Chapter Seven: Newsbites

7.1 Introduction

With the advent of online newspapers, a new news genre has emerged - the newbite. In the literature, newbites are also known (or dismissed) as blurbs (Lewenstein, et al., 2000) or abstracts (Massey, 2004); among journalists as write-offs or woffs (at the Sydney Morning Herald, for example), and stand alones (at The Australian, for example) (see Appendix C). These short headline-plus-lead-plus-hyperlink news texts (see 7.2 below) feature on online newspaper home pages, including home pages in content sections (such as the National content section, or the World content section - see Chapter 5).

The emergence of newbites has not attracted a great deal of attention in the literature on media studies, journalism, or discourse analysis. To date, newbites appear to have been accepted as a transparent, or ‘natural’ result of newspapers moving online, and their impact on the mass-mediation of information in and across societies has ‘slipped beneath the radar’ of critical scrutiny. In this chapter, the argument is presented that newbites constitute a new news genre: they are a new way of telling stories in the mass media, and not simply an ideologically transparent or neutral summary of ‘full-length’ stories appearing elsewhere in the online newspaper. Their historical origins indicate that they are an evolution, rather than a revolution in mass-media story-telling. Nonetheless, the relatively small semiotic burden on language in these short texts - there is a limit to what can be said in a headline and a sentence (though cf. Bell, 1998) - has led to an increase in the demands on visual
communication. Visual communication already plays an important role in print newspapers (Chapter 2), but the brevity of newsbites, the affordances and constraints of the online medium, and the practices of online newspaper readers make newsbites a different genre than the stories on print newspaper pages.

In the corpus of this study, newsbites are used extensively. While there were developments in the design of newsbites in the BKP and the PD over the data collection period, by far the greatest changes in newsbite design was observed in the SMH. For this reason, this chapter charts the multi-semiotic design of newsbites on the SMH home page, and its development over time.

In section 7.2, a brief overview of the structure of newsbites is given, along with a glossary of functional terms used in the remainder of this chapter. In section 7.3, a historical trajectory is charted which shows that newsbites have emerged in response to changes in social context, and the functions of newsbites are discussed.

Section 7.4 provides a more detailed examination of the structure of newsbites than the overview provided in section 7.2, and charts the developments in newsbite structure from February, 2002 to April, 2006 on the SMH home page. At the same time, this section takes a systemic perspective on newsbites and their evolution, showing how the design of newsbites, and the structural changes over time realise paradigmatic oppositions which value these news stories in ways which are unlikely to be obvious to the newspaper reader, but which are ideological.
This chapter charts a case of phylogenetic change on an ontogenetic timescale. That is, in the *SMH*, the genre of the newsbite is evolving rapidly, on a timescale much faster than that typically associated with the development of genres in a culture, and certainly much faster than the evolution of genres in print newspapers (cf. Chapter 2). Reasons why this is the case, and why newsbites have evolved so rapidly over this period are considered in section 7.5, the conclusion to this chapter. The challenges this rapid evolution poses for descriptions of media discourse, and semiosis more generally are considerable, and these questions are taken up in Chapter 9.

### 7.2 Structure of newsbites: Overview and terminology

Probably the single most important genre on online newspaper home pages is the newsbite. The newsbite is a relatively new genre of news story, which has evolved as a result of social and technological developments in the mass media, including the emergence of online newspapers. Newsbites feature on home pages (and may also be found on story pages where they are typically valued compositionally as Secondary - see Chapter 6). Examples of newsbites from the home pages of *SMH, PD*, and *BKP* are given in Figure 7.1.

The relatively recent emergence of the online newspaper and the newsbite contribute to rapid and considerable change in newsbites at this stage of their development. Despite this change, in the corpus of this study, it is possible to identify
three essential structural elements of a newsbite. The first two, the headline and the main text of the story, are given the functional labels of **Focus** and **Event** respectively. The third obligatory functional element is the **Link**, which may be realised by a separate hyperlink (Figure 7.2). Often, the headline and/or image function as a hyperlink.

