“Iron Cage” Or “Silken Thread”?
Continuous Improvement And Other Organizational Identification Strategies On *The MTR Express*:
A Content Analysis Of An Unobtrusive Control Device
By A Public Transport Corporation In Hong Kong

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Statement of Original Authorship

I, Michael Chun-Kau Li, hereby certify that the work embodied in this dissertation is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a degree to any other University or Institution.

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This dissertation is dedicated to:

Sabina and Heen-Yurn
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Abstract

MTR Corporation Limited (MTR), a public transport company in Hong Kong, has been publishing a monthly newsletter – The MTR Express – for its employees since 1979. It is suggested that MTR must find it worthwhile to do so, using it to influence its employees and make them accept its values as their own. Influence is exerted on staff members through identification-inducement strategies in the newsletter which implant values in their decision-making process so that they always act in the organization’s interest. This is one of the ways through which an organization exercises unobtrusive control over its workforce. The main focus of this study is, using content analysis, to examine the extent of MTR’s use of Cheney’s (1983) identification-inducement strategies and tactics in The MTR Express. The study is the first to develop rules for assessing new strategies to add to Cheney’s (1983) framework. These Criteria for Addition will distinguish legitimate candidates from the others so that not every novel message or presentation method in a newsletter would automatically give rise to a new strategy or tactic. The Criteria for Addition have been used in the study to justify, with evidence from The MTR Express, the addition of the “employee voice” strategy and several tactics to Cheney’s (1983) framework. These new entries show that modifications and additions to Cheney’s (1983) framework are not only possible but also useful to reflect an organization’s persuasive efforts. Proposals to add new tactics in four past studies by other researchers have also been evaluated. No previous research has been conducted on employee newsletters in Hong Kong under Cheney’s (1983) framework. This study will raise organizations’ interest in employee newsletters as well as employees’ and outsiders’ awareness of their purposes. It is also the first comprehensive study of an organization’s newsletter, using all ten editions of MTR’s Newsletter published in 2007 and all the articles in those editions without sampling, enabling a full analysis of the identification-inducement strategies and tactics used. This study illustrates that content analysis can be a versatile tool in the study of newsletters and other materials and that simple EXCEL worksheets can be used to expand its usefulness. It also illustrates that content analysis is not always a quantitative procedure as a significant amount of qualitative work has been involved in the study. Finally, the author advocates a balance between organizational control and employee autonomy and between uniformity and diversity, to nurture an organization’s adaptability to change, which is vital for organizational survival and excellence.
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