

# **The Game of Identity Politics: Delta Airlines Performs Neutrality**

**James Perez  
Colorado Mesa University**

*The language used by Delta Airlines in a press release when responding to the controversial topic of gun control given the Parkland Mass Shooting is examined. Delta Airlines uses several linguistic techniques to perform neutrality on the polarizing issue of gun regulation. The techniques involve referring to themselves in the third person, simple grammatical structures, and objective lexical choices. A brief discussion regarding the efficacy of the press release by Delta follows the analysis. Several headlines from major news organizations are examined to discuss how journalists linguistically use emotionally charged language to represent the airline.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

On the afternoon of Wednesday, February 14<sup>th</sup> of 2018, a 19-year-old man entered Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida and began firing his rifle. Nikolas Cruz, the man in question, was a former student of the high school. By the time Cruz was apprehended, 17 people had been killed by the gunfire (Florida School Shooting, 2018). This mass shooting ignited controversy to an already ongoing debate regarding gun control in the United States of America.

The central question being asked by citizens was how mass shootings, such as the Parkland Mass Shooting, could be prevented. Some felt increasing regulations on gun purchases was the answer. Others felt gun ownership was not to blame, but, rather, larger societal issues such as lack of mental health care. Even large corporations felt the pressure to succumb to their constituents and take a hard stance on the issue. Delta Airlines was one of the first major American corporations to produce a press release directly addressing the topic of gun control.

## **THE ARGUMENT**

Immediately following the Parkland Mass Shooting, companies produced press releases to inform the public about their views on gun control. Dick's Sporting Goods, for instance, stated they would no longer sell assault-style rifles and banned the sales of guns to those less than 21 years of age (Troise, 2018). Delta Airlines, however, decided to remain neutral on the issue. On February 24<sup>th</sup> of 2018, the airline posted a press release on their website stating they no longer were offering discounts to members of the National Rifle Association (NRA); the NRA was receiving much criticism in the weeks following the shooting. The overall purpose of this press release by Delta was to let consumers know the airline would distance themselves from any controversial organizations, such as the NRA. The question is how did Delta perform neutrality in their press release? The linguistic structure of the press release produced by

Delta Airlines will be examined to discuss how the company wishes to frame themselves concerning the argument of gun control: as neutral. The argument is Delta Airlines utilized third person addressability, simple grammatical structure, and *objective* lexical choices (particularly pertaining to verbs) to linguistically perform neutrality in their press release.

The conventions of press releases and traditional journalism (hard news stories) will be discussed first in order to provide theoretical background on how objectivity presents itself in writing. For the analysis, the headline of the press release and the body paragraphs will be analyzed line by line to deconstruct the linguistic techniques Delta used in hopes to perform non-partisanship. Although press releases typically use the conventions used in journalism, the function differs slightly. A traditional hard news story aims to present information to their target audience of subscribers. A press release aims to present information to a news agency in the hopes they will write a story about press release and disseminate it to the public. To conclude, there will be a brief discussion about the efficacy of Delta's press release. Stories taken from major news organizations about the press release will be examined to see how information about the airline was disseminated to the public based on their press release. The aim of this paper is to open a conversation about the performative language used in the genre of press releases.

## OBJECTIVITY AND THE PRESS RELEASE

The press release is one of the oldest, and still most common, tools public relations practitioners use to garner attention for their client. The press release is written by organizations in order to, as the name suggests, receive press coverage. However, the press release is not an advertisement: a forum for which to sell a new product. Rather, the press release acts to sell a narrative about the organization itself. This means a company that produces a press release must not only discuss their new product, but how the company connects to local communities, the company's philanthropic work, the company's fundraising event, etc. (Bivins, 2014).

Press releases often use the journalistic convention of objective language to be deemed credible by news sources. Of course, much has been written on the impossibility of language representing reality in a purely objective or neutral way, particularly in journalism (Hackett, 1984, p. 230). However, there are various ways to define objectivity and discursively represent stories as free from bias as possible. Objectivity, or neutrality, in press releases and hard news stories entails judgment and opinion are not blatantly produced (Coboy, 2007, p. 9). This means commentating or editorializing within a press release is viewed as subjective and, hence, an advertisement.

