

# Media Framing of Southern Utah University's Transition to the Western Athletic Conference

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Suggested Citation:

Francis, T. (2024). Media framing of Southern Utah University's transition to the Western Athletic Conference. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 2(2), 116-123. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13905346>

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## Abstract

This study investigates the media coverage and framing of Southern Utah University's (SUU) transition from the Big Sky Conference to the Western Athletic Conference (WAC), a move announced on January 14, 2021. The research focuses on 20 press releases, analyzing how the media portrayed this shift, particularly emphasizing four key themes: the revival of football in the WAC, the rich historical connections of the conference, the renewal of rivalries, and the financial impact of the transition. Utilizing rhetorical analysis and framing theory, the study explores how these themes were strategically used to shape public perception, portraying the transition as a positive and strategic decision for SUU. The analysis highlights the media's role in crafting narratives that emphasize the benefits of the move, such as increased local engagement, economic advantages, and the revival of traditional rivalries. The findings underscore the significant influence of media framing in sports journalism and provide insights into the broader implications of how media narratives can shape public understanding and opinion.

*Keywords: Media framing, Sports journalism, Southern Utah University, Western Athletic Conference*

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On January 14, 2021, the commissioner of the Western Athletic Conference (WAC) announced that Southern Utah University (SUU), along with five other schools, would be joining the WAC as full-conference members starting July 1, 2022. SUU's decision to leave the Big Sky Conference and join the WAC garnered significant attention and various perspectives in the media. While this move marked the return of WAC football, with the conference planning to form a Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) league, the move was also part of an effort to create more

robust regional rivalries and improve the competitive landscape of the conference. SUU's decision to join the WAC came after months of speculation and rumors. Significant media coverage, including both local and national outlets, produced 20 articles over the following 48 hours. For this study, I performed a rhetorical analysis of all 20 articles produced about SUU joining the WAC, as it will reveal how media framing influenced public perception and interpretation of this significant decision in the history of SUU Athletics.

## Literature Review

Erving Goffman's seminal work, "Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience" (1974), lays the foundation for modern framing theory, positing that individuals interpret their world through primary frameworks that are largely taken for granted. Durham (1998) and Berkowitz (2005) expand on this, noting that frames make the world more comprehensible, especially for unusual or unexpected events, by aligning them with familiar narratives. This approach allows journalists to create stories that resonate better with their audiences, embedding ideological positions and social narratives to create meaning (Coombs, 2022). Moreover, credible media outlets possess greater influence on shaping audience perceptions of an event or issue, while an outlet with less credibility in a particular area has less impact (Rhee, 1997). Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) identified seven key framing techniques: metaphors (framing concepts through comparison), stories (using narrative for vivid, memorable framing), traditions (cultural mores adding significance), artifacts (objects with symbolic value), jargon (using slogans or catch phrases for memorable framing), contrast (defining objects by what they are not), and spin (presenting a concept with a subtle value judgment). These techniques highlight the various ways in which the media can shape the perception and understanding of news and events (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996).

### Media Framing & Sports

Media framing in sports significantly influences public perception and understanding of events, narratives, and athletes by focusing on specific aspects and utilizing particular language and imagery (Coombs, 2022b). This framing can affect how the public views professional athletes and the broader context of sports media (Lewis & Weaver, 2013). For instance, Ash and Cranmer (2019) demonstrated how media descriptions using terms like "brawn" or "brain" influenced perceptions of a college football recruit's abilities and character, highlighting the power of framing in shaping public opinion about student-athletes.

Sports-specific media outlets, such as SportsCenter, often use framing to focus on particular narratives, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bell (2021) found that SportsCenter's coverage emphasized the pandemic's impact on sports, particularly the cancellation of the 2020 NCAA men's basketball tournament, while downplaying broader global effects. This example underscores the need for audiences to seek multiple perspectives to get a complete picture of events, as media framing can present a biased or partial view.

The case of Colin Kaepernick, analyzed by Boykoff and Carrington (2019), illustrates the significant sway media framing can have on public opinion. The study found that media outlets largely framed Kaepernick's protest against police brutality in a positive light, despite public controversy. This framing influenced public perception, showcasing how media can shape the narrative around athletes' actions and societal issues.

