Chapter 5: A rank scale for online newspapers

5.1 Introduction

As discussed above, this thesis examines the evolving macro-genres of online newspaper home pages, and newsbites and images on these home pages, from a systemic functional perspective. The purpose of this investigation is to inform our understanding of the nature of these genres and their relations with the social contexts in which they are developing. In order to establish a theoretical base for this exploration of home pages and newsbites, two preliminary issues are addressed in this chapter. These are, first, the question of how newsbites and home pages are related to one another within the structure of the online newspaper, and second, where they stand in relation to the entire structure of the online newspaper. These questions are addressed here using the analytical tool of rank.

Rank, where parts at one structural level combine to form wholes at the next level up, has been an important tool in the development of systemic functional (SF) theory as applied in the analysis of language, and more recently to multimodal texts as discussed in Chapter 3 (see also section 5.3 below). Even so, the suitability of rank as a tool to investigate multimodal discourse remains an open question.

The choice of having ranks or not ... seems to me to be determined by factors such as the size and nature of the phenomena under investigation ... [and] also seems to depend on what one needs the analysis for ... . (Martinec, 2005, pp. 162-3)
More specifically, the applicability of rank to analysing websites has been questioned by Kok (2004), who examines web pages as one level, or ‘order of abstraction’ in a hierarchy of hypertext:

these orders of abstraction are not necessarily related to each other by constituency. Indeed, the orders of abstraction are different in nature to [a rank scale] because hypertext is not a semiotic resource, but a platform for the codeployment of different semiotic resources. (Kok, 2004, p. 134).

But regardless of the nature of the levels and the relationship between them, multimodal communication in online newspapers clearly operates on a number of structural ‘levels’ simultaneously (cf. Baldry & Thibault, 2006, p. 144). That is, what we ‘read’ at any given time makes meaning in relation to:

- other visual and verbal elements on the screen
- other elements off-screen but on the same page
- other pages of the newspaper and their constituent elements.

Because home pages and newsbites (not websites and their ‘levels’25) are the focus of this thesis, the corpus was not collected in order to study whole websites. For this reason, the discussion in this chapter is partial, and exploratory in nature. However, in order to contextualise the analysis of home pages (Chapter 6) and the newsbites appearing on them (Chapter 7), some consideration of how home pages and newsbites function as parts of the whole text of the online newspaper is important. Additionally, the current study provides an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the structural ‘levels’ in online newspapers, and the extent to which the analytical tool of rank - a fundamental theoretical construct in SF theory, and one whose role in SF-MDA is still under investigation and debate - is applicable to online newspapers, in an informed manner.

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25 ... and not hypertext, as is the case for Kok (2004), ...
Due to its importance in the development of Systemic Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA) (O’Toole 1994; O’Halloran 2004a; Martinec 2005; Zhao, forthcoming), the analytical tool of rank is used here in order to address the framing question set out in Chapter 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?

Section 5.2 following looks at existing descriptions of website structure as given by Djonov (2005, 2007), whose work is based on a detailed study of children’s websites, including children’s news websites. This is then used to inform the complementary description of a rank scale for online newspapers in section 5.3, which is outlined in a ‘top-down’ manner based on the corpus of this study.26 The implications of this description for the current study, and also for the application of the tool of a rank scale to online newspapers and multimodal discourse analysis more broadly are then considered in section 5.4.

5.2 Web design and periodicity

Djonov (2005, 2007) outlines three perspectives on website structure. The first two draw on the literature in the fields of web usability, information architecture, and human-computer interface. The third perspective, developed by her, integrates aspects of the first two perspectives with the SF notion of hierarchy of periodicity (Martin, 1992; Martin & Rose, 2007; see also Martin, 2002).

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26 Examples from outside the corpus are also used at times.
The first of Djonov’s three perspectives, strongly informed by website useability studies (e.g. Nielsen & Tahir, 2002), is the segmental perspective. In the segmental perspective, the structure of the website is viewed from the perspective of the number of ‘clicks’ it takes to reach any given page from the home page, and the availability (or lack) of links ‘controls’ a website user’s access to different parts of the website.

Defined in this way, website hierarchy is a control hierarchy. Its horizontal dimension, also known as ‘breadth’ or ‘width’, is determined by the number of webpages accessible from the homepage, and its vertical dimension, or ‘depth’, by the number of levels below the home page. (Djonov, 2005, p. 132)

Djonov illustrates this perspective with the diagram reproduced here as Figure 5.1.

In contrast, the holistic perspective, informed by information architecture (e.g. McGovern, Norton & Dowd, 2002), views websites from a containment perspective. The whole website contains sections, and each section may in turn contain its own, hierarchically subordinate sections.

From the holistic perspective, the horizontal dimension of a website is determined by the number of sections the information is grouped into,
whereas its *vertical dimension* is defined by the number of subdivisions (subsections, subsubsections, sub-subsections, etc.) within these sections. (Djonov, 2005, p. 134)

Djonov illustrates this with the diagram reproduced here as Figure 5.2.

![Website hierarchy from a holistic perspective](image)

*Figure 5.2: Website hierarchy from a holistic perspective (source: Djonov, 2005, p. 135)*

The third perspective offered by Djonov, and in fact developed by her, is the **periodicity perspective**. Building on the SF notion of hierarchy of periodicity (or information flow), websites are conceived as hierarchies of Themes. In SF theory, Themes\(^{27}\) serve as the point of departure for information, and give the reader expectations of what is to follow (Martin & Rose, 2007). Djonov demonstrates how web pages at higher levels in the hierarchy of periodicity in (effective) websites are designed to predict what comes ‘below’ them through the organisation of their

\(^{27}\) Here, the term Theme (a clause-level structure) encompasses the closely related notions of macro-Theme, and hyper-Theme (which are text-level structures).
content, the links provided, and in the way that links are designed to orient the reader to content on the lower pages and aid navigation.

In doing so, she incorporates aspects of the segmental perspective (what is ‘clickable’ from a given page) and the holistic perspective (what is ‘contained’ in each section) by building website navigation into her theory of website hierarchy.

What that means for websites is that a main page below the level of the homepage can function as a higher-level Theme only to webpages belonging to the same section, subsection, subsubsection, and so on. In other words, the subdivision of a website section into subsections can be seen as giving rise to a separate hierarchy of Themes. Each subdivision thus creates a new sequence of webpages available for users to explore or branch away from to visit webpages in other such sequences. All such hierarchies of Themes, however, are united by the homepage as the website’s highest level macro Theme. (Djonov, 2005, p.148)

The periodicity perspective is illustrated by Djonov with the diagram reproduced here as Figure 5.3.