![Image of newsbite example](image)

**Figure 7.1: Examples of newsbites from the PD (top), BKP (left), and SMH (right)**

In addition to these obligatory structural elements, newsbites also may feature an **Illustration** (realised by an image). Another optional structural element is a heading placed above the headline, typically in a smaller and different coloured font, which functions to frame the newsbite, either in terms of the wider social context of a particular story, or in terms of the newspaper’s structure (e.g. **TRAVEL**, **OPINION**) or value system (e.g. **EXCLUSIVE**) and is given the functional label of **Verbal Frame** (Figure 7.3).

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57 Bell (1998) and Iedema, Feez & White (1994) provide frameworks for analysing such texts ***linguistically***. This thesis and this chapter takes a ***multimodal*** perspective on the structure (and paradigmatic meanings) of these texts.

58 This chapter follows the convention used in SFL, whereby the first letter for functional labels is capitalised. Technical terms introduced in this thesis are in bold font the first time they appear in each section.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural Feature</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus</strong></td>
<td>a heading at the beginning of the story which orients the reader to the content; the focus of a story (typically realised by a headline)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tradition-Focus</strong></td>
<td>a Focus in traditional, black font drawing on the visual conventions of print newspapers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hyper-Focus</strong></td>
<td>a Focus which draws on the visual conventions of the world wide web, often (but not exclusively) in blue font and underlined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Modern-Focus</strong></td>
<td>a Focus with visual features which draw in part on the conventions of print newspapers, and in part on the conventions of the world wide web</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scream-Focus</strong></td>
<td>a Focus which is larger than other headlines on the page, and therefore with parallels to so-called ‘screamer headlines’ in the tabloid press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Event</strong></td>
<td>the main verbiage of the newsbite where the details of the story are given, usually in one or two sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Link</strong></td>
<td>a hyperlink to a longer version of the ‘same’ story, or a version of the story using different semiotic resources (e.g. audio or video)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Invitation</strong></td>
<td>a Link which is an explicit verbal indication that the reader can click to access a longer or modally different version of the ‘same’ story, and which has no other overt verbal function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Navigator</strong></td>
<td>a hyperlink in a newsbite which takes the reader to the home page of a content section rather than a story page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tangent</strong></td>
<td>a hyperlink in a newsbite to a related, but different story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Illustration</strong></td>
<td>an image in a newsbite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lure</strong></td>
<td>an Illustration which appears before the main verbiage of a newsbite, and which dominates the newsbite visually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Verbal Frame</strong></td>
<td>a heading appearing above the headline which frames the newsbite in a wider social context, in terms of the website structure, or in terms of the newspaper’s value system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Border</strong></td>
<td>a visual feature which explicitly demarcates the spatial boundary of a newsbite (typically a line-border, or background shading)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 7.1: Definitions of structural elements in newsbites*

In addition, **Tangents** - headline-only hyperlinks appearing with a newsbite - allow readers to follow one or more links to story pages which have content related to
a given newbite, and provide more entry points to the content of the newspaper.

Finally, **Navigators** are hyperlinks from a story which take the reader to the home page of a content section, rather than to a story page. Figure 7.3 shows the same newbites as shown in Figure 7.2, this time with all structural elements identified. Each of these elements is discussed and exemplified (and some elaborated) in section 7.4 below. At this point, a glossary is provided for the reader’s reference (Table 7.1).

