Commentary

Image Repair, Image Prepare, and *It*: Inoculating against Horror Portrayals of Professions

Professor Josh Compton (PhD) [1]

[1] Dartmouth College, Speech at Dartmouth; josh.compton@dartmouth.edu

Abstract: The World Clown Association (WCA) released a press kit in anticipation of potential negative effects on the image of clowns from the release of a film version of Stephen King's *It*. *It* features a murdering, cannibalistic clown as a key villain in the story. In this analysis, the theoretical framework of *image prepare*—a combination of image repair strategies and inoculation theory—is used to better understand the WCA's rhetorical strategies. The analysis shows how pre-denial and pre-bolstering were used to prepare people for the negative portrayals of clowns, which, in a sense, attempted to inoculate people against fearing clowns.

Keywords: image repair theory; image prepare; inoculation theory; credibility; reputation; professional identity; rhetorical analysis.

In September 2017, Warner Brothers announced that *It*, a film version of Stephen King's classic horror novel by the same name, had grossed over $500 million in worldwide box office returns, making *It* the top horror film of all time, breaking the record held previously by *The Exorcist* (McNary, 2017). The villain of the movie, It, is an evil presence that takes the form of a terrifying, child-killing, cannibalistic clown named Pennywise the Dancing Clown (Muschietti, 2017).

Professional clowns saw *It* coming. To save face before the movie premiered, the World Clown Association issued a press kit with the headline, "WCA STAND ON SCARY CLOWNS!!" (Available: https://worldclown.net/CONTENT/presskit/wca-stand-on-scary-clowns.PDF). In this one-page document, the WCA offers a defense of "real" clowns, a preemptive attempt to protect against any backlash from seeing such a sinister clown portrayed on film.

The WCA's effort to preempt damage to the reputation of clowns before the movie's release offers an interesting case of reputation management—a type of *image prepare* (Compton, 2016), whereas conventional strategies of image repair (reactive attempts to repair a damaged image, see Benoit, 1995; 2014) were used proactively, much like a prophylactic inoculation theory-based strategy of resistance to influence (see Compton, 2013; McGuire, 1964). Although it would likely be too late to prevent a fear of clowns (coulrophobia, see Burke, 2019), one could attempt to preempt the heightening of this fear provoked by the film. Additionally, with recent findings suggesting a therapeutic value of inoculation theory-based messaging (see Compton, 2020), such a campaign might also help to reduce fears of clowns that already exist.

Some of this case's features are admittedly unique, with clowns and movie monsters front and center. Other features, however, speak to larger issues of public relations challenges, including the

unique relationship between professions and popular culture and proactively instead of reactively responding to challenges. This analysis begins with an exploration of theories of image repair and image prepare, then turns to a specific analysis of the WCA's preemptive efforts against the portrayal of clowns represented in *It*.

1.　**Image Repair, Inoculation Theory, and Image Prepare**

Image Repair Theory (IRT) explores rhetorical options for repairing perceptions of credibility after it has been damaged by a perceived offense (Benoit, 1995; 2014). IRT centers on a five-category typology of primary rhetorical strategies (*denial*, *evading responsibility*, *reducing offensiveness*, *mortification*, and *corrective action*), with most of the strategies further divided into more specific tactics. *Denial*, a general strategy of asserting innocence, can be attempted through two possible tactics: 1) simple denial and 2) shifting blame. *Evading responsibility*, a general strategy of admitting the offense but not the blame, can be attempted through four possible tactics: 1) provocation (asserting that the act was a reasonable reaction to another act), 2) defeasibility (asserting a lack of control), 3) accident, and 4) good intentions. *Reducing offensiveness*, a general strategy of accepting blame but not the offense, has five possible tactics: 1) bolstering (boasting of positive/good characteristics, achievements, contributions), 2) minimization (asserting that the act is not so offensive), 3) differentiation (comparing the act with something worse), 4) transcendence (reframing the act in the context of larger issues), and 5) attacking the accuser. *Corrective action*, a general strategy of attempting to make things right, offers either a solution or promises changes that would prevent the offense from reoccurring. *Mortification* is an expression of regret, such as an apology. (See Benoit, 1995; 2014, for more extensive treatments of the typology.)

