ENDANGERED NEWSPAPER: AN ANALYSIS OF 10 YEARS OF CORPORATE MESSAGES FROM THE *DALLAS MORNING NEWS*

Amy McLarty, B.J.

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

December 2009

APPROVED:

Tracy Everbach, Major Professor
Koji Fuse, Committee Member
Jacqueline Lambiase, Committee Member
Mitchell Land, Interim Director of the Frank W. Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism and Interim Dean of the Frank W. and Sue Mayborn School of Journalism
Michael Monticino, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

Most newspapers today are struggling to survive in an increasingly fragmented and digital media environment. How have their owners or corporate parents shaped or adapted their business practices to in order to thrive? This question guides the overall approach to this study. The focus is on one newspaper, the *Dallas Morning News*. In particular, how has the *News* used corporate messages to respond to the changing media landscape? This study employs forms of rhetorical and discourse analysis to determine the effectiveness of the *News*’ corporate messages during a 10-year period in order to answer this question. This study finds that the *News* used inconsistent and ineffective corporate communications throughout this tumultuous period.
Copyright 2009

by

Amy McLarty
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study owes a great deal to Dr. Tracy Everbach, my fall 2009 thesis advisor, and to Dr. Jacqueline Lambiase, my spring 2009 thesis advisor. Drs. Everbach and Lambiase guided me closely and diligently as the work evolved over the past several months. I owe Dr. Koji Fuse immense gratitude for also agreeing to join Drs. Everbach and Lambiase on my thesis committee. He too offered valuable feedback that opened my eyes and mind to the thoroughness required of academic research and writing. I also want to deeply thank Dr. Richard Wells for his supporting my first attempts at a thesis topic and for teaching me public relations techniques that I have used daily for the past four years in my work. Dr. Wells also contributed to the useful feedback that guided my research and writing.

Finally, I want to thank Stephanie Hoefken with the Richards Group, whose presentation on the state of newspapers led me to additional research on the financial viability of the medium. Ms. Hoefken also provided general information about the News’ brand campaign, Live Better Here.
INTRODUCTION

One hundred fifty years ago, newspapers were the dominant form of mass media in the United States, and never more so than during the Civil War. One newspaper historian wrote: “The newspaper, which in times past had been an important source of public information, suddenly became crucial and indispensable to all citizens” (Douglas, 1999, p. 55). But forces are at work on the nation’s newspaper printing presses that may end our centuries-old relationship with the daily news on paper. People who read a daily newspaper to learn about current events are in a shrinking minority, according to most indications. According to a Pew Research Center survey, slightly more than a third of Americans, 34%, read a newspaper on a given day, down from 40% in 2006 (Pew Research Center, 2008). Additionally, fewer people are claiming that they accessed any kind of news source: Only 19% of the survey respondents said that they got no news yesterday (Pew Research Center, 2008). And in the 35-49 age group, 17% claimed yesterday as a no-news day (Pew Research Center, 2008). Newspapers such as the Rocky Mountain News have closed, and others such as the Seattle Post Intelligencer are struggling to stay in business (Yahoo!News, 2009). Forces that will not retreat are beginning to grind printing presses to a halt. Media guru Jeff Jarvis (2009) states the following:

Newspapers assumed their competitive advantage was in owning the means of mass production and distribution. In the old, scarcity-based content economy they were right. But now print’s infrastructure carries an unbearable cost burden. So I say papers should set a date in the not-too-distant future when they will turn off the presses (2009, p. 125).
Jarvis is not saying newspapers should go away entirely; he is reminding them that their reinvention is inevitable if they hope to survive. The subject of this research rests on the process of reinvention undertaken over the course of 10 years by one newspaper.

So, the topic of newspapers’ survival in an increasingly fragmented and digital mass communications milieu is timely and relevant to democracy. For instance, aside from the sense of community that comes from reading the review of a show one has attended with several hundred fellow citizens or checking the score from a previous night’s basketball game, daily newspapers matter in other important ways. The watchdog function of newspapers was illustrated when the work of reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward of The Washington Post revealed the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s. Geneva Overholser, dean of the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School of Communication, said newspaper journalism still sets the agenda for all other news reporting (CBS News, 2009). Clay Shirky (2009), an adjunct professor at New York University’s graduate program in interactive telecommunications, agrees and states the following:

It’s true that the print media do much of society’s heavy journalistic lifting, from teasing out every angle of a huge story to the grind of attending the city council meeting, in case something happens. This coverage is beneficial even for people who aren’t newspaper readers, because the work of print journalists is used by everyone from politicians to district attorneys to talk radio hosts to bloggers. (p. 47)
The viability of journalism—especially the kind practiced by reporters at daily newspapers—is a concern for anyone living in or hoping to create a democracy.

The selection of this topic also is personal. I learned early in life that newspaper reporting can have a profound impact on the citizenry. A great uncle, Forrest Weimhold, was owner and publisher of the (now weekly and renamed) Hockley County Herald in my hometown of Levelland, Texas. I grew up with stories of his constant pursuit of information and how the publishing of that news shaped my hometown. Those stories, along with additional experience with high school journalism, shaped my decision to become a reporter. For three years after graduating from The University of Texas at Austin, I worked at two daily newspapers: the Alamogordo Daily News in New Mexico, and the Lubbock Avalanche-Journal in Texas. For the past 15 years, I have worked in public relations, a field that depends on a thriving mass media, including newspapers. Like many reporters, former reporters and mass communications professionals, the enormous shift that is occurring in journalism from print to digital and from profitability to insolvency is dear to me.

How have newspapers been affected by the trend away from print and toward digital options? How have their owners or corporate parents shaped or altered their business practices to adapt or not? These questions guide the overall approach to this study. The focus is on one newspaper in particular, the Dallas Morning News. This study offers an examination of one newspaper’s success or failure at shaping corporate messages in the face of change. The precise research question this study attempts to answer is: How effective were the News’ corporate messages at reflecting, deflecting or denying this newspaper’s approach to adaptation during a shift in the mass
communications business over the 10-year period from 1999 through 2008? The rationale for this study rests on the importance of effective corporate messaging employed for the purposes of successful brand management through public relations. The support for this rationale is discussed in a later section of this study.

The following review section of this study is divided into three parts. First, it reports findings from the literature, thereby detailing the history of newspaper journalism in the United States. This literature review also provides an examination of the recent forces and trends that make up the current business climate for newspapers, thus creating the need to understand more deeply how effective brand management can help improve the sustainability of newspapers. The second portion of this section also examines the history the News and how it has arrived at its current status. The final part of the review section briefly details why a newspaper’s corporate communications are important.

The methodology section of this report explains the two-part research approach that has been employed to analyze the News’ corporate messages. This two-part approach uses both rhetorical and discourse analyses to determine an answer to the research question. The findings section of this report demonstrates what was discovered using both research methods. The conclusion section of this report summarizes the findings, presents the limitations to this study and offers suggestions for further research.
In order to understand where newspapers are today, one must look back at the history of this medium and its relationship to other forms of communications media. According to DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989), mass media in a format akin to daily newspapers are about 400 years old, but predecessors go back in time even further. More than 2,000 years ago, the Romans employed scrolls, known as *Acta Diurna*, from which the word journalism comes (Karolevitz, 1985, p. 3). Seventeenth-century Europeans used the movable type to publish regular information sheets that were sold to or read aloud to the public (Karolevitz, 1985, p. 3). Later in that century, in what would become the United States, printers such as Benjamin Harris published informative handbills that were the direct forerunners of contemporary newspapers. By the early 19th century inexpensive newspapers began to proliferate in American cities and beyond. The nation’s public school system created more literate masses eager to consume information, and for roughly a century in America, newspapers had little other media competition for readers. For nearly a century, nothing except town gossip could compete with the medium’s immediacy (Douglas, 1999). As the practice of journalism matured, more papers strove to provide the most accurate, unbiased information available at the lowest cost for readers. For advertisers, newspapers meant access to a mass audience that was increasingly affluent (Douglas, 1999). Competition arose in the early 20th century for newspapers with the advent of radio (Douglas, 1999, p. 233). The mass media became increasingly fragmented ever since.
There is nothing new about one form of communication eclipsing another. Stone tablets were supplanted by papyrus. Now, electronic media are overcoming print. At first, the advent of electronic media, such as the telegraph, transformed the way and helped to increase the speed at which newspapers gathered and dispersed information (Douglas, 1999, p. 55). For a while, newspapers remained the chief mass medium. During much of this time and despite competition from radio, television, magazines and others, newspapers remained profitable. Philip Meyer (2004) describes the force that allowed newspapers to be highly profitable for most of its lifespan. Beginning in the 1960s, newspapers were increasingly bought and sold as parts of media conglomerates (Meyer, 2004, p. 36). In the 1980s, Wall Street began to pay closer attention as the likes of Al Neuharth of the Gannett Company boosted big business’ attraction to newspapers by using tight money management to create a steady cycle of earnings during both good and bad economic times in the (Meyer, 2004, p. 38). So, newspapers were expected to turn a significant profit, regardless of the economic forces at work elsewhere (Meyer, 2004, p. 39). This high profitability expectation continued until the new millennium, when the popularity of the Internet collided with newspapers’ business model. That business model had undergone a radical shift over the years. In the middle of the 20th century, circulation brought in about 30% of a newspaper’s revenue, but by 2000 it accounted for only 19%, meaning more revenue had to come from advertising (Meyer, 2004, p. 37). At the same time, the ratio of advertising dollars was changing too. In 1950, classified advertising accounted for 18% of that revenue. By 2000, it had grown to 40%.