Having presented an overview of the structure of newbites, the following section provides a historical perspective on their emergence.
7.3 Emergence, and functions of newsbites

This section charts a historical perspective on the evolution of newsbites. Having established a textual basis for the genre of newsbite in the previous section, the purpose of this section is to argue from a social perspective that these short texts instantiate a new genre. Thus, questions of the social purpose of newsbites, and how this purpose differs from that of other similar genres, are also addressed.
7.3.1 Emergence of newsbites

7.3.1.1 From print to screen

As outlined in Chapter 1, newspaper institutions took to internet publishing with surprising speed. As a screen-mediated phenomenon, the world wide web provides affordances and challenges for story-telling which differ from those of the printed page. It is not ‘natural’ that newsbites emerged - the move to screen was, of course, one important factor, but short headline-plus-lead news stories are not unique to online newspapers (see below), and there are other approaches that online newspapers could have adopted on their home and section pages (cf. Bateman, 2008; Cooke, 2003; Engebresten, 2000). As Boczkowski (2004a) argues was the case with the emergence of online newspapers, newsbites emerged as a result of social and institutional factors, as much as from changes in the technology of news delivery (cf. Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001). Here, I give three reasons for the emergence of newsbites: the historical development of hard-news stories in English-language newspaper reporting; the news values of immediacy and salience which bring news ‘highlights’ to the ‘front’ of news texts; and the demands of screen reading.

7.3.1.2 Hard news and the Nucleus-Satellite structure

As discussed in Chapter 2, hard-news stories in English-language newspapers have evolved verbally into a Nucleus-Satellite structure, where the primary social purpose of this ubiquitous genre, “describing an event in terms of its potential for ‘destabilisation/ stabilisation’”, is achieved in the headline and lead (Iedema, Feez & White, 1994, p. 115). This has made it possible for home page authors to include only the verbal Nucleus of stories on the home page, and to supplement this with other
structural elements such as a Verbal Frame, Tangents, and/or Illustrations (see section 2.3.1; section 7.2; and further discussion below).

7.3.1.3 News values - ‘fronting’ the news

The second reason for the emergence of the newsbite, like the first, has to do with the institutional practices of mass media organisations and their interaction with society more broadly. This is the importance of the ‘news values’ of immediacy and relevance (see Chapter 2). In broadcast news, ‘headlines’ are presented at the ‘top’ of the broadcast; in the macrogenre of the print newspaper, the most important stories appear on the front page, and these stories are often split, with the majority of the story continuing on a later page.

In some cases ... the article does not even appear on the front page, so that the page becomes a kind of summary, signalling both the relation between the paper and its readers and the relation between these two and the events and issues represented on the page, and in the newspaper as a whole. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1998, p. 205)

The institutional practice of putting important news ‘up-front’ in broadcast and print news, and where necessary splitting stories, combines neatly with the affordances of the online medium.

As news has become increasingly commoditized, and is increasingly blended with entertainment (Ursell, 2001; cf. Machin & Niblock, 2006, p. 10; Perlmutter, 2003, p. 12), the textual products of news must compete in what Gauntlett (2000) calls ‘the attention economy’. The institutional tendency towards capturing readers’ attention (rather than maintaining it) can be traced back as far as the emergence of tabloids in the mid-19th century (Machin & Niblock, 2006, p. 139), and seen also in the 20th century phenomenon known as ‘soundbite news’. Though often associated
with broadcast and so-called ‘tabloid’ news, in a marketplace where all news providers compete for ideological and economic gain, the ‘quality’ broadsheet press and its online offspring also reflect this social and textual development (cf. Gauntlett, 2000; Hallin 1997; Iedema 1995, pp. 91-3; Lumby 1999, pp. 14-19; Pilger 1994, pp. 63-68; Sparks, 2000, pp. 273-6), and the verbal brevity of newsbites is consistent with this social and institutional trend.

7.3.1.4 Screen reading

Finally, text presented on a computer screen requires unique reading practices (Jewitt, 2002; Kalantzis, 2001; Thurstun, 2000). It is not possible to scan large tracts of text quickly, and any long text requires the reader to scroll down the page. In online publishing, longer texts are commonly divided into smaller chunks, which are then hyperlinked together due to the demands of screen reading (cf. Jewitt, 2002; Thurstun, 2000; Zhao, 2008). Newsbites allow the reader of the electronic newspaper to scan major news stories, and thus to read the news quickly, seeing a number of news texts in their entirety without the burden of scrolling through long texts on the screen (cf. de Vries, 2008).

