

How Obama lost the healthcare debate online

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Executive Summary

- The UK's National Health Service (NHS) has become an integral part of the US healthcare debate. Supporters of Obama's public healthcare initiative frequently cite the NHS as a positive example of what public healthcare would be like, while critics are quick to highlight the negative aspects of the British system.
- To find out who is winning these debates, we used citation analysis to determine who is most influential on the topic of British-style healthcare in the United States.
- The results suggest that the debate is dominated by extreme voices on either side, with critics having more influence than supporters.
- The top influencers are primarily critics of healthcare reform, such as Fox News and The Daily Telegraph, who frequently use terms such as "mistake" and "breeding ground for terrorists" in reference to the NHS.
- Supporters with high influence include the UK Conservative Party, Organizing for America and the American Medical Association.
- Twitter and YouTube also have high influence, with Twitter being the most influential of all stakeholders. These entities are used by both camps and are ranked as neutral, even though they contain strongly pro- and anti-public healthcare voices.
- Members of the liberal blogosphere, such as The Huffington Post and GoFourth, demonstrate less influence on the topic.
- The results suggest that Obama is losing the healthcare debate online. So what can Obama and his supporters do to spread their message and gain more influence?
- We suggest that Obama do two things:
 1. create a strong narrative around healthcare reform;
 2. push the message that reform will be fiscally neutral.
- Both of these steps hinge on the storytelling, that is, Obama needs to deliver a message that is both specific and compelling. In doing so, he will give people a story that they not only remember, but one that they're compelled to talk about with their friends, family and other potential supporters of healthcare reform.

Narrative

The topic of the NHS has served as a lightning rod for debate around Obama's own public healthcare option in the United States. The internet has provided a global arena where each of the three main camps - supporters, detractors and neutral parties - have weighed in. But which of these camps is most influential in the debate? And who are the most dominant voices?

We used citation analysis to identify who is influential on the topic of British-style public healthcare in the US. Our results suggest that the debate is dominated by extreme voices on either side, with detractors demonstrating more influence than supporters. Neutral voices, as exemplified by the liberal media, rank lower in influence.

To perform the analysis, we used web-crawling technology to search the internet for pages about the NHS and US healthcare, then tracked mutual references between people, institutions and entities mentioned in the context of this topic. The results give us a mathematical measure of "influence" and "sentiment", where negative sentiment represents hostility towards public healthcare (as exemplified by the NHS) and positive sentiment represent support for public healthcare.

The results show that:

- The most dominant voices come from detractors, such as Fox News and The Daily Telegraph, who have used terms such as "mistake" (MEP Dan Hannan, UK Conservative Party) and "breeding ground for terrorists" (Dick Cavuto, Fox News) in their arguments against public healthcare.
- Supporters with high influence include the UK Conservative Party, Organizing for America and the American Medical Association.
- Twitter and YouTube also rank highly in terms of influence. These entities are used by both camps and are ranked as neutral, even though they contain strongly pro- and anti-public healthcare voices.
- Members of the liberal blogosphere, such as The Huffington Post and GoFourth, demonstrate less influence on the topic.
- Stephen Hawking ranks as a high influencer and supporter of public healthcare. This is due to an editorial in Investor's Business Daily which stated that "Stephen Hawking wouldn't have a chance in the U.K." The comment prompted Hawking to defend the NHS, and his words were widely reported across the internet.

The results may seem surprising. Supporters of public healthcare have the liberal media and a substantial business lobby on their side. They also use strong case studies to back their arguments. So why are the supporters losing the debate?

One clue is found in the thinness of the "neutral" camp. Normally one would expect to find substantial bodies here, particularly government institutions, who hold the middle ground. Instead, the neutral entities contain strongly pro- and anti-voices. For example, Twitter is the highest influencer and YouTube is in the top five, but both are used by both camps and are characterized by highly opinionated voices from both sides of the debate.

Why Fox News and other detractors demonstrate so much influence in this debate is a matter for conjecture. Perhaps a better question for us, from a marketing standpoint, is: what can Obama do to gain more supporters of public healthcare?