This increasing reliance on advertising, and, in particular, classified advertising, set newspapers up for trouble as the Internet became common in everyday lives. At first,
though, this didn’t seem a problem for newspapers. As the Internet began to further fragment the mass communication audience in the mid-1990s, newspapers joined the fray by developing their own Web sites. At first, newspapers resorted to shovel-ware, offering their print content online. Today, most offer specialized online content, and many break stories online. Despite the ability to provide robust Internet content, newspaper revenues began to deeply suffer when classified advertising category stalwarts such as general merchandise and employment went online for free or little cost on sites such as Craigslist and Monster (Pew Project for Excellence, 2006).

The past two years for newspapers have been a watershed period, according to many sources. During the prior year, print advertising revenue dropped more than 9%, and paid circulation fell 8.5%. Most predicted the following year would be worse (Bloom, 2008). In early 2008, the prognosticators were proven right. Early that year, the Newspaper Association of America reported the worst drop in advertising revenue in one quarter since 1971 (Saba, 2008a). The online resources that newspapers offer are attracting more online readers. But, online advertising does not generate revenue the same way print does. In 2007, a newspaper reader was considered worth $360 a year and an online reader was worth between $20 to $25 to newspapers (Pew Project for Excellence, 2007). Among the daily newspapers that report their circulation figures to the Audit Bureau of Circulation, the demand for daily newspapers has continued to slide. According to a report in the December 2008 issue of Editor & Publisher, overall circulation figures fell 4.6% and Sunday circulation figures dropped by 4.8%. While print circulation numbers dropped dramatically in recent years, online readership has seen increases. In 2008, there was a 16% jump from 2007 to 2008 (Newspaper Association of
Thus, newspaper executives have increased their attention to their online products (Pew Project for Excellence, 2006). So, if online is the future of “print” journalism, it may be a paltry one in terms of finances.

The rise of one mass medium at the expense of another also appears to be occurring even among electronic media, with the Internet gaining on television. According to a 2009 Pew Research Center report by Rich Morin and Paul Taylor, television sets are decreasingly considered a necessity among Americans. Fifty-two percent of Americans believe televisions are a necessity, a drop of 12% from 2006. Half of Americans believe a home computer is a necessity, which is a drop of 1% from three years ago. But the amount of people who believe high-speed Internet access is a necessity has climbed 2%, with 31% now claiming it a necessity. Mobile phones, according to this study, are also increasingly considered a necessity.

Some experts, like Brian Tierney, chief executive officer of Philadelphia Media Holdings, which owns the Philadelphia Inquirer, view this era of newspaper-based reporting with a sense of optimism. Tierney said during an interview with CBS News, “Times change, but you can either look in the rearview mirror and lament the past. Or, you can say, ‘You know, it’s damn exciting’” (Morrison, 2009). Others, such as journalist and media entrepreneur Jeff Jarvis, believe mass media are dying and that newspapers should adapt, in part, by offering niche products (Jarvis, 2009, p. 129). Supporting this theory is information from Editor & Publisher, which found that the top 10 daily newspapers to gain in circulation in 2008 were in small-to-medium markets with circulation at or less than 50,000 (Saba, 2008b).
History of the *Dallas Morning News*

Twenty years ago, the *Dallas Morning News* was in a fight-to-the-death battle with the *Dallas Times Herald* to dominate the city’s newspaper readership. In late 1991, the *News* delivered the coup de grace by purchasing the *Times Herald*’s assets for $55 million; the *Herald* ceased operations the following day (Dallas Dies, 1991). Dallas joined the ranks of other major metropolitan areas with only one daily newspaper. In 1997, the *News* scooped its printed daily and all other media outlets by posting on its Web site the confession of home-grown terrorist Timothy McVeigh. That year, the newspaper appeared to be soaring. But trouble was brewing. The following year, the company that owned the *News*, called A.H. Belo Corp. at the time, announced that it would offer voluntary retirement to 200 employees of the paper, making up 9% of its staff. Burl Osborne, president of the company’s publishing division called 1998 “a challenging year as advertising momentum slowed, particularly in the employment category” (Nicholson, 1998). The challenges with advertising revenue, and thus profits and staffing, were only beginning. The next 10 years would bring additional problems, including an Internet-device debacle (the Cue-Cat) and a circulation scandal. A story published by *Columbia Journalism Review* reported that since 2000 profits at the *News* had dropped 35% and home delivery had sunk by 10% (Flournoy, 2004). The paper, which boasts of winning six Pulitzer Prizes from 1986 to 1999, would win only two in the next decade. The effectiveness in which the company publicly addressed these challenges is the focus of this thesis.

By reviewing the 124-year history of the *Dallas Morning News*, one can see an arc that reaches its zenith in quality and circulation in the early 1990s. This rise and
descent, and the era in which they occur, reflects a greater trend in the nation’s newspaper industry as a whole. For the purposes of this study, this situation provides the necessary context for how events have shaped its approach to the current trends affecting its business. The following timeline reveals key historical milestones in the paper’s history as well as its mission statement. These highlights and the origins of the paper’s mission statement provide a general setting for the corporate statements that the paper’s parent company have issued during the time of this study.

the News historical timeline, as taken from the paper’s Web site and other sources noted in the bibliography of this report is as follows:

- October 1, 1885. Paper begins publishing with a circulation of 5,000
- 1895. News’ circulation reaches 15,000
- 1906. To commemorate the paper’s 21st birthday, General Manager George Bannerman Dealey, describes the paper’s founders to employees. His remarks, which are verbatim here, were rephrased and then carved on the façade of the paper’s current offices on Young Street:
  
  They built the News upon the rock of truth and righteousness, conducting it always upon the lines of fairness and integrity, and acknowledging the right of the people to get from the newspaper both sides of every important question. (Dallas Morning News, 2009)

- 1926. Dealey and a group of other investors buy the paper from its founders’ families. They incorporate under the name A.H. Belo
- 1930. Circulation reaches 88,000
- 1986. News wins its first Pulitzer Prize
• 1990. *News* purchases rival the *Dallas Times Herald* for $55 million

• 1992. Circulation reaches 515,000


• 1997. *News* breaks Timothy McVeigh story on its Web site

• 1998. Belo cuts 9% of the paper’s staff

• 2000. *News* introduces CueCat, a hand-held bar-code reader that takes users directly to Web sites.

• 2001. CueCat dropped

• 2003. *News* launches *Quick*, a free tabloid-sized paper with short news, entertainment, and sports stories aimed at drawing readers to subscribe to the regular paper

• August 5, 2004. Belo announces that circulation numbers for the *News* had been overstated

• 2004. *News* cuts 150 staff

• 2005. Circulation drops to 462,000

• September 14, 2006. One hundred eleven employees leave the paper voluntarily

• 2007. Belo announces it will spin-off its newspaper division to create a separate company

• 2008. Staff cuts attained through attrition total 170
Newspapers as Brands

Even before the millennium and the new challenges to the old business model employed by the News and most other daily newspapers, leaders in the industry were calling for change in the way the industry markets itself. In 1995, Editor & Publisher reported on the efforts of Cathleen Black, president and CEO of the Newspaper Association of America (Consoli, 1995). Black encouraged executives to sell newspapers as brands. The publication quoted Black as saying, “newspapers can go after the huge opportunity that building brand identity offers—credibility, marketability and new revenue” (Consoli, 1995, p. 11). Newspapers would remain viable media commodities by capitalizing on the trust that they had earned with the public and by investing in new media that was designed to meet the needs of new and existing audiences (Consoli, 1995; Meyer, 2004, p.43).