One method linguistics have used to analyze the objectivity of language in news is appraisal theory. Appraisal theory functions to assess the amount of positive or negative attitude connected to language; it seeks to analyze if the language being used frames the story in a negative, positive, or neutral light. This involves examining language to ensure it is free from: (1) affect (2) judgment (3) appreciation (White, 2015, p.2; Thomson et al, 2008, p. 220; Martin et al, 2005). Affective language means there is some kind of emotional aspect attached to it. For example, the verb *feared* has more affect attached to it than its synonym *distrusted*. Judgmental language means making an assessment about human behavior. An example of a judgmental verb would be *manhandled* which is more highly charged than its synonym *maneuvered*. Appreciation is when social value is applied to objects. An example of this type of language would be the verb *triggered* versus its counterpart *stimulated*.

If a news organization, which is a third party to a company such as Delta Airlines, writes a news story about the airline, it is viewed as more credible than a controlled publication for which is paid by the company such as a TV ad, a social media ad, a radio ad, or a billboard (Bivins, 2014, p. 107). Because the press release is sent to news agencies in the hopes that a story will be written about the organization, it is structured in a similar fashion to a traditional news story in an inverted pyramid style (Jacobs, 1999, p. 26). That is to say, the press release is composed of a succinct and clear headline that informs the audience precisely what the story of the press release is, a lead sentence to start that divulges the five Ws of the story (who, what, when, where, and why), supporting paragraphs that provide details about the story, and a conclusion containing contact information for further questions the press may have (Lassen,

2006, p. 510). That being said, press releases should not provide every single detail of the story (Robbins, 2011, p. 26). Indeed, the mark of a successful press release is if a news organization deems the story news worthy and if they are motivated to conduct further research on the organization (Dutch, 2012, p. 23).

Organizations, regardless of how large or small, ultimately want to have their name recognized by the public and news agencies often act as a mediator between consumers and organizations. However, sending a press release that adheres to journalistic standards to a news outlet does not guarantee that a news story will be produced and disseminated for public reading. 75% of corporate press releases are ignored by the press simply because there are so many news stories competing for attention (Schafraad, et al., 2015, p. 452). In addition, most press releases feature a narrative that is just not considered newsworthy. Companies who produce press releases that discuss their new products can comprise anything from a new application for a cellular telephone to a new food item. Unless these press releases involve some kind of controversy, surprise, or negative impact they are often overlooked (Schafraad, et al., 2015, p. 453).

In order to 'sell' a story to the press, an organization must ensure that there is a newsworthy event connected to a human-interest story to make it interesting for journalists and legible for mass audiences (Pearson, 2016, p.11). Timeliness is a technique that often works to ensure the organization promotes a 'newsworthy' story in their press release. If there is a story that is emergent and trending among the media, then creating a press release around that story will provide a human-interest component. For instance, in 2006, Chicago was facing the worst unemployment rates it had seen in over 40 years. Wal-Mart sent out press releases to local news agencies discussing how a new location in the Chicago area would provide jobs for the community and Wal-Mart also offered philanthropic grants to those in the local Evergreen Park Community of Chicago (Massengill, 2013, p. 96). When an organization has ties, regardless of how minute they may be, to another organization or cause, the press and consumers alike often create a strong connection between the two. One organization comes to stand for the other and vice versa; this type of persuasive strategy can act to benefit the organization if the associated story is positive (Bivins, 2014, p. 52).

A more recent example of using an emergent issue to associate it with a company is Coca Cola. The Coca Cola company featured a press release on their company website on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018. The release discussed their upcoming advertisement to premier during Super Bowl 52 on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018. The 60-second spot for Coca Cola was entitled "The Wonder of Us" and featured people from all over the world being united with Coca Cola. Moreover, the press release discussed the advertisement would feature people who identify outside of the binary labels man and women. In addition, inclusive gender-neutral terms of address, such as 'us' and 'them', were to be used in the Super Bowl spot.

The press release from Coca Cola unveiled a performance that the company was anticipating. The Super Bowl advertisement entitled "The Wonder of Us" received much press coverage from both large and small news agencies. The vast majority of this press coverage was positive and praised the corporation for taking a hard stance on the issue of equality in a global society. More importantly, Coca Cola became branded as harbingers of the Gender-Neutral Movement in the United States of America and beyond. Regardless of how divisive the issue of gender neutrality may be in America, the risk paid off for Coca Cola. President and CEO of Coca Cola, James Quincey, stated in a press release that Coca Cola had experienced a 4% growth during the month of February (Shoup, 2018).

