Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Newspapers in context

Print newspapers have been with us since the 17th century (Baldwin, 2003; Smith, 1979). Their origins lie in the broadsides, pamphlets, and newsbooks of Europe, whose production (and more importantly, reproduction) was made possible by the development and spread of the European printing press from the 15th century (Briggs & Burke, 2002; Smith, 1979). Over the centuries, newspapers have gone through a variety of changes: textual, commercial, and technological (Chapman, 2005). But fundamentally, their production has remained bound to the printing press, their distribution to the movement of paper, their reading to the materiality of newsprint.

After three-and-a-half centuries, the change that broke these bonds was the emergence and development of the world wide web. In 1990, online newspapers did not exist. In 1995, only a handful of major newspapers published on the world wide web. In 2000, only a handful didn’t (cf. Arant & Anderson, 2001; Barnhurst, 2002; Boczkowski, 2004a; Deuze, 2001; Foo, Tham & Hao, 1999; Li, 2002). The speed with which newspapers took to the world wide web is illustrated in Figure 1.1, which takes newspapers published in the U.S. as an example.

From their beginnings as news room experiments, conducted for the most part by enthusiastic and tech-savvy staff (Boczkowski, 2004a), online newspapers developed into a supplementary means by which the news carried in print editions could be distributed, and later into a fundamental aspect of news production and
dissemination in individual newspapers, and a major element in the landscape of the mass media.

As Rupert Murdoch observed in the 2008 Boyer lectures, online newspapers and their related products appear to represent the future of newspaper institutions (even despite the question of trust to which Murdoch refers), as the costs of paper, ink, and the distribution of material objects increase in relation to the revenue print newspapers generate.

It's true that in the coming decades, the printed versions of some newspapers will lose circulation. But if papers provide readers with news they can trust, we'll see gains in circulation—on our web pages, through our RSS feeds, in emails delivering customised news and advertising, to mobile phones.

In short, we are moving from newspapers to news brands. ... In this coming century, the form of delivery may change, but the potential
The internet is only the latest in a series of technological challenges to the newspaper industry. “Other innovations have radically transformed the news media business before, creating wholly new markets or destroying existing markets for other technologies” (Paul, 2008, p. ix). However, unlike any previous technology, the world wide web has broken the bond between newspapers and the printing press. Paul continues:

> the adoption of Internet technology as a new production, packaging, and distribution channel for news and information has fundamentally challenged every aspect of media organizations. New newsroom organizational structures and positions are being created to marshal the flow of copy to multiple distribution channels. New business models are being explored as Internet-based companies are competing with traditional media in the advertising market. New deadlines are being set. Even the very definition of what is “news” and who is a “journalist” is being reexamined. (Paul, 2008, p. ix)

It is in this context that this thesis examines the home pages of three online newspapers, and the way in which they mediate communication between news institutions and online newspaper readers visually over a four-year period (February, 2002 - April, 2006). These online newspapers are the Bangkok Post (BKP), an English-language newspaper published in Thailand; the English-language version of the People’s Daily (PD), a Chinese-language newspaper published in the People’s Republic of China and translated into English; and the Sydney Morning Herald (SMH), an English-language newspaper published in Australia. These three newspapers are among the many print newspapers that moved onto the world wide web in the last decade of the 20th century (see section 1.4 below).
The remainder of this chapter introduces the thesis. First, it looks at the development of online newspapers and the social, technological, and intellectual environment in which they have emerged and continue to develop (the remainder of this section). Then, section 1.2 briefly considers research into visual communication and online newspaper pages. Section 1.3 sets out the questions and context of the research project, and the last section of this chapter, section 1.4, previews the contents of the thesis.

1.1.1 Print and bytes: The mass mediation of meaning and the world wide web

When newspapers first emerged, there were no media by which information could be accurately reproduced and distributed with a comparable speed, on a comparable scale. It was not until the early 20th century that wireless radio broadcasting and newsreels played in cinemas provided the first real competition to newspapers as a medium for the mass distribution of news. Television broadcasts also arrived in the late 1920s and early 1930s, adding to the new technologies broadening the media landscape.