![Figure 5.3: Website structure as a hierarchy of Themes (source: Djonov, 2005, p. 147)](image-url)
The holistic perspective (built on the structural notion of containment, with wholes encompassing smaller sections) outlined above provides at first glance a very similar perspective to the tool of rank (built on the structural notion of constituency, with wholes being built from smaller structural elements) outlined in section 5.3 following (see also Chapter 3). Containment and constituency clearly have similarities as structural principles, but as Djonov (2005, p. 134) explains, there is an important distinction between the two. Applying the principle of containment, “websites may consist of sections, which may consist of subsections, which may consist of sub-subsections and so on”, but applying the principle of constituency, websites must consist of at least one section, which must consist of at least one page, which must consist of at least one zone, and so on. There are important ramifications once these different principles are applied (such as the status of home pages relative to other parts of a website, and the way that the form-function relationship is handled) and this becomes plainer in the course of the discussion in section 5.3 following.

In conclusion to this section, Djonov (2005, p. 134, n.1) notes that future research “may be able to establish a rank scale for modelling the organisation of information in websites as hypermedia texts”. In the section that follows, a rank scale for online newspapers is proposed, though the extent to which it is applicable to websites more generally is an open question (cf. Zhao, forthcoming).

5.3 A rank scale for online newspapers

As discussed in Chapter 3, rank is a central conceptual tool in SFL theory, and has been applied to describing semiotic systems other than language such as visual art,
sculpture, and architecture (O’Toole, 1994, 2004), and multimodal genres such as museum exhibitions (Pang, 2004), print advertisements (Cheong, 2004), and text books (Libo, 2004). A rank scale takes a specific perspective on structure.

A structure is basically a set of relations; primarily part-whole relations, with secondary part-part relations derived from them. ... The elements of structure are the functions defined by these relations... . (Halliday, 1981, pp. 129-130)

This is the principle of constituency, “an extremely simple but powerful device, whereby parts are built up into wholes, and these again as parts into larger wholes, but with different organic configurations at each step” (Halliday, 1994, p. 16). Each of these steps is known as a rank, and collectively the ranks as a rank scale.

Figure 5.4 shows, on the left of the figure, the five ranks of the rank scale for online newspapers as discussed in this chapter. On the right of the figure, the class (in lower-case and square brackets) and function (in upper-case and bold) elements, each cycle of which constitutes a single rank, are set out as discussed in the sections following. The claim is that, structurally, online newspapers consist of sections, which in turn consist of pages, which consist of zones, which consist of texts. At each rank, different [class elements] are distinguished by their differing Functional Structures. In the following sub-sections, the ranks in the rank scale are described in turn from the top (newspaper) down.
5.3.1 Online newspapers

From the perspective of constituency, online newspapers have a predictable, functional structure. This means that in order to function effectively, all websites that belong to the class of online newspapers need to have at least the following three structural elements:

- Portal (which functions as the ‘gateway’ to the newspaper)
- Content (which functions to report the news to the readers)
Chapter Five: Rankscale

- Administration (which functions to facilitate the legal and commercial activities of the news institution).

Figure 5.5 illustrates.

![Figure 5.5: Proposed constituent structure of online newspapers at the rank of newspaper](image)

The argument presented in Figure 5.5 is that online newspapers share a semiotic structure. The three structural (i.e. functional) elements shown in the figure are at the same ‘level’ in the hierarchy, and realise the class element of online newspaper. This ‘class-realised-by-function’ structure is the fundamental relationship at each rank in a rank scale: each rank is defined by a class-function relationship (typically known in SF theory as a class-function cycle). In turn, each functional element at a given rank (e.g. Portal) is realised by a class element at the rank below (e.g. Portal realised by home section - see further discussion below).

The fact that Portal, Content, and Administration are at the same level in the hierarchy in the rank scale is something which immediately distinguishes this perspective from the segmental and periodicity perspectives discussed in section 5.2 above, both of which place the home page at the top of their respective hierarchies. It is also distinct from the holistic perspective in section 5.2 above, which views website
structure from a formal rather than functional perspective (websites are structured in sections, sections in subsections, all of which are formal elements, as they are not distinguished in terms of their function in the website, nor in terms of their own structure).

Turning to the three functional elements at the rank of online newspaper, the first is a **Portal**,\(^{28}\) which is the gateway to the newspaper (and includes, but is not limited to the home page). The vast majority of readers enter the site through the Portal each time they read the newspaper, and it is the place to which most readers are directed. The Portal is the ‘home’ of the newspaper’s online presence, through which other areas of the site can be accessed.

**Content** is the *raison d’être* of the online newspaper, and incorporates the ‘news’ of the newspaper and associated content (opinion, background information, blogs, advertising, weather, and so on): what Bell (1991) refers to as editorial content. At the broad level of structure under discussion here, the Content can be distinguished from both the Portal, and from that functional area of the newspaper not devoted to providing current information and debate to readers: **Administration**.

Administration is the ‘institutional nuts-and-bolts’ of the online newspaper, devoted to functions of the news institution including commercial operations (e.g. selling advertising space, selling print subscriptions), legal operations (e.g. providing copyright information, stating the privacy policy), management (e.g. recruiting, publishing annual reports) and so on.

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\(^{28}\) Compare the use of this term by Large, Beheshti & Cole (2002).
Each of these structural elements have different functions (as described by their capitalised functional labels), and in order to fulfil these functions, class elements at the rank below (i.e. the class of elements known as website sections, identified by *form* rather than *function*) are brought into service.

Moving down from the rank of newspaper to the rank of section, the three structural elements of the newspaper (Portal, Content, and Administration) are realised by formal elements of website sections (home section, content section, and functional section respectively) at the rank below. In SF theory, this distinction between functional elements and formal elements (called class elements in SF theory) is a fundamental aspect of the theory. Because there is not a one-to-one correspondence between function and form, distinguishing function elements from class elements allows the theory to move beyond formal description, and account for semiotic phenomena such as rankshift and grammatical metaphor (see Chapter 3). The explanatory power of this perspective is illustrated in section 5.4 below.