Gender differences in media framing were explored by Nicely (2007), who found that female athletes are often portrayed negatively, with themes suggesting weak mentality or likening them to familial roles. This study highlights the ongoing challenge of biased framing in sports media and the importance of addressing these biases to promote a more accurate and respectful representation of all athletes. These findings collectively demonstrate the pervasive influence of media framing in shaping public understanding and attitudes toward sports and athletes.

After reviewing the literature on media framing and analyzing its relation to sports and college athletics, the following research questions have been drafted in order to study media framing in a specific case regarding media coverage of Southern Utah University's departure from the Big Sky Conference and emergence into the Western Athletic Conference that occurred in 2022.

*RQ1: What are the major rhetorical themes that emerge throughout the media coverage?*

*RQ2: In what ways does Southern Utah's internal coverage of the transition differ from the narratives presented by local media, if any?*

*RQ3: Which framing tactics did the media attempt to use in order to influence the public opinion and perception on SUU's transition to the WAC?*

## Method

This study utilizes rhetorical analysis as the primary methodology to examine the media coverage of SUU's transition from the Big Sky Conference to the WAC. Rhetorical analysis is well-suited for this research as it explores how language, symbols, and messaging strategies shape public perception (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). This approach is particularly relevant for analyzing media texts, as it focuses on the techniques used to persuade and influence audience interpretations. The goal is to understand the impact of media framing

on public perceptions of SUU's significant conference change.

Framing theory is central to this study, providing a framework for analyzing how media narratives influence public perception (Coombs, 2022b). Drawing from Goffman's foundational work in "Frame Analysis," the study examines specific narrative techniques such as metaphors, narratives, and contrasts used in the media (Goffman, 1974). The way an issue is framed can significantly affect how individuals interpret and react to it, making this theory essential for understanding the media's role in shaping public opinion on SUU's conference transition.

The choice of rhetorical analysis is further justified by its ability to dissect the construction and impact of media frames (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). This method involves a detailed examination of rhetorical elements, including the purpose of communication, audience characteristics, contextual factors, and the effectiveness of rhetorical strategies (Greenhalgh & Coombs, 2023). While alternative methodologies like case studies or quantitative content analysis were considered, they were deemed less suitable. A case study approach was not used because the media coverage did not provide a bounded system (Coombs et al., 2023), and quantitative content analysis lacked the depth needed to analyze the persuasive elements of media coverage.

The sample for this study consists of 20 articles published between January and July 2022, focusing on SUU's transition to the WAC. These articles were selected to provide a comprehensive view of the media narrative during the announcement period, covering perspectives from SUU, the WAC, the Big Sky Conference, and various media outlets. This sample was chosen to align with the research questions and objectives, ensuring a thorough exploration of how media framing affected public perception. Saturation was achieved by analyzing all relevant articles within the defined period, capturing a full spectrum of perspectives (Coombs, 2022a). The data, obtained through archival research, are publicly accessible, allowing for replication and ensuring the study's credibility.

## Results

The analysis of media coverage on Southern Utah University's transition to the Western Athletic Conference (WAC) revealed four key themes: the revival of football, the rich history of the conference, the renewal of rivalries, and the financial impact. The most dominant theme was the revival of football, with publications using terms like "revive," "rebirth," "revamp," and "revitalize" to emphasize Southern Utah's role

in reintroducing football to the WAC, positioning the university as a crucial player in rejuvenating the conference's football program. Additionally, the rich history between Utah universities and the WAC was highlighted, suggesting Southern Utah's move continued a proud legacy. The renewal of in-state rivalries, particularly with Utah Tech and Utah Valley, was noted as a benefit that would enhance local competition and community engagement. Finally, the financial impact was positively framed, with the transition expected to save Southern Utah significant funds, earmarked for improving the student-athlete experience, and providing a financial boost to the WAC, stabilizing its future. Overall, these themes constructed a favorable narrative, highlighting the transition's benefits for the university, the conference, and the broader community.

