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Title To All the World: Reinventing the Church's Media Businesses

Author(s) Mark H. Willes

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Abstract This annual Neal A. Maxwell Lecture was given on 11 March 2010. Willes discusses his work of leading an LDS Church-owned media company as it sought to blend old media with new while reflecting the values of its parent organization and seeking to have a worldwide reach and impact. Innovative steps to avoid gratuitous negative journalism, elevate civic dialogue, and emotionally engage readers and viewers in relevant, compelling issues are highlighted.

To All the World: Reinventing the Church's Media Businesses

Mark H. Willes

In section 43 of the Doctrine and Covenants, starting with verse 8, the Lord said:

> And now, behold, I give unto you a commandment, that when ye are assembled together ye shall instruct and edify each other, that ye may know how to act and direct my church, how to act upon the points of my law and commandments, which I have given. And thus ye shall become instructed in the law of my church, and be sanctified by that which ye have received.

And then in verse 16: "And ye are to be taught from on high." That is a remarkable promise that says if we are open to the Spirit, it actually does not matter what I say, because you will be "taught from on high." I hope and pray that you will be.

I have to confess—when I was asked to give this talk, I thought about the man after whom the Maxwell Institute is named. Then I thought about those who had preceded me. And when I thought about what I might do, I kept coming back to the question, "Why me?"

I remember an experience I had when I was at the *Los Angeles Times* and several of us went over to mainland China. We landed in Beijing the day after the United States had bombed the Chinese

This annual Neal A. Maxwell Lecture was originally given on 11 March 2010 at Brigham Young University. Photographs © Jeffrey D. Allred, *Deseret News*.

embassy in Belgrade. Needless to say, their feelings toward Americans were not friendly. All of our official appointments were canceled, so we mostly did a little sightseeing. Every night I would turn on the television; I didn't understand what they were saying, but one night I could see people throwing bricks and paint cans at the U.S. embassy. The next morning I went to our reporter, who was also serving as our interpreter, and said, "Would you take us to the U.S. Embassy? I'd like to see what's going on." And he said, "No, you can't go there." And we went off and did something else. I repeated this for three days. Finally, on our last day I said, "We are going to go. Please take us there."

He realized who ultimately signed his paycheck, so he decided that would be a good thing to do. We took a taxi to within two blocks of the embassy—there was a blockade across the street. Our reporter went up and explained that we were U.S. citizens who wanted to go to the U.S. Embassy, so they let us through. Half a block away from the embassy—just across the street from it—we encountered another blockade with another military group. Our reporter explained again that we were U.S. citizens and that we wanted to go to the U.S. Embassy. The soldier said, "No!" to which our reporter asked, "Why?" And the soldier said, "There is no why."

I found that a remarkably unsatisfactory response. I have, however, learned that it does have its uses. When we got home, I asked my wife to do something. She said, "No." I said, "Why?" She said, "There is no why." The kids ask for the keys to the car. You say, "No." They say, "Why?" I mean, it really does have its uses.

But I kept being troubled by why I was asked to give this lecture. I pondered all the things that I could talk about. I first thought about doctrinal subjects and then about Book of Mormon subjects; I was having an absolute stupor of thought. I got thinking about the interactions that I had had with Elder Maxwell. I found it very interesting that every time he saw me, he would say, "Now, tell me what you are doing." No matter where I was working, it was "Tell me what you are doing." And we would then talk about what I was doing. It was remarkable to me that he was so interested in me: not only in my career

but in everything I was doing, how that would give him a perspective that would help him in his Church assignment.

So tonight, I should like to talk about what I'm doing. The one thing I feel great comfort in is that if Elder Maxwell were here, he would have a smile on his face and actually be interested in what I have to say. So I hope that you're at least slightly interested in what I have to share with you.

For those of you who don't know, let me just give you a couple of sentences about what Deseret Management Corporation has been and now is. It used to be the company that was responsible for most of the for-profit businesses owned by the Church: Beneficial Life Insurance, real estate companies, and so on. Some of those have been transferred back to the Church; some of those have been sold by the Church. Today we are primarily a media company: Deseret News, Deseret Book, KSL Radio and KSL-TV, and Bonneville International, with a new Internet division, Deseret Digital Media.