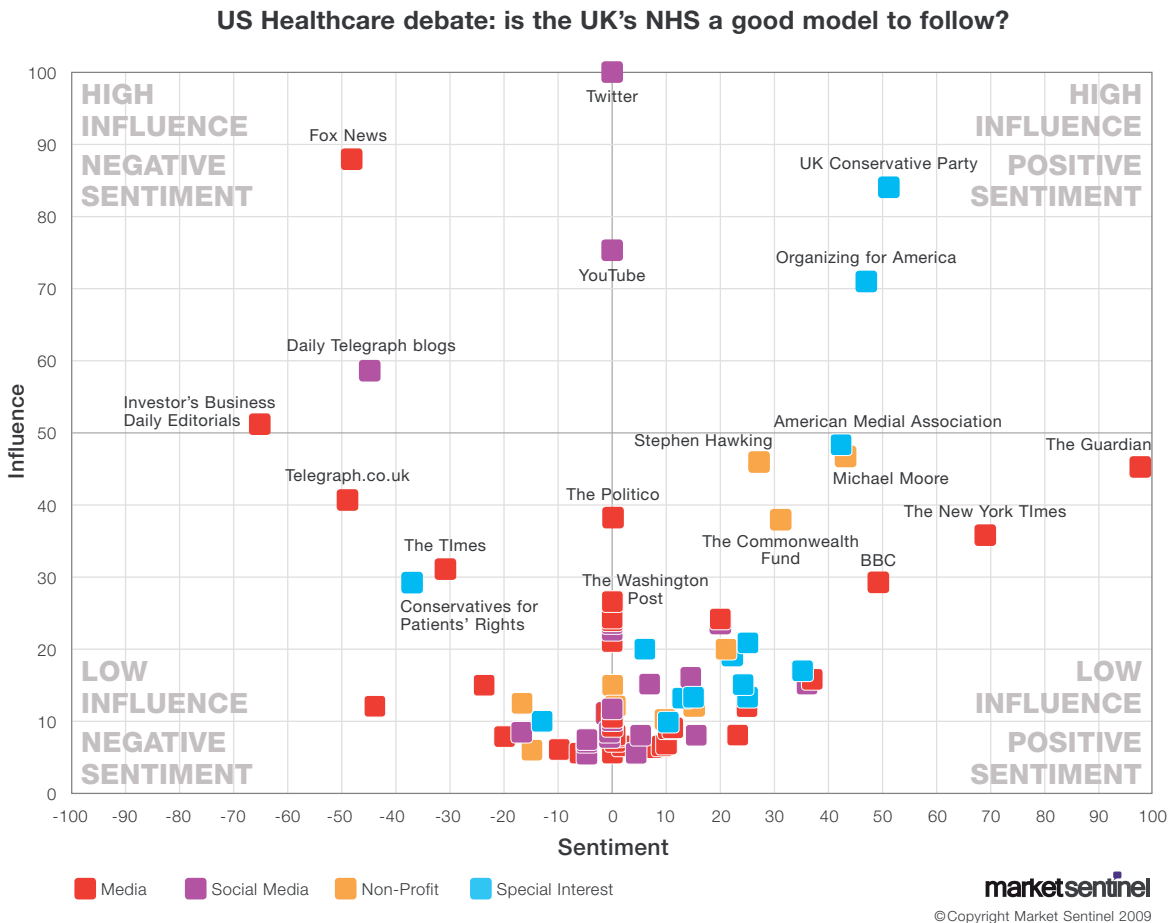
If Obama were one of our clients, we would normally suggest he build coalitions of supporters and target non-profit organizations. But Obama has already done this, and his message still isn't gaining acceptance. The debate illustrates that there's more to generating a successful message than simply knowing the right people. You have to know how to talk to people in such a way that keeps them talking, spreading your message and perpetuating acceptance.

From that standpoint, there are two things Obama could do to gain more supporters of public healthcare:

- 1 Create a strong narrative around healthcare reform.** Obama and his supporters have given us plenty of statistics to support public healthcare, but who are the 30 million Americans behind those statistics? What are their issues? Give us specific examples. Give us people we can meet. Put faces on the numbers and tell us a story.
- 2 Push the message that healthcare reform will be fiscally neutral.** He's already delivered this message, but he needs to make it stronger and be more specific. If he can offer some kind of bounty, he might pry away at least some of the insurers into joining his coalition and perhaps encourage some of the antagonistic media to slide towards neutrality.

Results

1.1 Graph - US healthcare debate: is the UK's NHS a good model to follow?



1.2 Table - US healthcare debate: is the UK's NHS a good model to follow?

US Healthcare debate: is the UK's NHS a good model to follow?