U.S. newspapers and the companies that own them are not alone in the phenomenon of digital competition and the need for their brands to help capture and retain media consumers. Chouke (2006) reported that newspaper brands will support stronger advertising revenue potential because the audiences associated with strong newspaper brands will help advertisers cut through the fragmented media market. Chouke quoted a U.K. print media trading expert, Steve Goodman, as saying this about the significance of newspaper brands to their financial viability: “When consumers access content around the clock it’ll be harder for advertisers to know when to reach their audience. Clients may therefore buy into brands rather than media platforms. They may go for Times Online and podcasts, for example” (Chouke, 2006, p. 24).
Building and maintaining strong brands is the expertise of David Aaker, marketing professor at the University of California Berkely’s Hass School of Business, who has identified guidelines for building strong brands. Among those guidelines is the recommendation that companies create consistent and therefore effective communications to support their brands. Aaker said: “One practical problem in building and maintaining brand equity is the development of effective communication that is consistency over different media and over time” (Aaker, 1996, p. 58).

This study will attempt to answer whether or not the News conducted its corporate communications and crafted it public relations messages in an effective manner to support the newspaper’s brand during a tumultuous 10-year period. Specifically, this study will attempt to answer the following research question: Have the corporate messages of the Dallas Morning News’ been used effectively during the 10-year period from 1999 through 2008, during which the newspaper has been adapting to the ongoing shift in the mass communications and newspaper industries?
METHODOLOGY

Public relations and corporate communications are forms of rhetoric (Skerlep, 2001, p. 176). Therefore, research methods chosen to examine the research question were forms of rhetorical analysis.

Once the decisions are made, they have to be communicated to various publics in an effective manner and at that moment different genres of public relations discourse have to be deployed. Rhetoric and discourse analysis can elaborate further on these crucial aspects of public relations practice, so they should become of the central preoccupations in the field of public relations theory and research (Skerlep, 2001, p. 185).

In order to analyze the News’ messages and to determine their effectiveness, a two-step research process employing both discourse and rhetorical analyses was used. First, discourse analysis was used to determine consistency, or lack thereof, among a set of messages from the News. Second, rhetorical analysis was employed. This second step involves creating a rubric based on the issue-driven behavioral approach to public relations writing, created by Tucker, Derelian, and Rouner. (1997). A rubric is “a set of categories, criteria for assessment,” (Cooper & Gargan, 2009, p. 54). Then, selected information from the News was graded using this rubric. Both methods are described further in the following two sections.

Methodology of Discourse Analysis

According to Rosalind Gill, “Discourse analysis is the name given to a variety of different approaches to the study of texts, which have developed from different
theoretical traditions and diverse disciplinary locations” (Gill, 2000, p. 172). She also defines discourse analysis as: “a careful, close reading that moves between text and context to examine the content, organization and functions of discourse” (Gill, 2000, p. 188). The analysis itself is then rooted in the researcher’s ability to think critically about what he or she reads and to interpret the text so that he or she can “focus on the construction, organization and functions of the discourse” (p. 178). The discourse analyst then codes the text and sorts the findings (Gill, 2000, p. 179). Essentially, Gill (2000) said, the analyst then sets about establishing patterns in the discourse and studying the way language and even lack of information (or silence) functions. Gill summarizes discourse analysis into eight steps:

1. Formulate research questions.
2. Choose texts to be analyzed.
3. Transcribe the texts in detail. Some texts, such as archival material, newspaper articles, or parliamentary records, will not require transcription.
4. Skeptically read and interrogate the texts.
5. Code – as inclusively as possible. You may want to revise your research questions, as patterns in the text emerge.
6. Analyze, (a) examining regularity and variability in the data, and (b) forming tentative hypotheses.
7. Check reliability and validity through: (a) deviant case analysis; (b) participants’ understanding (when appropriate); and (c) analysis of coherence.
8 Write up. (pp 188-189)
All of Gill’s (2000) eight steps were followed sequentially. First, discourse analysis was used first to develop the bulk of the work involved in this study, and, for the purposes of this study, all eight of Gill’s steps were used. With the research question defined, the second step was to access information provided by the News over the 10-year time frame from 1999 through 2008. This era was selected because it included several tumultuous events at the paper that would provide situations in which the paper’s leadership would be inclined to react publicly. By using traditional and electronic library sources, the following six sources of public statements from the paper were obtained for study and interrogation:

- News releases, 29 in all, obtained electronically from the Belo Corp. and A.H. Belo’s Web sites. For the purposes of this study, these are referred to as proactive communications, meaning that the News deployed them almost exclusively as a means to help shape media coverage and rarely as a requirement or reaction to outside requests.

- Year-end filings to the Securities and Exchange Commission, 11 found, 2 used in the study, obtained electronically through the Electronic Data Gathering, Analysis, and Retrieval system (EDGAR), through which publically traded companies file required documents with the Securities and Exchange Commission. These documents are referred to as reactive because they are required by the federal government.

- Corporate correspondence, four, retrieved from the Belo Corp. and A.H. Belo Web sites. These documents are proactive, as they are corporate communications
designed to help share information and shape opinions of stakeholders (employees and shareholders).

- Industry and consumer media reports, 35, obtained electronically from EBSCOhost. These statements are reactive comments provided to reporters covering the journalism and newspaper industry.

- Stories about the business of the paper published in the paper, 12, accessed from the electronic database Newspaper Source. These stories are included in order to provide additional background information and as additional sources of direct statements from the News leadership, with the understanding that reporters at the News would provide accurate accounts of leadership statements.

- Live Better Here brand advertisements for the News published in the News. Five of these were accessed via microfiche from the Dallas Public Library. These are also labeled as proactive messages from the News.

To best analyze the messages using this method, these sources were read and re-read. Then, the statements were sorted and placed into seven categories created based on the frequency of specific themes that were prevalent over the 10 years worth of data collected. The seven categories are:

- Circulation and readership
- Staffing and layoffs
- Internet and Web
- Advertising and revenues
- Content and quality
- Promoting the paper through advertising: Live Better Here
• Spin-off

Next, the statements were divided into two parts: direct quotations and advertising statements. Most of the information provided by the paper was whittled away during this process, except for direct quotations from the paper’s leadership and relevant information to help provide context for these quotations. This provided for a means to thematically narrow the corporate communications message delivered. These quotations and the supporting information are identified further in the findings portion of this study. The advertising messages represent a different kind of direct message: brand advertising. The text from the selected advertisements is presented in their entirety because they are brief. Both forms of communication represent official messaging, meant to represent the official corporate character of the paper and the parent company.

The final steps were to perform the analysis, to test its validity using deviant case analysis and, finally, to write up the entire process. Additional information resulting from these three steps is revealed in detail in the findings chapter of this study. During steps 6 and 7 of the discourse analysis, one question surfaced and remained unanswerable using discourse analysis: How could one more deeply judge the proactive communications from the News? While discourse analysis revealed consistencies and inconsistencies in messages from the News, all of which were strongly informative, it did not yield a clearly didactic analysis that could help practitioners from the News or any other company write more effective public relations messages. Further study of the existing literature on public relations writing research was made, in order to address this question and, in an additional step apart from the deviant case analysis, to test the findings of the discourse
analysis. Few studies and texts exist that focus exclusively on public relations writing, but at least one, by Tucker et al. (1997), offers a perspective that is relevant to this study.

Methodology of Rhetorical Analysis

Upon reading the text by Tucker et al., it is possible to describe the approach recommended by the authors as a form of rhetorical analysis. Rhetoric is, among other more modern uses of the term, the “act of persuasion” (Leach, 2000, p. 207). Still another definition of rhetoric means the study of rhetoric, or rhetorical analysis. Leach defined rhetorical analysis this way:

...look at texts and oral discourse, developing theories of how and why they are compelling and persuasive, why they were developed when they were, what argument structures, metaphors and structuring principles are at work and, in some cases, what can be done to make different forms of communication work better in context (Leach, p.207)

According to Leach, the Roman orator Cicero divided rhetoric into five parts: invention, disposition, style, memory and delivery. Invention essentially means context, and in the ancient world this was subdivided into ethos, pathos and logos. Ethos is the argument based on the credibility of the speaker or source. Pathos refers to an appeal to a listener or reader’s emotions. Logos represents the worldview under which an argument or an appeal is made (Leach, 2000, p. 214). Disposition is the organization of the information in an argument or appeal, while style refers to the word or phrasing choices made by rhetoricians to evoke imagery. This can be broken out further to include parts of speech such as metaphor, analogy, metonymy and synecdoche. Finally, there are memory
and delivery. Memory applies both to the more antiquated art of memorization by the
speaker and to the more contemporary approach of employing shared cultural memories
to make an argument more effective (Leach, 2000, p. 217). Delivery refers to the study of
the medium used to deliver an argument, as in by speech, television, written
communication, etc. (Leach, 2000, p. 21).