## **DELTA AIRLINES**

Delta Airlines was founded in 1924 and began as a crop dusting operation. Delta Airlines currently flies to over 240 locations in the United States of America and has the largest loyalty reward program with 74 million members (Gay, 2016). However, Delta Airlines is unlike companies such as Coca Cola. The aforementioned company has long used public relations campaigns to target a particular audience: young and progressive. Indeed, advertisements for Coca Cola feature progressively liberal ideals and promote diversity and change. Delta Airlines, however, is a company that relies on consumers from both ends of the political spectrum, Republican and Democrat, and anyone in between. That is to say, everyone

travels. Hence, such a company wishes to remain objective during moments of political unrest as not to upset and ultimately alienate those on one side of a controversial issue.

The Parkland Shooting created a storm of news stories that were discussing gun control. The one organization that immediately found itself at the center of the gun control debate was the National Rifle Association (NRA) of America. Many felt the NRA was responsible for mass shootings and placing guns in the hands of those who were not deemed fit to carry them. Because the NRA was such a controversial organization, those associated with them were also facing scrutiny. Prior to the Parkland Shooting, Delta Airlines had been offering NRA members a travel discount on fares. The airline knew they had to create a press release to address any potential concerns about their relationship with the NRA.

Delta Airlines features, like most organizations, an online resource for the news organizations, and consumers, featuring press releases. This online source is entitled *Delta News Hub* and features recent stories promoting Delta Airlines. In an attempt to remain impartial on the controversial issue of gun control, Delta Airlines posted a press release roughly a week after the Parkland Mass Shooting on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018. The headline read: *Delta ends NRA discount to annual meeting*.

During a moment of crisis, organizations must be prepared to communicate with the public. Press releases often frame the organization in question as actively taking steps to ensure consumer care (Choi, 2012, p. 425). Delta produced this press release as a response to the mass shooting to let their consumers know they have updated their discount policies. According to the conventions set by public relations professionals, the headline of the press release, much like a traditional hard news story, should be relatively simple and succinct (Galita, 2016, p. 102). The headline of the press release serves the function of providing the reader with only the main points of the story (who, what, when, where, why, and how). Delta Airlines adhered to this journalistic structure by creating a brief headline consisting of as few words as possible, only six words in this case, and containing a summary of the story; such an adherence to structure illustrates the company is aware of journalism conventions and, hence, credible (Galita, 2016, p. 102).

As mentioned, the majority of language in press releases aims to answer the question what has happened to X or what did X do, with X being the client in most cases. The types of verbs being used within a press release or traditional news story can perform a particular genre of reporting. For instance, if a press release uses verbs that are categorized as a ‘change’ verb such as *modify* or *convert*, the client is typically editorializing and/or promoting a product with persuasion (Klavans et al, 1998, p. 683). Here, we are concerned with the verbs that function to illustrate action, categorized as ‘act’, such as *have* or *give* which are used in traditional hard stories (Klavans et al, 1998, p. 683).

The majority of news stories use transitive verbs, which are verbs that require at least one object in the clause. An example of a transitive verb is from the Wall Street Journal: *But the outsiders haven't yet been able to crack Saatchi's clubby inner circle, or to have significant influence on company strategy* (Roland et al, 2000, p. 31). The transitive verb in this case is “crack” and is typically used when discussing something making a sound or breaking. However, in this instance, the verb “crack” is used to indicate an aggressive entrance into a group and illustrates emotion. Intransitive verbs are verbs that do not need an object in the clause. A few examples would be: *He ran. We started. She stopped*. These types of verbs are not used frequently in traditional hard news stories because the genre relies heavily on framing conflict between two parties. If there is only one party involved, then typically there is no conflict, and, hence, no news.

Examining the headline as a whole from Delta Airlines we can see it is free of stereotypical biased and promotional language, in terms of journalistic conventions, in that it consists primarily of nouns (Cotter, 2014). That is to say, additional verbs, particularly emotionally charged verbs, or adjectives are absent from the headline. The typical press release often utilizes what is termed ‘promotional’ language in order to advertise a new product, event, service, or personnel changes. Promotional language, for the most part, encompasses adjectives such as *strong, reliable, diverse, and most important* (Maat, 2007, p. 70).