	Pro-NHS	Anti-NHS	Neutral
Name	Influence	Sentiment	
Twitter	100	0	
Fox News	88.23	-48	
Conservative Party	84.20	51	
YouTube	75.46	0	
Organizing for America	71.08	47	
Daily Telegraph Blogs	58.69	-45	
Investor's Business Daily Editorials	50.80	-66	
American Medical Association	48.38	42	
Michael Moore	47.58	43	
Stephen Hawking	46.06	27	
The Guardian	45.64	98	
Telegraph.co.uk	42.13	-49	
The Politico	38.03	0	
The Commonwealth Fund	37.97	31	
The New York Times	35.94	69	
The Times	30.86	-31	
BBC	29.45	49	
Conservatives for Patients' Rights	29.26	-37	
The Washington Post	27.00	0	
Matthew Yglesias	23.80	20	
Wikipedia	23.72	0	
Facebook	22.89	0	
Kaiser Family Foundation	22.02	21	
CNN	21.11	0	
Health Care for America Now!	20.93	25	
Single Payer Action	18.84	22	
Washington Post Blog	16.95	14	
Physicians for a National Health Program	16.72	35	
Huffington Post	16.06	37	
GoFourth	15.53	7	
California Nurses Association	15.30	24	
Talking Points Memo	15.28	37	
Center for Public Integrity	14.86	0	
The Wall Street Journal	14.65	-24	
Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America	13.41	25	
The American College of Physicians	12.90	15	
MoveOn.org	12.87	13	
The Heritage Foundation	12.62	-17	
National Academy of Sciences, Institute of Medicine	12.31	15	
The Daily Mail	12.07	-44	
National Public Radio	11.99	25	
Digg	11.69	0	
Paul Krugman	11.67	0	
The Hill	11.46	0	
Reuters	10.68	0	
America's Health Insurance Plans	10.32	-13	
Royal College of Physicians London	10.29	10	
The New Republic Blogs	10.13	0	
The Los Angeles Times	9.63	0	
Healthcare Economist	9.52	0	
Michelle Malki	8.97	-17	
Washington Monthly	8.95	11	
MSNBC	8.72	10	
CrooksAndLiars.com	8.55	16	
The Caucus Blog	8.46	5	
The Independent	8.12	23	
Chicago Tribune	8.05	0	
The Washington Independent	8.05	0	
WebMD	7.97	0	
Time Magazine	7.89	0	
NHS blog doctor	7.75	-5	
Washington Times	7.65	-20	
The Spectator	7.40	0	
USA Today blogs	7.32	-5	
Columbia Journalism Review	7.28	10	
Boston.com	6.68	9	
The Daily Show	6.65	2	
Yahoo News	5.97	0	
Public Broadcasting Service	5.96	7	
Human Events	5.96	-6	
Townhall.com	5.91	-10	
Medical News Today	5.87	0	
Think Progress	5.86	19	
Healthbeat Blog	5.85	4	
Media Matters	5.71	5	
Wall Street Journal blogs	5.70	-5	

