlet, type of source and the types of issues being covered. Time frame plays a role in agenda setting as well; those issues that are more current and relevant are easier to be framed as more important in media. Agenda setting shapes what audiences perceive as important, and the theory of framing shapes whether audiences perceive those subjects as positive or negative, depending on the way in which a subject is positioned. Audiences are susceptible to particular attitudes toward a subject when that subject is painted in either a positive or negative light by the rhetoric of media. Stories and coverage about an organization that use negative terminology and are negative in tone or focus will result in negative perceptions of that organization by the audience. Thus in crisis communications and public relations, keeping the focus on positive factors will help the audience perceive an organization more positively overall, and will help to counteract negative coverage.

Finally, the Evaluation phase entails determining the overall success of the campaign as defined by how well the campaign maintained and achieved its initial goals. This is the stage in which public perception regarding the organization and its campaign must be ascertained. That requires monitoring what has been said about the organization and the campaign, what responses have been received as a result, whether that be in purchases, website visits or any other measurable outcome, and defining whether those results are a direct effect of the campaign. Often, the organization’s identity that is decided upon and encoded during the production stages of the campaign will be assessed against the identity the public has defined for the organization after the campaign. Encoding identity during the production stage involves labeling and highlighting the specific identifying elements the organization wishes to convey in order to create a certain perception or impression among the publics. Those elements will contribute to the overall dominant identity of the brand, which will then serve as the foundation for subsequent
dialogue. Successfully establishing an identity means that the publics associate the brand with the attitudes and beliefs the organization desires to be associated with, and thus engage with the organization in the desired manner. The identity must then be maintained in further publications and engagements with the publics, synchronizing with the overarching themes that comprise the brand identity.

Essential to the assessment of brand identity, as well as the overall evaluation of the campaign, is the analysis of dominant discourses that have formed during, and as a result of the campaign. Public relations “facilitates cultural communication while always recognizing the persistence of difference and power between different ‘speakers’ within the same cultural circuit” (Hall, 11). Power is deemed to be micropolitical, in that it is an innate factor in all relationships, acting simultaneously productively and as a restraining force. The dynamic flow of power in a relationship between organization and publics leads to the development of certain rhetoric and discussions, and the domination of one type of discourse over another, where one particular voice is heard loudest and most authoritatively over the others. The dominant discourse often becomes known as the truth, shaping the future actions of both the organization and its publics. An organization may not always be responsible for its own dominant discourse, but may rather be subject to the competing discourse offered by a specific group or media outlet in the process of gaining coverage. Responding to the dominant discourse if it is undesirable in order to reframe it as more ideal is the best possible solution for an organization facing such a situation. Allowing the dominant discourse to take on a mind of its own and spiral out of control often results in public relations disasters, and requires crisis communication tactics, which can be exorbitantly expensive and only mildly effective unless enacted properly and timely.

Dominant discourse will essentially be what forms public opinion about the organization and its public relations efforts due to the thinking styles, media adoption processes and herd mentality that audiences tend toward when consuming media. Additionally, the power that particularly American culture places on media outlets, such as news sources, enable those sources to set the agenda in the 24-hour news cycle, and also affords those outlets the ability to frame topics with the audience’s general trust and
acceptance. This has the potential to create either a virtuous or a vicious cycle, through which one type of dialogue about a topic or organization continues to feed and be fed by audiences. For an organization to break through that cycle, if it has negative implications for the organization, requires addressing the issues directly, quickly and with the appropriate authority.

Dominant discourses may be difficult to predict and break, especially when the topics, organizations or events in question are highly controversial and impactful to a large number of people over a large area. The British Petroleum oil spill crisis in 2010 was a prime example of how vicious these cycles can be, especially if not handled directly. Given the context of the spill during a time when the energy crisis in America was a major debate, and expectations of environmental responsibility by businesses and the government were growing, the spill quickly rose to the forefront of news coverage. Clearly, an event with such great magnitude of harm to the environment and to the people living near the Gulf of Mexico would receive negative publicity and cause attitudes toward BP, and the oil industry in general, to grow increasingly negative in nature. The public relations efforts of BP in response to the spill were aimed at deflecting blame and illegitimating claims for the interruption of business with primary customers. BP did eventually take responsibility for the spill and for cleanup efforts, however it failed in combating the dominant discourse that portrayed the company as a villain, and it still remains subject to the unfavorable sentiments of many Americans.

What worked to the company’s disadvantage was the viral capability and massive global popularity of the Internet, which enabled the alarming information about the spill, as well as the blunders conducted by BP, and its leadership and public relations managers, to spread almost instantaneously to audiences everywhere, often before BP was able to respond. That information circulating online soon became the foundation for the negative dominant discourse that developed as a result of the crisis. The lesson to be learned, and what BP soon discovered, is that dominant discourse may not be entirely under an organization’s control. However, acknowledging the problems at hand and working to address public
opinion hastily, and before the dominant discourse spirals away and out of reach, can be a useful effort to positively alter the conversation, and thus improve public perception of the organization.

Another element to consider in discussing dominant discourse is whether it is the final deciding factor in terms of an organization’s campaign success. Competing campaigns and coverage may arise that bring a heightened awareness about an organization, service or product, and despite the tone of the dominant discourse being negative, the attention placed on that specific organization or topic may ignite a positive reaction from audiences. In some cases, a negative dominant discourse may be overpowering the media, and yet the organization it refers to will experience an increase in sales, visits or other measurable audience responses. Of course, not all publicity turns out to be positive for an organization, yet this convoluted logic is studied frequently within the industry. Also key to consider are any budgetary discrepancies between an organization and its competing dominant discourse. Oppositional groups that publicly oppose an organization and its products or services may have large budgets for promoting a contrary viewpoint, and subsequent negative coverage regarding the organization may have high monetary value; yet that may not always ensure success of that discourse becoming dominant, nor does it ensure that the organization’s own public relations efforts will be unsuccessful.

Ethics also plays an interesting role in public relations and in dominant discourses. Under the American Constitution, First Amendment rights protect free speech in public relations, as well as in the competing discourses and opposing public relations efforts that result. As an industry, public relations has only the guidelines set by the Public Relations Society of America as a standard for the ethical values in public relations messages and tactics with nominal consequences for organizations that stray from those standards. Thus exaggeration, hyperbole, erroneous guarantees, and occasionally inaccurate information are often debated as to their appropriateness and legal protection in public relations campaigns and practices.

Public relations is a complex and intricate industry with a multitude of theories, techniques and strategies. Among the most crucial elements to the function and effectiveness of public relations, and
ultimately the process of communication as a whole, is the use of language and rhetoric. Campaign materials, dialogue with publics and dominant discourses all rely on a deliberate use and interpretation of language to relay and perceive messages that will motivate, persuade and in some way mutually benefit organizations and their publics. Examining the use of language and rhetoric as they relate to the basic models of public relations in a case study application will provide a better understanding of the function and use of language in the public relations and communications efforts, as well as in the formation of a dominant discourse relating to a significant piece of legislation in American history.
Chapter 3
Affordable Care Act Campaign Case Study Analysis

Campaign Overview

The public relations campaign for the Affordable Care Act was multidimensional, encompassing both federal and state governments as sponsors of promotion to state and national audiences; while the federal government promoted the overall legislation and HealthCare.gov site, individual states were responsible for promoting statewide marketplace exchange websites in correspondence with the legislation. The Affordable Care Act as written mandates a campaign to inform the public about the legislation, the budget of which is as follows: $500 million allocated for 2010; $750 million in 2011; $1 billion in 2012; $1.25 billion in 2013; $1.5 billion in 2014; and $2 billion in 2015. A variety of firms took part in the campaign research and execution, including leading global public relations firm, Porter Novelli, which has worked on a number of accounts including The Walt Disney Company, Proctor & Gamble, and HP, and was awarded $20 million to promote the ACA. Other firms on the ACA account were Buying Time LLC, which was awarded $1 million to implement a targeted online campaign, Weber Shandwick, which was awarded $41.2 million to promote the ACA through local radio and television advertisements between 2013 and May of 2014, and Fleishman-Hillard, which was responsible for promoting the Illinois health care exchange marketplace in 2013 using digital and social media, grassroots, and targeted marketing and public relations tactics. It is important to note that the campaign will be considered as one entity comprised of the various means and firms through which the ACA and the HealthCare.gov website were promoted, rather than viewing each component individually or on a state basis in order to draw conclusions about the effects and success of the overall campaign as a whole.

The campaign timeline begins a year prior to the signing of the ACA in 2010 with the goal of garnering support for the enactment of the legislation. Once the ACA had been enacted, the primary focus
was to instill knowledge of the Affordable Care Act legislation among the general American public, and consequently incite enrollment and purchase of health care coverage plans through the HealthCare.gov and state exchange websites. A major issue to tackle was the disparity between the Democratic Party and other opposing political parties, which would inevitably produce competing stances on the ACA due to conflicting political agendas and opinions. The challenge was to highlight the importance of the legislation not only to the Democratic Party and the Obama administration, but to all Americans, who would be affected by its implementation. Various public relations tactics have been used and experimented with in order to achieve these goals, and to combat some of the negative backlash from critics of the legislation in media and political institutions.

The campaign employed both traditional and social media public relations methods. News releases were published and made available on the United States Department of Health and Human Services website, as well as the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services website. The majority of those news releases dealt mainly with the informational aspects of the legislation, including changes to the purchasing and application of health care, the phases of the legislation, and the HealthCare.gov rollout and updates. Advertisements on local and national television, radio and print promoted HealthCare.gov and state exchanges, and were aimed at motivating Americans to sign up for health care insurance via those sites. Social media accounts for the HealthCare.gov website were created on outlets such as Facebook and Twitter. In addition, President Obama and other political figures who supported the ACA also promoted HealthCare.gov on their personal Facebook and Twitter accounts, providing links to the website, as well as reasons and means by which people should learn about and purchase health care. This type of targeted government engagement through social media concerning a specific legislation had not previously been seen.

Though the campaign needed to reach all Americans as equal stakeholders, one of the primary target audiences was the demographic of young adults, ages 19 to 30, commonly known as the “Millennial” generation. Individuals in this group would be first-time buyers of health care under the Act,
and were statistically the largest age bracket to be uninsured among the U.S. population. Due to a generally lower income, those individuals were in need of lower-cost health care options that would be affordable, and easy to access and understand. The campaign also needed to promote the idea that young adults should, and need to be covered under health insurance if they are not already. Therefore the Internet was an ideal medium chosen for the campaign, as the target demographic heavily uses that outlet for news, information gathering, communication, and sharing. Other demographics that were difficult to get on board included Americans who already had, and were satisfied with, their current health care plans, and African-American and Hispanic populations across the U.S. Additional public relations firms were hired specifically to target those groups using the messages and media that would resonate best given certain distinct cultural, socioeconomic and geographic factors.

In order to make people aware of the changes to the health care industry and the gains of the legislation in the improved health care coverage for individuals, and to persuade individuals to purchase health care insurance through HealthCare.gov or state-based marketplaces, the campaign had to build trust through relationships and public dialogue. Social media served as a natural outlet for this task, allowing users who had questions or experiences regarding the ACA to communicate directly with the government-run accounts. Given the large number of active monthly Internet users in the U.S., this practice would fit cultural norms and thereby make the necessary information accessible to the majority of Americans. Other methods of creating buzz and generating dialogue involved obtaining celebrity endorsements. The Baltimore Ravens received $130,000 to promote the Maryland health care marketplace through television and radio spots, in addition to the official Ravens website, newsletter and social media account. Oprah Winfrey, Ashley Judd and John Legend also endorsed the ACA in periods leading up to registration deadlines to increase the number of enrollees.

The initial campaign was reportedly rocky, struggling with messages that did not resonate with the right demographics, and ineffective use of certain media outlets. Americans’ struggles using the HealthCare.gov site upon its initial rollout hindered the campaign a great deal. The Obama administration
asserted that HealthCare.gov underwent thorough beta testing, and would have enough capacity for 50,000 concurrent users on its rollout date of October 1, 2013. Despite this assertion, those who accessed the website on October 1 claimed to experience countless issues completing registration due to difficulties navigating the site. On top of those difficulties, the website crashed several times briefly after going online. Speculation began as to whether the website had, in fact, been tested as extensively as required, and whether the website issues would cause “even the lowest projections for enrollment” to be unmet (Archambault). The ACA faced backlash as a result, not only for the technical complications, but also for poor explanations of those complications, and of the legislation itself, that rendered Americans even more confused and dissatisfied. Even the campaign methods and advertisements grew to face criticism, some for perpetuating the confusion about the ACA, and some merely for mediocrity amidst the more sophisticated forms of political and commercial public relations efforts dominating the media. It was clear that the campaign needed to directly address the negativity and take on alternative methods for its message to be heard.

Beginning in 2012, the Obama administration commenced a public relations push for the Affordable Care Act occurring before and during the designated annual enrollment periods. Further pushes followed, surrounding the 2013 and 2014 enrollment periods as well, bringing new campaign themes and tactics to the forefront. These pushes required the assistance of supplementary public relations firms for various federal and state campaign components, including the aforementioned Porter Novelli deal in 2012, and the Weber Shandwick deal in 2013. Crucial were the use of more targeted materials to well-defined audiences, outreach by informed activists, additional celebrity and corporate endorsements that included national pharmacy chain, CVS Caremark, President Obama’s prioritization of promoting the ACA, and the use of traditional public relations methods to inundate the 24-hour news cycle with press releases, video and radio announcements, and press conferences (Celsi). The last-minute public relations push in 2014 helped gain 7 million enrollees in a final surge just before the enrollment deadline, achieving the administration’s goal for that year. One of the most underrepresented demographics within
that enrollment surge, however, was the college and recent-graduate Millennial age group. Nonetheless, the later pushes after the initial rollout appeared successful in reaching overall enrollment goals.