### *Revival of Football in the WAC*

The reemergence of football in the WAC was the most prominent theme found within the numerous articles studied. Nine of the 20 publications mentioned the return of WAC football in the titles of their articles. Southern Utah was heavily correlated with the revival of the sport in the WAC, with outlets such as KSL.com using strong verbiage to describe the transition, stating that the Thunderbirds were "set to join revamped WAC football" and would be "leading the charge" (KSL.com, 2021). Certain media publications specifically cited Southern Utah as a key reason for the return of football in the WAC, as the Salt Lake Tribune credited SUU along with the four other schools entering the WAC with "[reviving WAC] football at the FCS level" (Salt Lake Tribune, 2021). Another popular Utah-based media, the Deseret News, adds to this idea, distinguishes the importance of the Thunderbirds being one of the five teams being added to the conference, crediting as being "on the ground level of the WAC's rebirth and expansion" (Deseret News, 2021). The Spectrum, a local news outlet, continued to highlight Southern Utah as a key component in the return of WAC football, stating that "the T-Birds [are leaving] the Big Sky to be part of a WAC football revival" (The Spectrum, 2021).

The addition of football to the WAC as the result of the expansion headlined the WAC's official press release. WAC commissioner Jeff Hurd expressed his excitement for the announcement in the release and stated that "[bringing] football back under the WAC umbrella is [a move] that made sense" (WAC, 2021). An article by WacHoopDigest featured a quote that further explained the relation between the return of football and the WAC's expansion, stating that "the re-introduction of football to the conference is just one of the results of the expansion" (WacHoopDigest, 2021).



Internal publications from Southern Utah addressed the change in conferences in relation to football. An article from SUU Athletics dismissed the notion that the football program could be dropped as a result of the change, as the WAC would be reintroducing the sport back as a Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) conference, which equals the level of competition the Thunderbirds played in under the Big Sky banner (Lester, 2021). A release from SUU News framed Southern Utah's entrance into the WAC as "an effort to reinstitute FCS football competition in the conference" (SUU News, 2021). An official release from Southern Utah University credited the expansion with the reintroduction of WAC football, stating, "the Thunderbirds will be joining the league along with Abilene Christian, Lamar, Sam Houston State and Stephen F. Austin from the Southland Conference, bringing back FCS football to the Western Athletic Conference" (SUU.edu, 2021).

### **Rich History**

Another relevant theme that surfaced in many of the artifacts was the rich history enjoyed between the state of Utah and the WAC. This was a key factor in an article released by Southern Utah announcing the move in conference, as the opening line stated that the Thunderbirds would be "continuing the traditional relationship between the state of Utah and the Western Athletic Conference" (SUU.edu, 2021). The press release pointed out that, with the Thunderbirds move to the WAC, all DI universities in Utah had been members of the conference at some point with the exception of Weber State, further solidifying the rich history of Utah in the conference (SUU.edu, 2021).

The Deseret News further highlighted the state's successful history in the WAC, referring to the conference as "Utah's Legacy Conference" in the title of their article covering the transition (Deseret News, 2021). This theme was prominent throughout the publication's coverage of the move, as the dominant history of Utah universities in the WAC was recalled, headlined by a total of 22 football conference championships won by Utah universities in the past (Deseret News, 2021). Another article released by the Deseret News further addressed the historic compatibility of the state and the conference, comparing the successful combination of Utah and the WAC to peanut butter and jelly (Deseret News, 2021).

### **Renewed Rivalries**

The rebirth of rivalries was another important theme found within the artifacts, with many sources citing it as a pivotal piece of the move. The St. George News reacted positively to the announcement, stating that the move "gives the local region an in-conference rivalry in

Division I" (St. George News, 2021). The article included a quote from SUU women's basketball head coach Tracy Sanders, who discussed the significance of having three Utah teams in the WAC, citing the potential for entertaining rivalries which could improve attendance at games (St. George News, 2021). Another local outlet, the Iron County Today, featured a quote from SUU men's basketball head coach Todd Simon, who highlighted the potential for local rivalries to drum up excitement in the program, stating that "building in-state rivalries with Utah Valley and Dixie State will be a lot of fun for our fans" (Iron County Today, 2021). SUU president Scott Wyatt elaborates on this topic in an article by The Spectrum, highlighting that "one of the most exciting aspects of this is the rivalry were [sic] going to build with Utah Valley and rebuild with Dixie State" (The Spectrum, 2021). The anticipation for renewed rivalries was an important factor for Southern Utah, as SUU News describes the ability to play in-state opponents as a priority for President Wyatt (SUU News, 2021). The article later features a quote from Wyatt, as he explains that:

