Multimodal discourse on online newspaper home pages: A social-semiotic perspective

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person where due reference is not made in the text.

John S. Knox MAppLing, BA
Abstract

In a short space of time, online newspapers have emerged to play an important role in the institutional construction of ‘news’ and the mass mediation of information. The home pages of online newspapers feature short verbal texts, and communicate using language, image, layout, colour, and other semiotic resources: they communicate multimodally.

This thesis examines the multimodal discourse of three English-language online newspapers: the Bangkok Post (Thailand), the English-language edition (translated from Chinese) of the People’s Daily (China), and the Sydney Morning Herald (Australia). Between February, 2002 and April, 2006, three data collections were made (February-April, 2002; September-November, 2005; January-April, 2005) using a five-day ‘constructed week’ method. The main corpus was 15 home pages from each newspaper (five per collection per newspaper), but the total corpus (including other pages from each newspaper) was 603 web pages. Two senior editors (one each from the Bangkok Post and the Sydney Morning Herald) were interviewed.

The multimodal discourse of the home pages was analysed using tools from Systemic Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA), and a ‘visual grammar’ of home pages building on the work of Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) was developed. In addition, a rank scale for online newspapers was proposed, and limitations of applying the tool of rank scale to this corpus were identified. An emerging genre - the headline-plus-lead-plus-hyperlink newsbite - was identified, and the design of newsbites on the home page of the Sydney Morning Herald and the evolution of their design over time was analysed. The use of images on the home pages in the corpus was analysed, and the increasing use of thumbnail images in the
Sydney Morning Herald - particularly close-up thumbnails of faces - was investigated in further depth.

The visual design of online newspaper home pages and the news texts appearing on them are an evolution of print news genres and their design practices. Newsbites and headline-only newsbits are verbally short, so the authors of newspaper home pages are forced to rely increasingly on visual communication in order to position stories and readers, and to communicate the values of the news institution on the home page as mediated by the screen. Thumbnail images are evolving as a new form of punctuation on some home pages, and this may be a short-lived, or an emerging historical trend in the development of punctuation, at least in online environments.

Overall, online newspaper home pages are tending towards shorter texts, which communicate in novel ways. These short texts cannot communicate the values and ideology of news institutions in the way that extended verbal texts have done for centuries, yet this function of news texts remains important to the construction and maintenance of a readership, and therefore crucial to the home page of a newspaper. As a result, news institutions express values visually in their design of newspaper home pages. As readers become familiar with the meanings of online news design, they become adept at reading and understanding short stories within these multimodally-construed frames of reference. Ideology is increasingly fragmented on shorter timescales, but expressed over longer timescales in a hypermedia environment that affords and extends many of the pre-existing multimodal features of print newspaper discourse.
Preface

This preface discusses two issues in relation to the thesis: matters of research ethics, and matters of publication and plagiarism.

Firstly, research ethics. This thesis reports on a research project examining online newspaper home pages. The texts collected for the research were freely available texts in the public domain, and therefore no ethics approval was required to collect them. As part of the research, interviews were also conducted with senior editors at two newspapers. Ethics procedures for research on humans were followed, and these are detailed in Chapter 4.

Secondly, publication and plagiarism. Written texts in many social spheres are becoming shorter and more fragmented. In academic discourse, for example, traditional PhD theses are giving way to other gatekeeping texts, such as ‘thesis by publication’.

Thesis by publication is a reflection of the changing nature of the academy. It is in the interests of both the candidate and the institution for PhD candidates to publish their research as they study, and in some fields (for example, medicine) it is necessary to do so as knowledge moves at a rate much faster than it did when the traditional model of PhD research and thesis production emerged.

The University of Sydney has developed policy regarding thesis by publication. The policy allows for traditional PhD theses, theses by publication, and
theses which fall somewhere between the two. The information for candidates about this policy states, in part:

**How should the papers be incorporated in the thesis?**

Papers can be incorporated in the thesis in any or all of the following ways:

- Passages from published papers can be quoted verbatim (or in appropriately edited form and referenced) into one or more chapters of the thesis.
- A published paper or an accepted manuscript can form a single chapter (or several papers may form successive chapters) without any editing.
- An original reprint of the paper(s) can be directly bound into the thesis or inserted as a photocopy (where paper size of the reprint differs from that of the thesis).


The current thesis has, as it were, one foot on the platform of the traditional thesis, and one on the train of ‘publish as you go’. In the process of research and authoring, journal articles were developed and published, conference papers presented and published, and commissioned book chapters written and published. But each of these involved compromises in terms of the amount of data that could be presented, the extent to which analysis could be included, the extent to which the published paper conformed to the rhetorical focus of the thesis, and also the amount that could be written in individual papers (each of which was required to ‘start from scratch’ in terms of presenting the project and reviewing the relevant literature).

Presenting individual published papers as complete chapters (the second bullet point from the policy in the above quote) would be a compromise. At the same time, citing each published paper each time it was quoted or paraphrased (the first bullet point from the policy in the above quote) would be impractical for both writer and reader of this thesis, as the published papers from the current research project have
been broken up, adapted, spliced, edited, and used verbatim in differing degrees throughout the entire thesis.

Therefore, in order to avoid the cumbersome, inefficient and unproductive process of citing the papers published from this thesis at every point they are sourced, the submitted manuscript (prior to proof editing) of each paper is included as a separate appendix within the thesis.

In this way, the reader has access to the manuscripts of the published papers as well as the thesis, and as they form part of the same text, by the same author, produced as part of the same research project for the same degree, potential issues of self-plagiarism are avoided.

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