Figure 5.6 aims to capture the notion of constituency (i.e. parts combining to make wholes) visually, while showing the relationship between the newspaper as a whole, its functional (structural) elements at the rank of newspaper, and the formal (class) elements - website sections - which realise that structure at a rank below. As indicated in Figure 5.6 and discussed above, each functional element (indicated by Initial Capitals) in the overall structure is in turn realised by a class element (written in lower case) at the rank below. So in Figure 5.6, each level of ‘boxes’ (online newspaper at one level, then sections at the next) represents one rank.
Thus far we have identified the ranks of newspaper and section (each of which represents a class of items which have their own functional structure). As explained in Chapter 3, taking this structural perspective on online newspapers allows us to explore paradigmatic oppositions at different ranks. Taking the rank of newspaper, a

\[29\] Other elements of structure may be identified by further analysis.
system can be posited as shown in Figure 5.7. This Figure presents a system classifying (a sub-set of) genres collectively known as newspapers, differentiating online newspapers from print newspapers in terms of their structure.30

What practical benefit does this approach provide? Bateman (2008) questions the extent to which online newspapers can actually be considered as belonging to the same genre family as print newspapers. He argues that online newspapers are closer in some respects to other online texts such as search-engine results pages.

Although there are many issues of design and usability to consider here, what is most relevant for our present discussion is the way in which the properties of the online newspaper align with very different sets of cogeneric texts than might have originally been thought on the basis of its informal classification as a ‘newspaper’. (Bateman, 2008, p. 181)

Questions such as the social role and function of online newspapers, how their structure reflects their social purposes, and the ways in which they are similar to and different from other texts (print, multimedia, and/or online), require thorough and rigorous analysis from a range of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. Using the tool of rank and deriving systems from the rank scale provides one way forward to address such questions empirically, in a theoretically grounded manner. It may be, as Bateman suggests, that online newspapers are a web genre with little or no structural relation to print newspapers, and this may lead us to a completely different set of paradigmatic relations akin to that illustrated in Figure 5.8.

30 The structure of print newspapers has not been analysed in this study, and I am unaware of any studies describing the structure of print newspapers from a rank-scale perspective.
In this case, questions would arise about how such web genres are related, and the kind of analysis used in this chapter might further lead us to mapping relations between web genres in a way similar to that suggested by Figure 5.9.

Important though they are, such questions are beyond the scope of this thesis, which does not rely on the assumption that online newspapers are systemically related to print newspapers (nor to other web genres), and which provides evidence for the evolution of genres in online newspapers distinct from those which occur within print newspapers (see Chapter 7). Nonetheless, future work aimed at addressing the
relationship between online newspapers, print newspapers, and other web genres could usefully take a systemic approach, where structures on the syntagmatic axis are theoretically related to paradigmatic possibilities, as one starting point.

Combined with work such as that done by Djonov (2005, 2007 - see section 5.2 above), a rank scale allows us to move beyond lay understandings of how online newspapers are structured, and beyond technically-based descriptions of website hierarchy, while incorporating their insights.

5.3.2 Sections

In section 5.3.1, the rank of newspaper was described, and the relationship between this rank and the rank of section (i.e. that the structural elements at the rank of newspaper are realised by class elements at the rank of section) was described. This section (5.3.2) considers the three kinds of website section found in online newspapers as identified here (home sections, content sections, and functional sections), each of which has their own functional structure.31

The home section of an online newspaper has two structural elements: an optional Splash, and an obligatory Orientation. Figure 5.10 illustrates the home section from a Thai newspaper, The Nation, in 2008, and is used here to illustrate a

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31 Djonov (2005) also identifies surfacing sections, in which links to pages from a range of different content (and/or functional) sections are grouped together on a single 'home page' (see section 5.3.3 below for discussion of home pages). For the purposes of this chapter, surfacing sections are assumed to be structurally the same as content sections (in terms of constituency) and are therefore not considered separately. This assumes, however, that different sections (at one rank) share constituents (pages) at the rank below, which challenges the notion of constituency as it has been used in SF theory.
home section with its potential structure fully realised, as there are no Splashes in the corpus of this study.32

![Diagram of home section]

**Figure 5.10: Illustration of the home section of The Nation online, September 9, 2008**

Historically, some news websites have had included a Splash (realised by a splash page at the rank below) in their home section (cf. Djonov 2005, p. 113 n.1). Splash pages “served no navigational function. Instead, the screen was eye candy for users, ... [and the] splash screen was not popular with news websites” (Cooke, 2003, p. 171). The Splash (as used in Thai online newspapers at the time of writing) highlights a single event or issue as being extraordinarily newsworthy, and where present is particularly revealing of the values of the news institution, and of the community of readers they are attempting to foster. While there are no Splashes in the current corpus, many Thai online newspapers periodically include a Splash (e.g. during the mourning period following the death of members of the Thai Royal family;

32 The Orientation used in this figure was retrieved from an archive approximately two weeks after publication.
during the trial of then prime minister Samak Sundaravej and other key events in the 2008 Thai political crisis).

While the Splash is optional and usually absent, the Orientation (realised by a home page at the rank below) is essential, and functions:

- ideationally (by providing an overview of the news of the day from various news categories, in particular that news valued by the authors of the newspaper as being most important; and related information)
- interpersonally (by establishing the authority of the voice of the newspaper, by verbal and visual valuation of the content presented, and by establishing ‘communality’ among the authors and readers of the newspaper by building familiarity)
- textually (by providing navigational information and links, by acting as a Macro-Theme for the newspaper which “gives us an orientation to what is to come: our frame of reference as it were” (Martin & Rose, 2003, p. 181)).

The structure of home pages functioning as Orientation in home sections is the subject of Chapter 6, and also considered briefly in section 5.3.3 following.

Turning from home sections and their structure (i.e. Splash and Orientation), to content sections and theirs, content sections have a structure of Briefing and Dispatch. The Briefing is, like the Orientation in home sections, realised by the class of page called home page (see further discussion below), and gives the reader an overview of the information (i.e. news content) in a given section of the newspaper. In contrast, the Dispatch (realised by the class of page called story page) gives the details of one or more news stories (Figure 5.11).
Figure 5.11: Partial illustration of the ‘China’ content section of the People’s Daily online, January 5, 2006

Figure 5.12: Partial illustration of the ‘national’ content section of the Sydney Morning Herald online, March 3, 2006, showing serial expansion of story pages
Within a content section, the Briefing is realised by one and only one home page, while the Dispatch is realised by one or more than one story pages. In technical terms, class elements have the potential for serial expansion (i.e. the same class element can be repeated), and this potential is realised by story pages as shown in Figure 5.12.

Just as there can be serial expansion of story pages in the Dispatch of a content section (Figure 5.12), so too can there be serial expansion of entire content sections (e.g. a ‘national’ section, a ‘business’ section, and so on) each having the same functional structure (Figure 5.13).