Stakeholder Profiles

Pro-NHS camp

- **Health Beat Blog** (healthbeatblog.org) – a blog supporting single-payer healthcare which cites a number of stakeholders, including the BBC, Columbia Journalism Review, Talking Points Memo, British Medical Journal, and the Office for National Statistics. The Guardian references them in the context of fraud in the healthcare business.
- **UK Conservative Party** (conservatives.com) – UK political party cited by numerous stakeholders in the context of a David Cameron speech, stating his commitment to the NHS and his gratitude towards the system.
- **Organizing for America** (barackobama.com) – the successor organization to Obama for America, whose goal is to clarify the objectives of the administration with regards to healthcare.
- **Michael Moore** (michaelmoore.com) – filmmaker, author and liberal political commentator known for his controversial documentaries. His film ‘Sicko’ portrayed the NHS in a positive light, in contrast to the American Healthcare system. He supports the single-payer system and recently organized a rally with the California Nursing Association.
- **Huffington Post** (huffingtonpost.com) – American liberal news website and aggregated blog. Primarily referenced by liberal stakeholders, including Paul Krugman and Think Progress.
- **Talking Points Memo** (talkingpointsmemo.com) – blog of Josh Marshall, an American journalist who has stated that the US insurance industry requires more competition.
- **Physicians for a National Health Program** (pnhp.org) – an advocacy group composed of healthcare professionals in favour of single-payer model.
- **The Commonwealth fund** (commonwealthfund.org) – private foundation whose purpose is “to promote a high performing health care system that achieves better access, improved quality, and greater efficiency.” Their comparative study ranked the US healthcare system’s last among a number of other countries, which includes the UK. Both supporters and detractors frequently cite the study in support of their cases.
- **Stephen Hawking** (hawking.org.uk) – British theoretical physicist and best-selling author. Hawking, who is almost completely paralysed due to a muscular dystrophy, spoke out in support of the NHS after Investment Business Daily claimed he wouldn’t have survived under the NHS. He is quoted by several influential stakeholders, including the Daily Telegraph, CNN, NY Times, Michael Yglesias, Facebook, BBC, and YouTube.
- **Healthcare for America Now!** (healthcareforamericanow.org) – national grassroots campaign in favour of universal healthcare, recently endorsed by the Obama administration. It is referenced by The Huffington Post, Guardian, and Talking Points Memo.
- **Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America** (phrma.org) – represents leading research-based pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies in the US. Has funded ads pushing for reforms of the healthcare system. Cited by the NY Times and the American Health Care Reform.org blog.
- **California Nurses Association** (calnurses.org) – advocacy group for a single-player national public health care insurance plan. Cited by Talking Points Memo, the Guardian, and the Huffington Post.

- **The Independent** (independent.co.uk) – left leaning British newspaper, often critical of the NHS.
- **Single Payer Action** (singlepayeraction.org) – coalition of organizations and individuals in Ohio whose purpose is to seek “health care reform in Ohio and the United States so that every resident is guaranteed full and comprehensive coverage through universal health care.” Cited by several stakeholders including the Economist, Huffington Post, and the BBC.
- **Kaiser Family Foundation** (kff.org) – non-profit organization focussing on health issues. Have published several articles citing the high cost of health care in US, and the limited span of its coverage.
- **Matthew Yglesias** (yglesias.thinkprogress.org) – American liberal blogger and prominent voice in the liberal blogosphere. His blog receives numerous links to his post deploring President Obama’s failure to follow the British example.
- **Crooks and liars** (crooksandliars.com) – American liberal blog which posted a heated response to negative commentary from Republican John Boehner who implied that the government should not run the health system because they have a bad track record.
- **The American College of Physicians** (acponline.org) – national organization of doctors and physicians who has suggested the single-payer model, stating that all Americans should be covered with insurance.
- **National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine** (iom.edu) – provides information about health and science policy. Their report, “Care without Coverage: Too Little, Too Late,” which estimates that 18,000 adults nationwide died in 2000 because they did not have health insurance, is referenced by several stakeholders.
- **Royal College of Physicians** (rcplondon.ac.uk) – one of the most active of all medical professional organisations. It is cited by several influential stakeholders, including the Guardian, the BBC, and Crooks and Liars.
- **Columbia Journalism Review** (cjr.org) – American magazine for professional journalists; cited for its commentary around IBD’s statements regarding Stephen Hawking.
- **NHS Blog Doctor** (nhsblogdoc.blogspot.com) – blog of “Dr Crippen, a British GP who is generally pro-NHS, but is often cited by others as an example of how the Government tries to restrict choice for doctors and patients in an NHS-like system.
- **GoFourth** (gofourth.co.uk) – campaign to secure a 4th Labour victory. It has associated Dan Hannan MEP attacks’ of the NHS to the global Conservative ideology. The site is also influential because its founders, John Prescott, is a famous British politician.
- **Public Broadcasting Services** (PBS.org) – non-profit television broadcasting service, which has published videos demonstrating how peoples’ lives have been negatively affected by lack of insurance. Frequently cited by pro-reform bloggers.
- **The Caucus blog** (thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com) – left-leaning blog at The New York Times.
- **Media Matters for America** (mediamatters.org) – non-profit research organization “dedicated to comprehensively monitoring, analyzing, and correcting conservative misinformation in the U.S. media.” Their list of the “worst misinformers” in U.S. media include Sean Hannity of Fox News.
- **The Daily Show** (thedailyshow.com) – American satirical new program frequently cited for its story of Glenn Beck, a Fox News presenter who went for an operation in the U.S. and complained on air about the services, then later stated that the U.S. has ‘the best healthcare system in the world.’