Compton (2016) has argued that when used preemptively, image repair strategies can function as a type of *image prepare*. He suggests a merging of image repair theory (Benoit, 1995; 2014) and inoculation theory (Compton, 2013; McGuire, 1964) to study such instances of preempting attacks on image. Inoculation theory (Compton, 2013; McGuire, 1964) is a classic theory of resistance to influence. Its name is its explanation: Just as a medical inoculation confers resistance to future viral threats through pre-exposure to weakened forms of those threats, a persuasion inoculation confers resistance to future persuasive threats through pre-exposure to weakened forms of those threats (Compton, 2013; McGuire, 1964). Usually, inoculation theory-informed messages confer resistance preemptively; that is, such messages are used as a prophylactic against future harms (Compton, 2013). Inoculation-based messages have been applied to a number of persuasive challenges, including attacks on image (e.g., Ivanov & Parker, 2011).

Image prepare, then, would be the use of conventional image repair strategies in an inoculation theory-informed treatment (Compton, 2016), building from Benoit's acknowledgement that image repair strategies might be used preemptively (Benoit, 2014), and recent findings that inoculation theory can be effectively employed retroactively (e.g., Ivanov et al., 2017; van der Linden et al., 2017; and see Compton, 2020). The concept of image prepare has been used to support analyses of rhetorical strategies across diverse issues, including tourism marketing (Kunt & Gülcan, 2020), and sport communication (Compton & Compton, 2018).

2. Press Release: "WCA STAND ON SCARY CLOWNS!!"

The World Clown Association (WCA) was founded in 1982. According to its website, its mission is "to serve the needs of the members of the Association, to serve the needs of local affiliate clown alleys (small groups), and to promote the art of clowning throughout the world" (https://worldclown.com/about-us/). The WCA's membership spans 35 countries, with membership including professional clowns and part-time hobbyists.

Of note for this present analysis, WCA also seems keenly aware of threats to the image of clowns. They explain on their website:

> We respectfully oppose any use of the clown image in evil, violent or destructive ways. We don't cause stress. We help people relieve stress through laughter, fun, play, and creative experiences. Our WCA Members commit to help positively raise the public's perception of the art of clowning locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. (https://worldclown.com/about-us/)

Two image-related issues are highlighted here. First, some depictions of clowns are negative—"the clown image in evil, violent or destructive ways." Second, such depictions threaten the image of clowns, or perhaps more to the point, that the clown image has already been threatened. Note that the line indicates the need to "raise the public's perception of the art of clowning" and not to maintain the public's perception. The timing here is of particular interest in the construct of image prepare since it is the timing that usually separates image repair from conventional inoculation theory (Compton, 2016).

One of these threatening depictions—threatening in multiple senses of the word—came in the form of Stephen King's (1986) Pennywise the Dancing Clown character from his horror novel, *It*. *It* was published in 1986 and tells the story of a million+-year-old evil force that takes the form of peoples' worst fears—a mummy, a vampire, a clown. One of the most iconic manifestations is the latter— Pennywise the Dancing Clown. Pennywise is a terrifying character. His portrayal in mediated versions of the novel—like the 1990 miniseries (Green & Epstein, 1990) or the 2017 (Muschietti, 2017) and 2019 (Muschietti, 2019) feature films—have earned characterizations such as "a truly frightening character" (Canfield, 2015, para. 5); "the archetype of the genre [of scary clowns]" (Glenza, 2014, para. 4); and "a face of the novel itself" (Smythe, 2013, para. 4). Smythe (2013) continues: "I'd never been scared of clowns, but something about Pennywise taught me how to be" (para. 4). The 2017 film *It* was the first of two movies based on King's novel. The actor Bill Skarsgård portrayed Pennywise, and the marketing of the film prominently featured Pennywise, including on its movie posters and in its trailers.

The context of the WAC statement also involved several reported incidents of "creepy clown" sightings and interactions—"people dressed as clowns and menacing others, and hoaxers calling in 'creepy clown' threats" (Park, 2016, p. B3). The phenomenon was not new to 2016—reports trace it back to at least the 1980s (Park, 2016)—but in combination with the highly-publicized movie, *It*, these sightings magnified concerns.