The theoretical principles of class-function cycles (e.g. online newspapers realised by Portal+Content+Administration, realised in turn by sections), constituent structure (e.g. Briefing+ Dispatch at section rank), and serial expansion (e.g. Dispatch being realised by a series of story pages) provide us with the tools to map the semiotic structure of online newspapers both ‘vertically’ and ‘horizontally’ from a particulate perspective.
Thus far, both home sections and content sections and their respective structures have been discussed. The third kind of section, **functional sections**, are so named following the terminology of the web design literature.

**Content** and **functional** website sections are the only two types of website sections recognised in hypermedia design. Content sections contain information on a given topic or activities of a certain type (e.g. voting polls, chat forums, games, quizzes). ... Functional sections, by contrast, inform users about the purposes, privacy policy, content and organisation of the website, its designers, sponsors and/or the institution it represents. (Djonov, 2005, p. 123; bold type in original)

For this thesis, the structure of functional sections (which realise the newspaper-rank structural element of Administration) has not been analysed, and this aspect of the rank scale is not pursued further in this thesis.

![Diagram](image.png)

*Figure 5.14: Illustration of the ranks of newspaper and section*
Chapter Five: Rankscale

The layer of structure described in the preceding paragraphs allows us to extend the diagram in Figure 5.6, as shown in Figure 5.14. In turn, taking a systemic perspective on the rank of section, the diagram in Figure 5.14 gives rise to the system shown in Figure 5.15 (cf. Figures 5.7 - 5.9 which posit oppositions at the rank above).

![Diagram](Diagram.png)

*Figure 5.15: Basic system of sections in online newspapers*

As with a systemic approach at the rank of newspaper, this approach to online newspaper sections allows us to map the semiotic architecture of online newspapers in addition to the web architecture by considering the paradigmatic oppositions at play. Sections differ in terms of their functional structure (e.g. *(Splash)^Orientation* contrasts with *Briefing^Dispatch*), providing a semiotically-grounded basis for distinguishing different website sections which incorporates both their structure, and the paradigmatic oppositions realised by the different structures at this rank.

To this point, we have looked at the ranks of newspaper and section, how systems can be derived at each of these ranks. In the following sub-sections, we examine the ranks of page, zone, and text.
5.3.3 Pages

The rank of page reflects an important phylogenetic development:

in modern society the page is an important textual unit and a comparison of virtually any page from contemporary publications (whether newspapers, school textbooks or scientific journals) with those of previous generations will show that this change in status is due mainly to the rise of the multimodal page in the last fifty years (Kress, van Leeuwen, 1996).

(Baldry, 2000, pp. 41-2; cf. Cooke, 2003)

The multimodal pages of the online newspapers in the corpus under investigation realise the structural elements of sections, and different classes of page have emerged in response to the functional demands of online newspaper authors and readers.

Beginning with the pages which realise the functional elements of home sections, splash pages realise the functional element of Splash, and home pages realise the functional element of Orientation as illustrated in Figure 5.16 (recalling Figure 5.14).

Figure 5.16: Classes of page realising functional elements in home sections
Splash pages (which realise the Splash) are rarely used in online newspapers. They typically have a single link to the home page of the newspaper, and are visually engaging with little verbal content. As explained in the discussion of the Splash in section 5.3.2 above, these pages are revealing of the values around which the newspaper builds its readership, but have little informational value. Because there are no splash pages in the corpus of this study, and because they are relatively rare in online newspapers, there is no analysis here of their structure.

Moving from splash pages to home pages, home pages realise the Orientation (see Figure 5.16 above). Home pages (of websites in general) have been discussed by various authors. Thurstun (2004) identifies homepages as a separate ‘text type’, and defines them as “the external pages of a site, the pages that provide a map of the website and which are the user’s introduction to the site”. According to Kok (2004, p. 140), a website homepage:

- “serves the function of welcoming and introducing the [hypertext reader] to a series of linked webpages”
- “is held to be the locus of point to all the other linked webpages”
- “may also serve as an index of varying degrees”.

Nielsen and Tahir’s ‘useability’ perspective is a business-oriented approach to home pages, and is also relevant to the current purpose. “The most critical role of the homepage is to communicate what the company is, the value the site offers over the competition and the physical world, and the products or services offered” (2002, p. 2).

These descriptions of home pages are all functional, and in fact correspond to the Orientation function of the home section of online newspapers which is realised
by home pages, but do not necessarily correspond to the *class* of home page, which can map on to more than one function (as discussed below - cf. Figure 5.14 above).

*Figure 5.17: Home page from Bangkok Post, March 15, 2002, with structural elements indicated*

Home pages are identifiable by their structure. The home pages in this study have a predictable structure which distinguishes them from other classes of page in
online newspapers (though story pages have a very similar structure, and this is taken up further below). The elements of structure of home pages in the corpus of this study are illustrated in Figure 5.17. Home pages have a Brand - an area on the page which prominently and explicitly provides the identity of the newspaper. The Brand (realised by a header) establishes the identity of the newspaper, often by some to the print newspaper front page. Home pages also have the structural element of Navigation (realised by navigation zones), which functions to allow the reader to navigate beyond the page to other pages and sections of the newspaper. In addition, home pages have a Signature which signifies ownership of the content of the newspaper and is realised by a footer. Home pages can also include Marketing, which sells products or publicises other parts of the newspaper. Finally, and importantly, home pages also have the functional element of News Coverage. News Coverage functions to give an overview of events and/or issues in one or more news domains (e.g. international news, entertainment news), and is realised by a visual or visual-verbal taxonomy (discussed in section 5.3.4 below).

Figure 5.18: Classes of page realising functional elements in content sections
The home page illustrated in Figure 5.17 realises the function of Orientation in the home section of the BKP. Having considered both splash pages and home pages in home sections, we turn now to those pages which realise the functional elements of content sections. **Home pages** realise the functional element of Briefing in content sections, and **story pages** realise the functional element of Dispatch as illustrated in Figure 5.18 (recalling Figure 5.14).

As home pages realise the functional element of Orientation in home sections and the functional element of Briefing in content sections, there is some justification in asking how they can realise both. The reason for this analysis is that the functional structure of those pages realising the two functions of Orientation and Briefing is the same (i.e. they share the structural configuration of Brand, Navigation, Signature, Marketing, and News Coverage). For this reason, there is no structural justification for distinguishing between **home pages** (which are class elements), but there is justification for distinguishing between the **functional roles** this class of page realises in different semiotic environments at the rank above.