Anti-NHS

- **Fox News** (foxnews.com) – U.S. news network whose treasurer, Neil Cavuto, claimed that the NHS is used as a terrorism recruitment tool. This statement is frequently used by bloggers as ammunition against anti-reform statements.
- **Dan Hannan** (blogs.telegraph.co.uk) – Tory MEP and blogger at the Daily Telegraph who is frequently cited for his anti-NHS stance. He has also been interviewed by Fox News, advising Americans that they should not employ a NHS-like system.
- **Investor's Business Daily** (investors.com) – news site that claimed Stephen Hawking would not have survived under the NHS. Hawking spoke out against this comment, and numerous bloggers and media outlets published his statement.
- **Conservatives for Patients' Rights** (cprights.org) – non-profit organization dedicated to “educating and informing the public about the principles of patients rights and, in doing so, advancing the debate over health care reform.” Stakeholders citing them include the Daily Mail, Guardian, Los Angeles Times, and Facebook.
- **The Heritage Foundation** (heritage.org) – conservative think tank who is cited for its videos rebutting Obama's public healthcare plan.
- **The Daily Mail** (dailymail.co.uk) – British newspaper frequently cited by US stakeholders in statements against public healthcare. Stakeholders citing them include Freemarketcure.com and SavetheGOP.com.
- **America's Health Insurance Plans** (ahip.org) – national trade association often cited as a leading opponent to Obama. Stakeholders citing them include TPM café, American Healthcare Reform.org, Wikipedia, and Business Insider.
- **Michelle Malkin** (milchellemalkin.com) – conservative blogger who claims “the effects of socialised medicine in Britain – engineered by government-run cost-cutting panels on which Obamacare would be modelled – continue to wreak havoc on the elderly and infirm.
- **Washington Times** (washingtontimes.com) – conservative American newspaper who has accused the Obama administration of turning America into a socialist country.
- **USA Today blog** (blogs.usatoday.com) – US news source who is against public healthcare and has instead suggested “free market reforms” to resolve the problem. Frequently cited for its criticism of Obama's town hall debates.
- **Human Events** (humanevents.com) – conservative magazine that takes a strong stand against the NHS. Frequently cited in blogs to support claims that an NHS-like system is too expensive and gives the government excessive control.

Neutral

- **Twitter** (twitter.com) – social media platform widely used to express both pro- and anti-public healthcare opinions. The British movement, #WelovetheNHS, is reported by most media outlets across UK and the US.
- **Washington Post** (washingtonpost.com) – international newspaper that has remained neutral in the debate.
- **Wikipedia** (wikipedia.org) – online collaborative encyclopaedia and one of the most visited websites on the internet. It is a traditional source of influence because of its depth of information.
- **Facebook** (facebook.com) – popular social media network where people can create groups or fan pages leveraging the collective forces of each individual in support of one common goal.
- **CNN** (cnn.com) – news source whose high rank is due to its political blog, politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com.
- **Center for Public Integrity** (publicintegrity.org) – non-profit investigative journalism group whose stand remains bi-partisan.
- **Paul Krugman** (krugman.blogs.nytimes.com) – American economist, liberal columnist, and author, who won a Nobel prize in Economics.
- **The Hill** (thehill.com) – Washing D.C. newspaper written for and about the U.S. Congress. Stakeholders citing it include Freemarketcure.com, Matthew Yglesias, and Think Progress.
- **The New Republic Blogs** (tnr.com) – a blog about American politics, foreign policy, and culture. Stakeholders citing it include the BBC, Matthew Yglesias, and the Spectator.
- **Healthcare economist** (healthcare-economist.com) – blog of Jason Shafrin, a PhD economist cited by Conservatives for Patients Rights and CanadianMedicineNews.com.
- **Chicago Tribune** (chicagotribune.com) – major daily newspaper based in Chicago who is traditionally right-leaning US but has taken a neutral stance on this issue.
- **Washington Independent** (washingtonindependent.com) – a non-profit organization that funds investigative news websites.
- **WebMD** (webmd.com) – online health resource publishing news and information about health and health care
- **Spectator** (spectator.co.uk) – right-leaning British magazine cited for its article on Stephen Hawking.

Introduction

Two metrics are used in this study: Authority and Sentiment. The term, 'Authority', is used interchangeably with the term, 'Influence'. The methodologies used in deriving these metrics are shown in Section 3.2 and Section 3.3.