Cicero’s five-part breakdown of rhetorical analysis is mirrored in the behavioral
framework created by Tucker et al., which establishes a series of basic questions that can
be applied to create effective public relations messages. Tucker et al. put it this way:
“Since generating supportive behavior – be it action or inaction – is the main reason why
most organizations invest in public relations, behavior should drive public relations
campaigns and program plans” (Tucker et al., 1997, p. 4).

The four questions to be asked are:

1. Does the communication raise a public need, concern or interest?
2. Is your desired behavior clearly packaged as a credible solution to the need,
   concern or interest?
3. Have you clearly presented the benefits of action and the consequences of
   inaction to create discomfort with existing behavior?
4. Have you helped the receiver mentally rehearse the desired behavior? (Tucker et
   al., 1997, p. 4)

Tucker et al. base their framework on behavioral psychology and the work of Kurt
Lewin and Leon Festinger (Tucker et al., 1997, p. 41). Many parts of the 4-step
behavioral framework mirror Cicero’s five components of rhetoric as well. Question 1
can be seen as reflecting Cicero’s invention category. Tucker et al. dive deeper into
question 1 by explaining that the use of mental imagery – or metaphors and analogies – in writing can help frame an issue in a more personal way. Cicero also suggested the use of metaphors and analogy in his category of style (Leach, 2000, p.216). The Question 2 by Tucker et al also recalls Cicero’s invention category, particularly as it applies to the establishment of source credibility, or ethos, as well as the validity of the argument as a whole, or logos (Leach, 2000, p. 214).

Tucker et al. provide several examples of how this method can be used to create public relations communications and programs that are designed to directly influence behavior such as public safety campaigns and public health education campaigns, thus the use of the term, “issue-driven,” in the title of their book. Nonetheless, Tucker et al. also demonstrate that the framework should be used by public relations practitioners to render all forms of organizational communications more effective, including marketing communications (Tucker et al., 1997, p. 5), news releases (Tucker et al., 1997, p. 90) and internal employee communications (Tucker et al., 1997, p. 225). It is possible to create a rubric using the criteria for success that Tucker et al. provide. Table 1 below demonstrates how I created a rubric by using elements of the behavioral framework.
Table 1

*Behavioral Framework Rubric*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the <em>News</em> Document</th>
<th>1A</th>
<th>1B</th>
<th>2A</th>
<th>2B</th>
<th>2C</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feb. 23, 2001</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 24, 2001</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 10, 2003</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 15, 2004</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 5, 2004</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 16, 2004</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 24, 2004</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 29, 2004</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 11, 2005</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 13, 2005</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 30, 2006</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 13, 2006</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 16, 2006</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 14, 2006</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 1, 2007</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 28, 2008&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 28, 2008&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 24, 2008&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 24, 2008&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 11, 2008</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTALS</strong></td>
<td>✓(15)</td>
<td>✓(0)</td>
<td>✓(9)</td>
<td>✓(20)</td>
<td>✓(4)</td>
<td>✓(9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>x(5)</td>
<td>x(20)</td>
<td>x(11)</td>
<td>x(0)</td>
<td>x(16)</td>
<td>x(11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* 1A represents the first question offered by Tucker et al. in the behavioral framework rubric, “Does the communication raise a public need, concern, or interest?” (Tucker et al., 1997, p. 4). 1B represents a subset of the first question, which relates to the use of “Mental imagery: using concrete language and visuals to paint pictures” (Tucker et al., 1997, p.45). 2A represents their second question, “Is your desired behavior clearly packaged as a credible solution to the need, concern, or interest?” (Tucker et al., 1997, p.4). The categories 2B and 2C represent additional questions that practitioners can use to determine if their messages are credible. 2B represents the “Credible source” (Tucker, 1997, p. 49) issue. 2C represents, “Credible writing style” (Tucker et al., 1997, pp. 50-52). No. 3 represents the question, “Have you clearly presented the benefits of acting and the consequences of inaction to create discomfort with existing behavior?” Tucker, 1997. (Tucker et al., 1997, pp. 49) or more specifically, have you applied the “What’s in it for me?” principle? (Tucker et al., 1997, pp. 52-53)?

<sup>a</sup> letter to employees from Robert W. Decherd  
<sup>b</sup> letter to shareholders from Robert W. Decherd  
<sup>c</sup> letter to employees from Robert W. Decherd  
<sup>d</sup> letter to shareholders from Robert W. Decherd  
✓ = yes  
X = no
To perform the rhetorical analysis portion this research, 20 examples of corporate communications were selected from the *News*: the four letters and 16 of the news releases. For the purposes of analyzing these 20 documents from the *News*, Questions 1, 2 & 3 were used. Question 4 was excluded because its use in this study is not applicable. That question better analyzes public relations communications that are directly tied to action or inaction on the part of readers, such as public health campaigns, and none of the examples from the *News* could be categorized in that genre of public relations communications. Question 1 was sub-divided into four sub-categories, which are used by Tucker et al. to elaborate how a writer employs language to help the reader mentally and emotionally interpret the behavior or opinion that is to be adopted.
FINDINGS

The Discourse analysis

The findings from the discourse analysis have been organized using the seven coded categories as sections. Each one of these sections is organized chronologically in order to build a narrative tied to the 10 years that this study covers. The direct quotations and additional information gleaned for the discourse analysis are used to further present the data in a narrative fashion.

Circulation and Readership

In 2001, the News reported that it was pulling out of the so-called mid-cities markets, the suburban area between Dallas and Fort Worth, where it had been competing with the Fort Worth Star-Telegram for readership and circulation by dedicating staff to cover those suburbs intensely (Hudson, 2001). Instead, the paper decided to target nearby suburbs north of Dallas. James Moroney, publisher of the News told Eileen Hudson of Editor & Publisher, “When we’ve got that up to the strength it should be, then we can go into the areas that don’t identify so strongly with Dallas” (Hudson, 2001).

In 2003, the News decided to attack eroding circulation by increasing readership among a younger audience by launching Quick, a free, five-day-a-week tabloid-format publication that targets the 18-34 age group. The company news release that announced the new publication quoted Robert Decherd, chairman, president and CEO of Belo (Belo News Release, November 10, 2003). Decherd said Quick would grow advertising dollars and attract new readers. He elaborated by saying:
By extending the trusted content that readers have come to expect from the *Dallas Morning News* to a summary format, we are providing the market with a complementary publication that will yield incremental advertising revenues. We also expect *Quick* to attract new readers to the *Dallas Morning News*. (Belo News Release, November 10, 2003)

In addition to *Quick*, the *News* also launched *al Dia* and the *Dallas Morning News – Collin County Edition*. In the company’s end-of-year financial news release, these and other niche publications were promoted as, “exciting products … to create new revenue streams by reaching underserved segments of their markets” (News release, February 6, 2004). Though expenses for the company increased to launch *Quick*, operating costs and other expenses only rose 1.6%, according to the release. Startup costs related to it and other new products would be $4 million to $5 million in 2004.

In an August 5, 2004, news release, Belo announced that an internal investigation revealed that the *News* had been overstating its circulation figures. The company reported that the figures were elevated by 1.5% for the daily paper and 5% for the Sunday paper. Together with a planned statewide circulation reduction and decreasing circulation volumes, the drop in circulation was totaled to be 5% for the daily paper and 11.5% for the Sunday paper. Belo planned to compensate advertisers for the increased costs to buy ads due to the overstatement. “the *Dallas Morning News*’ circulation practices must be completely consistent with Belo’s uncompromising standards,” said Robert Decherd in the August 5 release. Eleven days later, in an August 16, 2004, release, Belo announced that the estimated cost to compensate advertisers was $23 million. The investigation into what caused the overstatement could cost another $3 million, the statement said. Decherd
said in this news release, “The trust of our advertisers is a pillar of the economic value Belo has built for our shareholders, and this compensation plan should be regarded as an investment in the Company’s future.” On August 24, in another news release, Belo reported that a federal lawsuit related to the overstatement had been filed against it and specific company employees.