The problem is that as soon as I give you that list of media companies you realize most of them are old media. Even newspapers themselves say that newspapers are dying, and broadcast television is only one step behind. Many think printed books are going to go the way of all flesh. In many people's minds the businesses we manage are old media with not much life left in them. But we happen to think that if we combine old media with new media, and do some things in a different way, we actually have a lot of exciting things that lie before us. And that's what we're trying to do.

When I was asked to lead DMC, I put down some basic guiding principles. The first was that we are owned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The only reason for the Church to continue to own us is if we are somehow a blessing to the Church. Otherwise it ought to get rid of us. The second was we must therefore be aligned with the values of the Church. I will come back to that—but those are values like integrity, civility, love, sacrifice, and self-reliance.

Therefore, all that we do and the way we do it must be aligned with and reflect those values. That does not mean that those of us who work at Deseret Management Corporation have to be members of

the Church. But for all of us who are there, we must be aligned with those values and live those values. And finally, because the Church is a worldwide church, we need to think about how we can have worldwide reach and impact. All of this means we have to set dramatically higher goals for what we do, how professional we are, and the kind of impact we have.

Starting from those very simple propositions, we decided that we would try to write for ourselves a mission statement and the values that go with it. For those of you who've dealt with mission statements, and I've read a lot of them over the years, they kind of all read the same—they're all about motherhood and apple pie. "We're just going to be wonderful; we're going to do good things." The power in a mission statement comes from the fact that if you decide to internalize it, if you make it part of you, it will then help transform you. I hope to show in a small way—and as you watch us in the years ahead, in a major way—that this mission statement is literally transforming what we do and the way we do it. We are not the same companies or set of companies now that we were a year ago. And we will not be the same two, three, or four years from now, because this mission statement is meaningful to us and it is changing what we do and the way we do it.

Hundreds of Millions

Our mission statement reads: "We are a trusted voice of light and knowledge reaching hundreds of millions of people worldwide." Let's just start with that notion of hundreds of millions. And that is real live people around the world, not website hits. I used to think I was relatively bold, but I do not have the courage to make up that objective. When one of the senior brethren came to rededicate the Deseret Book building, he looked at all of us connected to Deseret Book and said, "Your responsibility is to find a way to reach hundreds of millions of people." I confess that we just staggered out of that session.

But as we pondered this charge, we believed this was a prophetic challenge that we must somehow find a way to live up to. Obviously, if we're to reach hundreds of millions, it means a reach extending far outside of the Wasatch Front, and even far beyond Church member-

ship. We have to do things in such a way that we really literally are appealing to hundreds of millions of people around the world. Now notice that the mission statement uses the word *reach*. It does not say *convert*. We are not the Church. We are not going to teach doctrine. Our purpose is quite different from that. We hope to support what the Church does, but our purpose is to reach, to enlighten, to help, to edify, to lift up, to strengthen.

Now, it turns out that there is a remarkably powerful thing that happens to any business if you set an objective that seems unrealistically high. I learned this first when I was at General Mills, where we had about nine plants making our various products. The man who was responsible for all of our plants around the country made a calculation of how long it took to change from one product to another—to stop the production line, take off the tooling, put on new tooling, clean it, start it up, and then start producing the next product. On average the process took three hours. So every time we changed from one product to another, it took three hours. He then multiplied that three hours across all of our plants for a month. And it turned out we were spending an enormous amount of money simply on these changeovers in our plant.

So he called a meeting and said, "Our current level of performance is three hours. The new standard is ten minutes." And they looked at him like you're looking at me and said, "Well, that's ridiculous." And he said, "No, that is not ridiculous. You have to find a way to go from three hours to ten minutes." Well, what did they do? They went to the NASCAR pit stop. Cars come in, wheels go off, gas goes in, wheels go on, and the cars go out. They took a video of that process and went through frame by frame trying to establish how to apply pit stop techniques to the changeovers in the plant. When I left General Mills, we were down to eleven minutes. It wasn't ten, but it was pretty good. Three hours to eleven minutes. I was impressed.

In fact, I was so impressed, I was bragging about it one day to the CEO of a large engine manufacturer—big truck engines. He said, "Well, that's very interesting. We had the same problem." I said, "Really? What was your changeover time?" He said, "Ten hours." I

said, "Wow, what was your new standard?" He said, "Ten minutes." I said, "Did you get there?" He said, "Yes." I said, "How'd you do it?" He said, "We went to a NASCAR pit stop, took a video . . ."