Authority

Measuring the authority of stakeholders, based on online conversations, is difficult for the following reasons.

- There is a huge volume of online conversations surrounding this topic, in Britain and America.
- Some of the individuals/organizations in the debate are very different, making it difficult to compare the extent of their influence. For example, how does one compare the influence of the World Health Organization (WHO) and a popular blogger in this debate?
- Some stakeholders are cited by few people, but turns out to be extremely influential in the discussion because they are cited by the 'correct' people. How does one take different types of associations into consideration?

In answer to these questions, we carry out stakeholder analysis. A stakeholder of a topic as “an entity (individual or organisation) who is sufficiently¹ referenced in the context of the topic”². This Stakeholder Analysis uses a recognised methodology often referred to as “citation analysis”³.

When performing a Stakeholder Analysis our computer systems initially collect any documents on the Internet (web pages, Word, pdf or PowerPoint documents) which match a defined search phrase.

These documents (often hundreds of thousands) are then analysed. The analysis is especially focused on identifying who references whom. Based on these references it is possible to calculate influence.

When measuring influence we do not consider all stakeholders as being of equal importance. Each stakeholder here “votes” for the influence of another stakeholder with the weight given to the stakeholder by those other stakeholders who “vote” for her, and so on. This recursive methodology enables us to compare the influence of different types of stakeholders and associations. As an example, if person A is cited by 5 people with low authority, he might have less authority than person B, who is cited by 3 people if collectively, these 3 people have far more influence than the 5 people citing B.

1. Based on statistical significance and/or practical experience

2. Most stakeholders will participate in the debate about the issue but having spoken about the topic is not a requirement to be considered a stakeholder of the issue. If stakeholders of sufficient importance or stakeholders of in sufficient numbers references someone in the context of the topic, they may be considered a stakeholder.

3. This methodology has been used for more than 3 decades to measure the influence of academic journals and is also used by The Times Educational Supplement (TES) to produce lists of the most influential universities in the world.

Sentiment

In this context, we are concerned with the sentiment of the stakeholder towards the idea of a system like the NHS in the US. For any given stakeholder, there are two components involved in the computation of its sentiment value, as follows.

- **Sentiment factor:** If a stakeholder is anti-NHS, we assign it a value of -1. If the stakeholder is pro-NHS, we assign it a value of +1. If the stakeholder is neutral, this factor is 0. We make these decisions based on the online conversations made by the stakeholder, or about the stakeholder. These conversations are collected by a tool developed by Market Sentinel.
- **Magnification factor:** If one feels strongly about a subject, people will tend to cite him/her because of the infectious nature of sentiment. Therefore, the number of times a stakeholder is mentioned in the context of this debate (by other stakeholders) is correlated with its sentiment towards the subject. Therefore, we associate the magnification factor with the number of times the stakeholder is mentioned in the context of the debate.

To get the sentiment value for the stakeholder, we multiply the sentiment factor with the magnification factor, and normalize the result in the range of -100 to 100. Therefore, if a stakeholder has a sentiment value of 100, the stakeholder is very much in favour of a system like the NHS in America. On the other hand, if the stakeholder has a sentiment value of -100, the stakeholder is very much against such a system. A stakeholder with a sentiment value of 0 takes a neutral stance on this issue.

Recommendations

Our study suggests that Obama has so far lost the healthcare debate online.

If Obama were one of our clients, we would normally suggest he build coalitions of supporters and target non-profit organizations. But Obama has already done this, and his message still isn't gaining acceptance. The debate illustrates that there's more to winning a political debate than harnessing the support of your core. You have to reach out to neutrals. You have to formulate your proposition in a way that appeals to them, that keeps them talking, spreads your message and builds a consensus.

From that standpoint, there are two things Obama could do to gain more supporters of public healthcare:

- 1 Create a strong narrative around healthcare reform.** Obama and his supporters have given us plenty of statistics to support public healthcare, but who are the 30 million Americans behind those statistics? What are their issues? Give us specific examples. Give us people we can meet. Put faces on the numbers and tell us a story.
- 2 Push the message that healthcare reform will be fiscally neutral.** He's already delivered this message, but he needs to make it stronger and be more specific. If he can offer some kind of bounty, he might pry away at least some of the insurers into joining his coalition and perhaps encourage some of the antagonistic media to slide towards neutrality.