In SF theory, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between elements of structure and the class elements which realise them. Taking the case of the class of home pages, in this thesis home pages are defined by their functional structure. At the same time, as wholes in their own right, they can realise different functional roles at a higher rank. This is one advantage of taking a rank perspective on structure: it is possible to show how home pages functioning as an Orientation in a home section are related to those functioning as Briefing in a content section. That is, they have the same structure when examined ‘from below’ at the rank of page. At the same time, it
is possible to show how they differ: they realise structures playing different functional roles when examined ‘from above’ at the rank of section. In short, they have the same form, but realise different functions, a relationship which cannot be accounted for in theories which do not distinguish between function and form.33

Figure 5.19: Structure of home pages functioning as Orientation in the home section (left) and as Briefing in a content section (right) Sydney Morning Herald, January 5, 2006

Figure 5.19 compares home pages playing different functional roles in the same newspaper on the same day, and demonstrates the structural consistency between them.

33 As discussed in section 5.3.6 below, the ability to distinguish between function and form comes at a cost, and that is the accessibility of analyses due to the volume of technical terminology necessary to describe phenomena such as online newspapers in a rigorous and theoretically consistent manner.
Turning to pages realising the function of Dispatch in content sections, this functional element is realised by story pages, which are typically dominated by the text of one and only one news story, and which may instantiate any of a variety of news genres (e.g. editorial, hard news story, feature - see Iedema, Feez, & White,
The text of a story page may be verbal/visual (e.g. ‘traditional’ newspaper stories), or aural/visual (e.g. sound clips, or video clips). Story pages provide the text of a given story in greater detail than is allowed for on home pages.

The structure of story pages is very similar to that of home pages. Both classes of page have the structural elements of Brand, Navigation, Signature, and Marketing, but unlike home pages, story pages have the element of News Excursus rather than News Coverage (Figure 5.20; cf. Figure 5.17).

In summary, on the basis of the description of pages provided in this section, four classes of page can be identified: functional pages (not described in this thesis), splash pages, home pages, and story pages. Two of these page types (home and story pages) report the news, and their shared function is realised in a shared structure. A system network of options at the rank of page in online newspapers can be derived as shown in Figure 5.21.
One interesting point illustrated by this system is the relative lack of structural variation between news pages. There are only two kinds of news page which can be distinguished on the basis of their structure, and these share an almost identical constituent structure. This consistency between pages can be explained partly by the virtual nature of web pages, and the need to build navigation into the design of each page (see Djonov, 2005, 2007). This is also related to building reader familiarity with the newspaper - it is vital to the survival of the institution to build a committed readership who are comfortable with the reading experience they get from the newspaper (Thurman, 2007; see Chapter 8).

At the same time, issues raised by Bateman (2008) as to the relation of online newspapers to other print and online genres (see section 5.3.1) are relevant again here. The online page is ... in many respects closer generically to online offerings such as web-browser result pages and simple lists, possibly with subheadings breaking those lists down into categories. The multidimensional access possibilities of the print newspaper are severely reduced. (Bateman, 2008, p. 181, emphasis in original)

At the rank of page, Bateman’s argument is strongly supported by the analysis of online newspapers presented here and summarised in Figure 5.21. That is, there appears to be more structural similarity than diversity between news pages playing different functional roles in online newspapers. In Chapter 7, we return to this argument at a lower rank, and examine how online newspapers home pages appear to be evolving to reconcile the need for page-rank consistency across the newspaper on

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34 Subsequent studies devoted to online newspapers may identify additional classes of news page realised by different functional structures, particularly when looking at pages employing audio and video multimedia.
one hand, with the need for ‘multidimensional’ design on the page in presenting stories on the other.

In summary to this sub-section, the four elements of structure at the rank of section - Splash and Orientation in home sections, and Briefing and Dispatch in content sections - are typically realised by three classes of page - splash pages (for Splash), home pages (for Orientation and Briefing), and story pages (for Dispatch). Because this thesis is an examination of home pages, there is no further detailed consideration of story pages in this chapter.

5.3.4 Zones

As described in the previous section, the functional elements of home pages are realised by zones. Table 5.1 gives the relationship between elements of structure at the rank of page (as identified above), and the class elements at the rank of zone which realise them (cf. Figure 5.17 above). These zones each have their own structure, but due to the focus on news texts in this thesis, only the structure of news taxonomies (which realise the functional element of News Coverage) are explored in this section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page-rank structure</th>
<th>Class of zone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand</td>
<td>header</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigation</td>
<td>navigation zone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Coverage</td>
<td>news taxonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>marketing zone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signature</td>
<td>footer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5.1: Relation of realisation between page-rank structures and classes of zone on online newspaper home pages in the corpus*
News taxonomies (which realise News Coverage) have a structure including two functional elements. The first is one or more **Superordinates**, which may be
overt and realised in the form of verbal titles, or covert and realised visually, but not verbally. The second is one or more Subordinates (realised in the form of news stories). The covert visual taxonomy in Figure 5.22 positions ‘hard’ news (in the left column) against ‘lite’ news (in the right column), and these are differentiated at zone rank by positioning (in the two columns), relative size, and the white space that separates the two columns, but have no verbal classification (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). The overt taxonomy in Figure 5.22 has verbal Superordinates (General News, Business News, Entertainment, Outlook, Horizons Travel, Real.Time, circled in red in the figure) which classify the Subordinates in conjunction with coloured bars and borders. These visual-verbal taxonomies of news are discussed at length in Chapter 6 following, and so are not explored in any more detail at this point.

As at other ranks, it is possible to systematize the options at the rank of zone, but because a detailed description of other elements of this rank (such as headers, navigation zones, footers, and so on) would require a level of detail beyond what is necessary for the current purpose, a systemic description of this rank is not explored further at this point.

In conclusion to this sub-section, zones each have their own functional structure. The zone relevant to the current purpose, the news taxonomy, has a structure of Superordinates (realised verbally and/or visually) and Subordinates (realised by news stories). The next section describes the rank of text.