These news media have ‘carved out’ their respective spaces based on their relative strengths and weaknesses. In this changed media landscape, newspapers have had to compete for the news audience:

throughout the developed world, newspaper circulation has been in decline for decades. France’s circulation crested in 1950, Australia in 1956, Great Britain in 1957, the United States in 1971, and Japan in 1981. (Gottlieb, 2003)
Yet newspapers have survived, attributable in part to their long history of exploring and employing new technologies in their own institutional and communicative practices (Chapman, 2005; Machin & Niblock, 2006, pp. 10-13; see also Caple, in press). Even as the internet was emerging in the late 20th century, newspapers were experimenting with a range of technologies, including videotex (primarily text-based news transmitted via phone lines to dedicated receivers, and later personal computers), teletext (primarily text-based news transmitted via television frequencies to televisions with decoders), audiotex (automated news provided over the telephone to callers), and fax papers (shortened or summary versions of newspapers transmitted by facsimile) (Boczkowski, 2004a). But as personal computers became more widespread and the world wide web accessible to many through the 1990s, it was the web that emerged as the technology of choice for newspapers wishing to publish electronically, and “the delivery of content and applications to personal computers connected to the web achieved a dominant status” (Boczkowski, 2004a, p. 42).

Golding & Murdock (2000, p. 79) observe that the rise of digital technologies mean that all forms of communication can be encoded, stored, and distributed “using the same basic digital array of zeroes and ones”. Coupled with the processes of globalisation and the move towards ‘free markets’, they argue, this results in an increase in the ability of large mass media organisations to transcend boundaries of time and space. They refer to this as “the era of convergence” (ibid.), or an era of social and technological developments which extend:

the power of ... those who own the key building blocks of new communications systems, the rights to the key pieces of technology and, even more importantly, the rights to the cultural materials - the films, books, images, sounds, writings - that will be used to put together the new services. (Golding & Murdock, 2000, pp. 80-81)
More recently though, as the power to control access to information has dispersed beyond the traditional gatekeepers (Bruns, 2008), the economic viability of newspaper institutions has come increasingly under question, and it is an open question as to whether existing news institutions will remain as the behemoths of the new media age, or become the dinosaurs. If they are to avoid the latter path, online newspapers will undoubtedly play an important role in their survival.

In short, newspapers are caught in a fundamental social movement, in which the production, mediation, and distribution of information and knowledge is moving from the printing press, ink, and paper, to computer networks, bytes and screens.

1.1.2 The rise of the visual

At the same time that the printing press has gradually given way, first to personal computers, and then to networked computers, an intellectual and social shift has been taking place, with the primacy of the written word ceding ground to a growing interest in visual communication and culture.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a plethora of books, journals, conferences, and university courses suddenly appeared, all of them dealing with what appeared to be a new topic, a new area of study: visual culture. But what, we might ask, is new about it? After all, human beings have always looked at and seen the world around them, and made sense of themselves and others through their understanding of what they see. (Schirato & Webb, 2004, p.1; cf. Barnard, 2005, pp. 1-5)

With the advent of photography and film in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, television in the mid-20th century, and computer screens in the late 20th century, it is not surprising that scholarly interest in visual communication should
increase, nor that professional practices of visual communication workers should
become more institutionalised.

As a profession, graphic design has existed only since the middle of
the twentieth century; until then, advertisers and their agents used the services provided
by ‘commercial artists’. These specialists were visualizers (layout artists); typographers who did the detailed
planning of the headline and text, and gave instructions for typesetting; illustrators of all kinds, producing anything from
mechanical diagrams to fashion sketches; retouchers; lettering artists and others who prepared finished designs for reproduction.

(Hollis, 2001, p. 8)

The ‘rise of the visual’ in intellectual circles is also attributable to a
broadening of the focus of study in individual disciplines, and a move towards trans-
disciplinary work, where researchers from different disciplines with common interests
are more willing to talk and listen to one another.

Interdisciplinary work is not unique to visual communication, but it
is nevertheless particularly common in the field, perhaps in part because within many of the most relevant traditional academic
disciplines (anthropology, sociology, education, linguistics, etc.) it has, at least until now, been a relatively marginal concern. (Jewitt et
al., 2002)

Particularly relevant for this thesis is the increased interest in visual
communication on pages (see Chapter 5). And in the case of pages, it is not simply
that scholars have begun to notice that pages communicate visually (though there is
an element of that, too). Rather, the nature of communication on pages has changed,
particularly (but not exclusively) over the latter part of the 20th century. “What was
essentially a linguistic unit 100 years ago has now become primarily a visual unit”
(Baldry & Thibault, 2006, p. 58). The emergence of the internet, and the beginning of
the decline of the power of the printing press are important factors which have
accelerated this development (cf. Helfand, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2006).
Chapter One: Introduction