There are two things that are interesting about that story. The first is if you set a very dramatic goal, you cannot increment your way there. You have to think about things in a fundamentally different way. The second is often—if not always—the answer is out there rather than where you are. In other words, you have to get out of your mental set, out of what you're doing, find out what somebody else is doing, and then figure out how to apply that to what you're doing.

Well, having had that experience, I went out to run Times Mirror, and the *Los Angeles Times* was our largest newspaper. This was in 1995, and what you read about newspapers then was exactly what you read about today: they're declining in circulation. It is only a matter of time before they die. The *LA Times* was in a decline from a million and a half circulation—just about to drop below a million. And I called everybody in and I said, "Not on my watch. Your new goal is an increase of five hundred thousand—50 percent." Well, they looked at me just like those plant people. Before I left, we'd increased by two hundred thousand, 20 percent, when virtually everyone else was declining. So there's power in setting an objective that appears to be so ambitious that you can't possibly get there. And that's the magic of it. Because if you can't get there doing what you're currently doing—by growing incrementally—then you have to think radically differently. And some wonderful things can happen.

Trusted Voices

Now take a look at another phrase in that mission statement. We are to be "trusted voices." That has a very special meaning for us. It means that we're not only going to be trusted—if we do it right—by our readers, our viewers, our listeners, and our users; but we have to be trusted by our owner. Remember I started by saying, "We are owned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." It means that we are not going to damage the Church. We are not going to gratuitously poke the Church in the eye. And the fact is sometimes we've done that.

Let me give you one quick example. Shortly after I was given this assignment, we ran a really wonderful article in the *Deseret News* about the City Creek project in Salt Lake City, this massive undertaking by the Church in downtown Salt Lake. There isn't a city in the world that wouldn't drool to have a project like that financed without debt, without bonds, without all of the other things that normally take place. And we published a wonderful article about how the project was coming in the midst of the worst recession since the Depression. And then for the sake of balance, we found somebody who was disgruntled about the project and quoted that person as saying what a terrible thing it was. What good did that do?

This is a very sensitive subject because it goes to the heart of journalism—to the notion of balance, of independence. And that's not quite as simple to think and talk about as most people make it out to be. Research on news outlets—radio, TV, newspapers, magazines—suggests that virtually everybody thinks they're biased. Now, they have different biases: some are liberal, some are moderate, some are conservative. But virtually everybody who reads us, looks at us, watches us, listens to us, thinks that we and everybody else are biased. Only journalists will dispute that.

I had a thousand journalists in the newsroom at the *LA Times*. We probably had two thousand journalists in all of our newspapers. I talked to a lot of journalists in the five years I was there. I had one editor say to me, "The purpose of a great newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comforted." That sounds like a double bias to me. If I'm writing a story about those who are downtrodden, who need help, I'm going to tilt the story to try to "comfort" them. And if I'm doing a story about somebody in the power structure, I'm going to tilt the story to poke that person in the eye. And that's what happens.

Getting ready to write my PhD dissertation, I asked my professor, "How do I write an unbiased dissertation?" He said, "Don't even try. The fact of the matter is that everybody who writes is going to be influenced by their experience, their maturity, their life, the kind of life they've had, the influences they've had, and their own perceptions and preconceptions. The importance of a university is you will have a lot of

biased books in an unbiased library." And I learned a great principle. Now, are we going to try to be biased? I don't like the word. It's pejorative. It says we're going to twist things to make them untrue. We're not going to do that—it would be unethical. What we are going to do is cover things in a way that makes sense to us.

Let me give you an example. Suppose we were to do an article on the homeless. We would talk about the challenges that the homeless have getting medical care, the danger they face if they have no place to go in the depth of winter, and so on, in order to help all of us really understand the plight of the homeless. What we would not do, for the sake of "balance," is include a statement like, "Well, of course, the fact is the reason they are homeless is that they made bad decisions and it's their fault." Now, there are people who think that. We could get a quote from somebody. But what's the point? Why do it? Why take all of the energy, empathy, and power out of a wonderful article just for the sake of an arbitrary balance?