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35 Note that ‘hard’ news is sub-classified verbally further down the page into OTHER TOP, WORLD, BIZTECH, OPINION, ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS.
5.3.5 Texts

The structures of zones on home pages (only one of which was described in section 5.3.4 above) are realised by texts at the rank of text. In order to describe these texts, the “basic prefabricated meaning-making resources” called mini-genres by Baldry (2000, p. 60) make a useful starting point. The kinds of texts identified by Baldry (as shown in Table 5.2) represent some of the text types found on online newspaper home pages. While not all Baldry’s examples are found in the corpus of this study, and not all the elements found in the corpus appear in Baldry’s table (see section 5.4 below), it nonetheless provides a useful overview of the kinds of static texts that can be expected on many contemporary pages, online and print.36

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbal</th>
<th>Visual</th>
<th>Visual and Verbal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Abstracts</td>
<td>1) Bars (top, side, etc.)</td>
<td>1) Captions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Acknowledgements</td>
<td>2) Diagrams</td>
<td>2) Charts (flow, pie, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Affiliations</td>
<td>3) Drawings</td>
<td>3) Graphs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Headings and Titles</td>
<td>4) Logos</td>
<td>4) Maps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Interviews</td>
<td>5) Photographs</td>
<td>5) Tables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Letters (to the editor)</td>
<td>6) Sketches</td>
<td>6) Tree structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Main verbal (running) text with Reports, Hypotheses, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2: Different types of mini-genres (source: Baldry 2000, p. 59)

To take the example of news taxonomies (at the rank of zone), their structural elements of Superordinates can be realised verbally by item 4) in Baldry’s Verbal column (Headings and Titles), or implicitly realised by item 1) in the Visual column (Bars (top, side, etc)). Meanwhile, Subordinates are realised by item 7) in the Verbal

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36 Baldry’s typology is meant to focus on elements that can function as complete ‘texts’ in their own right. Other meaningful design elements such as typography or layout design, are dealt with at different ranks.
Chapter Five: Rankscale

column (Main verbal (running) texts with Reports, Hypotheses, etc.), more specifically in this case, news stories (see Figure 5.22 above).

Figure 5.23: Newsbites (left), standalone (top right), and newsbits (bottom right) on the PD home page, March 27, 2006

As illustrated in Figure 5.23, there are three kinds of news stories on home pages (all of which realise the structural element of Subordinates at the rank above).

The least common in the corpus of this study (and more generally) are **standalones**, which have a relatively large image, an extended caption, but no hyperlink. Much more common than standalones are **newsbits**, which are headline-only hyperlinks to story pages (though in some online newspapers outside the corpus - particularly some tabloids - these are becoming more complex, sometimes including thumbnail images and sometimes systematically differentiated by font type and size). The third kind (and the subject of Chapter 7) are **newsbites**, which are the one-paragraph
headline+lead+hyperlink stories which feature on home pages and which, like newsbits, typically link to story pages.

Because newsbits are the news text which are the focus of this thesis (and described in detail in Chapter 7), the structure of standalones and newsbits will not be pursued in this section. For the current discussion, it is sufficient to explain that newsbits minimally have three structural elements: Focus, Event, and Link (Figure 5.24).

Figure 5.24: Newsbites from Bangkok Post (top), People’s Daily (middle), and Sydney Morning Herald (bottom), February 26, 2002 showing basic structural elements
A partial system for news stories at the rank of text is shown in Figure 5.25. Chapter 7 pursues this system in terms of delicacy, and its evolution over time. The argument presented in Chapter 7 is that the issues raised by Bateman (2008) in relation to home pages as discussed in section 5.3.1 and 5.3.3 above (i.e. their relation to other print and online genres, and the affordances they offer authors and readers of online newspapers) need to be explored in a way which incorporates a thorough consideration of newsbites and other news texts, and that a systemic approach can offer insights that would be difficult to reach by other analytical methods.

![Diagram of news story system]

*Figure 5.25: Partial system of news stories on online newspaper home pages*

For this section, it is sufficient to say that newsbites are one of three kinds of news text found on online newspaper home pages, that texts in the current corpus can be distinguished systemically, and that newsbites can be differentiated at more delicate levels as described in Chapter 7, below.
5.3.6 Rank scale: Conclusion

There are five ranks in the rank scale for online newspapers described here: **online newspaper**, **section**, **page**, **zone**, and **text**. At each rank, systems can be derived which give options for sub-classes of elements at that rank.

![Figure 5.26: Class-function diagram showing a rank scale perspective on online newspaper structure, from newspaper to newsbite (reproducing Figure 5.4)](image)

Various diagrams have been used to this point to illustrate the rank scale, but the ‘class-function’ diagram typical of SF descriptions has thus far not been used.
Class-function diagrams show the relationship between class elements (in small letters and square brackets in the diagram) and functional elements (with Initial Capital in the diagram) in a tree-structure. Figure 5.4 (reproduced as Figure 5.26 for convenience) shows a class-function diagram which includes all the elements discussed to this point (apart from the structure of story pages). The broken lines in the diagram indicate aspects of the rank scale not included in the diagram.

In light of the discussion which has brought us to Figure 5.26 (and which is summarised therein), we can return to the two issues outlined in the first paragraph of this chapter: first, the relationship between home pages and newsbites, and second, their place in the overall structure of the online newspaper.

The first point to clarify is that this thesis does not examine home pages; rather, it examines home pages realising the Orientation function of the home section of online newspapers. Thus, the term **home page** as used in this thesis refers to a ‘home page realising the Orientation function of the home section of an online newspaper’ unless otherwise indicated.

With regard to the relation between home pages and newsbites, newsbites appear in news taxonomies which realise the News Coverage function of home pages, and do not appear in other zones such as headers, footers, or navigation zones (which realise other functions on the page). Newsbites obviously play an important role collectively in introducing a sample of the news of the day (specifically selected and prioritised by the institutional authors of the newspaper) to the readers. Functioning as Subordinates in news taxonomies, they are classified within the higher-level structure
of the home page, and their brevity (both verbally and spatially) allows the authors of
the newspaper to construct the news taxonomies which classify the news content on
the home page, while at the same time giving enough information for readers to
follow their interests by navigating to story pages. In this way, they provide effective
entry points to a variety of content sections, and contribute to the ideational (or
informational) and textual (or navigational) functions of home pages. Newsbites
contribute also to the interpersonal functions of home pages both visually and
verbally, and this is discussed further in Chapters 6 and 7.

With regard to their place in the overall structure of the online newspaper, in
constituent terms both home pages and their newsbites are located in home sections
which realise the Portal (through which the majority of readers come to the online
newspaper), and are therefore important in readers’ initial experience of an online
newspaper.