7.3.1.5 Emergence of newsbites: Conclusion

Three factors have been discussed in this section: the social development of the Satellite-Nucleus structure in newspaper reports; the existing institutional practice in the mass media to bring important texts to the ‘front’, and to split texts where necessary in order to reconcile the demands of immediacy and relevance on one hand and space on the other; and the reading practices associated with the medium of the computer screen. Together, these factors dovetail in the genre of the newsbite.
7.3.2 Newsbites and co-text

If the social and historical trajectory charted above means that newsbites are a different genre, there should also be textual evidence that an uncritical understanding of newsbites (i.e. that they are simply an extract from a longer story) is incomplete. This section provides such evidence, in the form of:

- different wordings of newsbites and the stories to which they have a Link
- the use of different wording in newsbites which appear on different pages in the same newspaper, yet have a Link to the same story page
- newsbites which use different semiotic resources to the hyperlinked story (e.g. written language vs video).

Newsbites hyperlink to a longer version of the ‘same’ story. This ‘same’ story has its own headline and lead, but the wording and image can differ between the newsbite and the longer text. These longer stories are not a continuation, but a different construal of the story on a different page, in a different verbal and visual context (Figure 7.4a, 7.4b, 7.4c).

Such instances demonstrate that newsbites function as texts in their own right, and go through an institutional authoring process which constructs them differently from stories which appear on story pages.

Moving to the second phenomenon which provides textual evidence that newsbites are not ‘simply’ an ‘extract’ from a longer story, newsbites sometimes appear on more than one page in the same newspaper. In such cases, they enter into
different intertextual relationships with the other texts (linguistic and visual) on each
page. This can lead to different wordings and/or different visual presentation of the
‘same’ newsbite (Table 7.2).

WATERWORLD

Surf hot spots put on the map

The noble, ancient art of map making is to make room for the lexicon of the surfer as the NSW Government announced a plan to allow the nomination of surf break names along the coast to the Geographical Names Board. Full report

- Graphic: Naming Sydney’s surf breaks

The last word on surf hot spots: see you at the winkipop, bra boy

On the map ... surfer John Sutton catches a wave breaking between “dunny bowl” and “stormy” at Maroubra beach yesterday. Photo: Andrew Taylor

By James Woodford, Environment Writer

- Graphic: Naming Sydney’s surf breaks

The noble, ancient art of map making is to make room for the lexicon of the surfer - a waterworld where a good break can be known as anything from dunny bowl to voodoo.

The NSW Government yesterday announced a plan to allow the nomination of surf break names along the coast to the Geographical Names Board - a move the Information Technology Minister, Kim Yeadon, hopes will improve response times for life savers and rescue officers.

Figure 7.4a: Newsbite appearing on home page (top), and extract from the ‘same’ story on a story page (bottom) to which the newsbite is hyperlinked (SMH, March 15, 2002)
Opposition Leader Kim Beazley says former Labor leader Mark Latham used the party to get to the top before arbitrarily turning on the people who had backed him.

Mr Latham has launched a stinging attack on Labor and Mr Beazley in his soon-to-be-released diaries.

But Mr Beazley today dismissed Mr Latham’s criticisms as fanciful, saying the former Opposition leader had to take responsibility for last year’s election loss.

Mr Beazley said he had not ruled out taking legal action against Mr Latham over some of his comments.

"In these sort of circumstances, quite frankly when you look at both documents and coverage, you do reserve your legal position," he said.

Mr Beazley said if the character traits now being displayed by Mr Latham had been manifest if he had won last year’s election, then Labor might have had to move on him.

"I know about myself and my cabinet colleagues, or what would have been my cabinet colleagues, that if anything went seriously wrong we would have dealt with it," he said.

"We are a trustworthy group, those of us on the front bench."