The turn of events leading up to, and throughout the Affordable Care Act campaign present a noteworthy case study on the application and effectiveness of rhetoric in public relations methods on a broad, national scale. Given the historical impact of the ACA in restructuring an entire American industry, this is also a case study of serious weight that may be of import and influence for succeeding legislative reforms and revolutions with similar scope. This campaign also has potential implications for the employment and trend of public relations tactics for government purposes, as it was the first federally sponsored campaign to fully embrace new media and methods, and through trial and error, paved the way for future federal campaigns. As the Affordable Care Act continues to reach implementation by 2022, its campaign will congruently develop. Nonetheless, its past track serves as fundamental groundwork for its future directions, and for the direction of all government and political rhetoric forthcoming.

**Media Analysis**

In order to delineate the effectiveness of the promotional techniques regarding the Affordable Care Act legislation and the dominant discourse surrounding the legislation, materials published at various points throughout the ACA campaign thus far must be analyzed with emphasis on the function and encoding of rhetoric in each campaign advertisement, interview and publication, in addition to the anticipated results of audiences’ decoding of that rhetoric. The following is a series of campaign materials used to promote the Affordable Care Act between 2012 and 2014, many of which gained a substantial amount of national media attention following their publication. The materials derive from both federal and state-based efforts, but will thus be considered elements of the overall Affordable Care Act campaign.
The Talk

One of the most widely discussed ACA advertisements is comprised of video and print materials under the title “The Talk”, and seems to aim mostly toward the young adult demographic between the ages of 19 and 30. The video advertisement takes on a tone of lightheartedness, depicting a young, well-dressed, professional speculating as to the topic of a vague, but “important”, upcoming conversation with his parents. Among his speculations are that his parents are moving in with him, that his “grandmother is a dragon”, that they “got matching tattoos”, and that they “know what [he] did last summer”. His tensions are relieved when at dinner, they simply tell him that they care about him and think it is time he get health insurance coverage. “That’s it? Health insurance?” he asks, before the words “Having the talk is easier than you imagine. Make sure you talk to your loved ones about getting covered,” display in the frame.

Figure 1: “The Talk” Video Advertisement (Organizing for Action)

The cheerful nature of the advertisement, carried along by the buoyant tune in the background, creates a sense of amusement as the advertisement’s protagonist plays through each absurd imagined scenario of the impending conversation, adding a humorous edge to the otherwise seemingly dull topic of health care. On the other hand, having such a lighthearted tone also points out the advertisement’s artificiality and distracts from the gravity of a serious topic. Clearly, however, it appeals to a trend toward comedy popular among the younger target demographic of new enrollees, who may not be as willing to pay attention to a more solemn and earnest message. The ad is certainly encoded with an appeal to pathos through humor. Yet in decoding, it seems to fall short in some aspects of its humor, making the ad funny,
but not quite funny enough. The text displayed in the final frames, while likely encoded to have humor as well, has rhetorical merit in that it completes the circle of logic by providing the punch line for the ad’s proposed joke. It also proclaims the ease of discussing health care with one’s parents, and the obligation parents have to incite the conversation, drawing on a certain level of familial love and desire for a parent to care for and protect their child, conveying somewhat of a deeper pathos than its surface humor suggests.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the ad’s rhetoric disappoints in that the preceding scenes that constitute the majority of the ad simply try too hard to establish humor. Instead, the concept of parental love and care could be an impactful theme of the overall ad to persuade the audience as to the importance of having “the talk” and getting health care. Had the focus been on the parent’s love for their son and desire for him to be protected, the rhetoric of the entire ad might have been much stronger via the use of pathos. It also would have likely resonated better with the Millennial generation, which is generally reaching the stage of undergoing the transition away from their parents and into their own independent life, reminding them of the love their parents have for them and motivating them to look into health care options to indulge their parents’ need to continue to nurture and protect them.

The video advertisement is accompanied by a print ad that appeared digitally, featuring the same protagonist presumably sitting at home in his pajamas, nestling a mug of hot chocolate and, as the adjacent text suggests, talking about getting health insurance.
The video component of “The Talk” took on an air of lightheartedness, yet this print ad comes across as nearly ridiculous. It ignores all seriousness about the importance of having health care, evidently struggling to appeal to the Millennial generation through an inaccurate depiction of a member of the demographic. It is not clear whether the ad is suggesting an appeal to pathos, or any appeal at all, for that matter, as the concepts of wearing pajamas and drinking hot chocolate have no relevance to the concept of talking about health care. The rhetoric of this ad also falls short, drawing no distinct connection between the image and its message, but relying on the assumption that the audience will infer from the text that talking about health insurance is as easy and comfortable as sitting at home in pajamas and drinking hot chocolate. This inference takes several minutes to pick up and digest, however, and by that time, the audience’s attention is entirely lost, leaving no impression other than a mild sense of confusion. Had the connection been stronger in the encoded language, or had the message been made clearer, the rhetoric would likely be much more effective at encouraging the audience to believe that discussing health insurance is not intimidating or uncomfortable. The single redeeming factor of both of these ads is the noticeable call to action: to “Get Talking” about health insurance. Aside from this, there is little strength in the overall impact of the ads, and it lacks the proper appeals and the accuracy of the Millennial mindset to truly resonate.
In stark contrast to the empty humor and weak resonance of “The Talk”, the “Luck Health Plan” campaign advertisements promoting the ACA and the Illinois marketplace exchange are much more comedic and do a much better job of using humor to explain why health care is necessary. The “Luck Health Plan” video, print and web ads show a group of metropolitan Millennials engaging in a range of activities considered popular among the demographic, such as yoga, photography, and going out on the town, all with a variety of makeshift casts and braces fashioned from flimsy materials, predominantly cardboard and tape. “Now there’s a health plan for people who can’t stand paperwork or monthly premiums,” narrates the voiceover in one ad. “A plan with no real benefits. Introducing the Luck Health Plan. There’s nothing to it… no real care of any kind,” the narration continues, ending with the catch phrase, “You’ll be okay. Probably.”

This ad series cleverly satirizes the flawed, headstrong mentality of Millennials, who believe purchasing health care is not essential due to a perceived sense of invincibility found to be common among that particular age group. It does so with a tone that makes the message humorous rather than accusatory. The concepts are ridiculous enough to spark a genuine laugh from the audience, while providing valid reasons as to the importance for young adults to have health care. The ads also embrace enough of the characteristic trends of the target demographic, such as the activities, fashion and attitudes featured. This enables the ad to hold somewhat of a mirror to those audiences so they might relate to it enough to receive the rhetorical message encoded, and thereby realize their erroneous belief that health care is superfluous.
The “Luck Health Plan” advertisements appear comedic enough to hold their own amongst the staggering array of over-the-top ads on television and in the media. The accompanying website is a brilliant extension of the original concept, and includes the entire ad series along with several other notable features, such as a news page with updates from “members” of the fictionalized health plan, a map with a “Find a Doctor” feature, sarcastic articles such as “6 Replacements for a Doctor That’ll Work Just Fine In A Pinch”, links to the Luck Plan Twitter page, and, most importantly, links to Get Covered Illinois, which created and sponsored the fake Luck Health Plan to gain enrollees. A message from the “CEO” of the Luck Health Plan also appeared on the site, stating that Luck Plan operations would cease on February 15, the deadline date for health care enrollment under the ACA of that particular year, and that if people do not have a legitimate health plan by then, they’ll “be okay. Probably”.

The parodying advertisements and website seem to be a much more effective means of tapping into the difficult Millennial demographic with a realistic, yet obviously mocking, portrayal. This series succeeds where “The Talk” fails, by encoding a vital tone of seriousness to relay the importance of having health care within the message, but surrounding it in humor to grab the audience’s attention. This, as a result, generates an underlying sense of truth and actuality regarding the topic, and clarifies the connection between the joke and the call to action. Presumably those Millennials who were exposed to this ad series indulged in a few laughs, but likely decoded the message as the encoders intended, intuiting the sense that relying on luck to avoid paying health care premiums and filing paperwork really is not a feasible option.
Got Insurance?

The “Got Insurance?” ads were part of a campaign to promote the marketplace exchange in Colorado. Attempting to provide reasons for obtaining health care, the ads contain an extremely feeble appeal to pathos through humor, presenting instead an outlandish portrayal of actual people and activities that alienates the audience members rather than relating to them. The first, and likely most controversial, advertisement of the series is titled “Brosurance”, and features a trio of college-aged men performing a keg stand while clutching red plastic cups, stereotypes of the college party environment. Centering on “keg stands” and claiming that saving “beer money” should be an incentive for purchasing health care coverage comes across as a juvenile depiction of young adults, and a poor effort to reach the demographic. By highlighting and hyperbolizing a notion of irresponsibility within that particular categorization of individuals, the ad may in some sense offend that actual group, rendering them unlikely to identify with, nor attend to the larger message about health care.

Another “Got Insurance” ad of similar quality is entitled “Let’s Get Physical”, and depicts a young woman flaunting what appears to be a typical pack of birth control pills as she stands alongside an
attractive male. The text on the ad explicates the woman’s hope that the man is “as easy to get as this birth control”. This is a shallow depiction of a woman’s sexuality and trivializes a woman’s reasoning for purchasing health care in a distasteful manner. Like “The Talk” and “Brosurance”, this ad utterly fails in its representation of the Millennial generation, ostracizing women who may legitimately need health care for reasons with greater justification than “getting him between the covers”.

Figure 5: "Let's Get Physical" Campaign Advertisement

A third ad from the series shows two young girls in soccer uniforms, bandaged and bloody because they “never play it safe” on the field. It is unclear whether this particular image means to appeal to pathos through sympathy by depicting severely injured children, or whether the girls’ exaggerated injuries were encoded to be interpreted humorously. The lack of clarity in that distinction muffles the message, making its overall impact ineffectual. Yet the rhetorical connection between the image and the call to action is explicit in the text, which directly points to avoiding high medical bills as an impetus for obtaining health care.
The greatest failure in these ads is the faulty encoding, which leads to distorted audience decoding. Encoding, as previously discussed, is always an intentional process, and audiences are often aware of that intentionality, searching for the messages and impressions that they are meant to receive, so as to cognitively decode the message properly. Since the context of these ads does not seem to match the audiences’ own personal contexts in any of the depictions of the types of individuals featured, the message is misconstrued, resulting in a negative interpretation that neglects both the message and the call to action regarding health care. The inadequate rhetoric of the images and the text in the ads does little to bridge the gap between the encoded and decoded messages, and therefore the ads constitute an ineffective means of promotion for the campaign.

**Between Two Ferns**

In 2013, President Obama appeared on a satirical interview show, *Between Two Ferns*, hosted by actor and comedian, Zach Galifianakis. The interview was posted on the Internet comedy website, *Funny or Die*, as well as the *Funny or Die* YouTube page, both of which are largely popular among young adult Internet users, who are also generally familiar with Galifianakis from young adult comedy movies such as “The Hangover” franchise. Amidst sarcastic and witty banter, President Obama finally makes his “plug”, segueing the conversation into a discussion on HealthCare.gov and the ACA. Galifianakis, in jest,
remarks that HealthCare.gov is “the thing that doesn’t work”, to which President Obama responds, saying that the site “works great now”, and that millions of Americans have already obtained coverage. Obama urges Galifianakis to visit HealthCare.gov to sign up for health care himself when Galifianakis shows him fictitious spider bites he says he has had for four months.

_Between Two Ferns_ an ideal outlet for informing young adults about the ACA and HealthCare.gov due to the demographic’s familiarity with, and enjoyment of, both _Funny or Die_ and Galifianakis. Moreover, it allows President Obama the opportunity to do so while showing a cheerful, less diplomatic side to the health care discussion that relates federal government, often considered a cold, distant and culturally out-of-touch entity, to pop culture and similar types of humor, behavior and attitudes as those of the Millennial generation. Obama’s mention of the perceived invincibility of young adults during the interview also echoes messages from the “Luck Health Plan” ads, supplying reasoning for the demographic to pursue the purchase of health care. Rhetorically, all the necessary elements are present, including the pathos in humor, logos in the explanation of the ACA and HealthCare.gov, ethos in President Obama’s authority and perceived likability in the comedic interview, and the explicit call to action, and all through an appropriate outlet for the message and audience. The connection between these elements is smooth and transparent, strengthening the rhetorical argument in support of the ACA in a way that is likely to be decoded correctly by the Millennial audience.

**Social Media**

One of the most remarkable components of the ACA campaign thus far is the use of social media to promote the legislation and motivate Americans to purchase health care through HealthCare.gov and state marketplace exchanges, and moreover, the gradual development in sophistication of that use over time. Though the social media presence of the ACA campaign, through the HealthCare.gov, Luck Health Plan, and other related social media accounts, as well as preexisting accounts for President Obama and
other political figures, was initially unorganized and sporadic, it eventually became a much more professional and efficient means of disseminating the appropriate information. It also grew to be a valuable platform for engagement with the American public, particularly through the use of hashtags and trending topics, which are included in messages to code and organize posts concerning a specific subject or event. This helped to coordinate not only the social media presence, but also the campaign as a whole, tying in various components of promotion and informing through a centralized strategy that strengthened the overall public relations efforts.