When a verb such as *end*, used in the headline, is both transitive and intransitive, it will typically be used in the transitive sense when reporting news. Delta most likely used this verb, *end*, as it is considered a relatively objective word within journalism in that it performs a level of abstractness that indicates a

final point in time. Verbs that highlight outwardly violent and aggressive actions, such as *throw* or *remove*, have typically been considered bias within journalism (Vaes et al, 2017, p. 3). This is evident when considering Delta's headline and using alternative verbs that may elicit more emotion. For instance, a headline that read, *Delta terminates NRA discount to annual meeting*, indicates Delta Airlines aggressively acting upon the NRA rather than allowing for time to take its course to naturally bring a resolution (Vaes et al, 2017, p. 2).

Another technique to establish neutrality in the headline by Delta Airlines is the use of a third-person self-reference. This particular linguistic pattern involves the organization in the subject position of the headline; it follows the pattern X does/did Y, with X being the organization and Y being the event or object (Galita, 2016, p. 106). Press releases are typically written in active voice in which the organization is always written in the subject position; the use of passive voice in press releases is viewed as weak in that it places the organization in a subordinate position in relation to the issue or story (Walters, 1994, p. 354). Because the organization, Delta Airlines in this case, is referenced in the third person, there exists a level of abstraction and distance between Delta as the subject and the NRA as the object. This distance is part of the discourse involved in the neutral authority principle, in which a third party, such as reporter or public relations practitioner, must use lexical choices not laden with value (Cotter, 2014, p. 174). A first-person self-reference, such as *I* or *we*, creates a personal tone by placing the company directly in the narrative being presented within the press release. The use of the third-person self-reference distances Delta from gun control and is utilized in order to create neutrality (Galita, 2016, p. 106).

### **FIGURE 1 PRESS RELEASE FROM DELTA AIRLINES**

*Delta terminates NRA discount to annual meeting*

*Delta informed the National Rifle Association Saturday that the airline will end its contract for discounted fares for travel to the association's 2018 annual meeting. The company requested that the NRA remove Delta's information from its meeting website.*

*Delta's decision reflects the airline's neutral status in the current national debate over gun control amid recent school shootings. Out of respect for our customers and employees on both sides, Delta has taken this action to refrain from entering this debate and focus on its business. Delta continues to support the 2nd Amendment.*

*This is not the first time Delta has withdrawn support over a politically and emotionally charged issue. Last year, Delta withdrew its sponsorship of a theater that staged a graphic interpretation of "Julius Caesar" depicting the assassination of President Trump. Delta supports all of its customers but will not support organizations on any side of any highly charged political issue that divides our nation.*

The entire structure of the press release from Delta adheres to the conventions of a press release in that it is short; the typical press release is one page in length (Bevins, 2014, p. 91). The first paragraph of a press release aims to summarize the central information of the story, just as a first paragraph of a traditional hard news story would (Lassen, 2006, p.510). The first sentence of a press release, and news story, is termed a lead sentence. The lead sentence of Delta's press release continues the neutral linguistic tone that is set by the headline. That is to say, the lead sentence, as well as the majority of the press release, uses the third-person self-reference, Delta, when referring to the organization. This use of third person referencing within the press release is a technique often used by public relations practitioners in order to parallel the techniques used by journalists. Those reading the press releases (and ultimately writing about them) are journalists; hence, the third-person self-reference technique works to establish credibility in the eyes of news editors (Malekova, 2013, p. 56). The two-sentence paragraph that starts

the press release provides the ‘what’ portion of the narrative performed by Delta Airlines. Again, because it is succinct, just as a hard news story, it presents as something legible for journalists.

When using verbs to discuss the action that is taking place, it is paramount for journalists and public relation practitioners alike to ensure objectivity. For instance, in the first paragraph of the release, the two verbs that are used to describe the action that Delta Airlines is conducting are: *end* and *requested*. The lead sentence adopts the same verb that was used in the headline: *end*. The lead sentence of the press release ensures continuity between the headline and story with use of the same verb. The lead sentence for this press release follows conventions set up by the traditional hard news lead journalists use: 25-25 words in length and a simple sentence structure (Cotter, 2014, p. 153). In the second sentence we see the past tense of *requested* used to indicate this action took place and that Delta and the NRA no longer intertwined with one another. The verb *requested* illustrates the neutral tone Delta Airlines wishes to perform. This is apparent if another verb, such as *demanded*, was to replace *requested*.