In newspaper studies, interest in the way newspaper pages communicate visually has brought this aspect of newspaper discourse into focus, and while newspapers have always communicated visually (Barnhurst, 1994; Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001), the meaning of the visual design of news is emerging alongside studies of the language of news, news photography, newsroom ethnography, and political economy (among others) as a valid and important area of research in studies of the mass media (e.g. Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001; de Vries, 2008; Evans, 1976; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1998; Utt & Pasternack, 2003).

Journalism studies has yet to acquire a critical vocabulary with which to investigate the development of visual journalism. While there have been studies of news photography and meaning, which are predominantly from semiotic approaches to visual texts, there has been little if any prominent investigation on the impact of typography, layout and picture editing. (Machin & Niblock, 2006, p. 137)

It is in this area the current thesis seeks to make a contribution. A theoretically grounded, systematic account of the visual design of online home pages is proposed, which is intended to serve as a basis for further investigation, and for the development of approaches to the teaching of reading emerging genres such as online newspapers, and also approaches to the training of future media professionals (see Chapter 9).

1.1.3 Newspapers in context: Conclusion

With the emergence of the internet and the world wide web, newspapers have changed fundamentally. While the long-term impact of these changes is still unknown, for now the online newspaper has emerged as a central aspect in the practices of news institutions.
Similarly, the ‘rise of the visual’ has led to new textual practices in many genres. It has also led to increased academic interest in describing and theorising visual communication. Visual communication on newspaper pages has attracted increasing interest as part of this movement.

These historical trajectories make online newspapers an important area for study, and draw focus to the question of how online newspaper pages communicate visually. In response, researchers in a number of fields have taken up the challenge of investigating visual communication in online newspapers from a range of perspectives, and some of these are discussed in the following section.

1.2 Researching the visual in online newspapers

Online newspapers have, in less than a decade, become an important feature of the landscape of the mass media, and may represent the future viability of the social institution commonly known as the newspaper. Similarly, visual communication is now recognised as a central element of the ways that newspaper pages communicate, and therefore the ways in which these texts achieve the commercial and ideological objectives of the news organisations which publish them. Unsurprisingly, a number of methodological approaches have been taken to studying visual communication on online newspaper pages, including grounded theory (e.g. Cooke, 2003), content analysis (e.g. Barnhurst, 2002; Greer & Mensing, 2004), interviews and surveys (e.g. Lowrey, 1999; Utt & Pasternack, 2003), and eyetracking research (e.g. Holmqvist et al., 2003; Stark Adam, Quinn & Edmonds, 2007).
These studies (which are reviewed in more detail in Chapter 2) have made important contributions to our understanding of visual communication on online newspaper pages, contributing to knowledge of the design choices in online newspapers comparative to the websites of other media organisations; the extent to which pages dedicate space to (for instance) images, text, and advertisements; the implications of online publishing for the status and role of photojournalism; and the reading practices of online newspaper readers as measured by questionnaires and eye fixations on the screen.

This thesis provides a complementary but distinct analytical perspective, based on social-semiotic theory. Social semiotics (also known as systemic-functional or SF theory) is an approach to analysing texts which has the basic tenets that texts make meaning in relation to context, and that text and context are systematically related.

Figure 1.2: Newsbite from SMH home page, September 15, 2005

From the perspective of social semiotics, texts make meaning on a number of levels simultaneously. Take the text in Figure 1.2 for example. On the broadest level, this text makes meaning in relation to other texts. That is, we can identify it as some kind of news story: it is not a lecture, it is not a wedding ceremony, it is not a
scientific report, it is not a fairy tale.¹ At the same time on another level, the author of this text has chosen to present it in a relatively dramatic fashion by using the headline *Obesity Crisis*. This represents a discursive choice on the part of the writer, designed to orient the reader to the text in a given way. Compare, for example, how the text would read if the headline read: *Obesity Study Findings*. So not only is the text structured as a news story (with headline and lead), but the meaning of the text depends on discursive choices, such as how the reader is oriented to the story by the headline.