The primary reason for conducting and developing such a campaign through social media, and particularly Twitter, was to gain more awareness and popularity among the Millennial generation, and to thereby increase Millennial health care enrollment rates. The usefulness of Twitter for most businesses, as stated previously, is the development of relationships with key publics and the creation of “buzz” around the organization or a related product, service or topic. While many businesses had already jumped on the Twitter and social media bandwagon by the time the ACA had been enacted, government was still new to this realm, and the struggles of determining how Twitter could, and should, appropriately be used for government and political affairs were apparent particularly in the vague and fruitless Twitter presence of HealthCare.gov. The Twitter campaign was evidently unstable at the onset, as some of the earliest tweets from HealthCare.gov were principally informational, involving little audience engagement, and therefore gaining little audience reaction. As time went on, however, and public relations firms with experience in creating and managing Twitter accounts for major corporations were hired to manage the HealthCare.gov account, its presence became modeled much more like that of a for-profit business, and impact increased based on the number and quality of responses and engagements.

The HealthCare.gov Twitter account eventually took on the role of not only an informational government-based identity, but also an active consumer of, and contributor to, Internet culture. Recognizing and taking advantage of the Internet fads in circulation increased the attention of Millennial Twitter users aware of those fads. Referencing issues and trends that had become well known through the
Internet, as well as favorite celebrities and artists among the Millennial generation, likewise allowed HealthCare.gov to connect with its target audience on a common level while acquiring greater attentiveness by tapping into other conversations about prevalent subjects, such as the 2014 Ebola crisis and viral Internet photos.

Another key change in the HealthCare.gov Twitter presence was the creation and use of corresponding hashtags and trending topics to generate awareness and buzz about health care coverage and matters surrounding the Affordable Care Act with the goals of enabling users to contribute to the conversation through the use of the same hashtags, and to consequently prompt Millennials to enroll in health care. One hashtag that appeared on the HealthCare.gov Twitter page was “#GetCovered”, which was centered on the various reasons for people to purchase health care plans. Users could include their personal reasons with the same hashtag in tweets to their own Twitter followers, thus increasing the reach of the dialogue surrounding the ACA and health care. Tweets from HealthCare.gov using “#GetCovered” were used to code several types of messages under the same campaign, which included information and facts about the ACA, question and answer forums with Americans via Twitter, and ads as part of the campaign. The informational tweets included details about the enrollment process and deadlines, and the question and answer forums were a way for Americans to directly execute conversations with HealthCare.gov representatives in a public manner that would allow for that information to be viewed by other Americans through the HealthCare.gov Twitter page.
The campaign ads embedded in the HealthCare.gov tweets became much more varied, including some that related to preexisting ad series, and others that were entirely original; additionally, some were meant to be humorous in nature, while others were more poignant, depicting real Americans and the reasons why they decided to “#GetCovered” under the ACA. Many of these tweets also appeared with the hashtag, “#WhyImCovered”, which comprised messages and ads of a similarly varied tone and nature. The “Between Two Ferns” interview was also referenced in several tweets from HealthCare.gov shortly after its initial airing on the Funny or Die website to increase awareness and popularity for the clip, especially with the primary target audience.

![Image of tweets from HealthCare.gov](image)

**Figure 8:** Tweets from HealthCare.gov using hashtags

Other widely used hashtags from HealthCare.gov included enrollment-date-specific hashtags, like “#BySept5”, as well as the more generic ones, such as “#Enroll365”, “#HealthTalk” and “#GetTalking”. Each resembled the “#GetCovered” messages in that they expanded upon informational and promotional aspects of the ACA and health care. HealthCare.gov also targeted Millennials and new health care enrollees through the hashtag, “#BornIn88” to remind them to avoid gaps in coverage upon turning 26, which the ACA dictates is the age at which individuals are responsible for obtaining their own health care.
coverage. “#Medicaid” and “#CHIP” were frequently included in the mix to refer to important components of senior and pediatric health care coverage under the Act. The HealthCare.gov Twitter account was commonly used as an information center for those learning about, and attempting to gain coverage through the HealthCare.gov website under the ACA; therefore, issues and updates regarding the website, general facts about the ACA, and links to other useful websites and articles concerning the ACA were addressed in a large number of tweets posted with high frequency on a daily basis.

![Informational Tweets from HealthCare.gov](image)

**Figure 9: Informational Tweets from HealthCare.gov**

In general, the HealthCare.gov Twitter account developed a tremendous amount since its initial inception in 2012. The mixture of factual, useful, comical, and inspirational posts enabled augmented resonance within a variety of individuals on different levels to meet those individuals’ own needs and norms of media consumption. Modeling the HealthCare.gov Twitter presence in a similar manner as that of a business was likely the best possible direction for this component of the campaign, in that businesses have set a precedent for a particular format of social media use and engagement from an institutional standpoint, and the target audience has now grown accustomed to viewing and interacting with institutions via Twitter and other social media within that format. This made it easier for HealthCare.gov
and other related accounts to reach that audience by enabling the encoding of messages in such a way that the audience could decode accordingly. Additionally, having the support from other government-affiliated Twitter accounts, such as “The White House” and President Obama, adds a level of ethos to the Twitter presence of HealthCare.gov, allocating credibility and authority by association.

In addition to Twitter, HealthCare.gov also set up a Facebook page that shared similar types of posts, and in many cases, the same posts, as those featured by the Twitter account. The Facebook page underwent the same direction of development, beginning as a primarily factual page and emerging over time as an engagement-centered authority under the management of outside firms. Ultimately, the social media accounts leveraged the cultural norms of the target audience and its preferred channel for consuming media to serve as both an essential informational resource and a useful tool for achieving the public relations goal of increasing awareness and building relationships through the establishment of audience engagement and dialogue.

Figure 10: Facebook Posts from HealthCare.gov
Overall ACA Campaign Analysis

In analyzing the totality of the campaign based on these few components, it is essential to determine both the positive and negative elements that work for the campaign as a whole. First, in general, the ads and social media presence demonstrate an improvement of the campaign over time, particularly in the messages’ encoding. A trend toward direct engagement and communication with the target audience implies a greater effectiveness in gaining positive attitudes and responses toward the campaign and toward the ACA itself. The use of some ads that include pathos to reach audiences on some emotional level, especially in some of the “#GetCovered” Twitter posts where actual Americans described their reasoning for obtaining health care coverage, is an ingenious and much more advantageous use of pathos, rhetorically speaking, rather than simply attempting to use humor that often misses the mark in terms of actual comedic quality surrounding such a controversial, yet imperative, legislation. Ethos is present in the associations with respected and amiable political and cultural figureheads, including President Obama and other celebrity and corporate endorsers. The level of logos in most of the ads was dramatically low with poor logical flow of ideas. Within the HealthCare.gov tweets, however, logos is much more apparent and functional in presenting messages and calls to action in a succinct, direct manner.

Furthermore, the application of important cultural references to promotions for health care and HealthCare.gov are an effective means of reaching the primary target audience of Millennial Americans, although some cultural references did fail, such as the numerous synthetic depictions of the typical Millennial in the “The Talk” and “Got Insurance?” ads. The more recent stages of the HealthCare.gov Twitter account, as well as the Luck Health Plan series, are unarguably the most brilliant of the ACA ads, combining wit with earnestness to make Millennials recognize the imperative significance of having health care coverage under the ACA. These ads make up for the flaws in others in which the link between content and the ACA or HealthCare.gov is ambiguous or not present.
Based on these few campaign facets, it can be inferred that for those who already have some level of knowledge or interest about the ACA and HealthCare.gov, or have specific questions regarding the legislation, some of the campaign efforts may have been very useful. In terms of spreading awareness, however, this goal may have only been achieved due to public ridicule of some of the ads that were simply too unusual and shallow to be taken seriously, and were instead decoded with an unintended sentiment of either confusion or offense. Most of the ads also did little to address or explain the complexity of the legislation that many Americans were struggling to grasp, and it became the responsibility of the Twitter campaign to endeavor to solve that problem through tweets and live chat forums. The goal of persuading audiences, particularly Millennials, to enroll in health care was ostensibly the least successful of all the campaign goals because of the slow development of the disorderly campaign into a cohesive one that would engage and resonate better with audience members. The continued lack of interest in gaining health care coverage likely persisted despite the campaign as a result. In conclusion of this analysis, the ACA campaign eventually started to take on a more suitable form in order to achieve its goals; however by the end of 2014, it still lagged in several areas due to some difficulties as a government organization striving to establish its place among a corporate-dominated and corporate-tailored sphere of advertising and social media techniques and sophistication in public relations tactics and rhetoric.
Chapter 4
Anti-ObamaCare Campaign Case Study Analysis

Campaign Overview

The opposing “Anti-ObamaCare” campaign grew out of politically rival stances to President Obama and the Democratic Party. Republican Party members, Tea Party members, and members of other political affiliations vocally opposed the legislation due to issues regarding constitutionality and intermingling of government with a capitalist industry and economy. Several main groups arose as leaders in the attack on the ACA, separately funding and creating individual campaigns both locally and nationally to gain support in proposing a repeal of the legislation. Those groups included Americans for Prosperity, the nation’s largest conservative advocacy organization, and Generation Opportunity, a conservative group focused on, and comprised of, Millennial Americans, in addition to The Heritage Foundation, American Crossroads, and the Citizens’ Council for Health Freedom. A report published by nonpartisan organization, Kantar Media’s Campaign Media Analysis Group, in mid-2014 states that overall spending for Anti-ObamaCare campaigns totaled $445 billion since 2010, and that ads taking a negative stance on the ACA outnumbered positive ads at a ratio of 15 to 1.

Due to the state and federal components of the ACA, the Anti-ObamaCare campaigns were disseminated both on a state and national scale. The primary audience for the Anti-ObamaCare ads were voters, political party affiliates and members, and Millennials, particularly for the Generation Opportunity campaign components. The goals of the Anti-ObamaCare campaigns were to demonstrate the ways in which the ACA was harmful to Americans, and that had not been living up to expectations and original promises made by President Obama and the Democratic Party by revealing negative effects of the legislation to portray it in poor light. Some of the ads were therefore meant to have appeals to pathos
through sentiment, whereas others included a shock factor that would jar the audience out of comfort, and likewise, out of acceptance of the legislation. Like the ACA campaign, social media was used in the Anti-ObamaCare campaign to engage audiences and incite conversations about why the ACA should be repealed, and to advance the political agendas of these individual groups by openly condemning and advocating against the Act.

The timeline for the Anti-ObamaCare campaign followed one similar to that of the ACA campaign, beginning before the enactment of the legislation and continuing through the next several years, with peak periods of campaign activity occurring during key enrollment periods and oncoming phases of the legislation. The Anti-ObamaCare campaign used several traditional and new media outlets to disseminate messages, including radio, television, and the Internet, especially relying on the use of social media outlets such as Twitter to build relationships and provoke audience engagement and dialogue.

The following campaign materials will be discussed to determine the rhetorical effectiveness of the Anti-ObamaCare campaign given the overall goals of depicting the legislation as harmful and negative, and gaining support for the legislation’s repeal. Despite the various groups individually producing and funding campaigns to oppose the legislation, the Anti-ObamaCare campaign will thus be considered as one cohesive campaign, just as was the case for the ACA campaign. Each advertisement to be discussed was published during the same period between 2012 and 2014 as those of the ACA campaign. This campaign will be analyzed as a separate entity from ACA campaign, however, in order to study its own independent rhetorical merit. Comparisons will subsequently be drawn after the analysis has concluded. Additionally, to coordinate with the messages encoded in the Anti-ObamaCare campaign advertisements, the ACA will, solely in this section, be referred to as “ObamaCare”.

Media Analysis

Videos

Several Anti-ObamaCare videos appeared both on television in particular states or nationwide, and online on sites such as YouTube, as well as on political organizations’ respective websites. The first was sponsored and publicized by Americans for Prosperity, titled “Julie’s Story: It’s Time to Listen”. As a lamenting piano motif pedals along, middle-aged Julie Boonstra shares her account of receiving a terminal diagnosis of leukemia only to have her insurance cancelled under ObamaCare, making out-of-pocket expenses for the necessary medication extremely difficult to manage; Julie states, “If I do not receive my medication, I will die,” imparting a sense of the severity of the situation. She claims having believed President Obama about his promises that Americans could keep their existing health care plans under ObamaCare, and now feels as though she had “been lied to”. She then addresses her state congressman, Democrat, Gary Peters, saying that his decision to vote for ObamaCare jeopardized her health, and asserts that it is essential he now listen to her and the “other American citizens out there who are hurting” about the fact that “ObamaCare is not the answer”.

Upon initially viewing the ad, Julie’s story about her diagnosis and difficulty affording the medication she needs in order to survive is indeed emotionally moving and unsettling to the viewer. The issues she faces as a result of ObamaCare appear to be honest, and are extremely unfortunate, and a sense of responsibility to assist her in her plight undoubtedly consumes the audience. Pathos in the ad engenders a sympathetic appeal that is visibly present in Julie’s message wrapped in the somber tone of her voice as she delineates her piteous tale against the lugubrious background music, casting a pall over the audience. The interview-like quality of the ad has a particularly interesting rhetorical effect in creating the sense of somewhat of a “behind-the-scenes” view of how ObamaCare harms everyday Americans that is ignored in the ACA campaign ads. “Julie’s Story” provides, instead, a simple realism to the subject that is often aggrandized by the President and other Democratic figures to show the true nature of the legislation as
told by someone who has legitimately been impacted by it, adding to the ad’s ethos. Julie states explicitly that “this is not a game”, referring to the negligence of politicians and political ads in toying with Americans’ health care coverage and representing the situation in an extravagant and even humorous manner.