In anticipation of reactions to the film, WAC released a press guide (also referenced in other reports as a press kit, a press release, and a letter): "WCA STAND ON SCARY CLOWNS!!". Pam Moody, president of WAC, told *The Hollywood Reporter*: "Last year we were really blindsided. We've since created a press kit to prepare clowns for the movie coming out" (Abramovitch, 2017, para. 8). Here, we have explicit mention of the preemptive strategy of the WAC efforts, and the motivation to not be caught off guard again. The press release began with a description of WAC itself:

> We at the World Clown Association are proponents of positive, family-friendly entertainment. We believe the art of clowning is something to be treasured and enjoyed by audience's [sic] world-wide. We bring a happy, joyful, creative, caring, positive, and fun experience to our audiences. ("WCA STAND ON SCARY CLOWNS!!, 2017, para. 1)

These opening lines bolster, or draw attention to positive attributes (Benoit, 1995; 2014). The bolstering effort seems directed toward two entities—the WAC in particular and clowns in general. As for the WAC, the organization is described as "proponents of positive, family-friendly entertainment." As for clowns, the rhetor shifts agency from the organization of clowns to clowns in general, adopting a "we" that represents clowns who bring "a happy, joyful, creative, caring, positive, and fun experience…" When used after an image attack, such strategies of bolstering can function to reduce the offensiveness of a perceived transgression—a way to shift focus from what was done wrong to what was done right (Benoit, 1995; 2014). In this instance, I argue, the bolstering is functioning to preemptively reduce image derogation of clowns in general.

Next, WAC's press guide mentions a motivator of their efforts—the "'horror genre' of entertainment." They note:

> We understand that some people enjoy the "horror genre" of entertainment, but we find that many people are confronted by images of horror characters (impersonating clowns) and are startled by them…which is obviously the goal of these horror characters. In my opinion, these horror characters are not clowns. Even the character in the movie "IT" should be understood to be a fantasy character—not a true clown. ("WCA STAND ON SCARY CLOWNS!!, 2017, para. 2)

On a literal level, the WAC is correct about the villain of the novel, *It*. *It* is described by King as a force that takes on multiple physical forms; it is, indeed, a fantasy character. Second, it is of note that WAC refers to this force as "the character" and not "the clown," which is consistent with the concluding argument that this character is not a "true clown." This approach could be functioning, then, as a sort of pre-denial, or preemptive denial. That is, the villain of *It* should not threaten the image of clowns since the villain of *It* is not a clown.

After establishing positive attributes of clowns—in general, and of the WAC in particular—and delineating between the villain of *It* and actual clowns, WAC turns to a comparative analogy:

> Just as a Haunted House event may have a "doctor" wearing surgical gear, carrying a bloody chainsaw, people need to understand that this character is NOT a real doctor. He is a person portraying an evil character in order to scare people. In the same way, people dressed as

horror clowns are not "real clowns." They are taking something innocent and wholesome and perverting it to create fear in their audience. ("WCA STAND ON SCARY CLOWNS!!, 2017, para. 3)

As with any analogy used to advance an argument, this analogy carries some risk. Some message recipients, in extending the analogic between doctors and clowns, might find that the similarities fall away—that the qualifications for becoming a doctor and a clown are too dissimilar. Perhaps anticipating this possibility, WAC reiterates its point with another analogy:

Please understand, just because someone wears a rubber Halloween mask, that does not make one a clown! The horror movie character, "Jason," wears a hockey goalie mask. But, people would be mistaken if they actually thought he was a hockey player! We disavow any relationship with these "horror characters." ("WCA STAND ON SCARY CLOWNS!!, 2017, para. 4)

Here, we have another group to which we are invited to compare portrayals of clowns in horror films: hockey players.

By this point of the message, recipients have learned of the positive attributes of clowning, considered a denial that clown characters in horror films are not actual clowns, and have been provided two analogies involving doctors and hockey players. In the penultimate section, WAC explains:

We stand with our safety officers who call for an end to the traumatization of individuals and communities by horror characters in public. Anyone making a threat of violence should be arrested, whether this person is wearing a mask or not. This clearly is not the act of a professional clown. ("WCA STAND ON SCARY CLOWNS!!, 2017, para. 5)

This part seems to reflect a shift in focus—away from portrayals of clowns in horror films to the "creepy clown sightings" mentioned earlier. The argument, at its core, remains the same: someone dressed as a clown, but acting in a threatening or scary manner—in real life or on film—is not a clown.