*"If you were to ask all of the schools in the Big Sky who their number one rival is, none of them would say Southern Utah University ... But moving into the WAC, we think Utah Valley and Dixie will see us that way" (SUU News, 2021).*

Along with in-state rivalries, the potential of playing new opponents was an exciting aspect of the transition, as SUU president Scott Wyatt explains that "being a member of the WAC also creates new athletic rivalries that our alumni and fans are excited about" (KSL.com).

### **Financial Impact**

The final theme that emerged through coding was the financial impact the move would have on both SUU and the WAC. The Salt Lake Tribune reported that Southern Utah was set to lower expenses by roughly \$200,000-\$300,000 by joining the WAC, citing simpler travel as a major factor financially (Salt Lake Tribune, 2021). This was elaborated on in article by SUU News, which included a quote from SUU president Scott Wyatt, who claimed that due to travel expenses decreasing the university will "be able to use that money to increase the competitiveness of our students and more fully support our athletes" (SUU News, 2021).

Many outlets commented on how the move could benefit SUU financially. A report from KSL.com proclaimed that the WAC was "more economically sustainable" than the Big Sky (KSL.com, 2021). The Deseret News discussed the financial viability of the WAC, stating that "WAC universities are located in five of the top

30 media markets in the United States” (Deseret News, 2021). Later in the article, a quote from SUU athletic director Debbie Corum was included that discusses her opinion on the future financial growth of the conference, saying that Corum was “convinced that in the very near future WAC media exposure will increase to the entire country” (Deseret News, 2021).

The potential improvement in brand recognition was a major point concerning the financial impact of the move. The Salt Lake Tribune quoted WAC commissioner Jeff Hurd, who emphasized the importance of the brand recognition that comes with the WAC, stating, “in terms of brand recognition, the Big Sky is good, but the WAC brand recognition is significant” (Salt Lake Tribune, 2021). The same article includes a quote from SUU’s athletic director Debbie Corum, who highlighted the potential brand exposure of joining the WAC, saying, “I know from experience that if you can get into bigger, major media markets, it just changes everything for you” (Salt Lake Tribune, 2021).

Certain publications commented on how the addition of Southern Utah would positively impact the WAC. One outlet dedicated to coverage on the conference, WacHoopDigest, noted in an article how the WAC appeared to be “close to its deathbed” prior to the expansion (WacHoopDigest, 2021). Later in the press release, a quote from the president of Grand Canyon University was included, who praised the inclusion of Southern Utah in the conference and described how SUU will help keep the conference afloat, saying that the WAC “[needs] to consist of schools that have the will and desire and resources to compete ... Utah is a growing state with a growing economy” (WacHoopDigest, 2021). KSL.com built on this idea, commenting on the rapid growth of the state of Utah and how that could be potentially helpful to the WAC (KSL.com, 2021). The Salt Lake Tribune pointed out how the expansion “not only stabilizes the conference for the future; it also positions it for growth and success” (Salt Lake Tribune, 2021). An article by Deseret News discusses the importance of the expansion, and reinforces how Southern Utah joining will help the conference survive, saying, “the [WAC], however, struggled through conference realignments in the early 2000s. But like the mythical phoenix rising from the ashes, the WAC is now positioned for a grand resurgence” (Deseret News, 2021).

## Discussion

This study’s examination of 20 press releases on Southern Utah University’s (SUU) transition from the Big Sky Conference to the Western Athletic Conference (WAC) revealed four prominent

themes: the revival of football in the WAC, rich historical connections, renewal of rivalries, and financial impact. These themes, identified through a rhetorical analysis framework, illustrate how media coverage employed framing theory to shape public perception of the transition. Each theme was strategically utilized to construct a narrative that portrayed the move in a positive light, thereby influencing audience interpretations and reactions.