To the average viewer, this advertisement is resonant in that it shows an alarming side of ObamaCare that had not necessarily been publicized or acknowledged by the Democratic Party to any extent, and by demonstrating the negative aspects of the legislation that harm Americans dealing with significant health issues. The ad brings up a noteworthy point about being lied to by President Obama regarding ObamaCare, imparting a sentiment of broken trust and loyalty between the president and the American people. Despite the political agenda underlying the ad’s message, it still reverberates on an emotional level to the point where that political agenda is buried beneath the pathos, and only marginally noticeable. One potential problem with the ad, however, is the fact that it provokes a sort of horror at the thought of not having health care coverage in the face of unforeseen medical circumstances. This might have a contradictory effect than what was encoded in the ad, instilling within the viewer a desire to obtain health care coverage for his or her own protection to avoid a similar situation as that of Julie, who must now pay out of pocket for costly medical expenses and treatments. This is one example in which pathos may work to the opposite desired effect of the rhetorical encoding.

A second video published by Americans for Prosperity is entitled, “Questions”, which features a pregnant mother explaining how her young son unexpectedly began having seizures, compelling her to pay more attention to the medical care she and her family receive. She states that she has “some questions about ObamaCare” regarding the quality of coverage if her family is unable to pick their own doctors and must pay higher health care premiums. She then asks if she can “really trust the folks in Washington” with her family’s health care. As she speaks, a similar plaintive tune to that featured in “Julie’s Story” plays along while a montage of clips showing the woman with her son are interspersed between another interview-like setting where she directly addresses the audience. Finally, she states that “we all deserve
some answers” about ObamaCare, pointing to the crucial issue of American citizens’ confusion about the legislation.

Again, pathos in this ad is extremely high in that a pregnant woman discussing the health of her family and young son facilitates an emotional response within any audience member due to the deep familial and sympathetic human emotions it invokes. Certainly, the questions she poses are valid, and hold some worth with regard to the controversy over many Americans having similar questions regarding perplexing changes to health care coverage under the legislation, and the common sentiment that those questions were not being answered fully by the Obama administration. Wondering whether politicians are to be trusted to oversee the medical treatment of American families is a profound point that many audience members are left to wonder themselves upon viewing this advertisement. From a rhetorical perspective, this advertisement is likely very effective in making audiences at the very least question the legislation in a similar manner.

A third advertisement from Americans for Prosperity, titled “Veterans Speak Out Against ObamaCare!”, also plays on the audience’s emotions through the use of pathos. Five different military veterans address the audience, explaining how they fought and risked their lives for their country and expected that in return, they would be taken care of; however due to issues with the health care coverage they were supposed to receive through the government, they have been met with “neglect, disrespect and lies”. They ask, “If government can’t run health care for 8 million veterans…how can ObamaCare possibly work for the entire country?” and implore Louisiana Senator, Mary Landrieu, to “fix health care for veterans before forcing ObamaCare on the rest of the country”.

This ad plays on a particular issue that is already met with debate within the United States. Veteran benefits and health care provided by the government are known to have a number of flaws. Placing the issues of ObamaCare within the context of preexisting issues with health care for veterans increases the logos of the argument, demonstrating that one flawed system already affecting a portion of the American population needs to be fixed, and that another presumably flawed system should not be
enforced upon the remainder of the population. The ad also has a great deal of ethos and pathos, using actual veterans, a group that receives a great deal of respect, honor and admiration from the American people, who served the nation and have seemingly experienced these issues with government-regulated health care firsthand to explain the problems associated with such a legislation. Similar to the reaction to “Julie’s Story”, the audience might feel a responsibility to help these veterans, and the concept of rejecting ObamaCare is posed as the solution. Sentiment in the ad is also augmented through pathos and the use of yet another intimate interview-style conversation displayed in black and white lighting, again with melancholy piano music flowing in the background. This ad, like the previous two, is likely to be very effective at reaching any audience member and establishing at least some doubt about ObamaCare given its thoughtful message and ability to successfully mix all three rhetorical appeals in a powerful and convincing way.

One ad from Generation Opportunity has a much different tone than those previously discussed. The “Creepy Uncle Sam” series is meant to shock the audience in a much different manner. The ad shows a young woman entering a gynecologist’s office for the first time and preparing for a routine examination. With the woman’s feet up on the stirrups, the doctor says it’s time to “have a look”, and promptly walks out of the examination room. Suddenly, an oversized Uncle Sam mascot is shown emerging from beneath the woman’s legs within several different camera takes, and then proceeds to loom over her, causing her to scream. Finally, the words, “Don’t let government play doctor. Opt out of ObamaCare,” appear on screen.

Figure 11: Generation Opportunity’s "Creepy Uncle Sam"
Naturally, this advertisement fosters an overwhelming feeling of discomfort, almost as though an impingement on the audience’s personal privacy. The Uncle Sam mascot in its appearance is extremely bizarre and intimidating, standing out against the friendly, hospitable doctor’s office setting. Its entrance into the scene is, of course, jarring, illustrating the wrongness and awkwardness of government “playing doctor”. The rhetorical appeals are thus much different here than in the other videos. Credibility is less necessary to establish for this particular message to take effect. Logos and pathos are heavily present, however, albeit in altered forms. The logical argument about the inappropriateness of government playing doctor is dependent on the discomfort regarding Creepy Uncle Sam conducting the woman’s examination, making the audience realize that this type of interaction, although hyperbolized within the ad itself, is improper. Instead of generating sympathy through pathos, the ad generates horror at the concept of government handling health care to drive home its point. Finally, the call to action to “opt out of ObamaCare” concludes the logical path, presenting the audience with a defined way in which to escape the discomfort.

The Heritage Foundation also created a video about ObamaCare, predominantly exploiting the limitations and technical troubles of the HealthCare.gov website as a point of weakness in the legislation. With a similar tone as that of the “Luck Health Plan” campaign ads, the “More than a Glitch” ad is a sarcastic display of issues associated with ObamaCare depicted in the context of a mock-pharmaceutical ad. Several individuals are shown saying, “Now I’m covered,” while smiling and engaging in various activities with family and friends. The voiceover narration claims that Americans are to be covered by “mandates, regulations and new fees…sort of”, as an image appears exhibiting a couple logging onto HealthCare.gov but getting stuck on a screen that reads “The System is down at the moment”. The narration continues, stating “But don’t you worry your pretty little head off… it wouldn’t be covered”, and goes on to say that “HealthCare.gov is not responsible for fulfilling any of the expectations, mandates, legal requirements, hopes, or dreams of any users…if you notice that your premiums have gone up as a result of ObamaCare, please note that the program is working as intended.”
The ad’s structure as a simulation of an actual genre of medicinal advertisements provides the framework for the discussion of ObamaCare as a legislation that affects health care in much the same way as pharmaceutical drugs, but adds an element of irony in that while many drugs are genuinely meant to improve the lives of individuals, ObamaCare does the opposite. The ad also draws on the often-mocked catalog of possible side effects occurring as a result of certain medications that is included at the end of all pharmaceutical advertisements, delivering a similarly long list of adverse effects of ObamaCare, some with potential legitimacy, such as “lower health care quality”, and others meant to be humorous, such as “long wait times” and “European envy”. In addition to the irony regarding the negative consequences of ObamaCare, there is further irony in the fact that the individuals portrayed periodically throughout the narration stating “I’m covered” appear to be entirely ignorant of the narrator’s warnings about the legislation, frustrating the narrator to the point where he must distinctly clarify his sarcasm.

The humor in this ad is quite effective in connecting the supposed benefits of ObamaCare as alleged by the Obama administration to the actual problems resulting from its implementation in a teasing and straightforward, yet also deeply acerbic way, that does not overuse appeals to pathos to convey its point, but rather relies on logos and the truth of the message to communicate the ironic reality of the situation. It highlights genuine problems with ObamaCare, especially ones that were known to be of particular frustration, including foremost the website and the increase in the cost of premiums, and underlines the message with a sardonic tone that is simultaneously facetious and cogent enough for the audience to accept. Though the ad may cause a potential change in attitude within the viewer, missing, however, are the call to action, which would rouse the viewer toward some particular behavior that would
work to the mutual advantage of both the encoder and the audience, and any audience engagement. Often with video advertisements, gaining or creating such engagement is difficult because of the static nature of relationship between the material and the audience, though even static materials can spur audience interaction with the proper rhetorical encoding.

**Billboards**

Billboards are similar to video advertisements in that formulating audience engagement can be difficult during the production process. With the right combination of context, message and rhetorical encoding, however, a billboard may come alive in such a way that allows the audience to be an active part of the rhetorical experience. The Anti-ObamaCare campaign heavily used billboard advertisements to generate public awareness and to incite engagement. Two areas in particular, New York City, New York, and Orlando, Florida, displayed some of the more prominent and controversial billboards regarding ObamaCare. In New York City, The Heritage Foundation sponsored a massive billboard to appear in Times Square. The billboard simply reads, “Warning: Obamacare may be hazardous to your health”, and includes a specific code and number for individuals to text.

Though seemingly simplistic, the billboard has several key elements that work toward its effectiveness. The first is the format, which resembles a health warning label, drawing the connection between ObamaCare and hazards to health in a satirical manner. The second, of course, is the location. Times Square is considered the heart of New York City, and is one of the most heavily traveled areas within the city, and within the country itself. According to the official Times Square website for advertising and sponsorships, billboards and ads within that location gain an estimated 1.5 million impressions per day based on the amount of pedestrian, tourist and automotive traffic funneling through on a daily basis. The third element is the size of the billboard in conjunction with that location. At 90-by-67 feet, the billboard dominates a large surface area and is much larger than many other billboards within
its immediate surroundings, therefore grabbing the audience’s attention with ease. The last element is the instruction for the audience to “Text HAZARD to 33733”, which provides the audience with more information about the negative side of ObamaCare directly on their mobile device, and automatically adds them to a contact list for The Heritage Foundation, thus constituting the engagement aspect of the public relations material.

Figure 13: The Heritage Foundation Times Square Billboard

The Orlando billboards were sponsored by Citizens’ Council for Health Freedom, and appeared dispersed throughout the region. These billboards compare ObamaCare with the popular book and movie franchise, *The Hunger Games*, in which a post-apocalyptic government forces children to participate in an annually televised fight to the death to maintain order and peace in the nation. “The Obamacare Games”, one billboard reads, “Where the odds are never in your favor”, playing off of the famous phrase from *The Hunger Games*. The effect of constructing a parallel between ObamaCare and a government-enforced death match is the notion that government-regulated health care is neither healthy for the state, nor caring for its citizens. Taken to the extreme, it implies that ObamaCare will directly harm Americans. Pointing to *The Hunger Games* as a cultural icon helps to resonate with some younger audiences that may be familiar with the franchise. Moreover, it resumsoms some essence of the depiction of government bodies as an enemy in *The Hunger Games*, drawing a connection to the negative side of ObamaCare and the allegedly unfavorable new direction of the Democratic Party and government overall. Like the Times Square billboard, this would receive a large number of impressions given the fact that Orlando, Florida
remains one of the most traveled tourist destinations in the United States and the world. Though the billboard displays a specific website to visit, it does elude both a distinct call to action and an element of engagement to make it wholly effective. Nonetheless, it contains a significant amount of rhetorical value in the campaign against the ObamaCare legislation.

**Social Media**

Just as social media was an important tool for the ACA campaign, it also served as a tool for promoting the Anti-ObamaCare campaign. Most of the leading Anti-ObamaCare organizations were slow to adapt to Twitter, creating accounts only around the same time as HealthCare.gov, and experimenting to develop a stronger Twitter presence. Generation Opportunity has one of the more prevalent Twitter presences of the opposing organizations, with successful hashtags and trending topics, as well as a large number of user engagements. One of the primary hashtags appearing in Generation Opportunity’s tweets, as well as those of the other Anti-ObamaCare organizations, was simply, “#Obamacare”. The use of this hashtag establishes both a rhetorical advantage and a disadvantage simultaneously. The advantage is that the tweets by Generation Opportunity and other organizations opposing ObamaCare cut into the pro-ObamaCare conversation, offering an alternative viewpoint and directly counteracting some of the promotional efforts in favor of the legislation. The disadvantage is that the tweets may get lost in the shuffle of millions of other tweets about ObamaCare, never reaching full potential for impact as they may have using an independent and unique hashtag specific to the Anti-ObamaCare campaign.

Another issue with the Anti-ObamaCare social media presence is the lack of a specified audience targeted to achieve growth in message awareness. It appears that these accounts are tailored primarily to individuals that are already on board with the Anti-ObamaCare stance, but there is apparently little accomplishment in gaining additional supporters by increasing reach to those outside the spheres of the organizations. Interestingly, the Anti-ObamaCare Twitter accounts all post useful links to statistical and
factual information and articles that might enhance logos in the argument against ObamaCare; however, these tweets do not seem to receive substantial audience reactions or support, the primary responses being from those who are already part of, or at least subscribers to, the Anti-ObamaCare organizations. Many of the tweets also focus on the declining reputation of ObamaCare in public outlook, using poll results on Americans’ sentiments regarding the legislation to explain why people should oppose ObamaCare, and thus constituting a rhetorical fallacy in arguing solely on the basis of popular opinion.