By late September of 2004, the company told the public that its investigation into the overstatement was complete. Henry Becton, Jr., chair of Belo’s audit committee said, “This investigation has been painstaking and thorough” (September 29, 2004, news release). The release went on to say that the newspaper’s circulation department had used several tactics, including contests, cash incentives, bonuses and low rates, to fuel circulation. The effect was that circulation managers in some areas did not scrutinize circulation figures reported to them. There was no evidence to indicate improper circulation efforts at other Belo papers or among the News’s senior executive leadership, according to the release. Belo would, the release also said, redistribute a code of business ethics to all employees and managers.

The details of the circulation fraud consumed Belo’s year-end reports and filings. And for the first time in its messages, Belo claimed a history of 162 years, starting with its founding as a Texas newspaper company in Galveston (EDGAR, 2004). Previous public statements claimed slightly shorter roots to Dallas a few years later. The statement also boldly embraced the term, “online” for what appears to be the first time. In its 10-K filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission, Belo reported that the SEC had begun an industry-wide investigation into circulation practices, including at the News.
In 2005, the circulation fraud was the focus of several news industry and consumer media stories, which also detailed staff layoffs and other problems. In a headline accompanying a January *Texas Monthly* article titled “The Dallas Morning Blues,” by writer S.C. Gwynne, the magazine reported, “It’s been nothing but bad news lately for Belo....” (Gwynne, 2005, p. 50) Robert Decherd acknowledged in Gwynne’s article that the circulation overstatement had affected leadership morale. “You could not have come up with something that would have been more disappointing or more hurtful to the men and women who run this company at the top” (Gwynne, 2005, p. 54).

On May 13, 2005, the company announced audited circulation figures that showed a drop in daily circulation. At the same time, Belo said it would launch several initiatives aimed at increasing circulation controls and boosting readership. Those would be: creating a circulation review team, developing new localized content and building a new production plant (Belo, May 13, 2005, news release). In a February 9, 2006, end-of-year news release, Belo said that distribution of the *News* would be cut from areas about 200 miles more outside of Dallas, with the exception of Austin. The new release said that readers outside the Dallas area and Austin “will be encouraged to migrate to DallasNews.com or other electronic versions of the paper” (Belo, February 9, 2006, news release). The change was made to give advertisers the more targeted demographic they desire, the release said. Robert Decherd is also quoted in the release, positively remarking on the newspapers owned by Belo. “We are encouraged by the pacings within the Newspaper Group and expect solid revenue growth for the first quarter,” he said (Belo, February 9, 2006, news release).
In its September 14, 2006, news release announcing severance packages for 111 employees, Belo claims that the News has a readership of 2.1 million, in a combined weekly print and online audience. This figure is about 30% more than the 1.6 million readers claimed for the News in a previous news release from Belo (Belo, April 13, 2006, news release). The addition of that many readers, presumably including online readers with print readers, demonstrates a gradual move toward an integrated media platform of print and online assets. This shift was underscored by information in the September 14, 2006, news release that stated that 30 Belo positions were reallocated to “Internet-centric” jobs.

Early in the following year, as Belo made its 2006 results and plans the next year public, the company announced another way of tightening its financial belt by tightening its circulation focus. Distribution of the paper was limited to a 200-mile radius around Dallas, plus Austin, effective on April 1, 2006, and then was limited to a 100-miles radius plus Austin circulation on February 1, 2007. (EDGAR, 2006, p. 6). The paper’s leadership addressed its circulation woes in a story published in its own pages on April 27, 2007. The story reported that, while speaking to stock analysts, Decherd said the News will report percentage drops in March 31 circulation figures that are “in the low teens” for both daily and Sunday, compared with the same period in 2006. He noted that part of the circulation decline stems from the News’ decisions to limit distribution of the newspaper through third-party barter arrangements and to shrink its distribution. Decherd said: “Going forward, ‘we are going to do our best to hold as close to the current level, meaning post the March 31 period, as we can’” (Belo 1Q earnings slide, 2007).
The newspaper made national industry headlines when declining circulation numbers were made public. A May 7, 2007, Advertising Age story called the News’s 14% decline “shocking.” The paper attributed half of that figure to the decision to cut the geographic range of distribution. The paper’s leadership was seeking a circulation that captures readers, “that provide advertisers with the strongest possible return on investment rather than increasing circulation with subscribers having marginal value who are expensive to attract and retain,” James Moroney told the publication (Mullman, 2007, p. 16). Still, a 7-% decline would be the largest decline among the nation’s top-25 papers, Advertising Age reported. In August 2008, Belo added a free newspaper, Briefing, to the News’s family of print products in order to give advertisers access to more readers. The paper began publishing Briefing with a circulation of 200,000 non-subscribers of the traditional paper Wednesday through Saturdays (Case, 2008a). Overall, the addition of Briefing and online readers meant that readership for The News had increased, as of mid-2008 (Case, 2008a).

Staffing and Layoffs

In an October 10, 2001, story in the News, Belo announced it would cut 160 positions, 65 of which would come from the News staff. James Moroney, the News’ publisher and chief executive officer, said in the story, “The quality of this newspaper, for our readers and our advertisers, will not be impaired” (Belo to cut, 2001). Three years later, cuts were reported again. The day after Belo reported in 2004 that its internal investigation into its circulation misstatement was complete, the Wall Street Journal reported in its September 30, 2004, Eastern edition that Belo would be cutting 250 jobs,
mostly from the paper. In the January 2005 *Texas Monthly* article, Robert Decherd also acknowledged to writer S.C. Gwynne that recent personnel cuts were, “painful” (Gwynne, 2005p.57).

According to an article by Craig Flournoy in the May/June 2004 Columbia Journalism Review, Moroney addressed a gathering of the *News* employees, comparing the paper to someone near death: “The patient may appear healthy but, frankly, he’s slowly dying” (Flournoy, 2004, p. 12). The cure? According to statements attributed to Moroney in the article, it would be a combination of listening to and acting on concerns raised by staff members as well as performing more investigative reporting.

A comprehensive *American Journalism Review* article also recounted the *News’* recent disappointments, including much about lay-offs, in an April/May 2005 article by Charles Layton titled “The Dallas Mourning News.” Layton reported that the *News* lost 150 employees in its recent job cuts. Among the positions cut were a national editor, 18 sports reporters, three photographers, a European reporter and members of its Mexico City staff. About 550 employees remained to operate the newsroom. Layton also reported that, during their February 2005 conference call with shareholders, company officials issued 12 % more in dividends and that 15 of Belo’s 25 holdings had record revenues during 2004. Moroney addressed employees in September 2004, Layton wrote, and during the meeting, Moroney referred to the staff cuts as, “the common good of the organization,” and the situation that led to them as a, “perfect storm” (Layton, 2005, p. 23). Decherd told Layton that the cuts would have been made regardless of the circulation overstatement. And while Layton reported that he spoke with staff who said morale at the paper was low, Decherd questioned that fact. Still, Layton reported that the
News’s leadership was conducting employee meetings, at the time of his reporting. Mong told Layton, “It’s a huge public relations issue out there” (Layton, 2005, p. 31). Moroney also told Layton that he and the other leaders were forced to re-recruit staff. Finally, Layton reported that Decherd described the situation at the News as unhappy yet committed to the paper’s successful future. He said, “What we’re saying is, let’s take a step back together and understand what it is we have created as an organization ... and put back together the commitment, the loyalty, the belief that will carry us forward” (Layton, 2005, p. 31).

The theme of evolving the News to meet a changing media environment was employed again when Belo announced that 111 employees at the paper accepted voluntary severance, according to a September 14, 2006, news release from Belo. In this statement, Decherd described the staff reduction this way: “Belo is intensely focused on the right allocation of resources enterprise-wide, building up necessary competitive capabilities, and maintaining marketing and new product investments, while reducing costs wherever possible” (Belo, September 14, 2006, news release). About 450 staff members would remain at the News, according to the news release.