Mr Beazley conceded the issue would hurt Labor.

"We’ll take some water, you always do when something like this arises," he said.

**Figure 7.4b: Newsbite appearing on home page (top), and extract from the ‘same’ story on a story page (bottom) to which the newsbite is hyperlinked (SMH, September 15, 2005)**
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Obesity: the new crisis for women

By Julie Robotham and Justin Norris
September 15, 2005

Women in their 20s have put on an average five kilograms in just seven years, according to a landmark national survey that suggests an imminent health crisis for Australia.

More than half of middle-aged women are also revealed as being overweight in the study, which highlights greater female participation in the workforce, longer hours spent behind desks, and increasing difficulty balancing work and family commitments as key reasons for the unhealthy trends.

"It's startling," said Christine Lee, the coordinator of the Commonwealth-funded study, which will follow the fortunes of the same 40,000 women for at least another decade. "The younger women have already caught up with the older generation. We are going to have higher rates of heart disease and diabetes."

Figure 7.4c: Newsbite appearing on home page (top), and extract from the 'same' story on a story page (bottom) to which the newsbite is hyperlinked (SMH, September 15, 2005)

Table 7.2: Related newsbites on home page and section page
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Thirdly, many newsbites have a Link to a video or audio story, and sometimes newsbites have a Link to the home page of a content section, and no Link to a story page. In such cases, the newsbite clearly cannot be considered an ‘extract’.

In spite of the examples given above, in the corpus of this study, the text of the Focus and Event of newsbites are often identical to the headline and lead of the story to which the newsbite has a Link, and newsbites on the home pages of different content sections are often identical. Nonetheless, these examples demonstrate that the process of authoring newsbites involves conscious decision-making on the part of the editorial staff of the newspaper, and that newsbites function (i.e. make meaning) according to their placement and relation (both visual and verbal) to the texts appearing on the same page, regardless of the texts to which they are hyperlinked. As online newspapers continue to evolve and exploit the affordances of publishing on the world wide web, we can expect the specialised authoring of newsbites for particular pages to become far more common.

Thus far, we have considered the structure of newsbites, and their historical and textual contexts. We now turn to consider how newsbites function.

7.3.3 Functions of newsbites

Newsbites’ textual brevity, and their superficial appearance as an ‘extract’ from ‘the whole story’ can create the impression that they are not significant or important texts, perhaps not even texts in their own right. This contributes to making them ideologically almost invisible, and paradoxically makes them an important site for investigation of the mass-mediation of ideology in new media. In newspapers which
feature them, they are the texts that the reader typically encounters first and most in reading the paper (cf. Homqvist et al., 2003). 59

The social purpose of an individual newsbite is to present the focal point of a story with immediacy and impact, presenting the core (or Nucleus) of a story, “foregrounding what is considered important and who is considered important” (Iedema, Feez & White, 1994, p. 106; italics in original). As mass communication has moved onto the computer screen, methods of communicating important information in an accessible and efficient manner in this medium have become socially necessary. Newsbites are short enough to be read in their entirety on the screen, while remaining consistent with important features of existing written news discourse as already described.

Collectively, newsbites allow the news authors to present an overview of the most important news of the day on a single page, highlighting these stories in the context of the whole newspaper, classifying them, and evaluating their importance comparative to other stories on the same page according to the ideological values of the news institution. This valuation is made by the placement of different newsbites on the page (see Chapter 6) and their design (see section 7.4 following), in a way not possible with longer versions of the ‘same’ story, and not possible in the same way in print newspapers.