Therefore, when you think about balance, it's not a matter of twisting the truth; it's a matter of choosing those things that you emphasize and those things that you don't. It's a matter of telling the story you want to tell, recognizing that in today's world there are going to be a thousand other people who are going to tell a different story. We want to ensure that we tell our stories in a way that is consistent with our values—to show people love, respect, and concern. By the way, that editor never understood that in most people's minds, the press are the comforted and ought to be afflicted.

Light

When we think of light, we think of the traditional journalistic function of shining a light in dark places, exposing corruption, highlighting problems; but for us it goes way beyond that. Elder Maxwell said, "The matter . . . of being a light is even more important in dark times. Our impact, for better or worse, on others is inevitable, but it

is intended that we be a light and not just another shadow."[1] We take this notion of light very deeply. We think it means standing for light and truth. We think it means battling against hate and the darkness of hate. If you really mean that you're against the darkness of hate, you have to live it. You have to exemplify it. You have to talk about it and try to help it.

It also means for us elevating the civic dialogue. It is amazing to me the nature of public discourse and what that has become. Because of that, we've done two things, and have some other things we will do. We have launched a new public interest television show which we think will become a signature show for KSL. It is a place where people can come in a civilized, dignified, respectful way and talk about difficult issues. We'll try to expose all points of view in a way that helps demonstrate that you can talk about very difficult issues with respect and with civility.

Second, we took KSL.com comment boards dark. Our comment board, like frankly virtually every other comment board in the world, has become subject to the tyranny of the extremes. We felt we had a responsibility to help change that.

So we went dark. And if you tried to make a comment, you got a little message that says, "Here's our philosophy: From now on, we're going to have people comment. We want to have you come. We welcome you to come, but you need to be civil. And to help you do that, it is no longer possible to post an anonymous comment." You know, it used to be if you sent a letter to the editor, you had to sign your name. Now you have to register with us with a profile that will follow you so that people can see what you are doing and rate your comment. Was it civil or was it not civil? Was it helpful? Was it not helpful? Was it on the subject or not on the subject?

Once this is completely developed, you can control what you see in the comments. We think this is going to make a difference. Early indications are quite encouraging. We are going to do the same thing with Deseretnews.com. Let me invite you to join the discussion on our

1. *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*, ed. Cory H. Maxwell (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 201.

comment boards. Let me invite you to bring civility to what we do. Let me invite you to literally help make the world a little better place.

Knowledge

Elder Maxwell said, "There were no newspapers, as we know them, at the time of Jesus' ministry. Had there been, one can guess that the news coverage [of the day] would have missed the significance of what was transpiring at, and after, Calvary, while perhaps reporting the return of Pilate to Caesarea after a trying weekend in Jerusalem, or while noting the arrival or departure of new trade caravans. The atonement, the central fact of human history, would have been ignored or subordinated to the other busy and important things of the time—unless the publisher had perspective about 'things as they were.'"[2] We are going to try to have a better understanding of things as they really are. We will still cover sports, flu shots, that sort of thing. But we're also going to try to cover the really important things. Well, how do we do that?

If we're to succeed in old media and, interestingly enough, in new media, we have to be relevant. The research shows that people will make time in their lives for things that are important to them. But this is audience-defined. We can write things for professional colleagues, we can produce video productions that will win awards, and none of that makes any difference if you don't find it relevant to your lives. And therefore, in all that we do, we're trying to ask increasingly, "What can we do to be relevant to you?"

One answer to this question caused us to start a new Spanish-language newspaper called *El Observador*, published three times a week. The Hispanic market is the fastest-growing market in Utah, a market that believes nobody takes them seriously. We launched the paper at an open house in Salt Lake. A Hispanic woman from the mayor's office came up with tears in her eyes to thank us for taking them seriously. Some of you may have seen "Mormon Times." It was a jolt to some journalists to have a such a section in the newspaper, but

2. Neal A. Maxwell, *The Smallest Part* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 44.

96 percent of our readers are members of the Church. All indications are that this innovation is much appreciated.

We need to be more emotional. In today's world, if you aren't touched by what we do, you get bored and go someplace else. And therefore, we have to find a way to reach you in such a way that you are so moved you can hardly wait to read us or watch us or listen to us again. Let me suggest to you we're getting better at that. In fact, we had a series recently that is one of the best bits of journalism I have seen anywhere, and that was the *Deseret News* coverage of what was going on in Haiti.