In a 2007 study published in Columbia Journalism Review, Flournoy and Everbach reported the effects of the paper’s recent employee cuts. Flournoy and Everbach’s research indicated that most people who left the paper were happier than they were while working there. The report also quoted the News leadership responding to the cuts. James Moroney spoke positively about the results. He said, “Overall, I believe it is a better paper today than it was three or four years ago,” (Flournoy & Everbach, 2007, p. 37). Flournoy and Everbach also reported a recent survey that showed a 19 % decline in
reader satisfaction between the years 2004 to 2006. (Flournoy & Everbach, 2007, p. 37). Mong responded, saying, “...there’s no silver bullet explanation” (Flournoy & Everbach, 2007, p. 37).

Bob Mong was quoted in an October 2006 *Editor and Publisher* responding to the staff reductions. He told *Editor & Publisher*: “We are going to organize around and increase localism and determine what we are going to be best at, and talk about things we are going to give up doing” (Saba, 2006). For instance, Mong said, Washington stories with little or no connection to Dallas or Texas will not be reported by the *News* writers (Saba, 2006). In an October 20, 2006, story reported in the *News* about Belo’s recent staff severances, Robert Decherd, Belo’s chairman, president and CEO, was quoted as saying:

Belo continues to make steady progress in transforming its business to compete in an increasingly Internet-centric marketplace. ... Our operations are evolving to reflect fundamental changes in media usage by consumers and advertisers, and we’re focused on shaping Belo’s business for outstanding performance both now and in the future. (Belo profit declines, October 20, 2006,)

By the middle of the next year, after Belo spun off its newspaper holding to create the newly formed newspaper company A.H. Belo, the company was telling its employees and shareholders that something had to give. Once again, employees of A.H. Belo papers, including the *News*, were being asked to consider a voluntary severance package. In a July 28, 2008, letter to employees, Robert Decherd called the cause of the situation an, “unprecedentedly adverse business environment” coupled with a, “market ... overreacting to a combination of secular and cyclical changes.” In a letter to shareholders issued the same day, Decherd said, the goal of the severance packages would be to reduce costs by
$50 million mostly through company-wide cuts in positions totaling 670, including the
170 lost through attrition and hiring freezes. The company’s newspapers continue to be
the company’s key assets, according to Decherd’s letter to shareholders. Despite shifting
resources to online ventures, Decherd told shareholders “we believe that there will be a
place for print-on-paper newspapers for many years to come as an important part of the
Company’s multi-platform distribution effort to reach audiences through whatever
medium they prefer”

The staffing situation at A.H. Belo and the News by end of 2008 had become
grim. Robert Decherd announced that, despite cutting 450 employees voluntary
company-wide staff reductions in September 2008, an additional 90 employees across
Belo had to lose their jobs to meet staff-reduction goals (Case, 2008b).

Internet and Web

In a January 18, 2000, article published in the News, Belo announced that it was
investing $12.5 million in DigitalConvergence.com and a technology called Concerto, the
reader for CueCat, a handheld device that scans barcodes and directs users to Web sites.
The article stated: “James Moroney, president of Belo Interactive Inc., said Concerto is
‘the first Internet technology that we have seen that not only empowers our own Internet
strategy but leverages back into our core business, both in content and in advertising, in a
very powerful way’” (Dallas-Based Media Firm, 2000). The technology would, the
article reported, connect newspapers and television with the Internet. The article went on:
“Burl Osborne, The News’ publisher and president of Belo’s publishing division, said:
‘There has been, especially recently, a lot of discussion about the theory of how media, traditional and new, would converge. This is convergence, literally.’” Later that year, Belo rolled out the $37.5 million investment in CueCat to subscribers. But in September 2001, Belo announced that it would be ending its relationship with the company that created CueCat. News leadership addressed the topic in a September 6, 2001, article in the paper, with a headline that stated; “Belo abandoning CueCat technology. 200,000 sent to readers of the News for free.” Skip Cass, Belo senior vice president, was quoted as saying: “While we go into any project like this with the expectation of success, there is a realization that risk is involved and not every project has a 100 percent success rate” (Belo to Stop Using Technology, 2001). The cost of CueCat to Belo was around $40 million.

In a 2001 news release announcing an address titled, “Moving Forward,” Belo’s chairman, president and chief executive officer, Robert Decherd, told attendees at Editor and Publisher’s Interactive Newspaper Conference that newspapers would be the journalistic content providers for the Internet. “We brought content to the radio spectrum and consumers followed. We brought content to the television spectrum and consumers followed. We are bringing content to the Internet and consumers are following. This is not a time of retrenchment” (Belo, February 23, 2001, news release). The release does not mention CueCat. Quotes presented in this news release anticipate future strategies by Belo and the News. Decherd is quoted further in this news release: “There is a business in the business of new media. We can realize the opportunity by focusing on the consumer, preserving our inheritance advantage of localism, preparing for broadband and practicing excellence in journalism online.”
In May 2001, Belo announced the retirement of Burl Osborne, president of Belo’s publishing division. The news release announcing the retirement employed the word “convergence” to describe the ways in which Belo is making the most of its various media holdings. The release also announced support for the company’s new management team of James Moroney and Robert (Bob) Mong, saying that they were the, “strongest commitment yet to realizing the opportunities afforded by convergence of the Company’s various media businesses” (Belo, May 24, 2001, news release). The release also asserted that this new management team would exploit these media platforms particularly to support classified advertising. The boilerplate in this release appears to be the first time Belo uses the terms “interactive” and “new media” to describe part of its business assets. The term convergence was applied again, when the News leadership was interviewed by American Journalism Review about Osborne’s retirement and the paper’s new Moroney-Mong management team. “We tend to think of ourselves as a newspaper when we should be thinking of ourselves as a great creator of content,” Moroney was quoted (Wenner, 2001).

Belo put this convergence in action in 2004 through an award-winning documentary. The paper’s sister television station, Belo-owned WFAA-TV, produced War Stories, a documentary that captured the behind-the-scenes lives of Belo correspondents embedded with U.S. troops in Iraq. The Press Club of Atlantic City honored the documentary with a National Headliner Award. “Our Company’s future will depend on how well our media operations work together by sharing content, creating combined sales and marketing opportunities, and embracing enterprise-wide technology
platforms,” said Jack Sanders, Belo president of media operations in a March 15, 2004, company news release about the documentary.

The paper continued to build its online strategy by creating new Web ventures with other papers and with online companies. In 2005, the paper announced a new online auction venture with the Star-Telegram called DFW online. Before the close of the year, Belo announced it was joining with the online company Yahoo! to offer an online job-search and recruitment advertising product to local advertisers. A May 9, 2007, story in the paper reported that Robert W. Decherd told shareholders he was optimistic about the Yahoo deal. “It’s a challenging business right now. We’ve got the right plan” (Belo CEO, 2007).

Advertising and Revenues

An October 28, 1999, story published in the News, was positive about advertising and revenue for both Belo and the paper. The article reported:

Although advertising revenue at the Dallas Morning News was up only slightly in the first five months of the year, since June we’ve seen stronger advertising demand and our prospects going forward appear to be much improved,” Mr. Decherd said. …The company also said the News would report circulation increases for both daily and Sunday editions for the six-month period ending September 30.(Dallas-Based Media Company, 1999)

Two years later, however, the news about revenue and advertising began to take a negative turn. In 2001, the paper said it had experienced decreases in retail and classified
advertising, 15% and 19% drops respectively (Hudson & Fitzgerald, 2001). End-of-year financial reports for 2002 indicated that revenues at the *News* decreased 1.9%, with a 2% decline in advertising revenues. In particular, classified employment advertising revenue dropped 34.6% for that year. Dunia Shive, vice president and chief financial officer for Belo, said this about classified employment advertising revenue: “We do not expect a significant turnaround in classified employment volumes at the *Dallas Morning News* until there is job creation with the economic recovery” (Belo, February 7, 2003, news release).

In a January 2005 *Texas Monthly* article, the paper’s leadership reported that losses to the company included costs from adding new publications, what Decherd called “brand extensions” such as *Quick* – and the write-offs for CueCat. Quotes from Decherd used in the story were upbeat about these costs. He referred to the cost of refunding advertisers in light of the circulation overstatement as “charges.” Despite that, he said, the company managed to grow. “We have a business model were each of those (brand extensions) become cash-flow positive within the next two to three years” (Gwynne, 2005). On May 11, 2005, the company told the public in a news release that it would build a new plant in South Dallas for distribution and production, calling it, “one of Belo’s largest capital investments ever in the city of Dallas and the first in Southern Dallas.” Two years later, in an April 27, 2007, story in the *News*, Belo announced that its earnings dropped more than 10%. The cause for this decline was attributed to a 10.8% drop in newspaper revenue. Decherd optimistically responded by stating that the company was, “realizing the benefits of our proactive approach toward re-engineering
Belo’s newspaper businesses, and we are diligently seeking efficiencies across the company” (Belo 1Q earnings slide, 2007).