The lead of this news story uses the lexical item *ballooning* to construe the increase in average weight. The image depicts the bottoms of two obese people set against a sky-blue background, drawing on the visual and cultural stereotype which associates obesity with ‘roundness’. This combination of choices creates a visual-verbal pun. (Different versions of this particular story appeared in two other places in the same online edition of the *SMH* on the same day, and also once in the print edition. This image did not appear in any of the other versions of this story, nor did the word *balloon* or any of its derivatives.)

Thus, we can see that choices in overall text structure, discursive elements of verbal texts which operate at a ‘lower’ level, individual lexical items (at yet another level), and images are all meaningful. This is a feature of all texts, and the different levels of text structure, discourse, and lexis, their relations to one another, and their relations to context are all theorised in social semiotics. The different levels that operate in semiotic systems such as language are discussed in Chapter 3 and

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¹ In fact, it is a *newsbite*, a particular kind of news story commonly found on online newspaper home pages, consisting minimally of a headline, a lead, and a hyperlink (see Chapter 7).
Chapter One: Introduction

operationalised in relation to the design of online newspaper home pages in Chapters 5-8.

The theoretical approach taken in this thesis (sketched at this point in the briefest and most general terms) is comprehensive in its scope (from culture to graphology) and degree of detail, and has been applied to a range of semiotic systems, including language (e.g. Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004; Martin, 1992), image (e.g. Caple, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; O’Toole, 1994), music (e.g. Caldwell, 2008; van Leeuwen, 1999), mathematical symbolism (e.g. O’Halloran, 2005), three-dimensional space (e.g. Stenglin, 2004, 2009), and web design (e.g. Djonov, 2005, 2007, 2008). This thesis uses this theoretical approach in order to complement existing research into visual communication in online newspapers. It is not the only approach that could be taken in the larger social project of understanding how online newspapers function in society. Rather, it is an empirical, theoretically consistent approach that complements other approaches, and which, to date, has not figured prominently in the research into online newspapers (though see Bateman, Delin & Henschel, 2006; see also Appendices E-K).

1.3 Questions and Context

The research reported in this thesis studies the visual design of news on the home pages of three online newspapers, from a social-semiotic perspective, over a four-year period (February, 2002 - April, 2006). As stated above, the theoretical approach is explained in detail in Chapter 3. In this section, the framing questions for the research
are provided, and information regarding the institutional context of each of the three online newspapers is provided.

1.3.1 Framing questions

The research reported in this thesis is guided by a number of framing questions. The overarching question is as follows:

How is meaning communicated by the visual design of online newspaper home pages?

This question is addressed by a number of subordinate questions as follows:

1. What can the analytical tool of rank scale tell us about relations between home pages and their elements, and other elements of the online newspaper? What are the limitations of rank scale in describing the structure of online newspapers?

2. How do home pages, as unified visual signs in their own right:
   a. represent the human experience of events which are deemed newsworthy enough to appear on the page?
   b. construe a relationship between the readers of the newspaper, the institution of the newspaper, and the actors and events reported?
   c. construct coherent and cohesive messages?

3. How do newsbites (the short headline-plus-lead-plus-hyperlink stories common on online newspaper home pages) communicate visually? How important is visual design in such verbally short texts?

4. How are news images used on online newspaper home pages? What role do thumbnail images play on online newspaper home pages?

Each of these subordinate framing questions is addressed by a single analytical chapter, each chapter addressing a separate ‘layer’ of analysis:

- question 1 by Chapter 5
- question 2 by Chapter 6
- question 3 by Chapter 7
- question 4 by Chapter 8.
1.3.2 Institutional contexts

As already stated, this thesis reports research into three online newspapers. These newspapers come from different linguistic, institutional, and national contexts, as outlined below.

1.3.2.1 The Bangkok Post (BKP)

The Bangkok Post (BKP) was established in the immediate aftermath of World War II. A former American naval officer, who had come to Bangkok at the end of the war with the United States OSS (the forerunner of the CIA), formed the Post Publishing Company Ltd with five Thais, and published the first edition of the newspaper on August 1, 1946 (MacDonald, 1990). It was the only English-language newspaper in Thailand at the time, and has remained the most well-known internationally since. (Others include the Bangkok World which was bought and later closed down by the Bangkok Post, and The Nation which remains as the major competitor to the BKP, both in print and online.)

Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, the mass-media in Thailand have faced challenges from various governments (military and civilian), the BKP included. Censorship has been a common occurrence, and other forms of intimidation and violence are not unknown. But in contrast to the broadcast media (much of which has been owned and run by the government and the military), newspapers in Thailand have demonstrated a surprising degree of independence and criticism of governments throughout their history (Lewis, 2006; McCargo & Pathmanand, 2005; Phongpaichit & Baker, 2002; Sulistiyanto, 2002).
Chapter One: Introduction

The *BKP* was first published online on April 1, 1996 (Ekachai, 2000, p. 448). Like many other newspapers, its online beginnings were small and peripheral to the main business of the newsroom (cf. Boczkowski, 2004a). I asked a senior editor at the newspaper about the online edition:

JK: Do you know how the online newsroom began here at the *Post*?

Ed: No, I really don’t remember, sorry. I don’t remember how it all started. ... I think originally it was handled by the IT department - the information technology department: Khun E... and then a woman named D... . She created the website for us ...

(interview with author, January 2007 - see Appendix B)

Over time, though, the online edition of the *BKP* has become more important to the newspaper. The Post Publishing Public Company Limited’s Annual Report of 2002 reported that, in comparison to 2001, it’s web publications (including the *BKP*, and its related websites such as *Student Weekly*) had a 25% increase in advertising revenue, and a 25% increase in page views to an average of 4,000,000 per month.

And at the end of 2005, Post Digital was formed as a separate entity within the Post Publishing Company, with major re-designs of the site at the beginning of 2006, and in 2008.

In the time period covered in this study (from February, 2002 to April, 2006), the copy in the *BKP* online was basically ‘shovelware’, or text from the print edition ‘shovelled’ onto the website. As an employee of the web edition told me:

...basically what you see on the website is a mirror of the daily *Post* paper. We are not creating news, simply putting the news from the daily paper on to the site.

(personal communication with author, January 19, 2007)
This situation was reflected in the geography of the news building in January, 2007 (something which may have been different before and/or since). To get from the large newsroom at the BKP to the offices of Post Digital, it was necessary to walk a few minutes to a different part of the building. The few workers transferring the print edition to online sat at workstations in a small office, removed physically and professionally from the journalists and editors whose work they were reconstruing. This is illustrated in what the same senior editor at the BKP told me at the time:

JK: ... And what about the relationship between, say, [your section of the Post] and the online newspaper. So with the content from [your section] - do you just send that to them?

Ed: I don’t know how they download all the stories but you can read every section online.

JK: So do they liaise with you at all?

Ed: No. I think they have a channel somewhere. All the stories are channelled directly to the website. I don’t know how they do it, but it’s not my work to move the stories to the website.

JK: So the ... section that you edit, you edit the hard copy, and then the online version of [your section] happens completely separate from you.

Ed: right

(interview with author, January, 2007 - see Appendix B)

So, while the online edition of the BKP has been important both for the international status and the income of the newspaper since before the current research began, it appears that this importance was not reflected in the institutional practices surrounding the production of the online version during the data collection period of this research.
1.3.2.2 The People’s Daily (PD)

The People’s Daily was first published in June, 1948. It has played an important role in China since then, influencing public opinion (Lee, 1981) or, more subtly, contributing to “the major stock of social knowledge” (Chang, Wang & Chen, 1994, p. 52). It has also acted as a forum by which local grievances can be raised with the Communist Party at a national level through the letters to the editor (Chu & Chu, 1981), and served as a channel for ‘command communication’ between rulers and the populace (Wu, 1994).

Chang, Wang & Chen (1994) argue that as late as 1992 (just prior to the rise of online newspapers and other internet-based forms of new media), the People’s Daily and China Central Television were “the two most important national sources, which set the official news agenda for other media to follow” (p. 56). But as the mass media in China have expanded, it is likely that the People’s Daily has become less influential over public opinion in China (Wu, 1994, p. 211; cf. Lagerkvist, 2008).