After the central information (who, what, when, where) is addressed in the opening paragraph of Delta Airlines’ press release, the second paragraph offers an elaboration of the central information provided in the first paragraph (Lassen, 2006, p. 510). This structure follows journalistic conventions in that the second paragraph, as well as subsequent paragraphs, acts to fill in any details about the story; in this case, the ‘why’ of the story. Why did Delta Airlines decide to end discounts for members of the NRA? The topic sentence of the second paragraph clearly states the action Delta Airlines (again, referenced in third person) took ‘reflects’ the ‘neutral stance’ they have and have always had. The transitive verb *reflects* functions in this press release as neutral verb in that it is abstract and involves philosophical thinking and cogitating. Verbs that are more physically bound in terms of corporeal experience, such as *echo* (sound) or *mirror* (sight), would not convey the same level of objectiveness. The second sentence of the second paragraph departs from the neutral tone that has been set. Delta Airlines adopts a more personal tone by utilizing a first-person self-reference. The sentence begins: *out of respect for our customers and employees on both sides, Delta has taken this action to refrain from entering this debate...*” The use of the first-person, *our*, directly places Delta Airlines in the center of the argument, rather than labeling themselves as a third party with the name of the airline as they have been doing in the press release. The airline may want a moment in which they show themselves not as a large company, but *people* in a company. First-person self-references are used in press releases when organizations want to speak directly to the audience or appeal to emotions (Galita, 2016, p. 103). What is interesting is that before the main verb *refrain* is used, the subject is once again the third-person self-reference: *Delta*. This repositions Delta Airlines as a third party and neutral before using the verb *refrain* which paints a picture of the company exerting self-control and being objective in the face of the gun control debate. This is evident if the verbs *avoid* or *shun* were used to express Delta’s position on the NRA.

The final sentence of the second paragraph functions to conclude both the first and second paragraph by stating Delta continues to support the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment. Despite the controversy surrounding gun control, polls conducted over the last few years indicate over 70% of Americans do support the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment (Krause, 2016; Kopel, 2015; Jones, 2008). However, the controversy stems from how to interpret the amendment. Many companies have candidly discussed their support of the right to bear arms without any issue because it is a very general statement. This discursive technique is often used by CEOs who make blanket statements about upholding ideals that are relatively low-risk. CEOs utilize this linguistic technique when speaking to journalists, in particular, for the sake of image management to appear accepting; the goal is ultimately having a positive report written about them and their company (Westphal, 2011, p. 1066). The value performed by language rests on assumptions made earlier in the story (Thomas et al, 2008, p. 215). Delta stating it supports the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment is a statement that has been used ad infinitum that simply aligns the airline with the Bill of Rights, which is not news worthy or controversial. Hence, it can be said this final statement of the actual press release does perform neutrality. The concluding paragraph of the press release offers some historical context to the decision being presented by Delta. Press releases will provide history of their company at the end with what is termed a *backgrounder* or *boilerplate* (Bevins, 2014, p. 5). Similarly, hard news stories will also provide

background information of a story at the close to help place it within the context of a larger issue, or issues (Cotter, 2014, p. 140). The first and second sentences of this final paragraph use the verb 'withdraw' to highlight that Delta is a company that does not endorse any kind of politically charged behavior. The use of the past tense verbs "withdrawn" and "withdrew" positions Delta Airlines in a context of consonance, which involves referencing the past to build a case of expectedness in terms of action (Bednarek et al, 2017, p. 81). The initial sentence of the third paragraph illustrates that Delta Airlines has always aimed to be neutral when political conflict is involved and references how they cut ties with the Delacorte Theater in 2017 when they staged an assassination of Trump in 2017.

The ending sentence of the press release uses the verb "support" twice. The first use addresses how Delta *supports* all of its customers and the second use addresses how the airline will not *support* organizations that strongly represent one side of an issue such as gun control. The repetition of this verb The closings of press releases through boilerplates or backgrounders often reiterate common ground with the audience in order to build and maintain rapport (Kennedy, 2018). The value that is being performed by the airline is one of being politically moderate: Delta Airlines is neither extremely liberal, nor extremely conservative. Just as the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph of the press release aimed to illustrate the neutrality of the airline with blanket statements about supporting the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment, this final sentence enacts the same discourse with a blanket statement about supporting all customers.