Content and Quality

The 2001 management change announced when Burl Osborne retired was covered in a Texas Monthly story. The article raised criticism of the News as soft on local leaders and business. Osborn replied, saying the News’s reputation had relied on, “being fair, evenhanded, and even-tempered as well as accurate” (Patoski, 2001). Mong also addressed the new leadership’s desire to improve the paper. Mong told Patoski: “Over the past twenty years our ability to cover news as it breaks has improved dramatically. But are we creating an environment where we are breaking stories?”

The following year, 2002, Mong made a speech to employees on November 7, 2002. The speech was detailed in a 2004 Columbia Journalism Report story. In it, Mong was quoted as telling employees, “Clearly, in nearly every measurable way, we are far better today” (Flournoy, 2004, p. 15). Still, reports of so-called sacred cows receiving little or no negative coverage dogged the paper’s leadership. Moroney replied to those complaints detailed in the CJR article, by stating that he had heard those rumors but never found them to be true. “Everything that I felt needed to be in the paper, got in the paper from the time I was managing editor” (Flournoy, 2004, p. 14).

In a January 2005 Texas Monthly article, about the level of quality that the paper’s reporting had reached in recent years, James Moroney told the magazine that he believed the paper had room for improvement. He said:
While I give myself a failing grade, I don’t give the newsroom and the stories we are doing a failing grade. We have been doing and will continue to do great journalism. But I think we can also do better (Gwynne, 2005, p.58).

When asked if the paper had suffered in quality since layoffs in 2004, Mong told Charles Layton of American Journalism Review, “I don’t see a diminution anywhere” (Layton, 2005, p.24).

Promoting the Paper through Advertising: Live Better Here

In 2005, the paper also announced a new $3.7 million multi-media marketing campaign. The campaign included billboards and television. The following five samples are taken from display ad from the campaign published in the paper, except for one, which was published in Quick. They are provided to not only demonstrate how the News is promoting itself through advertising, a kind of official corporate messaging, but also to serve as a comparison to other corporate messages from this era. The paper used the slogan Live Better Here in advertising and other official communications such as news releases through 2008.

1. Date: September 12, 2005
   Section: Page13 C
   Headline: Ready for a daily take on last night’s hottest shows?
in the *Dallas Morning News*. A daily all-in-one collection of what’s happening around you.

2. Date: February 17, 2006  
   Section: Page 10D  
   Headline: Still Crazy?  
   Other messages: Ed Bark reviews the upcoming PBS special *Monty Python’s Personal Best*, featuring handpicked clips from the cast. Does the humor hold up in 2006? Read more, Sunday in TV Week.

3. Date: February 17, 2006  
   Section: Page 1F  
   Headline: Foodies rejoice!  
   Other messages: The 2nd annual Savor Dallas runs from February 16-18, and gives local foodies reason to salivate. Check out the wine, food, events and restaurants to sample, today in Guide.

4. Date: April 6, 2006  
   Publication: *Quick*, page 6  
   Headline: Know better. Vote better.  
   Other messages: More local content from your part of town

5. Date: October 21, 2006  
   Section: Page 20A  
   Headline: RB IQ
Other messages: Staff Writer Todd Archer takes a look at the evolution of the Cowboys’ Julius Jones and how he’s becoming a smarter running back.

Tomorrow in SportsDay.

Spin-off

In August 2006, Belo announced Cyndy Carr as its new vice president for strategy at the News. Her assignment was to create new projects and plans that help the paper adapt to the changing media landscape. In the news release announcing Carr’s position, Robert Decherd calls Belo’s six operating companies, “... an increasingly matrixed organizational structure” (Belo, August 16, 2006, news release).

Despite this matrixed organizational structure, in late 2007, Belo announced that it would spin off its newspaper division into a separate publicly traded company called A.H. Belo. By cleaving them from Belo, the newspapers would become more nimble and better able to adapt to compete, according to Robert Decherd (Maxon, 2007). Belo announced that the new company’s units had revenues of $750 million, 3,800 employees and served markets with 3.7 million people (Belo, October 1, 2007, news release). As a company with no debt, it would, Decherd said, “have the financial flexibility to compete in this challenging operating environment and return cash to shareholders through an attractive recurring annual dividend yield” (Belo, October 1, 2007, news release).

The paper reported this announcement in its October 1, editions, quoting Decherd saying that a lack of debt, “puts the newspapers in a position to win” (Maxon, 2007). The article went on to quote more of Decherd’s optimism:
As to the newspaper business, we need to be more cheerful. This business is important to our democracy… Journalism as we practice today is changing at a very rapid rate. ... But, there will always be a need for great journalism, and there will always be a need for the role that newspapers like the *Dallas Morning News* (Maxon, 2007))

The lack of debt was also reported as a benefit for the company in an October 18, story in the paper. The government filing for the spin-off was quoted in the story and stated: “A.H. Belo can focus on investing in technology platforms which will likely become the core of its future business without concerns about servicing the higher debt loads more appropriate for television business” (Case, 2007). But, by the end of 2008, A.H. Belo was in debt. A November 1, 2008, story in the *News* reported that the company had to add $10 million in debt to pay for a 90-person staff reduction in October and anticipated additional layoffs early in the next year. Decherd was quoted as saying, “These are challenging times for A.H. Belo, the industry and the country” (Case, 2008b).

Discussion of the Findings from the Discourse Analysis

Though the statements and messages discovered for and reported in this study are logical in their immediate contexts, they rarely connect thematically to a larger strategy or brand message. This disconnection to a larger theme makes them weak. Every news release, public statement and advertisement provides an opportunity for a company to present a united, consistent and strategic front. In the case of the *News*, most of the statements selected for this study indicated missed opportunities for stakeholders and
members of the public to develop a sense of trust in the paper’s brand and in Belo as a corporate parent. The statements are also frequently inconsistent in their messaging.

Statements about circulation are an example of a missed opportunity on the part of Belo and News leadership. As the paper contracted its circulation down over the ten years covered in this study to a 100-mile radius around Dallas, the statements offered indicated that the paper was seeking readership -- a better demographic with closer ties to Dallas and the surrounding cities -- for its advertisers while reducing costs. In 2001, James Moroney remarked, “When we’ve got that up to the strength is should be, then we can go into the areas that don’t identify so strongly with Dallas,” when the paper pulled staff covering specific suburbs to cover closer, northern suburbs. There was no mention in his remark as to how this change fit any strategy. In the midst of these circulation contractions and altered reporting habits, the paper was also announcing plans to boost readership, improve production and increase revenue. It also began, in 2006, to include online readership as part of its messages about readership and circulation. For instance, when the paper launched Quick and al Dia in 2003, the focus was more on the creation of new sources of revenue. None of these activities seem to be connected to an overall strategy, based on the statements offered by the paper’s leadership. When the paper’s leadership addressed the circulation overstatement, the message is inconsistent. On one hand, the leadership seems to accept accountability for the overstatement (“Belo’s uncompromising standards,” and, “The trust of our advertisers is a pillar of the economic value Belo has built ...”), but later statements from leadership push responsibility on mid-level management and express disappointment rather than regret (“You could not have
come up with something that would have been more ... hurtful to the men and women who run this company...").

Quotes from leadership about staffing cuts and layoffs focus more on the effect, or little effect, on quality and, again, barely address any connection to an overall strategy focused on localization. A good example of this missed opportunity is Robert Decherd’s quote on October 20, 2006. He blamed staff layoffs on the paper’s increasing focus on the Internet, but does not elaborate as to why staff cuts, versus staff increases, are needed to fulfill this strategy. When addressing quality, as it related to staffing, the remarks by leadership are inconsistent and sometimes conflicting. In 2001, Moroney claims quality, “will not be impaired.” In 2005, Moroney likens the paper to a patient who is dying. In 2007, Mong said he believed quality had improved despite staff cuts.