At the conclusion of the statement, WAC returns to the strategy that opened their press kit: bolstering, or more to the point of this analysis, preemptive bolstering. WCA argues:

The World Clown Association shares laughs and "comic relief" everywhere for the positive, wholesome, enjoyment of their audiences. It is true that various horror clown portrayals work against our goal. We hope our audience realizes that there are different categories in entertainment. We stay on the positive side of things providing fun, g-rated, child-friendly entertainment. We also recommend that young children not be exposed to horror movies which are intended for mature audiences. ("WCA STAND ON SCARY CLOWNS!!, 2017, para. 6)

In the ending paragraph, we have an encapsulation of the WCA image prepare efforts, sentence by sentence, building a preemptive case against the movie, *It*. The first sentence attempts preemptive

bolstering. The second—a forewarning of threat. In the third sentence, an attempt at pre-differentiation, of shifting the meaning of clowns from horror portrayals to "real" clowns, and at the same time, a type of preemptive denial—that horror portrayals of clowns are not "real" clowns. The fourth sentence returns to pre-bolstering.

The fifth and final sentence offers a bit of a twist to what had preceded this image prepare statement—a call to action, or perhaps more accurately, a call to *inaction*. WCA encourages a sort of quarantine—a "stay at home" plea directed toward children. In some ways, this is a decisive break from what came before, which seemed more focused on targeting attitudes—attitudes toward clowns, attitudes toward the WCA, attitudes toward horror portrayals, and so on. A call for quarantine—for avoiding the horror portrayals entirely—seems more in-line with a one-sided message approach than the two-sided inoculation format of the majority of the message. Another reading, however, suggests more consistency. The target audience is not children, but instead, parents and adults. As such, a call to keep children away from the film is not so much a one-sided message approach—do not go see this film—as it is an extension of the message to their parents and caregivers or a refutation of the counterargument that people should see the films.

3. Discussion

Several studies have examined how different professions have been portrayed in popular culture, including advertising professionals in film (Papp-Vary et al., 2015), lawyers in film (Greenfield & Osborn, 1995), social scientists on television (Levine et al., 2010), scientists in film (Simis et al., 2015), teachers in film and television (Swetnam, 1992), accountants in film (Dimnik & Felton, 2006), and physicians on television (Chory-Assad & Tamborini, 2003). Although specific findings differ across the professions studied, a common conclusion is that popular culture depictions of professions matter to how the public views a profession. Pam Moody, president of the WCA, told a reporter for the *Detroit Free Press* that the movie, *It*, might cost some clowns some work, but the worst damage would be to the image of clowns (Hinds, 2017). As this analysis demonstrates, WCA confronted this image threat with a preemptive rhetorical strategy—a combination of image repair (used preemptively, see Benoit, 2014) and inoculation theory (see Compton, 2013; McGuire, 1964), or *image prepare* (Compton, 2016).

We do have some limited evidence of responses to the WCA's message—or, at least, to the basic argument of the WCA. Stephen King (2017) tweeted in April: "The clowns are pissed at me. Sorry, most are great. BUT...kids have always been scared of clowns. Don't kill the messengers for the message." The *Chicago Tribune* Editorial Board concluded: "So, the verdict on clowns: inherently creepy…or victims of bad publicity? A bit of both, we think" (Clowns, 2017, para. 9). Others directly responded to the WCA's stand. Rex Huppke, in a column for the *Chicago Tribune*, offered a humorous take on it, calling the press release "a pro-clown propaganda statement" (2017, para. 11). He explicitly rejected WAC's denial that horror clowns are not clowns, writing:

[N]ot to quibble, but these "horror characters" aren't "impersonating clowns," they are characters who are clowns. That's part of what makes them horrifying. And just because Pennywise, instead of making animal balloons, talks to young children through a sewer grate prior to eating them, he's still scary in large part because he's a clown (para. 14).