Home pages (and the Orientation function they realise) are relatively ‘high’ in
terms of the constituent structure of the newspaper, and are therefore less likely to be
consciously ‘read’. That is, elements at or near the top of the constituency structure
have an important rhetorical function in terms of the overall structure of the
newspaper, but are more opaque to lay notions of what it means to ‘read’ a text,
notions which are dominant also in educational systems and literacy approaches
where:

- lexicogrammatical meaning is privileged over (often to the exclusion of)
  meaning in higher linguistic strata (i.e. grammar over discourse, register, and
  genre - Martin and Rose, 2008)
• ideational meaning is privileged over (often to the exclusion of) interpersonal and textual meaning (i.e. traditional grammar rules over the structures of evaluation, reader positioning, information structure, and cohesion - Lemke, 2002; Unsworth, 2006), and

• linguistic meaning is privileged over (and often to the exclusion of) multimodal meaning (i.e. language over image, layout, colour, gesture, space, and so on - Kress, 2000).

In contrast, at the ‘bottom’ of the constituent structure outlined here, newsbites appear at face value as short, or partial versions of ‘traditional’ news texts which can be read unproblematically as texts in their own right. Yet their brevity belies their key role in presenting the news on the home page (which plays a key role in introducing the reader to the online newspaper day by day), and this suggests that they are worthy of greater attention than they typically receive in the literature.

In summary to this section then, the rank scale shows the positioning of home pages and newsbites in the overall constituent structure of the newspaper, a constituent structure with five ranks.

5.4 Implications of the rank scale

The analytical tool of the rank scale is central to Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), and has been pivotal in some of the foundational work in SF-informed Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA) (e.g. O’Halloran, 2004a; O’Toole, 1994). The analysis in section 5.3 above demonstrates that a rank scale analysis of online
newspapers is possible. Further, it demonstrates that the rank scale analysis of class elements and their functional structures at different ranks, and the identification of the paradigmatic oppositions at play between different classes of element at each rank, can offer insights that other approaches to analysis may not, or may nor readily offer.

In terms of describing the structure of an online newspaper, a rank scale approach offers a number of insights, including the following. The first is the identification of the home section (realising the Portal) as a separate section from content and functional sections, a perspective which contrasts with the segmental, holistic, and periodicity perspectives on website structure recounted in section 5.2. The distinct, yet complementary structural perspective provided by the rank scale gives the analyst the ability to account for home pages (functioning as Orientation in home sections) and particularly splash pages (functioning as Splash in home sections) within the structure of the website rather than as pages that somehow ‘stand apart’ from other structural elements of the website (see the segmental and holistic approaches in section 5.2).

The second finding to highlight here is the identification of home pages as a class element which function as an Orientation in the home section (introducing readers to the entire online newspaper), and which also function as a Briefing in content sections while having the same structure when analysed ‘from below’. This allows the analyst to account for the relation between home pages on one hand, and so-called ‘main pages’ or ‘section pages’ (i.e. home pages functioning as Briefing in a content section) on the other in a theoretically consistent manner.
One key advantage of taking a rank scale approach, is the ability to explain the phenomenon of rankshift. In rankshift, functional elements are realised not by class elements from the rank below, but from class elements at the same or a higher rank. In language, for example, a clause may realise the function of Subject within another clause. Take the constructed example: *going to the beach is fun*. In this example, the non-finite clause *going to the beach* realises the functional element of Subject, which would ‘normally’ be realised by a nominal group from the rank below (e.g. *this game is fun*).

In online newspapers, a similar phenomenon occurs where the functional element of Content at the rank of online newspaper is realised not by a content section (from the rank below), but by a rankshifted online newspaper (from the same rank) (cf. Martinec & van Leeuwen, 2009, Chapter 7). An example of this is the SMH of 2008 and early 2009, where Content is realised by serially expanding content sections (section 5.3.2 above) along with rankshifted online newspapers. The Content of the newspaper associated with the topic of sport, for example, is not realised by a content section, but by an online newspaper with its own embedded structure of Portal (realised by a home section with an Orientation, but no Splash) and Content (realised by serially expanding content sections of NRL, Union, Beijing Olympics, Cricket, and so on). (Figure 5.27)

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37 Another constructed example can show how this operates. The Subject in the following clause is realised by serially expanding class elements, namely two nominal groups (from the rank below), and two non-finite clauses from the same rank: *violence, war, people killing people, and people killing animals are all wrong*. In the same way, Content in the SMH as discussed here is realised by serially expanding content sections (from the rank below) and online newspapers (from the same rank). Compare Figure 5.13 above.
In some cases, the Content is realised once again not by a content section, but by another online newspaper. In the example above, the *Union* hyperlink takes the reader to the rankshifted online newspaper called *Rugby Heaven*, which is an online rugby newspaper shared by the *SMH*, and sister publications *The Age*, *Brisbane Times*, and *WA Today* (Figure 5.28). This can be represented in a class-function diagram as shown in Figure 5.29.
Reading across the bottom of this class-function diagram, it is possible to see the path of home pages that a reader might take to find a current story on rugby. The navigational path from home page to home page shows the connection between the constituency perspective taken here, and the periodic perspective taken by Djonov (2005, 2007). Following the rank of page from left-to-right in Figure 5.29 (also Figure 5.27), home pages function as successive Orientations as the reader navigates into
rankshifted online newspapers, and then finally as Briefing as the reader enters a content section. Following Djonov’s periodic perspective, home pages function textually as successive Macro-Themes as the reader navigates through them in their role in the hierarchy of Macro-Themes of the online newspaper. From the metafunctional perspective of SF theory, these two structural perspectives (periodic and particulate) are simultaneous.

Figure 5.29: Class-function diagram illustrating the relation between SMH and Rugby Heaven
Returning to rankshift, rankshift also occurs at the rank of text, with the functional elements of Tangent and Navigator Menu in some newsbites (see Chapter 7) being realised by the class elements of newsbits and menus respectively at the same rank (Figure 5.30).

![Figure 5.30: Newsbites with rankshifted menu functioning as Navigator Menu (top) and rankshifted newsbits functioning as Tangents (bottom) from SMH of March 27, 2006](image)

So, while the development of a rank scale is costly in terms of the time necessary to identify and label the ranks, their class elements, and their functional elements, and in terms of the volume of technical terminology that must be borrowed / co-opted / invented in their construction, from a theoretical perspective a rank scale for online newspapers appears to provide a valuable and powerful tool to help explain the products and processes of semiosis in this semiotic environment.

Rank scales are fundamental also in the generation of system networks in SF theory (Chapter 3). The systemic perspective afforded by using a rank scale also
presents a number of advantages for analysts of semiosis in online newspapers. As discussed in section 5.3.1 above, a paradigmatic (systemic) perspective provides a useful analytical approach to examining empirically the extent to which online newspapers are generically related to print newspapers, and to other online genres (cf. Figures 5.7 and 5.9 above).