## REPORTING ON DELTA

Although public relations practitioners would like news organizations to ultimately present their clients in a positive light by presenting the news as written in a press release, journalists differ in terms of what they deem newsworthy. The text produced by an organization, such as Delta Airlines, is *text-in-context*. That is to say, the construction of language in the news is produced through relationships journalists have with the topic, timeliness of the topic, has the topic been discussed beforehand, and the professional language journalists have been taught to use (Centanaccio et al, 2011, p. 1845). Delta Airlines had explicitly identified themselves as being non-partisan in the debate regarding gun control. Indeed, the wording in the press release stated their decision to end discounts with the National Rifle Association *reflected the airline's neutral status*. However, did the decision by Delta Airlines ultimately result in the public viewing their stance, and ultimately the company as a whole, as neutral? Achieving neutrality is difficult with the hot topic of gun control because it has been a controversial topic since the inception of the United States of America. However, views on gun control have largely remained in tact, as cultural values are slow to change. That is to say, the overwhelming majority of Americans believe, and have believed, that stronger gun regulation is required; although, reasons for beliefs can vary (Kleck et al, 2009, p. 497).

In addition to the controversial topic of gun control acting as a mediator between the press release and the public, there also exists the stylized language used by the press. The language used in news reflects certain underlying values that journalists have when reporting stories. There usually exists a combination of reporting on an issue that is stereotypical, involves someone of high status, involves significant impact, emotional, human interest (personal), close proximity, timeliness, and unexpectedness; in addition, there are often uses of superlatives to create intensity (Bednarek et al, 2017. p. 80).

Well-known or elite entities, such as Delta Airlines, combined with subjective language translate into higher amounts of propagation for a news agency (Bandari et al, 2012, p.29). Although the role of the news is to present information as objectively as possible, there does exist consensus in terms of the language used and it is this language that ultimately reflects ideology. Consensus acts to affirm a belief viewed as universal among journalists; this is particularly important when discussing a controversial issue (Fowler, 1991, p. 49).

Examining the language used by the media to discuss gun control in the past provides insight into how such a topic is discussed today. In 1993, congress enacted the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, known as the Brady Bill, which mandated federal background checks. The discourse used to discuss the Brady Bill Campaign (in press releases and traditional news stories) used terms such as "terrorism,"

“public health and safety,” “murderers”, and “crime” (Steidley, et al., 2016, p. 618). Mass media theorists argue the coverage of guns, in general, is largely negative as a bias is present in the ways news organization report on the NRA in particular (Downs, 2002). Patrick (2002) has also noted that the media bias is due to an ongoing shift of journalists identifying with progressive culture.

When taking into account that neutrality on such a hot topic as gun control is nearly impossible and the linguistic tools used by mass media often negatively discuss gun culture, it is not surprising the types of stories that were produced about Delta and their press release. The following headlines are all from February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018 and taken from major news organizations about Delta’s press release to gain a preliminary glimpse of how the company was represented.

## FIGURE 2 HEADLINES FROM NEWS AGENCIES

- CNN:** *Delta and United join list of companies to cut ties with the NRA*
- FOX:** *Delta to End NRA Discount as Pressure Mounts*
- WALL STREET JOURNAL:** *Some Companies Bow to Social-Media Pressure, Sever NRA Ties*
- BREITBART:** *Seven Companies That Caved to Anti-NRA Pressure*
- VOICE OF AMERICA:** *More Companies End Marketing Programs With National Rifle Association*
- NBC:** *More companies cut ties with the NRA after customer backlash*
- NPR:** *One By one, Companies Cut Ties With The NRA*
- HUFFINGTON POST:** *The Teens Are Coming For The NRA, And They Can’t Be Stopped*