The paper’s brand advertising campaign employed several messages to help assert the brand slogan *Live Better Here*. One of the most troubling and inconsistent messages used in the campaign was the use of promoting staff. Throughout the life of the campaign, from 2005 to date, the paper has been laying off staff. So, in one media arena – advertising – the paper is promoting the attributes of its employees, including their faces, while in other arenas it is defending the quality of the paper despite regular staff reductions. The paper should have stuck to other messages to support the campaign, like coverage of local food festivals, and promotion of new sections and publication.

In 2006, there appears the only reference in this study to changes at the paper as part of an overall strategy. Mong is quoted twice, in an October *Editor and Publisher* article and in an October 20 *News* story. There was frank talk included in these pieces, and it all connected to a strategy of localism and increased online content. Mong said,
“Our operations are evolving to reflect fundamental changes in media usage ...” This transparency and consistency is found in few other statements or quotes. A memo from Decherd a year later claims that, “there will be a place for print-on-paper newspapers for many years to come as an important part of the Company’s multi-platform distribution effort ...” Compared to the measured response that Mong gave two years earlier, Decherd’s memo, which was addressing additional layoffs and other cost-cutting measures, rambled.

During the short time that the paper was issuing statements about CueCat, the paper’s leadership used the term “convergence” frequently to describe its rationale for creating and offering the device. Again, this was another missed opportunity to tie this business decision to a bigger strategy of increasing localism, and growing readership and advertising. Also, the notion of converging Belo’s media units via CueCat to advertisers and additional information on the Internet was debunked six years later when Belo decided to jettison its newspaper division. In this way, Belo appears to be employing shifting strategies to cope with changes in the mass media landscape. The paper also did not clearly comment on its finances. After a 10% decline in revenues, Decherd commented, using business jargon such as “charges,” “cash-flow positive,” and “diligently seeking efficiencies.” Seldom is the language about revenue clear, and again, the statements attributed to leadership do not link the topic revenue-generating tactics to an overall business strategy.

The inconsistencies of messaging was best revealed in the decision to spin off the troubled newspaper division, including the News, its flagship medium and the one that ties it to its deep corporate roots from the rest of Belo’s media assets. No messaging up
until the point of actually announcing the spin off indicated that Belo was preparing to jettison its newspaper brands into a separate company. In fact, most messages conveyed strength in the combined multi-media assets. The greatest attribute that new company would have, according to several company statements, would be the fact that it would have no debt. Only one year later, the new company had to incur debt, which, from a messaging standpoint, only weakened one of its greatest assets. The company had to take on debt to help pay for staff cuts.

Localism, an Exception

Speaking of the Internet in 2001 at a newspaper industry conference on interactive media, Decherd employed the term “localism” to explain why newspapers have an inherent advantage over other media sources. This theme was rarely used in following years to explain strategy. Based on the information provided by the company, and a few of the direct statements, the paper has spent the past 10 years increasingly focusing on a local audience and a digital presence. To this audience, the paper appears to be providing more local information reported by staff writers (as opposed to less original national and international content provided by staff writers) and increasingly through online platforms. Yet, few of the statements offered by leadership directly or indirectly refer to any such strategy. Instead, the statements are often reactive, based on the current situation in which they are provided.

Discussion of the Findings from the Rhetorical Analysis using the Behavioral Approach to Public Relations
By using a rubric based on the theories of Tucker et al. (1997) to grade the News’ public relations and corporate communications, one has a more objective way to determine their brand communications’ effectiveness. Mostly, the communications pieces fall short. Using Table 2 as a guideline, one can follow more closely how each document succeeded or failed.

• 1A: Did each piece raise a public need, concern or interest? More often than not, 15 out of the 20 instances, the News accomplishes this in its corporate messages.

• 1B: Did the News create mental imagery by way of concrete language and visuals to paint pictures for recipients of its public relations messages? The answer is no. In not one case did the language used by the News accomplish this suggested approach.

• 2A: Did each piece deliver a message that was clearly packaged as a credible solution to the need, concern or interest? The answer: about half the time. For example, in the February 23, 2001, news release, Robert Decherd is quoted about the business of journalism online. He said: “This is the time to stay the course and find the path to profitability...” Yet, such concrete and colorful language is found inconsistently in the paper’s public relations tactics and its corporate communications.

• 2B: Was each piece written in such a way to position the News consistently is a credible source? The answer is yes. All of the news releases and letters that were analyzed dealt specifically with issues related to the newspaper, therefore, the paper can be seen as a credible source.
2C: A credible style of writing? None of the news releases employed concrete language that could help a reader (or a writer using the news release) clearly or credibly understand the message. Seldom, the corporate messages employed credible language such as the active voice, precise diction or consistent phrasing. Examples of unclear words and phrases can be found, including the word “implement.” As a noun, implement means tool. As a verb, it can mean, “... to provide a definite plan or procedure to ensure the fulfillment of” (Morris, 1978, p. 660). the News uses the word in the sense of putting something into action or doing something. As a mass media company, they should use plainer language. Tucker, et al. put it this way: “If you do not use a particular word in everyday conversation, it probably does not belong in a news release” (Tucker, 1997, p. 100).

Other examples of unclear words are phrases are found throughout. In the November 10, 2003 news release, the terms “leverage infrastructure” is used to mean use all resources or use our resources better in the current climate. Again, they should use simpler, plainer language. The September 14, 2006, news release uses “right allocation of resources enterprise wide” is used to mean putting their resources to work more effectively. One term, “convergence,” is used at least twice (Belo, May 24, 2001, news release and Belo, October 1, 2007, news release) to mean joining media assets such as newspapers, broadcast television stations, Web sites, etc. For a mass media company to employ such business speak is puzzling.
• 3: Seldom too do the formal messages used the “what’s in it for me” that would help a reader understand the significance of what the newspaper was doing or was about to do. One exception to this is the April 13, 2006 news release that announced the paper’s groundbreaking of a new production plant. Publisher James Moroney is quoted as saying: “Constructing our new South Plant ... confirms the commitment of The Morning News and Belo to serving the needs of the people and supporting economic development throughout the Dallas area.” This rare exception affords the News the opportunity to communicate its business goals and to connect them with the greater good of all Dallas citizens.
CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The parent company of the News engaged in inconsistent and disconnected corporate communications in the way it shaped its messages responding to events affecting the paper and promoting the newspaper’s brand over the 10-year period from 1999 through 2008. By doing so, the majority of the messages do not support a consistent, and therefore, effective brand communication strategy.

As noted in the findings portion of this paper, there were several topics in which inconsistency occurred. the News also used ineffective messages to inform or to engage the publics in its public relations communications. This was determined using the second step of the analysis, the rhetorical analysis conducted through a rubric of behavioral approach questions. The development of the rubric could be used by future public relations and corporate communications practitioners to help guide their work in developing the most effective forms of strategic messaging.

The principles of rhetoric and rhetorical analysis that were used in this research are worth additional study by all communications practitioners. Whether one is an editorial writer for a newspaper, a broadcast journalist or a public relations professional, the ability to most effectively use language is at the root of our professions and not to be taken lightly. By reviewing the basics of rhetoric that Cicero used as well as the theories carefully put forth of Tucker et al. (1997), this study demonstrates that thoughtful selection of words and phrases, that are tied to an overall strategy, can have a meaningful impact on the receiver.

There were limitations to this study. Electronic research databases were used to seek and to read statements issued by the leadership from Belo, Corp., A.H. Belo and the
News. It is possible that additional statements were made during the 10-year period covered in this study that would not have been made available electronically. This study was also limited to reported information and did not employ the use of interviewing of the News leadership or staff. Additional insight could be gleaned by interviewing any of the newspaper’s leadership who were quoted in the reports used in this study. The study was also limited by time. This study was conducted over a period of seven months. The first step, the discourse analysis, began in February 2009 and ended in May of the same year. The next step occurred during the months of August and September 2009. Further time spent seeking additional information could shed light on the circumstances that occurred at the News during period of this study.

Future research on this topic should include interviews with News leadership into the development or lack of development of public relations strategy tied to business goals and objectives. Also, additional research should include the study of additional corporate communications, including employee newsletters and internal memos.
REFERENCES

Works Cited


A.H. Belo Corp. News Releases


A.H. Belo Corp. Correspondence


Belo Corp. News Releases


Belo Corp. (February 23, 2001). News Release. “Belo's Chairman, President and Chief Executive Officer, Robert W. Decherd, Addresses Editor & Publisher's Interactive Newspapers Conference.” Dallas.

Belo Corp. (February 8, 2002). News Release.” Belo reports results for 2001 full year and fourth quarter.” Dallas.