This is a mother and her newborn child in an LDS chapel in Haiti. The doctors and nurses inside that chapel didn't ask, "Are you a member of the Church?" They asked, "What can we do to help?" It had nothing to do with the Church, and yet it had everything to do with the Church.

A medical student from Texas, a member of the Church, went to Haiti to help and serve. He and his wife had been married for five years but were childless. While he was down there, they talked about whether or not they should adopt a Haitian child. She went to the temple, called her husband, and said, "Yes, we should. Look for a little girl—a small little girl, with short hair and a big stomach. I've gone on the Internet, and here's where you might look. Here's an orphanage." Her husband and a companion drove as far as they could, walked about another mile, but could not find the orphanage that she had found. Instead they found an orphanage that wasn't on the map. It was totally rundown, and children were being dropped off because they had no parents. He was surrounded by at least twenty children. The

article expresses his awkwardness, like he was in a market, trying to buy a child. Over on the side, he saw this little girl and knew she was the one.

This is a nurse who works for LDS Humanitarian Services. She lost her husband in the events of 9/11. She also went to Haiti to help. She saw a little boy who she knew would die without help. She cleaned his wounds, picked him up, took him to a hospital, and held him, telling him she loved him and would not put him down until he was in safe hands. Having lost someone dear to her, she was not about to lose that little boy. We know how to do emotional journalism.

One of the keys to great journalism is to ask more interesting questions, because the fact is the more interesting the question you ask, the more interesting the answer is. I learned this when we ran a series in Baltimore. Louis Farrakhan had asserted that there was no such thing as slavery in Africa. A typical way a journalist would deal with that question is to say, "Well, I wonder if that's true." So they'd go and interview people who say, "Yes there is." They'd interview other people who say, "No there isn't." They'd quote all the experts and leave the reader totally confused about whether there is or is not slavery in Africa. This editor said, "That's the wrong question. The question is, can I buy a slave?" We sent a foreign correspondent and an African American reporter from downtown Baltimore to Africa, where they bought two slaves. Most interesting expense report I've ever approved: $1,000. Two slaves. And they then wrote this absolutely wrenching, riveting series.[3] How did this African American feel on an airplane going to Africa to buy another human being? They talked about how these two boys that we bought were stolen away by the slavers from their blind mother and sold into slavery, and then how thrilled she was when we gave them back to her. If you ask interesting, compel-

3. Gilbert A. Lewthwaite and Gregory Kane, "Witness to Slavery," *Baltimore Sun*, 16–18 June 1996.

ling, powerful questions, you can do interesting, compelling, powerful journalism.

Let me give you an example that for me enforces the idea that we can achieve this goal of reaching hundreds of millions. Every day I meet people who are very skeptical that we can actually do it. They say that they love the way we talk about it, but the fact is you can't do it. You're too late. The Internet is going to take over the world. You're dead! Here's my response to "dead." When I grew up in Utah, which both Laura and I did, I thought water was free. Not only in the tap at home, but I'd walk down Main Street and I'd push a little button on this thing that was on the sidewalk, and water would come out and I would drink it. It was a new idea to me that you would actually sell water in a bottle. Nowadays you can buy water in a bottle for from just under 2¢ an ounce to $1.56 an ounce. There are three thousand brands of bottled water around the world. Americans in 2007 spent $15 billion on bottled water. In 1976 the average American drank 1.6 gallons of bottled water. Today the total is more than 28 gallons of bottled water. Growth in the sales of bottled water for the last thirty years has been at a compound rate of 8 percent. Just to put that number in perspective, if the Church grew at a compound rate of 8 percent for the next thirty years, it would go from 13.5 million to 135 million members.

How have they done it? They've done it because they have found a need you didn't realize you had until they offered it: convenience, taste, shape, color, properties inside. They have found that you don't necessarily think water in the tap is safe. Sometimes it was, sometimes it wasn't. They find that, for instance, you like to go hiking and take bottled water with you. By finding what you are interested in, they have been able to sell a huge amount of bottled water. Well, let me ask you, if they can grow at a compound rate of 8 percent by selling water, shouldn't we be able to grow by selling relevant, compelling, emotional content in print, on the radio, on TV, and yes, on the Internet? My view is, if they can sell water, we can sell what we do and have a whole lot more fun in the process.