Though some of the tweets are legitimately logical and applicable, dealing with rising costs of premiums and tax issues, and coinciding with other campaign materials, such as the “Creepy Uncle Sam” ads, to promote the oppositional stance, there is still a lack of a clear, express call to action. Very few tweets direct audiences to sign petitions against ObamaCare, opt out of the legislation, write to their state Senators, or even join a contact list. The tweets instead seem rather self-serving, as mentioned before, targeted to those who seem to already be opposed to ObamaCare, and geared at fueling their opposition, but not gaining new recruits. Facebook accounts for the organizations follow in the same fashion. Perhaps, therefore, the greatest failure of the overall Anti-ObamaCare social media campaign is that it does not use the corporate-established model for creating and maintaining an online presence to increase and preserve active relationships with audiences and build awareness through engagement and dialogue.
Overall Anti-ObamaCare Campaign Analysis

Just like the ACA campaign, the Anti-ObamaCare campaign had several positive and negative aspects that either contribute to, or impede upon, achieving its public relations goals. The campaign is successful at provoking the audience by producing pathos appeals, either through sympathy or horror. The emotional jars appear to be supported by enough factual data and firsthand accounts about the issues with ObamaCare that negatively affect the American people to comprise satisfactory logos and ethos. The campaign also successfully classifies an in-group and out-group based on the tweets about the low rate of popularity of ObamaCare, instituting those that oppose ObamaCare as the in-group and those that support it as the uninformed out-group.
However, there is discrepancy over the call to action in many of the campaign materials, which detracts from its overall logos and effectiveness. In the video and billboard ads, there is a distinct behavior the audience is intended to perform, whether that be texting a code to join a contact list, visiting a website or communicating with a member of Congress. The social media presence lacks those behavioral directives, instead seemingly targeting only those that are already a part of the Anti-ObamaCare in-group. The campaign also uses some rhetorical fallacies, and in some cases misrepresents factual information that is framed as reasoning for rejecting ObamaCare. Furthermore, though most of the campaign materials may have theoretically substantial claims, they may also be lost among the enormous jumble of other political advertisements, which follow a very similar format and tone.

Despite the reports that the Anti-ObamaCare campaign was worth a budget of $445 billion, it appears to be no more affective, strategic or effective than ACA campaign due to its own rhetorical flaws. In this campaign, misinterpretations during decoding are as problematic as they are in the ACA advertisements because of a dissimilar disconnection between the subject matter and the message as shown in the convoluted pathos with respect to “Julie’s Story” that inadvertently provides premises in support of the ACA. Also, whereas the ACA campaign strives to enlarge its reach by expanding to greater audiences through the cultivation of communicative relationships with publics, the Anti-ObamaCare campaign neglects this facet, instead, it would seem, assuming that getting the campaign message out will be enough to attract followers because of the existing negativity of Americans toward the ACA. From a rhetorical and public relations perspective, this is faulty reasoning, and diminishes the otherwise potentially powerful argumentative quality of this particular campaign. Even still, the messages and materials of the Anti-ObamaCare organizations will be of vital significance to the formation and development of the dominant discourse that emerged from the ensuing discussions involving the Affordable Care Act.
Chapter 5

Dominant Discourse

A test of the success of rhetoric, specifically in public relations, is the measured effect or outcome of the campaign on intended audiences by exploring the audiences’ process of consumption and identification with the topic or organization and its messages. The disparity in the variety of messages, and the variety in those messages’ forms and channels, from both the ACA campaign as well as the Anti-ObamaCare campaign, lends the assumption that a disparity will therefore exist in audience reaction and perception of the two campaigns. To determine the dominant discourse surrounding the ACA is to in some ways determine which campaign can be considered most successful in aligning the audience’s attitudes and behaviors to its own goals and ideals. As mentioned in a previous section, dominant discourse is tricky for an organization to manage in that the organization is not entirely capable of establishing and controlling the dialogue that results within surrounding publics. Though research, planning and execution for a campaign may be thorough and careful, many unanticipated external factors have the ability to influence a dominant discourse to a large extent, developing public opinion into something completely divergent from what the organization projected or expected.

Dominant discourse can be evaluated by examining coverage of a topic or organization, including the outlets, tone, timing, placement, and prominence of that coverage. It can also be analyzed by examining responses to coverage, such as individuals’ blog and social media posts regarding the topic or organization in question, including the outlets, tone, placement and prominence of those posts. Lastly, the dominant discourse as ascertained from those investigations should be compared against actual measured responses to reveal first, whether the dominant discourse was accurate in describing public opinion, and second, whether the dominant discourse did impact the success or failure of the campaign. There are some cases in which a negative dominant discourse appears around an organization and yet the organization experiences an uncharacteristic spike in sales or positive responses during that period. Thus understanding
the dominant discourse alone may be useless without also distinguishing the audience’s behaviors toward
the organization as a benchmark for judgment. The following analysis of the dominant discourse
surrounding the ACA will examine all of the aforementioned aspects to delineate the outcome of the two
campaigns, as well as the perceived, versus the actual, public perception to verify the more successful
campaign.

Media Coverage Analysis

Outlets

Given the status of the ACA as a federal legislation that affected the entire nation as a whole, the
ACA campaign ads, as well as the Anti-ObamaCare ads were disseminated through many major
networks, websites and print sources. The ACA was thus featured in news stories in nearly every major
outlets in which the most widely read coverage of the ACA was published. Politically affiliated news
sources, such as The Hill, also covered the legislation from its inception. Gallup and The Fiscal Times,
along with many others, conducted and published polls regarding reception of the ACA throughout its
many phases. Regional daily newspapers and localized publications, as well as many Internet news
sources, also covered the ACA.

In addition to the principal news outlets, the ACA was featured and mentioned in many other talk
shows, magazines and journals. The legislation was discussed on Good Morning America several times,
as well as The Ellen DeGeneres Show. In an article about more effective birth control options for women,
Time Magazine detailed that new provisions under the ACA would now make some of those options more
affordable (Sifferlin). Similarly, an article from *Women’s Health Magazine* discussed issues with women having complications during childbirth, explaining that the Affordable Care Act will enable women to have greater power to manage their health leading up to, and during pregnancy (Birch). The ACA was also brought up in a variety of other nontraditional news outlets, such as the web-based pop culture and news source for younger generations, *BuzzFeed*, which posted several articles about the ACA, including one in which the CEO of Uber describes the support that the ACA has brought to his business in protecting the multitude of Uber drivers across the country (Bhuiyan and Smith). Even NBC’s *Saturday Night Live* featured the ACA as the basis for several sketches, and the producer of the *Between Two Ferns* interview, *Funny or Die*, continued to create video content about the ACA.

Both the ACA campaign and the Anti-ObamaCare campaign received coverage mostly by the same outlets, with no campaign exceeding the other in terms of the number and types of outlets featuring or subscribing to each. The implication of the extent of this reach is that there was a large audience publicizing and critiquing the ACA, whether positively or negatively. The topic was undoubtedly of a high level of importance, from more than simply a political standpoint; its penetration into outlets mainly associated with popular culture demonstrates a trend of government as a whole toward being included in the mainstream of pop culture, particularly with this issue and its sizeable focus on Millennials. Since there is such minor disproportion in outlets covering the two campaigns, disparity must therefore be present in other aspects of media coverage in order to account for the negatively characterized public opinion.

**Timing, Placement and Prominence**

Timing, placement and prominence allow for a closer rhetorical examination of the types and formats of media coverage of the legislation. Timing can be considered an element of rhetoric in its ability to add relevance, newsworthiness and urgency to a particular message, and it also provides context
for establishing the significance of that message in relation to other events unfolding in the surrounding environment. In general, both the ACA and Anti-ObamaCare campaigns received coverage within a time frame either connected to important points in the ACA timeline, such as enrollment periods and phase rollouts, to the introduction of new campaign materials and initiatives, or to major state elections. Due to the nature of the 24-hour news cycle and the tendency of social media to keep publics up-to-date on the latest information within minutes, or even seconds, of its release, most of the coverage on the ACA was extremely timely, being published well within the range of relevancy. Some coverage, however, regurgitated previous issues and stories as a look back on how the ACA and the campaigns have developed. Nevertheless, the necessity of upholding newsworthiness in media mandates that the vast majority of coverage regarding this particular topic had to take place within proximity to some marked event or time element with respect to the ACA and its related campaigns, with steady distribution of coverage transpiring since 2010.

The placement and prominence of a particular story or article also has a rhetorical function in that analyzing the neighboring material, typically other articles and advertisements, provides context clues as to the outlet’s attitude toward a topic, which therefore influences audiences’ consumption of that article and attitudes about the topic. Placing an article about the ACA, for example, as the headline of a national newspaper will demonstrate the importance of the subject in the mind of national media, and therefore it will be important in the mind of national publics. Placement with other types of articles by category also demonstrates the framing of the subject. Some outlets may place coverage of the ACA with political or government-themed articles, whereas others may place it among health-related, or even pop culture-related articles, often depending on the specific aspects of the ACA or campaigns being discussed. The effect of this is a sway on how the audience thinks about the ACA and generates semantics, relating it to personal attitudes and experiences.

A great deal of articles about the legislation itself, federal decisions regarding it, political issues, and rollout phases appeared in headlines with other major national and international news articles. On
televised news broadcasts, the ACA was often discussed among breaking news and other government and political affairs. Some networks covered the ACA during political talk shows, such as *The O’Reilly Factor* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, placing the coverage within the perspective of other government-related activities and stories. One *Huffington Post* article discussed the “Got Insurance?” ACA campaign ads, placing the article within the politics section alongside other articles about health care reform. The *BuzzFeed* article detailing the Uber CEO’s comment regarding the ACA was headlined at the top of the website on the date of publication, and was surrounded by primarily pop culture articles. The article from *Women’s Health Magazine* was featured alongside other articles about issues with health care, nutrition and fitness. It would appear, then, that the ACA campaign received a slightly wider variety of coverage in terms of placement, particularly because of its direct ties to President Obama and the administration responsible for creating, managing and promoting the ACA.

The Anti-ObamaCare campaign received nearly equal prominence in coverage compared to the ACA campaign, with stories about specific ads, polls regarding the popularity of the ACA among Americans, and issues with the ACA and President Obama appearing in numerous headlines. One *Washington Post* article appearing in the politics section reported on the massive budget for the Anti-ObamaCare campaign in comparison to the ACA campaign, and another headlining *The Huffington Post* concentrated on the “Creepy Uncle Sam” ads from Generation Opportunity upon their release to the public, also categorized in the politics section. Yet another article appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* about employers’ issues with the ACA, surrounded by articles dealing with government and politics. Anti-ObamaCare sentiments were also placed within many feature stories about real Americans’ difficulties using and receiving care under the ACA. Slightly more disparity between the coverage of the campaigns existed chiefly in prominence and placement, although still more can be gleaned from the analysis of the tone saturated within that coverage.
**Tone**

Tone is, in fact, where the greatest incongruence between coverage of the ACA and Anti-ObamaCare campaigns can be seen. Tone refers to the positive or negative attributes allotted to an organization or topic within the wording and framing of an article or coverage. Many outlets portrayed the ACA as a positive legislation that would help Americans. The videos posted on the *Funny or Die* website jokingly confronted people’s health care issues in support of the ACA. One particular video featured famous actress, Jennifer Hudson, as the protagonist who solves people’s health care problems by directing them to HealthCare.gov in a parody of the hit television series, *Scandal*. Another revitalized a popular character from the comedy film, *Step Brothers*, to lampoon Americans’ perceived invincibility in the face of health care issues and to demonstrate an actual need for health care coverage. Again, both of these videos were created in support of the ACA, therefore although the tone was slightly sarcastic, the punch lines positively swung in favor of the legislation and HealthCare.gov.

Several articles, including those that were featured in *Time Magazine* and *Women’s Health Magazine*, talked about the necessity of women protecting and respecting their bodies, and therefore also spoke positively of the ACA and how it has empowered and enabled women to make choices to support their health. Even articles that criticize some of the early failures in the public relations efforts of the ACA and the HealthCare.gov website mention the advantages of such a legislation in helping Americans receive necessary health care coverage on a more affordable basis. Interviews with, and discussions on, President Obama featured on national talk shows, such as *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, also seemed to be affirmative, even providing explanations about how the ACA actually works, and the improvements it has made in the lives of people that have enrolled.

Tone becomes complicated in other sources, however, such as the *Saturday Night Live* sketches that aired between 2012 and 2014 around important moments in the legislation’s phases. One discusses issues with the HealthCare.gov website, featuring a parody of Secretary of Health, Kathleen Sebelius, listing problems with the website, such as “how it’s been crashing, and freezing, and shutting down, and
stalling, and not working, and breaking, and sucking” because the site was only designed to handle “six users at a time”. She offers solutions to these problems, including “restarting your computer”, or using the “low res website with simpler fonts and graphics”.

Figure 15: "Obamacare Website Tips" Sketch from Saturday Night Live

The remainder of the skit presents additional preposterous, and obviously unrealistic, options, satirizing the unfortunate issues with the website and the frustrations of those who had trouble enrolling through HealthCare.gov.

Another sketch teases President Obama’s botched explanation of the ACA, using mock guest speakers who cannot seem to perceive the actual necessity of the ACA and health care despite the president’s attempts to better explain the legislation. The skit includes a cameo from actor, Aaron Paul, from the popular television drama, Breaking Bad, in which a high school chemistry teacher is diagnosed with cancer, and with the help of a former student played by Aaron Paul, ends up operating the nation’s largest methamphetamine empire in order to pay for his treatments. Paul’s character from the series reappears in the SNL skit to talk about how his “friend…got sick, like cancer sick”, and that “because there wasn’t ObamaCare, he couldn’t afford the treatments” and “did what any of us would have done – he started cooking meth”.

The skit is visibly meant to play on some of the actual issues Americans seemed to have with the clarity of the legislation, as well as President Obama’s imprecise answers to many of their questions. Furthermore, bringing fake characters onto the scene to pose those questions depicts the actual quandary of Americans to gain a better understanding of the new legislation. Featuring Aaron Paul’s character, as
well as the final character, a spokesperson for the ACA who supposedly breaks his leg during his speech and cannot call an ambulance because he does not have health care, actually does give some valid reasoning for the support of the ACA and health care, though the sketch essentially serves as primarily a comedic and outrageous gesture of farce.