Delta Airlines is only explicitly mentioned in two of the headlines (CNN and FOX). The rest of the headlines have another noun in the subject position of the sentence: *companies* or *teens*. Although all of the articles mentioned do discuss Delta Airlines, the airline company is often mentioned as part of a group of organizations that are no longer affiliated with the NRA. All of the headlines contain the noun NRA in the object position, which reflects how much news agencies were reporting on others impacting the NRA. The verb usage in all of the headlines is also noteworthy. Two of the headlines (FOX and VOA) use the verb *end*, which has been discussed previously in the press release from Delta as being abstract in nature and, thus, more objective within the conventions of journalism. The verb *cut* is used in three of the headlines (CNN, NBC, and NPR); within the taxonomy of appraisal theory, the verb *cut* contains an affective element in that it references a physical act often associated with violence as made evident by its synonyms: slash, wound, lacerate, sever, etc. The WSJ and Breitbart use verbs explicitly dealing with the act of subordination: *bow* and *caved*. Bow and caved are appreciative according to the appraisal theory due to the personification of companies that *bowed* or *caved* to political pressure. Finally, NPR uses the verb *coming* with *teens* in the subject position of the sentence and the *NRA* in the object position. The verb *coming* is used with the preposition *for* and such a term has an affective feature. *Coming for* creates an emotional element of an entity rushing, charging, or attacking another entity.

Because the lexical choices by reporters were largely reflecting an emotional element when discussing companies, such as Delta, and their connection to the NRA, or severing of the connection. As discussed previously, gun control is an issue that can seldom be mentioned without previously held beliefs being integrated into the conversation. Regardless of how objective Delta Airlines may have wanted to appear in terms of developing a press release based on neutral journalistic conventions,



reporters ultimately have a story to report. The end goal for reporters is to have audiences read their stories and sometimes gaining attention can involve finding a balance between objectivity and emotional language.

## DISCUSSION

Delta Airlines carefully crafted their press release when responding to the crisis of being connected to the NRA, an organization viewed as polarizing after mass shootings such as the one in Parkland. The airline made deliberate choices when scripting their language: use of third-person self-reference to create distance between themselves and the NRA; using verbs that were neutral in nature; and, adhering to the succinct grammatical conventions of traditional journalism. However, because a press release is an uncontrolled publication, once it reaches the hands of journalists the public relations practitioner has no control over what is written and given to the public.

As discussed previously, the idea of newsworthiness in the field of journalism involves some kind of conflict between two entities and often language that elicits emotion can be used. Examining a few headlines from major news organizations that discussed the press release by Delta Airlines in their stories it is evident that neutrality is not necessarily newsworthy. The preliminary discussing regarding the efficacy of the press release by Delta Airlines illustrates that reporters discussed how companies in general, of which Delta was included, *cut ties* with the NRA or *caved/bowed* to pressures from anti-NRA protests. Hence, the central stories being circulated are about the NRA and whether companies are supporting or boycotting them.

This initial examination of the response to the press release by Delta Airlines gestures to the potential impossibility of neutrality when faced with such an emergent topic as gun control. Delta Airlines and Dick's Sporting Goods have already made decisions about their respective stances on gun control and their connection to the NRA. Other organizations are currently reviewing their own course of action. For instance, Amazon, Apple, and YouTube are being asked to remove NRA tv from their channel options. It remains to be seen whether or not these companies will create press releases to address the topic. Discussion about gun regulation has been, and will undoubtedly continue to be, a topic of contention amongst Americans. As the issue is discussed more and more by news agencies and as companies engage with the issue via press releases it remains to be seen the kinds of discourse that will emerge about gun culture in America. This paper analyzed the *neutral* linguistic performance of one company when responding to the debate of gun regulation and the NRA. Certainly, further research is necessary to examine the kinds of performative language that has emerged and will emerge by corporations, large and small, over the polarizing issue surrounding the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment.