59 ‘Promiscuous’ online readers who use manual news portals such as Fark <http://www.fark.com> and the Drudge Report <www.drudgereport.com>, or automatic news indexes such as Google News <http://news.google.com> often bypass the newspapers’ home pages (Thurman, 2007), which means that the institutional practices (including the multimodal design of news) of such aggregators is also in need of investigation.
Stories are ascribed relative importance by virtue of being included as a newsbite on a home page - the alternative is to be written as a **newsbite** (i.e. a headline-only hyperlink, often appearing in lists), as a **Tangent** (an additional hyperlink to a related story that sometimes appears in a newsbite - see section 7.2), or as a **standalone** (a short news story typically featuring an image but no hyperlink - see section 5.3.5). This is in contrast to **newsbriefs** (Iedema, Feez & White, 1994), or ‘single-sentence news stories’ - the short, headline-plus-lead stories which are used to fill space on print newspaper pages (Bell, 1998), and which newsbites verbally resemble. Newsbriefs give brief accounts of events evaluated as relatively *insignificant* relative to other stories in the print newspaper, whereas newsbites indicate that a story is *important* relative to others.

Another function of newsbites is to provide a large number of ‘entry points’ to the newspaper, attracting readers to follow links to other pages in content sections of the website, and bringing revenue to the newspaper in the process.

In summary, newsbites function to present the focal point of stories with immediacy and brevity according to news values of institution; give an overview of the news valued by the newspaper as most important at any given time; afford the classification of news on the home page; contribute to the visual evaluation of stories; and provide readers with many entry points to the newspaper and therefore to the copy and advertisements contained therein.
7.3.4 Evolution and functions of newsbites: Conclusion

To summarise this section, newsbites have emerged as a result of a number of socio-historical factors: the historical development of the Satellite-Nucleus structure and shorter news texts across the mass media, the mass media’s preference for putting important news ‘up front’ and splitting stories where necessary, and the demands of screen reading. While technology has obviously played an important role, it cannot be viewed as the determining factor of the emergence of online newspapers, nor of newsbites (cf. Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001; Boczkowski, 2004a). As Caple (in press) argues in relation to the development of photojournalism, “what the technology affords, the social, in its own good time, will take advantage of”. The purposes of newsbites identified in this section are to present, classify, and evaluate news stories according to the ideological values of the news institution, in keeping with the affordances of the screen-mediated web page, and in a way that can maximise the newspaper’s revenue.

This section has charted a brief historical perspective on the emergence of the newsbite in online newspaper home pages. From this perspective, it can be seen that this new semiotic practice reflects social change, and is not simply providing a ‘summary’ or ‘abstract’ for a complete story. The following section provides a systemic description of newsbites on the SMH home page, and charts their evolution over a four-year period.
7.4 Newsbites in the SMH: System and structure

In this section, the development of newsbites in the SMH over the three data collection periods (spanning February, 2002 to April, 2006) is described. This description charts the changes in their design, and how systemic oppositions in each design period can be derived from the structural differences between newsbites, regardless of page design. The systemic differences between newsbites, which increase over the four years, are in principle independent of page structure, but in practice closely related to page structure.

As cited in Chapter 5, Bateman (2008) has characterised the home pages of online newspapers as much poorer than print newspapers in terms of their ability to visually signify the relative value of stories on their pages. As Bateman explains, this is due in part to the page templates used in online newspapers, which are necessary both for editors to work with and for readers to have the consistency necessary to navigate their way around pages and around the website effectively and efficiently. The analysis that follows demonstrates that, in the SMH at least, these constraints on page design in online newspapers co-exist with an expanding paradigm of choices in newsbite design two ranks below.

The argument grounded in the analysis that follows is twofold. First, the increasing diversity in the design of newsbites provides an increasingly sophisticated paradigm of choices by which the authors of the home page can value news stories on the home page. Second, this evolution of choice in newsbite design has occurred in part to ‘offset’ the page-rank restrictions that Bateman describes.
If the [page design] pattern is truly static [as it is on the home pages of the three newspapers in this study, and in most online newspapers], it elevates form over function. The violence done to news values depends on the subtleties of the layout, but no layout designed *a priori* can genuinely reflect the news values of each and every day and their relationship to each other. The world does not order itself as conveniently as that. (Evans, 1976, p. 75)

The web page offers different affordances to the printed page, yet the demand for ‘multidimensional access’ is as important for online newspapers as it is for their print ancestors. Newsbite design is evolving to provide newspaper authors and readers with the functionality once provided by the print page, but with a different set of constraints and affordances.