The last SNL skit touches on the president’s social media pushes in promoting the ACA, coincidentally giving a legitimate glimpse as to the reasoning behind the administration’s heavy use of Facebook and Twitter. It mentions Obama’s “new social media expert”, who allegedly encouraged him to attend the Between Two Ferns interview, and is now pressuring him to take absurd photos that will go viral on the Internet in order to increase popularity and support for the ACA among younger Americans. Like the other two sketches, this one is purely tongue-in-cheek, but his assistant’s remarks that the ludicrous photos are to help Americans, such as “a pregnant woman in Denver who has no health insurance”, actually demonstrate some of the rationale behind the administration’s methods to gain Millennials’ approval of such an important legislation. Though all three of these skits parody the issues at hand and mock them with a great deal of sarcasm, in some ways they do seem to include positive tones regarding the seriousness of the ACA on the lives of Americans.

There was an enormous amount of news coverage that did condemn the ACA, taking the stance of the Anti-ObamaCare campaign in rejecting the legislation. While many dealt with political party opposition in addition to issues about the rollout and explanation of the ACA and HealthCare.gov, a large number of these articles praised the hilarity and emotional content of some of the Anti-ObamaCare campaign ads, including “More Than A Glitch” and “Julie’s Story”. Other key points in the coverage of the Anti-ObamaCare campaign were the large federal budgetary spending for the promotion of the ACA from American tax dollars, and the deficiency of popularity for the ACA among the masses. Countless polls and statistics were conducted and reported by most major news outlets to show the scarcity of support by the public for the ACA. A table from online political news source, Real Clear Politics, shows the outlets, methods and results regarding most of these polls. Of the results, 491 out of the 522 reported
polls revealed a majority in opposition to the ACA, whereas only 26 were in favor, leaving 5 in a tie.

Those that had a majority in favor were only in favor by a slight margin, and those that had a majority in opposition had a much greater margin.

Public opinion has been an obvious point of interest for building the argument of the Anti-ObamaCare campaign as exhibited by the campaign’s perpetual emphasis on the polls’ results. It suggests to a certain degree the media’s own use of unpopularity as a reason for rejecting the ACA based on prominence, placement and especially tone of the articles surrounding the polls. This was seen in a large number of the Anti-ObamaCare tweets, which centralize on the disapproval of the ACA to elucidate its problems. The tweets do not necessarily explain why that popular opinion exists, nor supply reasoning to fuel the opinion, however. To the average media consumer, this may not be explicit or even apparent, but the conscious consumer will realize that such an attack denigrates some of the credibility and logic of the Anti-ObamaCare argument. Yet the polls do show an unarguable lack of favorability for the legislation that does serve as a crucial talking point for the Anti-ObamaCare campaign; the campaign simply misused such information. The poll results should have been used as support for the discussion of problems associated with the ACA, not as the basis for the argument itself. Despite the rhetorical fallacy, the media did also use that negative public opinion as a point of coverage, condemning the ACA on the same basis. This contributed to the swelling negative tone in many media stories about the legislation, submerging some of the more positive pieces.

Eventually, coverage grew to condemn of parts of the Anti-ObamaCare campaign, as well. The “Creepy Uncle Sam” ads went under fire, criticized for being too uncomfortable for the audience to receive in earnest. Just as the budget for the ACA was reproached for using a colossal amount of federal tax money, the Anti-ObamaCare campaign was also chided for spending such a substantial amount of money with seemingly little return on investment. Regardless, criticism of the Anti-ObamaCare stance was much less frequent than criticism of the ACA. Overall, in terms of media coverage based on all of the factors, including outlets, timing, placement, prominence, and tone, the Anti-ObamaCare campaign
appears to come out on top, with more media subscribing to its ideals in attacking the ACA rather than supporting it. Although it has an influence on the concluding dominant discourse, media is not the final audience for a campaign, and in uncovering audience reaction to media coverage and campaign efforts, it becomes apparent that that influence is indeed forceful.

**Audience Reaction Analysis**

Even more important to understanding dominant discourse and the success or failure of these campaigns is the continued analysis to the level of audience reaction. What the public thinks, says and does in relation to the campaigns determines the definitive prowess of one campaign over another. Audience reaction is often contingent on media coverage, especially given the social value placed on media in today’s society. Thus it is often the case that the subjects covered by the media, in addition to the tone and framing with which those subjects are treated, shape audience perception and behavior as per the media consumption theories of agenda setting and framing. Just as studying the outlets, timing, prominence, placement, and tone of mass media coverage provides insight into the media’s perception of the issue, studying the same elements in terms of the audience’s reaction and coverage of the issue will provide even vaster insight into the entire scope of public perception.

According to Bernays, publics have a tendency to “resist new, useful inventions”, and the ACA appears to be subject to that philosophy (Bernays, 246). A large number of Americans took to social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to publish their individual personal opinions about the ACA beginning in 2010. A study was conducted on Americans’ attitudes regarding the ACA by analyzing 977,303 Twitter posts containing the keywords “ObamaCare” and “Affordable Care Act” along with other keywords that would trigger either a positive or negative sentiment in the overall rhetoric of the tweet. The results showed a significant trend toward negativity in a majority of the tweets, with tweets containing “ACA” or “#ACA” having a slightly more positive sentiment compared to those containing
“ObamaCare”. In addition, tweets aimed at HealthCare.gov were more negative than tweets aimed at state-based marketplaces. Increases in the positivity of sentiment correlated with increases in state health care enrollment, even when Medicaid expansion and differences between state-based marketplaces versus federally facilitated marketplaces were considered (Baker, Merchant, Sap, Schwartz, Town, and Wong).

A separate report published by Kantar Media revealed that negative sentiments in tweets about the ACA outnumbered positive sentiments 3 to 1. Of the 704 posts studied, 43.1% were original posts, and 55.1% were retweets in which individuals shared another organization’s original content directly to their own followers. Yet another study conducted by the California HealthCare Foundation showed that more tweets contained “ObamaCare” than “ACA” or “HealthCare.gov”. Even more interesting was the study’s findings that individuals used Twitter “to voice both satisfaction and frustration with their insurance coverage and access to care”, as well as using Twitter as a form of “social support”, a source through which people could seek “information and help from their networks related to signing up for health insurance”.

Many of the tweets and Facebook posts from Americans dealt with technical problems with online exchanges, as well as heightened premium rates and problems qualifying for subsidies through the exchanges. The official HealthCare.gov Facebook page received hundreds of angered posts from Americans shortly after the onset of the open enrollment period in 2013, many of which acquired additional comments from other Americans with analogous reactions and having similar difficulties. Others took to personal and public blogs to share their experiences and perceptions of the ACA, the majority being derisive and condemning. Many people criticized the ACA campaign advertisements and social media usage as being too juvenile and not explanatory enough to properly educate Americans about the new health care laws and policies. The volume of tweets and posts escalated significantly around open enrollment periods, making the subject a prime topic of social media conversation in correlation with peak times of media attention. During these periods of upsurges in posts, negative sentiment also rose slightly, however negativity in general was constant throughout the studies, as shown by a review
conducted by *Gallup* of public opinion regarding the legislation spanning between 2012 and 2014 (McCarthy):

![Figure 16: ACA Approval Rates 2012-2014](image)

In conclusion, the audience reaction to the ACA was obviously enduringly unenthusiastic. Though there were a handful of positive posts about President Obama’s approaches in promoting the ACA, they were drowned out by the deeply pessimistic and damaging opinions of other social media users, making the dominant discourse almost a completely united and unwavering negative voice, denouncing the ACA altogether.

**Analysis of Measured Responses**

It would be expected, then, that the number of Americans actually enrolling in health care under the ACA through HealthCare.gov or state-based exchanges was very limited, and that the target enrollment would not have been achieved. Conversely, quite the contrary occurred, as more Americans than targeted or predicted actually enrolled in health care on a national scale during each annual enrollment period, exceeding projections by reasonable margins. In 2014 alone, it was anticipated that 7 million Americans would enroll in health care. By the final deadline, 8 million had enrolled. Many outlets
and political figures questioned how such high numbers were possible given the heavy negativity surrounding the ACA.

A study from The Brookings Institution shows that particularly in Democratic states with a Senate seat up for reelection, a higher number of Anti-ObamaCare campaign ads was correlated with an increased rate of enrollment. The phenomenon was expeditiously picked up by many news outlets to examine whether the Anti-ObamaCare campaign had been successful at all. The disparity between the measured public sentiment as per the extensive poll results conducted and reported by news outlets and trusted communications research foundations nationwide, and the elevated enrollment rates required a definite explanation. The assumption is that many external factors were at play to cause such an event. Commentary from The Brookings Institution study stated that the ads might have “unintentionally increased public awareness of a governmentally subsidized service and its benefits” (Yaraghi). Indeed, Anti-ObamaCare ads, like “Julie’s Story”, that were encoded with dense pathos and a complexity of emotional appeals may have imbued within the audience a sense of cognitive dissonance, through which the audience felt both sympathetic toward Julie, worried for their own personal health care protection, and unsure of how to resolve both issues. The best possible path toward cognitive resolution in that scenario would be for the viewer to educate his or herself on the factual information about the legislation and its rewards, consequently leading to health care enrollment. The availability bias may have also worked against the Anti-ObamaCare campaign’s favor, inundating the media with a high frequency of Anti-ObamaCare ads only to have the topic of the ACA and health care appear more important and more popular among viewers, converse to the campaign’s intentions.

This type of incident, when negative rhetoric and publicity leads to increased awareness and positive attitudes about an organization, is often studied in communications and public relations. Such an event is not common, nor is it principled by other circumscribed events occurring leading up to the materialization of large-scale negative rhetoric in dominant discourse. In some cases, it simply depends on the organization, industry, or focus of the rhetoric and publicity to determine whether the negativity
will turn out to be advantageous or disadvantageous for the organization. Still, it can be useful to study how the results of this particular case came to be.

Other reports cited Americans’ fear of hefty fines for not having health care as the logic behind the inconsistency, meaning that the nature of the legislation as a federal mandate with consequences for noncompliance was an influence on Americans’ decisions about whether to enroll despite their attitudes toward the ACA. For those that choose not to enroll in health care, fines are added to the individual’s annual Federal Income Tax Return for each full month that the individual does not obtain health care. The overall cost of these fines is designed to be much higher than the cost of obtaining health care as an incentive device, and exemptions from the fines are based on Modified Adjusted Gross Income, and are allegedly extremely difficult for the average American to obtain. Moreover, according to the annual Edelman Trust Barometer, Americans continue to rate government lower than business in terms of their perception of trust, which may be an influence for the overall negativity about the ACA in the first place as a legislation that intermingles federal government regulation with a historically capitalist economy and industry. Coupled with the immense financial penalties of choosing to “opt out” of the ACA by not obtaining health care, this could account for the discrepancy in the public’s response.

Another influencing factor might have been the confusion surrounding the legislation, which masked the benefits of the ACA for individuals who had issues receiving health care. Americans unmistakably felt as though no proper explanation as to how the ACA functioned and impacted their personal health care options was provided, and political advertisements and rhetoric opposing the ACA may have amplified the confusion, presenting issues in extremes that led to panic and uproar. Those that wanted to avoid the fines and needed health care, but were concerned about the ACA were probably nonetheless motivated to educate themselves about the reform, and enrolled upon realizing that the pandemonium and rhetoric against the ACA was not necessarily accurate. It might be said that the ACA campaign did not include enough logos to present enrolling in health care in an objective manner as something that Americans need to do, but instead took the approach of using thick pathos to present it as
something Americans should want to do, which works against people’s innate schema for rhetorical appeals in campaigns for specific types of services and products, causing reactions to the campaign to be contradictory to what the message encoders had anticipated.

A final possibility is that Americans were quick to subscribe to whatever the herd mentality of the media agenda setting and framing, and the resulting dominant discourse were instructing them to believe, which was that the ACA was harmful to the industry, to individuals and to the country, and therefore perpetuated the discourse by contributing to it without being suitably informed. This may have prompted others to do the same, leading to a groupthink-like trend, in turn causing the vicious cycle and spiraling effect mentioned earlier. A Newsweek report discussed the ignorance of Americans with regard to civic matters, with findings that of 1,000 U.S. citizens who took the official American citizenship test, 29% were unable to name the vice president, 44% could not define or explain the Bill of Rights, and 6% did not know the official date of Independence Day. The article states that civic knowledge since the era of World War II only shifts by an average of just below 1%, citing causes that include the intricacies within the structure of the United States system of government, income inequality, and a decentralized public education system (Romano). Regardless, the repercussion is that most Americans are likely tuning out the more complicated political debate, only paying close attention when the issue crosses over into the realm of public news and knowledge on a surface level, which is in essence where the dominant discourse resides.

The divergence between public opinion emanating from the negative dominant discourse, and actual measured responses swaying in favor of the ACA implies that misperception surrounds the legislation from multiple fronts. This may perpetuate intensified misperception among Americans, especially those younger generations who are now faced with the task of deciding whether to enroll in health care under the ACA, and are highly susceptible to the preexisting dominant discourse, developing a set of concrete and unchangeable semantics and attitudes about it. Breaking the tendency toward herd mentality that bolsters the dominant discourse will be the next challenge for the ACA campaign, and
further collection and analysis of public opinion through media coverage and audience reaction, as well as measured audience response, will be necessary in order to verify the aforesaid potential causes and effects, and to determine which courses of action will be paramount in planning for the next several years.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

Dominant Discourse Effect

Whether a campaign was effective and successful remains a difficult question to answer, as is the question of whether the dominant discourse helped or hurt the campaign’s success. To begin to explore such a question entails foremost an individual definition of the requirements needed to outline the success of a campaign. For example, one might say that success depends on whether the goals created during the Action stage of the campaign process were achieved as measured by responses or public sentiment. Another possible, and broader, definition is whether as a result of the campaign, the organization and its targeted publics benefitted in some manner. A third entails whether any benefits at all to any publics, stakeholders or not, resulted from the campaign. Lastly, any of these definitions may be altered by the understanding of how the goals or benefits were attained, whether through the direct effects of the campaign itself, or through external factors such as competing campaigns and the dominant discourse.