### *Revival of Football in the WAC*

One of the most emphasized themes was the revival of football within the WAC. Media outlets consistently highlighted SUU’s pivotal role in reintroducing football to the conference, framing the university as a catalyst for revitalizing the WAC’s football program. This narrative not only underscored the strategic importance of SUU’s move but also suggested that the transition marked the beginning of a new era for the conference. The coverage was designed to foster a sense of excitement and anticipation, portraying the university as an integral player in enhancing the competitive landscape of collegiate football within the WAC. This framing was effective in positioning the transition as a significant and positive development, potentially enhancing SUU’s reputation and attractiveness to prospective students and athletes.

### *Rich Historical Connections*

The theme of rich historical connections played a crucial role in framing SUU’s transition as a return to familiar territory rather than an entirely new venture. Media narratives frequently referenced the longstanding relationships and shared histories between SUU and other institutions within the WAC. This emphasis on history and tradition was crafted to resonate with alumni and long-term supporters, creating a sense of continuity and loyalty. By portraying the transition as a reconnection with a storied past, the media effectively utilized nostalgia and tradition to frame the move as both natural and desirable. This approach helped to mitigate any potential resistance or concern by aligning the change with the university’s historical identity and legacy.

### *Renewal of Rivalries*

The renewal of rivalries emerged as a central theme, particularly in local and regional media coverage. This theme capitalized on the competitive spirit inherent in college sports, suggesting that the transition would reignite old rivalries, thereby enhancing fan engagement and increasing attendance at games. The media’s focus on rivalries was strategically employed to generate excitement and enthusiasm among the fan base, emphasizing the emotional and communal aspects of sports. This framing tactic not only highlighted the anticipated benefits for

SUU's athletic programs but also underscored the move's potential to strengthen community ties and local pride. The emphasis on rivalries was portrayed as a catalyst for revitalizing interest in SUU's sports events, positioning the transition as beneficial for both the university and its supporters.

### **Financial Impact**

The financial impact of SUU's transition to the WAC was a theme consistently highlighted in the media coverage. Articles detailed various economic advantages, such as reduced travel costs, potential revenue increases from larger attendances, and improved media rights deals. This theme framed the transition as a fiscally prudent decision, emphasizing the financial stability and growth potential for SUU's athletic department. By focusing on the economic rationale behind the move, the media presented the transition as a well-considered and strategic decision that would bring substantial benefits to the university. This framing was crucial in garnering support from stakeholders concerned with the financial aspects of the university's operations, including administrators, donors, and the broader community.

### **Consistency Across Media Types**

An analysis of the thematic alignment between SUU's internal media and local media revealed a high degree of consistency in the framing of the transition. Both internal and local narratives prominently featured the revival of football in the WAC, rich historical connections, the renewal of rivalries, and the financial impact. This uniformity in messaging likely contributed to a cohesive and compelling narrative that reinforced the positive aspects of the transition. By presenting a united front across different media types, SUU was able to effectively manage public perception, ensuring that the transition was viewed favorably by various stakeholders. The consistent use of these themes suggests a deliberate and coordinated effort to shape the narrative, underscoring the importance of strategic communication in managing significant institutional changes.

### **Framing Tactics and Public Perception**

The media employed several specific framing tactics to influence public perception, including the use of evocative jargon, emphasis on tradition, contrast framing, and alignment with community values. Terms like "revival" and "rebirth" were strategically used to evoke a sense of renewal and positive change, particularly in the context of football. The emphasis on tradition linked SUU's transition to a narrative of historical continuity, enhancing its appeal to alumni and long-term supporters. Contrast framing was used to highlight the benefits of the WAC over the Big Sky Conference,

positioning the move as a progressive step. Finally, the alignment with community values, such as increased local engagement and the revitalization of rivalries, helped secure public support by connecting the transition to tangible benefits for the local community.

The media's framing of SUU's transition to the WAC was a sophisticated and multifaceted effort that successfully shaped public perception by emphasizing the positive aspects of the move. The strategic use of specific themes and framing tactics not only highlighted the benefits of the transition but also fostered a supportive and enthusiastic response from the public. This study underscores the powerful role of media in influencing public opinion and highlights the importance of strategic communication in managing institutional changes. The findings provide valuable insights into the dynamics of media framing in sports journalism and suggest avenues for future research on the broader implications of framing theory in public discourse.

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