The online edition of the People’s Daily was formally launched on January 1, 1997, and the English-language online edition was first published on January 14, 1998 (People’s Daily, n.d.). Historically, the newspaper has produced different editions for local and overseas audiences (Scollon, 2000), and at the time of writing the online version was available “in Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, Tibetan, Korean, Mongolian, English, Japanese, French, Spanish, Russian and Arabic” (People’s Daily,
n.d.). The English language edition carries translations from the Chinese-language edition, and it is reasonable to expect important differences in the way stories are construed in the different languages (Scollon, 2000; Scollon & Scollon, 1997). Additionally, there are differences in visual design between the different editions of the *People’s Daily*. Such differences, though, are beyond the scope of the current research, which treats the English-language edition of the *People’s Daily* as an online newspaper, available to English speakers with access to the world wide web, like the *Bangkok Post* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

### 1.3.2.3 The *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH)

The *Sydney Morning Herald* was first published in 1831 as the *Sydney Herald*. It was a weekly newspaper, which became a daily in 1840, and changed to its current name in 1842 (Dick, Gibson & Lawson, 2005). It began its life, like most other Sydney newspapers of its time, with its front page dominated by advertisements (Iedema, Feez & White, 1994, pp. 23-5), and editorially “favoured the privileges of the ruling class” (p. 22).

Over time, the political and social roles of newspapers changed (Iedema, 1997; Iedema, Feez & White, 1994), and the *SMH* became a broadsheet, differentiated from a number of its competitors in the Sydney newspaper market such as the afternoon tabloids *The Daily Mirror* and *The Sun* (both now closed), and the only Sydney morning tabloid at the time of writing, *The Daily Telegraph*. Today it has a reputation as one of the most reputable and influential newspapers in Australia (though its print edition is not a national newspaper).
The *SMH* was first published online on April 25, 1995 (Monteiro, 2005). Since that time, it has grown from being an online version of the ‘computer’ section of the newspaper, to a central part of the newspaper’s business. Hartcher (2006) illustrates that the online edition is an important contributor to the financial viability of the newspaper: it earned AUD$24,000,000 in 2005. More fundamentally, perhaps, the online and print editions of the *SMH* are now integrated in a way that presents the *SMH* as a single ‘news brand’ (to use Murdoch’s term as quoted earlier). The print edition includes ‘links’ to the online edition, and the online edition draws on the name and status of the print edition for its authority. In 2007, over 20 staff were employed exclusively on the online edition, and staff on both the print and online editions work together in a physically and institutionally integrated newsroom. A senior editor at the *SMH online* told me about this.

Increasingly, we see ourselves as an integrated newsroom, and we’re making decisions about where’s the best place to put a story, and sometimes the best place to present that and to put that story first might be in the paper, perhaps the best place to present and put that story might be online. ... And I think that there are different ways of telling stories too which we haven’t really touched on, in that you might have a story that’s in the paper, but you can do something else. You can have other elements to that story online. And I suppose from that I mean you can have video, you can have audio, you have the ability to perhaps run many more pages of documents than what you perhaps would in the paper - that kind of thing. So it’s about finding ways of expanding the story-telling perhaps, rather than narrowly defining it as this is what we do in the paper and this is what we do with online. (interview with author, July, 2007 - see Appendix C)

Thus, the online edition of the *SMH* has become an integral element of the commercial and communicative operations of this long-standing news institution.
1.3.2.4 Institutional contexts: Conclusion

Each newspaper in this study publishes on the world wide web, and therefore has the same potential audience, though clearly the traditional audiences of their print editions, and the actual audiences of their online editions, differ.

In terms of their linguistic context, there are clear differences between each newspaper. The *Bangkok Post* is an English-language newspaper in a country where English is not widely spoke, and therefore has a limited but powerful audience in its national context. The *People’s Daily* is a Chinese-language newspaper translated into English, and unlikely to be read in English by anyone locally, aside from people wishing to examine the messages the Communist Party is communicating internationally. The *Sydney Morning Herald*, in contrast, is written in English and has always been intended for a local audience who (for the most part) speak English as their first language.

The three newspapers also differ in their institutional and national contexts. The *Bangkok Post* is published by the Post Publishing Company Limited, a public company which has commercial and political alliances and conflicts typical of Thai media companies (cf. McCargo, 2000). The Thai media industry is diverse in terms of voices and ownership, but there are few Thai media voices publishing or broadcasting in English. The online edition of the *BKP* extends the newspaper’s audience reach to so-called ‘Thailand watchers’, and to international media consumers who prefer to turn to locally-published online newspapers to follow notable events. Additionally and importantly, it maintains (and may even extend) the international status of the newspaper and its local importance (McCargo, 2002).
The *People’s Daily* is run by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and needs to maintain ideological consistency with the CCP and the Chinese government. Its institutional practices include overt control and censorship in a relatively regulated media environment (Scollon & Scollon, 1997; Wu, 1994).² The online English-language edition is a way for the CCP to reach an international audience, and is unlikely to attract a local audience, most of whom are able to read the Chinese-language version.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* is published by Fairfax Media Limited, a publicly listed company. Unlike Thailand, media ownership in Australia is heavily concentrated, and most newspapers published in Australia are owned either by Fairfax or the Murdoch-owned News Limited. In 2006, Fairfax owned:

- 21 per cent of the capital city and national newspaper market;
- 22 per cent of the Sunday newspaper market;
- 17 per cent of the suburban newspaper market;
- 16 per cent of the regional newspaper market.

(Jackson, 2006)

In 2007, Fairfax increased this concentration by merging with Rural Press Limited, which in 2006 had owned “over 150 regional newspapers and magazines”, and had “14 per cent of the circulation of daily regional newspapers” (Jackson, 2006). To illustrate the degree of concentration in the Australian media, in 2006, Fairfax’s major competitor, the Murdoch-owned News Limited, owned:

- 68 per cent of the capital city and national newspaper market;
- 77 per cent of the Sunday newspaper market;
- 62 per cent of the suburban newspaper market;
- 18 per cent of the regional newspaper market.

(Jackson, 2006)

² Of course, the Western media has self-censorship and its own ideological practices, some of which may be becoming more relevant to China (see Lagerkvist, 2008; see also Chapter 2).
In this market, the online edition of the *SMH* is targeted as much or more at the local market as it is at international readers (cf. Thurman, 2007).

From a geopolitical perspective, Thailand is a relatively small power economically and militarily. It is nonetheless one of the key countries in SE Asia, a region which continues to grow in global importance. China is growing in economic and military power, and is among the most powerful nations globally. Australia is a small power like Thailand, but uniquely positioned in relation to Asia: geographically adjacent, politically engaged, but historically colonised and culturally Western.³

The choice of online newspapers from Thailand, China, and Australia betrays a world view which is positioned in the Asia-Pacific, and outside the trans-Atlantic focus common in studies of the mass media (Paterson, 2008; Paul, 2008).⁴ In this way, this thesis provides data and analysis outside the scope of focus of much of the published literature on online newspapers, which has to date tended to focus on the U.S. (See Chapter 2). In addition, the three newspapers studied here provide interesting counterpoints in terms of their historical, linguistic, institutional, and national contexts.

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³ This is an oversimplification for convenience: Australia is culturally diverse, with a population which includes a large proportion of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians of non-Western backgrounds.
⁴ An otherwise positive review of a published article from this thesis questioned whether the focus on the *SMH* in the article was as a result of ‘parochialism’. While that paper did admittedly refer only to one newspaper, it is nonetheless interesting to reflect on whether such a comment would have been made if the article had studied, for instance, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, or *The Times*. 
1.4 Overview of Thesis

Chapter 2 reviews published literature relevant to newspapers and media discourse, providing foundational background to the current research.

Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical foundation for the research reported in this thesis: social semiotics and Systemic Functional (SF) theory as developed initially for language, and then later for other semiotic systems.

In Chapter 4, the methodology of the research is described, incorporating a description of the corpus, and explanations of the data collection and analysis.

Chapter 5 is the first of the analytical chapters (i.e. Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8). It examines online newspapers from the theoretical perspective of constituency. The analytical tool of a rank scale is often employed in social-semiotic studies of multimodal discourse, and Chapter 5 examines the extent to which it can be applied to an analysis of online newspapers in a theoretically thorough manner, and the limitations of such an approach.

Chapter 6 examines visual communication on the home pages of the current corpus, applying the framework of Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) to the home pages of the three newspapers as they appeared between February 2002, and April 2006.

In Chapter 7, newsbites (the headline+lead+hyperlink stories common to home pages) are described, and their development over the four-year period of this
study on the home page of the *SMH* is examined in detail. The paradigmatic
oppositions realised by the structure of these short texts, and their rapid evolution over
the data collection period is documented.

The use of images on home pages is described in Chapter 8, with relatively
large images (used in all three newspapers) considered first, and then the extensive
use of thumbnail images on the *SMH* home page examined second.

Finally, Chapter 9 returns to the framing questions outlined above, considering
how these are answered after considering the findings of the thesis. The limitations
and implications are then considered, and final comments are presented.