It would appear, by the previously stated definitions, that the ACA campaign did achieve, in some ways, its public relations goals by exceeding the anticipated number of enrollees during the given open enrollment periods, and by spreading awareness nationally about the legislation and health care. The Obama administration benefitted, having adequately implemented the legislation, and presumably the millions of Americans that enrolled also benefitted, now being able to receive vital health care coverage that many did not, or could not have received prior. The mechanisms that allowed for the success of the ACA campaign by this definition are questionable, however, as the campaign in analysis appeared to be flawed and ineffectual, perpetuating public confusion and engendering ridicule against the legislation. Meanwhile, the Anti-ObamaCare campaign irrefutably had a hand in spreading the awareness that in some part led to the increases in enrollment, as delineated by the Brookings Institution study. Full credit,
therefore, cannot go to the ACA campaign for its success by that fact; yet whether the ACA campaign was successful at all if it experienced such an enormous number of difficulties and setbacks, and since it in some ways depended on the antithetical campaign to achieve its own goals and generate benefits for itself and its publics, remains to be seen. The answer depends on one’s personal interpretation. From a rhetorical standpoint, it would seem that because the ACA campaign could not argue its stance independently and forcefully, crafting strong messages from rhetorical appeals and arguing cohesively, and because it did not establish a consistent, powerful identity for the ACA that transmitted steadfastly to its publics, it failed. Nonetheless, it cannot be disputed that the ACA campaign deserves at least nominal credit for spreading the initial word and giving the Anti-ObamaCare campaign fuel for its fire, which in turn aided the ACA campaign in the long run. Furthermore, the social good both campaigns brought to Americans by enabling individuals to purchase and receive health care as a result of the collectively amplified awareness about the ACA cannot be denied.

By definition, the Anti-ObamaCare campaign can be considered both a success and a failure in part. If its goal was to prevent increases in enrollment, the campaign undeniably failed, and has also thus far neglected to gain a substantial, active movement among average citizens in support of repealing the legislation; the general American public seems to disapprove of the ACA, but does not desire to take extensive, immediate measures against it. Fueling the ACA campaign unintentionally, and having done so on a much larger budget, makes the Anti-ObamaCare campaign’s failure appear even more pronounced. On the other hand, public sentiment regarding the ACA is perpetually disapproving, which implies that more audience members on some level subscribe to the opinions of the Anti-ObamaCare campaign. If spreading awareness about the detrimental consequences of the ACA was the central goal, the continued negative attitude of the general American public may denote the campaign’s success as well. A crucial telling point is the previously mentioned fact that even the president eventually began referring to the ACA as “ObamaCare”, allowing the negative discourse stemming from the oppositional stance to take license over the proponent’s own campaign and identity. Again, from a rhetorical standpoint, this implies
that the campaign succeeded in its argumentative prowess and ability to independently present its stance against the former and establish an identity, but failed in its only partial ability to persuade and influence the attitudes and behaviors of the masses, making an impact on public perception but not on public action. Though many of the Anti-ObamaCare campaign advertisements were more rhetorically sound than those of the ACA campaign, it is yet evident that ultimately neither campaign was totally dominant over the other due to the many exterior forces at work around the legislation, both politically and societally, nor was either exclusively in control of the dominant discourse and responses.

The aptitude of the Internet to spread information extensively and instantaneously, and the customs of American Internet users to ravage that information and speedily take a stance on it that is then shared to individual networks of other users were major factors in swelling and empowering the dominant discourse. Additionally, Americans’ expectations that larger powers in society must measure up to a standard set by corporate and democratic institutions presents a challenge for organizations like the Obama administration and the conservative Anti-ObamaCare groups to achieve, and makes even fractional failure or hindrance appear immense under the microscope of public scrutiny. The constant cycle of absorption and feeding of public perception by major media outlets helps to formulate the vicious cycle, too, generating a framed agenda based on attitudes and sentiments of the public, but in turn using that agenda to refuel the public sentiment, and so on. The political environment with openly competing viewpoints leads to an increased importance placed on such a topic in general, especially in media and the public, but thereby also leads to an innate compulsion for competing political viewpoints to contest for supremacy over the dominant discourse. Such outward complex political debates may cause individuals to tune out and neglect important issues, remaining ignorant of the legislation’s many inner workings.

One of the most crucial matters, and an injurious element that neither the ACA campaign nor the Anti-ObamaCare campaign could absolutely regulate, is the deficit of civic knowledge among the American population, as reported by Newsweek. Whether an individual subscribes to one campaign’s principles over the other must ideally be based on educated and cognizant attitude formation after
reviewing all of the necessary information and facts on the legislation, and determining its worth based on how it functions and impacts individuals, and American government and society. Reflexively subscribing to the herd mentality, however, is an irresponsible and detrimental course of action that can lead to the preservation of uninformed attitude formation, and eventually to poor decision-making. The most unfortunate effect of this is the rhetorical masking of the positive attributes of a largely beneficial legislation meant to improve the health of American families and individuals, instead rendering it to appear harmful to society.

Such a controversial topic does deserve a great deal of debate and discussion, as the ACA does impact an entire nation, and its citizens and industries. Had the ACA not been a federally mandated legislation, but rather operated on a reduced scale, it would have potentially incited a much less heated controversy and minor debate. Regardless, because of the role of government in implementing the legislation, and because the legislation mandates that government now have a role in regulating the health care industry, political resistance would still occur, and negativity on some level would still have surfaced. Though enthusiasm for the ACA remains inadequate, the legislation appears to be gradually gaining foothold among the historic and momentous reforms of the nation. While the campaign continues to develop and improve, inspiration and a new foundation may be attained from examining past government campaigns that achieved ample success within the United States, from which the ACA campaign can advance toward its full potential.

Comparisons and Predictions

The campaign for the Affordable Care Act is still underway as the legislation fulfills its complete enactment in 2022, and therefore a significant amount of work can still be done to enhance and perfect the messages, formats, audiences, and outlets to achieve greater success. Past campaigns may serve as a reference point for the ACA campaign’s transformation, although only in some aspects, as the federal
ACA campaign is a pioneer in the use of more modern tactics, such as social media. Nonetheless, the research, planning and strategic evaluation of the methods of former campaigns that have proven to contribute to those campaigns’ effectiveness and success in disseminating messages that resulted in the desired attitude changes and measured responses could provide valuable insight. Such an analysis could reveal innovative approaches and opportunities to be applied in the Evaluation stage and future planning of the ACA campaign, bettering it until its rhetorical message and argumentative quality achieve maximum capability.

One campaign in particular that the ACA campaign has been compared to is titled, “Don’t Be That Guy”, which was created by the Department of Defense in 2008 to reduce the rates of alcoholism within the U.S. military, and was presented with a Silver Anvil Award of Excellence from the Public Relations Society of America for its accomplishment and advancement within the public relations industry. Extensive research and planning beyond the analysis of statistical information went into the campaign process to ensure that the proper rhetoric and message forms were used to best resonate within the target audience. Primary and secondary research on social sciences revealed that a campaign exhibiting predominantly pathos creating sympathy or shock to stress abstinence from alcohol would be unsuccessful, but that members of the military would instead be more likely to accept and relate to a campaign centered on humor while also educating them on the facts about binge drinking and alcoholism. Focusing on the short-term consequences of binge drinking in the campaign was also shown to be more capable of altering the audience’s perceptions and behaviors. The campaign formulated a cohesive message identity that was spread across multiple platforms, including web content, billboards, traditional news, and print, ensuring utmost saturation and reception. It included interactive elements, such as websites and online games that would engage the audience while creating awareness. All components of the campaign were interrelated and coordinated in a neatly organized timeline and budget based on the research conducted to encompass all vital aspects for success (Lee, Neeley and Stewart).
While the ACA and “Don’t Be That Guy” campaigns are slightly different in subject matter and scope in terms of the audience, the ACA campaign could certainly gain from following the same structure and planning framework as the Department of Defense’s meticulously synchronized effort. The ACA campaign may need to rework its approach to research, delving deeper into the social science behind individuals’ semantics related to health care, trust in government and media consumption so as to determine a more tightly systematized campaign plan with clear audiences, tactics, messages, and foci. Like the “Don’t Be That Guy” campaign, the ACA campaign must categorize the type of message that will resonate with its audience most highly, using the polls and analysis of media coverage and public sentiment as a starting point to meet the needs of those publics, from which a message can be produced that perhaps accentuates educating Americans about the legislation to explain how they are affected by it on a short-term or long-term extent based on those needs. Another useful tactic would be for the ACA campaign to redefine its audience based on supplementary research so as to better target and represent that audience in advertisements, avoiding calamitous and offensive portrayals such as those of the “Got Insurance?” and “The Talk” series. The campaign should also work toward orchestrating all of its messages to more numerous and more segmented audiences, rather than using disorganized and disconnected messages and themes to reach all audiences at once. This will help to improve Americans’ familiarity with the campaign, and match the audience’s own media consumption and identity context, making the campaign’s rhetorical and argumentative aptitude stronger for each specific group, and therefore for the totality of the American public combined.

In terms of a crisis communications plan, the ACA could look to previous campaigns like that of the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill to learn from its mistakes in endeavoring to deal with a negative dominant discourse. After the spill, the international public relations firm, Ogilvy, was responsible for formulating and structuring a plan to overturn and manage the negative public perception surrounding BP. The firm was tasked with the responsibility of combatting several Twitter accounts that had “brandjacked” BP, or were posing as parodies of the authenticated BP Twitter account using BP’s actual
branding to bash the corporation, and had nearly ten times more Twitter followers than the official BP account. Express disapproval from President Obama and the media, and the anger of millions of Americans whose homes and communities were damaged by oil from the spill perpetuated the public’s pessimism regarding BP. As previously mentioned, Ogilvy made frequent blunders in not addressing the issues head-on, and experienced further obstacles when the then-CEO of BP, Tony Hayward, was recorded making cold and cavalier statements about the circumstances, and when those statements were spread virally over the Internet. Because the situation was not handled with a detailed and firm crisis communications plan, BP became subject to the dominant discourse, and still remains untrustworthy in the public mind.

The ACA campaign may not entail as urgent a crisis communications plan, yet having one in place to resist the disparaging dominant discourse is essential in order to ensure a prompt and scrupulous course of action in case the discourse spirals too far outside the range of influence. Monitoring public opinion in this case would be highly useful, as it would aid the public relations practitioners producing the campaign in staying proactive and reactive to any drastic changes in attitude or sentiment. The plan might also demand that figureheads of HealthCare.gov, the Obama administration and Democratic Party, and the Department of Health and Human Services be well coached in publicly responding to outcry. Due to the slow uptake on government public relations with regard to Internet norms and tendencies, the plan should also work toward improving Internet competence, and even incorporate premeditated reactions to potential viral disasters like that of the BP CEO and brandjacked Twitter accounts. A crisis communications plan of this sort can only profit the ACA campaign in the long term, helping it mature and thrive among the prosperous and refined public relations campaigns of modern day.

The ACA campaign and Anti-ObamaCare campaigns serve as a remarkable piece of historic literature, providing a window into the practice of rhetoric in government public relations that can be used to study and progress government public relations rhetoric over time. As technology and culture unceasingly change, government public relations must become more dynamic to adapt to the new norms
so as to be as effective as possible. As a result of the ACA campaign, government has already undergone some adjustments to embrace common customs in public relations of social media use, and to cultivate relationships with younger generations as stakeholders in the legislation. Because young voters are underrepresented in many major state and national elections, it is highly probable that government public relations will continue to target this demographic more explicitly in order to gain candidate support in the short term, and party loyalty in the long term, and will therefore become further entrenched in social media to do so, improving audience engagement and relationship building as well.

Also necessary is for government public relations to learn how to reach intended audiences with such a crucial nationwide message while dealing with the inevitable political opposition that will arise, and to understand that as a result, a negative discourse has a likelihood of occurring; yet government public relations as an industry must also accept that the negative discourse does not need to become dominant, and must formulate and employ the proper strategies to fight back against it. Government bodies may need to take cues from for-profit corporate public relations and advertising that use exhaustively comprehensive research and methodically tailored campaigns to not only create crisis communications plans, but to also reach markets with crisis communications messages, and public relations messages in general, more effectively. Government public relations will also have to evolve its rhetoric to be more efficient and resonant given the inherently momentous messages that impact widespread audiences in such a field.

It is predicted that government public relations will gradually begin to progress as an industry, becoming more acclimated to varying trends and the fluctuating social standards of stakeholders. The Affordable Care Act campaign and Anti-ObamaCare campaign, as well as the dominant discourse surrounding the legislation, can only be used as constructive and instructive tools to cultivate better means of informing and establishing mutually beneficial relationships with critical publics. Despite the obstacles and adversity the Affordable Care Act has faced, and continues to face, its best prospect is to continue to move forward toward full enactment in 2022. The Obama administration and related public relations
firms working on the ACA campaign will hopefully reflect upon the tactics, methods and research employed thus far, and will continue to evaluate public sentiment and improve the campaign so as to better educate and reach audiences across the nation, altering the dominant discourse and enabling the American public to recognize the revolutionary advantages and benefits of having affordable health care options.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, based on the entirety of this rhetorical analysis, it is apparent that while the ACA campaign failed at changing the attitudes of the American people, the Anti-ObamaCare campaign experienced profound success in changing attitudes, but failed in changing the behavior of Americans; thus the Anti-ObamaCare campaign achieved somewhat of a success in making up for the failure of the ACA campaign despite its own failure. The argumentative simplicity of the ACA campaign advertisements may be to blame for its shortcomings, while the emotional and argumentative convolution of the Anti-ObamaCare advertisements in attempting to present a set of factual information regarding the ACA while concurrently presenting an assertion against it, and the multifarious emotional appeals present in the ads that contradict their encoding, instead triggering an unintended decoding through which viewers are consequently led to engage in the very behavior the ads attack, comprise its own shortcomings. All of these shortcomings operating within the context of an exceptionally uneducated American public with respect to the legislation, and political affairs in general, that places trust instead in sensationalized media to prescribe attitudes and opinions on the whole fashions a perfect storm situation in which volatility and negative responses concerning both campaigns arise.