Huppke contends that clowns should "own your scariness" (2017, para. 22). He continues:

> Trust me, clowns. You might think Stephen King and Pennywise are damaging your brand, but they're not. They're showing you the future lies in scaring the tonsils off of children. Which, if we're being honest, is something you've been doing—unintentionally—for years. (Huppke, 2017, para. 31-32)

Huppke was not the only person to offer a humorous take on the WAC press guide. The humorist Argus Hamilton (2017) joked:

> The World Clown Association announced it will be picketing Stephen King's new horror film *It*, about an evil murderous clown. They complain the movie and its publicity are preventing clowns from getting work. The banquet circuit gigs seem to have completely dried up for Ronald McDahmer. (p. 7A)

Additionally, after mentioning the movie, *It*, and the WAC press release, the late-night talk show host James Corden joked that "it's hard to take you seriously when your organization is called the World Clown Association" ("Laugh Along with Late Night," 2017, p. Z2). Corden's remark is, clearly, a joke—but it also raises interesting questions about the WAC's image repair efficacy. Can an organization based on humorous characterizations successfully preempt image attacks from non-humorous sources? How does ethos—long a function of successful image repair and inoculation efforts (e.g., An & Pfau, 2004)—interact with comedy? We have less evidence of the broader reach of the WCA statement, except for some anecdotal commentary. For example, Moody told *The Hollywood Reporter*: "The very public we're trying to deliver positive and important messages to aren't getting them" (Abramovitch, 2017, para. 14). The WAC press release was also mentioned in movie reviews of *It* (e.g., Phillips, 2017).

We also see similar image building and repair strategies in the rhetoric of working clowns themselves. When the sequel to *It* was released in 2019, working clowns warned against equating scary clowns to "real" clowns (Imbornone, 2019). Other clowns used strategies not employed as prominently in the WCA press release. For example, one professional clown said, "[I]t would be great if there was more education to the idea that clowns are in pop culture all the time" (Mark Gindick, cited in Imbornone, 2019, para. 7), which suggests an attempt to minimize the threat of horror clowns by redefining clowns as common, broadening the conceptualization of clowns to include more conventional (and in turn, less scary) entertainers.

A few strategies remained consistent throughout the WCA's message, and the strategy of denial—or, in this case, pre-denial—was consistent in the press kit and in related commentary from WCA. For example, in an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, Moody asserted: "It all started with the original *It*. That introduced the concept of this character. It's a science-fiction character. It's not a clown and has nothing to do with pro clowning" (Abramovitch, 2017, para. 13). The strategy of bolstering was also used consistently, with clear framing of clowns as innocent, fun, and gentle.

The effort to preempt damage from the film could have been strengthened. For example, perhaps a more prominent use of visuals would have helped strengthen the image prepare efforts of the World

Clown Association. They were, after all, attempting to inoculate against the evocative visual of a cannibalistic, nightmarish clown in *It*'s Pennywise. The use of a text-based inoculation strategy may have not been up to the visually complex attack message. Nabi's (2003) work suggests that matching levels of visual evocativeness between the inoculation treatment message and the attack message leads to more effective resistance. Then again, some evidence suggests that such text-based inoculation messages can successfully thwart influence by visually complex material. For example, Banas and Miller (2013) confirmed that a text-based inoculation message could protect against the influence of a film.

Nevertheless, the WCA's public relations strategy seems, overall, to be rhetorically sound and within the parameters of *image prepare* (Compton, 2016). Several image repair strategies appeared in the statement (and in related commentary), and the core features of inoculation theory were present—including the preemptive refutation of attack messages (in this case, a preemptive refutation of the movie, *It*, and the defining characteristics of a clown).

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Author Biography

Josh Compton is a Professor of Speech at Dartmouth College. He has been studying inoculation as a way to confer resistance to influence for more than 20 years. Most of his work of late focuses on inoculation theory itself—how it works, why it works, and whether it might work better. His applied work is mostly in mis- and disinformation, science communication, health communication, and sport. His scholarship appears in *Communication Monographs*, *Communication Theory*, *Annals of the International Communication Association*, *Human Communication Research*, *Journal of Communication*, *Frontiers in Psychology*, *PLOS ONE*, and other academic journals. He authored the inoculation theory chapter in *The Sage Handbook of Persuasion* (Sage) and co-authored the inoculation theory chapter in *Persuasion and Communication in Sport, Physical Activity, and Exercise* (Taylor Francis). Josh has been an invited expert for the Department of Defense's Strategic Multilayer Assessment program (USA) and NATO's and USSOCOM's Joint Senior Psychological Operations Conference, and he is a member of the Global Experts on Debunking of Misinformation group. He has been named Distinguished Lecturer by Dartmouth College and has won the Outstanding Professor Award from the National Speakers Association and has twice won the L. E. Norton Award for Outstanding Scholarship.