The structural consistency between home pages and story pages, and the identification of the ‘news area’ of the page (i.e. the structural element of News Coverage versus News Excursus) as the element where there is differentiation in page structure, as discussed in section 5.3.3 are illustrated well in a systemic perspective. In addition, the identification of systemic distinctions between news texts on home pages (section 5.3.5) opens this level of structure for the analysis in Chapter 7. The analysis presented there contributes to explaining the ways in which online newspapers are evolving to allow for the needs of newspaper authors and readers to have ‘multidimensional access’ to stories (Bateman, 2008; see Chapter 7), at the same time as having consistency in design from page to page in order to aid navigation (see Chapter 6).

The application of a rank scale to online newspapers is not, however, without its problems. For instance, video stories once tended to appear on separate story pages (in those cases where online newspapers carried them at all). Increasingly, however, home pages of ‘video’ content sections run complete video stories on the home page (performing the function of Dispatch) along with the overview of the content on the same page (which plays the function of Briefing), blurring the distinction between
The SMH’s ‘video news’ page, for example, has a number of ‘channels’ (News, Entertainment, Life & Style, Executive Style ...) and realises the functions of both Briefing and Dispatch on the same page, if indeed these are the functional elements of this section (Figure 5.31). In this way, developments in technology and in institutional approaches to presenting the news online continue to pose theoretical challenges, some of which may not be accounted for by using the structural principle of constituency (see Zhao, forthcoming).

Figure 5.31: The ‘video news’ page from the SMH, February 2, 2009

Contributing to these challenges also is the very use of semiotic resources such as video (which is timed and therefore has a very different relationship to a page on which it appears than a static image or verbal text) and sound (which is not ‘part’ of the page at all). Such elements clearly cannot be considered as parts which combine

38 This suggests that the class element of ‘screen’ or ‘window’ may now sit alongside ‘page’ in realising functions from the rank of section.
into whole zones which in turn combine into whole pages in the same way as the texts
listed in Table 5.2 and discussed in section 5.3.5 above. This poses fundamental
problems for any attempt to describe home pages, and therefore online newspapers
using the structural principle of constituency.

In a similar way, marketing zones in online newspapers are not always
adequately described by the notion of constituency. The advertisements that appear on
online newspaper pages may appear as pop ups, as temporary animated overlays, or
even as animations that move across or around the screen (and disappear, or not). It is
difficult to maintain an argument that such texts are a constituent of marketing zones,
and such texts therefore also challenge the very notion of constituency.

In conclusion to this section, applying the tool of a rank scale to online
newspapers has a number of advantages, but also a number of important limitations. It
requires the analyst to identify the elements of analysis explicitly and consistently, and
to be clear about the elements of structure, the levels of structure, and the relations
between them. Because there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the
structural elements and the class elements which realise them, it allows the analyst to
move beyond formal descriptions, and account for the functional roles played by
different forms (for example, the different roles played by home pages, and also the
phenomenon of rankshift).

Like any analytical tool or model, rank scale should be pushed until it loses its
explanatory power, until it breaks. The issues which cause key problems for rank
scale mentioned above (for example, single pages which appear to simultaneously
realise a number of the functions at the next rank up; and the existence of elements in online newspapers such as video texts and animation which defy the structural principles of constituency) in fact did not cause significant problems for the current study as the pages in the corpus are largely static.\(^{39}\) This immediately dates the corpus, and illustrates how quickly online newspapers are evolving and producing challenges to the analytical tools we might have expected to be most useful in the early days of their development.

In short, online newspapers have not yet broken the rank scale, but serious cracks are emerging, and the kind of theoretical rigour once applied to developing this tool will need to be applied to developing the next generation of analytical tools, with close attention to the texts under investigation (cf. Barnhurst, 2009).

### 5.5 Rank and online newspapers: Conclusion

It is now possible to return to the framing question set out in Chapter 1 and repeated in section 5.1 above:

- 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?

Home pages play a role near the top of the constituent structure, in the Portal of the online newspaper and are therefore important in introducing readers to the content of the newspaper. Newsbites appear in the News Coverage on home pages,

\(^{39}\) It is worth repeating here that the corpus was collected in order to study home pages, not websites, so there may have been elements of the online newspapers under examination that would have caused such problems, but were not collected.
and allow the newspaper authors to classify the news on the page in news taxonomies, giving readers entry points to content sections and an overview of the news stories valued as most important by the newspaper (see section 5.3.6 above).

Rank scale is a useful tool to analyse online newspapers, particularly online newspapers which carry texts that are primarily static. Especially in the early days of online newspapers, when they consisted primarily of shovelware (Boczkowski, 2004a; cf. Barnhurst, 2009), a rank scale would have been relatively unproblematic in its application.

However, the evolution of new ways of presenting news, which have come about due to advances in technology and changes in the institutional practices of newspapers (e.g. the use of video footage and slide shows to tell stories) means that the structural principle of constituency may become progressively less able to account for the structure of online newspapers as they evolve.

In conclusion to this chapter, as mentioned a number of times throughout already, applying the tool of a rank scale in a thorough manner is a labour-intensive practice, requiring a high volume of technical terminology, and therefore a high degree of effort on the part of the analyst, and on the part of the audience to whom the analyst is writing. It provides an important and effective tool for theorists, but requires judicious application (see below) and careful translation in its reporting. Further, much of the technicality in a rank scale needs to reside in the background when the structures it describes are brought into pedagogical texts for practitioners, educators, and students. This kind of translation of SF theory has already been done successfully
in fields including language education (e.g. Feez, 2001; Martin, 1999), media
discourse (e.g. Iedema, Feez & White, 1994), and other fields (see Chapter 3), and the
rank scale description outlined here is one contribution to the longer-term, collective
process of developing empirically- and theoretically-grounded descriptions which are
accessible to practitioners and students not familiar with Systemic Functional
Multimodal Discourse Analysis.

Returning to the point made by Martinec (2005) at the outset of this chapter,
the usefulness of rank as an analytical tool in MDA depends on a range of factors,
including, crucially, the nature of the semiotic phenomenon under investigation.
Language lends itself to constituency analysis because the structural principle of
constituency is consistent with a fundamental structural principle in language (see
Chapter 3). Texts employing (combinations of) other semiotic resources (such as
dynamic web pages) have emerged in different social contexts, to meet different
communicative demands, and are therefore likely to develop with different kinds of
structure (see Zhao, forthcoming). Thus, in using what we know in order to learn
about what we don’t, we need to remain mindful of what our analytical tools reveal,
and what they may hide.