One might wonder as to the value of a rhetorical analysis in such a situation, and where to place that value, whether on the truth of a campaign, or on its success in persuasion. Of course, a rhetorical analysis serves as an explication of the literature within and surrounding an argument, and in the case of
the Affordable Care Act, it has a very practical purpose in illuminating the elements of success and failure for the associated campaigns with the objective of evaluating and providing insight as to how those campaigns could be improved to wholly benefit the health of the American people. In terms of the weight of truth in this type of analysis, only the encoder of the campaign message and the organization producing or sponsoring the campaign can decide whether honesty is a priority paramount to persuasion. In today’s society of investigative journalism that occurs both on the level of national media and that of the individual seeking verity and information, it would seem that truth bears great significance in the function of persuasion. As seen with both the advertisements of the ACA campaign as well as the Anti-ObamaCare campaign, exaggerated truth and hyperbole are in blunt excess, which may also, in part, account for their previously discussed failures. Regardless, both truth and persuasion are rhetorically deficient in both campaigns, so whether more emphasis is placed on one over the other in this particular case is arbitrary.

As mentioned earlier, the ACA campaign and the Anti-ObamaCare campaign alike have a substantial amount of room for improvement, and a proper assessment of their rhetorical success or failure can only genuinely occur once either the Act has achieved finalized implementation, or its repeal is sanctioned. Even then, external political factors might be considered as having an influence over that decision, and can be reviewed and investigated as to their contribution to the end result. The union between rhetoric, public relations and government forms an enormously intricate system that can be dissected endlessly, and yet never fully outlined. Nevertheless, when an entire nation is impacted by a particular event or legislation, no extent of examination is too in-depth, and examinations of this particular legislation and the historical national affair it has instituted will unarguably be crucial in learning about the effects of the combination of these three fields, and in shaping responsible and successful use of rhetoric in government public relations for the future.
Appendix

Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act Sec. 4004

EDUCATION AND OUTREACH CAMPAIGN REGARDING PREVENTIVE BENEFITS

(a) IN GENERAL.— The Secretary of Health and Human Services (referred to in this section as the “Secretary”) shall provide for the planning and implementation of a national public–private partnership for a prevention and health promotion outreach and education campaign to raise public awareness of health improvement across the life span. Such campaign shall include the dissemination of information that—

(1) describes the importance of utilizing preventive services to promote wellness, reduce health disparities, and mitigate chronic disease;
(2) promotes the use of preventive services recommended by the United States Preventive Services Task Force and the Community Preventive Services Task Force;
(3) encourages healthy behaviors linked to the prevention of chronic diseases;
(4) explains the preventive services covered under health plans offered through a Gateway;
(5) describes additional preventive care supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Health Resources and Services Administration, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, and other appropriate agencies; and
(6) includes general health promotion information.

(b) CONSULTATION.— In coordinating the campaign under subsection (a), the Secretary shall consult with the Institute of Medicine to provide ongoing advice on evidence-based scientific information for policy, program development, and evaluation.
(c) MEDIA CAMPAIGN.—

(1) IN GENERAL.— Not later than 1 year after the date of enactment of this Act, the Secretary, acting through the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, shall establish and implement a national science-based media campaign on health promotion and disease prevention.

(2) REQUIREMENT OF CAMPAIGN.— The campaign implemented under paragraph (1)—

(A) shall be designed to address proper nutrition, regular exercise, smoking cessation, obesity reduction, the 5 leading disease killers in the United States, and secondary prevention through disease screening promotion;

(B) shall be carried out through competitively bid contracts awarded to entities providing for the professional production and design of such campaign;

(C) may include the use of television, radio, Internet, and other commercial marketing venues and may be targeted to specific age groups based on peer-reviewed social research;

(D) shall not be duplicative of any other Federal efforts relating to health promotion and disease prevention; and

(E) may include the use of humor and nationally recognized positive role models.

(3) EVALUATION.— The Secretary shall ensure that the campaign implemented under paragraph (1) is subject to an independent evaluation every 2 years and shall report every 2 years to Congress on the effectiveness of such campaigns towards meeting science-based metrics.

(d) WEBSITE.— The Secretary, in consultation with private sector experts, shall maintain or enter into a contract to maintain an Internet website to provide science-based information on guidelines for nutrition, regular exercise, obesity reduction, smoking cessation, and specific chronic disease prevention. Such website shall be designed to provide information to health care providers and consumers.

(e) DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION THROUGH PROVIDERS.— The Secretary, acting through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, shall develop and implement a plan for the dissemination
of health promotion and disease prevention information consistent with national priorities, to health care providers who participate in Federal programs, including programs administered by the Indian Health Service, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Defense, and the Health Resources and Services Administration, and Medicare and Medicaid.

(f) PERSONALIZED PREVENTION PLANS.—

   (1) CONTRACT.— The Secretary, acting through the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, shall enter into a contract with a qualified entity for the development and operation of a Federal Internet website personalized prevention plan tool.

   (2) USE.— The website developed under paragraph (1) shall be designed to be used as a source of the most up-to-date scientific evidence relating to disease prevention for use by individuals. Such website shall contain a component that enables an individual to determine their disease risk (based on personal health and family history, BMI, and other relevant information) relating to the 5 leading diseases in the United States, and obtain personalized suggestions for preventing such diseases.

(g) INTERNET PORTAL.— The Secretary shall establish an Internet portal for accessing risk-assessment tools developed and maintained by private and academic entities.

(h) PRIORITY FUNDING.— Funding for the activities authorized under this section shall take priority over funding provided through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for grants to States and other entities for similar purposes and goals as provided for in this section. Not to exceed $500,000,000 shall be expended on the campaigns and activities required under this section.

(i) PUBLIC AWARENESS OF PREVENTIVE AND OBESITY-RELATED SERVICES.—

   (1) INFORMATION TO STATES.— The Secretary of Health and Human Services shall provide guidance and relevant information to States and health care providers regarding preventive and obesity-related services that are available to Medicaid enrollees, including obesity screening and counseling for children and adults.
(2) INFORMATION TO ENROLLEES.— Each State shall design a public awareness campaign to educate Medicaid enrollees regarding availability and coverage of such services, with the goal of reducing incidences of obesity.

(3) REPORT.— Not later than January 1, 2011, and every 3 years thereafter through January 1, 2017, the Secretary of Health and Human Services shall report to Congress on the status and effectiveness of efforts under paragraphs (1) and (2), including summaries of the States’ efforts to increase awareness of coverage of obesity-related services.

(j) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.— There are authorized to be appropriated such sums as may be necessary to carry out this section.

### Real Clear Politics Polling Data

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**California HealthCare Foundation Twitter Reaction Report**

*Twitter Reacts to Final Phase of First ACA Open Enrollment – April 2014*

This fifth and final analysis of Twitter activity during the first ACA open-enrollment period describes several trends since the Obamacare launch in October 2013 and provides a more recent snapshot of the Twitter dialogue.

This analysis examines volume of tweets, spikes in activity, and sentiment trending. The Topsy sentiment score uses advanced natural language processing to analyze the sentiment — positive or negative — of each tweet compared to the sentiment of everything else being discussed on Twitter. Each tweet is assigned a score from 0 to 100, with 50 being neutral sentiment and higher and lower scores representing positive and negative sentiment, respectively.

**OBSERVATION 1:** Twitter sentiment scores for state-based marketplaces were higher overall than those for HealthCare.gov throughout the first open enrollment period. Sentiment for HealthCare.gov did spike into positive sentiment territory occasionally in the last three months before the March 31 deadline. The graph below compares sentiment scores for the 17 state-based marketplaces combined versus HealthCare.gov.
OBSERVATION 2: The volume of tweets about Obamacare waned during the six-month open-enrollment period but increased slightly from February to March as the open-enrollment deadline neared.

In the above graph, tweets were counted if they included: Obamacare or #obamacare; ACA, #ACA, or "affordable care act"; and HealthCare.gov, site: healthcare.gov, "healthcare dot gov," or @healthcaregov.

OBSERVATION 3: Twitter is used as a consumer communication tool in health care as in many other arenas. Consumers turn to Twitter to voice both satisfaction and frustration with their insurance coverage and access to care. Twitter is also used as a direct line to costumer support, as evidenced below by health plan responses to tweets from dissatisfied consumers.

Example 1:
Example 2:

Kate Jaeger @kahiijinx
Almost 2hr on the phone, but I now have affordable health insurance... I'll be saving $345/mo from my current plan! What a blessing!

Max Sidman @maxsidman
Had my first appt. as a patient at @kpnorcal today. Fast, friendly, easy. Pretty great for a giant machine. (CC @KPMemberService)

Princess Uzor @msbadunkadunk
Just made a doctor appt. with my new HEALTH INSURANCE!!! "does the jive"

Toni Konz @tkon
After using my new health insurance plan for the first time this year today, I'm not a happy camper. I want my old plan back!

Example 3:

Cris Dobrosielski @CrisD_Fitness
Once again shocked, disturbed n insulted by @sharphealthcare n @AnthemBlueCross #Deceptive n #Dishonest billing and coding protocol. VERY SAD

SharpHealthCare @sharphealthcare
@CrisD_Fitness We're concerned about your tweet, Cris, and would like to help. Please email us at feedback@sharp.com w/ best way to reach you.

Cris Dobrosielski @CrisD_Fitness
@sharphealthcare Thank u, More #empathy n #activelistening received from my tweet then on a 15 minute call with billing department. Will do.
**OBSERVATION 4:** As the March 31 deadline for enrollment in marketplace plans approached, it became a topic of Twitter conversation, with individuals commenting on penalties, last minute enrollment, and getting in under the wire.

Example 1:

**Example 2:**

**OBSERVATION 5:** Consumers used Twitter in a "social support" capacity as people sought information and help from their networks related to signing up for health insurance. Below are examples of Twitter conversations about cost, subsidies, and the "metal level" plan choices.

Example 1:
Example 2:

**Michael Smerconish** @smerconish
After 8 weeks of frustration at healthcare.gov, I now have 24 plans to choose from. Here are the most/least $$: bit.ly/1dYv25M

**Kelly Jean** @Kelebration
@smerconish So Platinum level cheaper & better benefits than what you currently have. Imagine that #MACAssureStory

**Tom Adler** @TomAdler
@Kelebration @smerconish From what I have investigated the best plans if you are relatively healthy is the Silver plan

**Larry K** @Getsmart4
@TomAdler @Kelebration @smerconish seems if you're healthy & Silver & Bronze have same $$$ but Max out of pocket lowest premium may be best bet

**Tom Adler** @TomAdler
@Getsmart4 @Kelebration @smerconish Yeah but problem with bronze plan from what I see is that have a presc drug deductible am I correct
BIBLIOGRAPHY


doi: 10.1111/j.14602466.2011.01539.x


Young, Jeffrey. "Obamacare Promo Campaign To Hit Stride This Summer, Official Says." *The
ACADEMIC VITA

Fallon Anne Dungan

5324 Millstone Court
Orefield, PA 18069
Fallondungan@gmail.com
(484) 560-2549

EDUCATION

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
The Schreyer Honors College, College of Liberal Arts, College of Communications
University Park, Pennsylvania

Bachelor of Arts in English and Public Relations, Minor in Business and the Liberal Arts, Expected May 2015
Service Component: Penn State IFC/Panhellenic Dance Marathon Committees
Significant Coursework Application: Member of development team for a public relations campaign to be used for
The Jared Box Project 501(c)(3) service organization headquartered in Port Matilda, Pa., as part of major capstone
course

EMPLOYMENT

THE DISNEY COLLEGE PROGRAM January – May 2014
The Walt Disney World Resort, Disney Photo Imaging
Lake Buena Vista, Fl.

Provided exceptional guest services, and created unique and memorable experiences for Disney guests with
Disney’s Photo Imaging service in Magic Kingdom as a photographer on Main Street, for character meet and greets,
and special events (full-time position)
Collaborated with members of various departments to disseminate information to guests on park services,
knowledge and lore, as well as new technology and products
Acquired knowledge of Disney corporate marketing and leadership strategies through required Disney Professional
Internship courses for credit: “Exploring Marketing” and “Exploring Leadership” (completed May 2014)

PUBLIC RELATIONS INTERNSHIP June – August 2013
ArtsQuest
Bethlehem, Pa.

Collaborated with marketing and content creation departments to create brochures and web content relating to the
nation’s largest non-gated free music festival (full-time position)
Worked independently to write news releases and publish content in several regional newspapers and blogs
Managed third-party content for the promotions of musical artists and events
Implemented new media in both web-based and print format for administrative and publicity purposes

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:

Public Relations and Fundraising Chair, The Penn State Singing Lions
Public Relations Photography Committee Member, Penn State IFC/Panhellenic Dance Marathon
Entertainment Production Committee Member, Penn State IFC/Panhellenic Dance Marathon
Scholar, The Schreyer Honors College
Member, The Penn State Thespians