## REFERENCES

- Bandari, R., Asur, S., & Huberman, B. A. (2012). The Pulse of News in Social Media: Forecasting Popularity. *The Sixth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*. Toronto, Canada.
- Bednarek, M., & Caple, H. (2017). *The discourse of news values: how news organizations create newsworthiness*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bivins, T. (2014). *Public Relations Writing*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Catenaccio, P., et. al. (2011). Towards a linguistics of news production. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43, 1843-1852.
- Choi, J. (2012). A content analysis of BP's press releases dealing with crisis. *Public Relations Review*, 38, 422-429.
- Conboy, M. (2007). *The Language of the News*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cotter, C. (2014). *News Talk: Investigating the Language of Journalism*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Downs, D. (2002). Representing Gun Owners. *Written Communication*, 19(1), 44-75.
- Dutch, A. (n.d.). The Art of a Press Release: How to Write one. *Investors' Digest*, 28(9), 23-25.
- Florida School Shooting. (2018, February 14) *The Associated Press*.
- Fowler, R. (1991). *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Galita, R., & Bonta, E. (2016). Linguistic Means of Addressability and Self-Reference in Press Release Headlines. A Comparative Study. *Instertudia*, 19, 101-109.
- Gay, C. (2016). Timeline of airline. *Delta News Hub*. April 23<sup>rd</sup>. <https://news.delta.com/timeline-airline>
- Hackett, R. (1984). Decline of a Paradigm? Bias and Objectivity in News Media Studies. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 1(3), 229-259.
- Jacobs, G. (1999). *Preformulating the News: An analysis of the metapragmatics of press releases*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Jones, J. (2008). Americans in Agreement With Supreme Court on Gun Rights. *Gallup*, June 26<sup>th</sup>.
- Kennedy, M. (2018). 3 Ways You Can Improve Your Press Release Closing Sentences. *eReleases*.
- Klavans, J., Kan, M-Y. (1998). Role of Verbs in Document Analysis. *17<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Computational Linguistics*. Quebec, Canada.
- Kleck, G., Gertz, M., & Bratton, J. (2009). Why do people support gun control?: Alternative explanations of support for handgun bans. *Journal of Criminal Science*, 37(5), 496-504.
- Kopel, D. (2015). A survey of legislation on Second Amendment issues in 2015. *The Washington Post*. July 20<sup>th</sup>.
- Krause, J. (2016). New Poll: Majority of Americans Want to Protect the Second Amendment. *Activist Post*, August 28<sup>th</sup>.
- Lassen, I. (2006). Is the press release a genre? A study of form and content. *Discourse Studies*, 8(4), 503-530. London: SAGE Publications.
- Maat, H. (2007). How Promotional Language in Press Releases is Dealt with by Journalists. Genre Mixing or Genre Conflict. *Journal of Business Communication*, 44(1), 59-95.
- Malekova, D. (2013). Self-Reference in the Leads of Institutional Press. *BRNO Studies in English, Releases*, 39, 1.
- Martin, J., & White, P. (2005). *The Language of Evaluation*. New York, NY: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Massengill, R. (2013). *Wal-Mart Wars: Moral Populism in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: University Press.
- Patrick, B. A. (2002). *The National Rifle Association and the Media*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Pearson, E. (2016). *Selling a Story: How to Write a Successful Press Release. Communicating Astronomy with the Public*, 21, 10-12.
- Robbins, T. (2011). Best Practices: Is your press release guilty of information overload? *CoSIDA Digest*, February, 26.

- Roland, D., Jurafsky, D., Menn, L., Gahl, S., Elder, E., & Riddoch, C. (2000). Verb subcategorization frequency differences between business-news and balanced corpora: the role of verb sense. *Proceedings of the Workshop on Comparing Corpora*. Hong Kong, China.
- Schafraad, P., van Zoonen, W., & Verhoeven, P. (2015). The news value of Dutch corporate press releases as a predictor of corporate agenda building power. *Public Relations Review*, 42, 451-458. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Elsevier.
- Shoup, M. E. (2018, February 18). Coca-Cola: 2018 is shaping up to be stronger than 2017. *Beverage Daily*.
- Steidley, T., & Colen, c. (2016). Framing the Gun Control Debate: Press Releases and Framing Strategies of the National Rifle Association and the Brady Campaign. *Social Science Quarterly*, 98(2), 608-627.
- Troise, D. (2018, February 28). Defying the NRA, Dick's Takes a Harder Line Against Guns. *The Associated Press*.
- Vaes, J., Latrofa, M., Suitner, C., & Arcuri, L. (2017). They Are All Armed and Dangerous!: Biased Language Use in Crime News With Ingroup and Outgroup Perpetrators. *Journal of Media Psychology*, 28(1), 1-12.
- Walters, T., Walters, L. M., & Starr, D. P. (1994). After the Highwayman: Syntax and Successful Placement of Press Releases in Newspapers. *Public Relations Review*, 20(4), 345-356.
- White, P. (2015). Appraisal Theory. *International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.