As explained in Chapter 4, the data collection period spans four home-page designs of the *SMH*. Table 7.3 repeats the dates of these four design periods. Newsbites from home pages from each of these design periods are discussed chronologically. Conclusions are presented in section 7.5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>SMH</em> Period I</th>
<th><em>SMH</em> Period II</th>
<th><em>SMH</em> Period III</th>
<th><em>SMH</em> Period IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Table 7.3: Design periods for SMH*

**7.4.1 *SMH* Period I (mid-1999 - March 2002)**

In Period I, the home page of the *SMH* classifies newsbites in a basic taxonomy of hard news and lite news (Figure 7.5). This classification is reflected in a systemic opposition between hard and lite newsbites, an opposition motivated by structural differences. That is, in addition to the visual classification devices of the news taxonomy at the rank of zone (Chapters 5 and 6), there are a number of elements of
the structure of newsbites which allow us to systemically differentiate between hard and lite newsbites at the rank of text, irrespective of their positioning on the home page. In addition to hard and lite newsbites, there is a third systemic category of newsbites in Period I: cataloguing newsbites.

Figure 7.5: SMH home page from SMH Period I (top) and basic visual-verbal taxonomy of news (bottom)

Hard newsbites reflect the continued dominance of text over image in hard news in online newspapers at this stage of their development. Text dominates the
page. Headlines in hard newsbites are the most visually salient text on the page. There are few (typically two or three) hard newsbites with images on each home page. In those hard newsbites which do have an image, text dominates the image spatially, and the thumbnail images in hard-news newsbites are typically logico-semantically related to a Participant in the headline (see Chapter 8). Figure 7.6 illustrates that coloured hypertext and thumbnail images exist on the visual peripheries of the core of black-and-white print in hard-news newsbites in the SMH at this stage of their development. The message is: *our core product is still hard news, in black and white, in writing.* Lite newsbites demonstrate a greater degree of experimentation in news design in this period.

**7.4.1.1 Hard versus lite versus cataloguing newsbites: Basic distinction**

There are three basic categories of newsbites on the home page of the *SMH* in Period I: **hard**, **lite**, and **cataloguing**. These can be distinguished by differences in structure.

**7.4.1.1.1 Focus**

The first distinction to note is the size and colour of the font of the **Focus** of newsbites. Hard newsbites have a headline which functions as the Focus, which is in a larger font than the remainder of the newsbite, and which is black. These headlines draw on the conventions of the traditional print newspaper with its large headlines and predominately black text on white background (Figure 7.6). The Focus in hard newsbites is not a hyperlink.
Reith fingers bungling bureaucrats

Former defence minister Peter Reith today blamed bungling by defence bureaucrats for the government's failure to correct claims that asylum seekers threw their children overboard. Full report

- Marian Wilkinson, How Australia was led astray by a false story
- Ministers skip jet as rape case widens
- Children overboard, the main players
- Are you satisfied with the government's explanation? Have your say | Your view

ECONOMY

Unemployment up to 7 per cent

A surge in jobseekers pushed Australia's unemployment rate to 7 per cent in January despite the creation of more than 100,000 new jobs, official figures showed today. Full report

WINTER OLYMPICS

Inquiry into pairs medal as anger mounts over gold

Canada will appeal against the judges' decision to award the figure skating pairs gold medal to Russia's Evgeni Plushenko and Anton Serebryakov ahead of Canadians Jamie Sale and David Pelletier. Full report

- America lays up Roy; BOG stall on Salt Lake
- Ex-cell: Chappell finds a place in Sydney's heart
- 2000 Winter Olympics

CITY SINKERS

Rich are richer and living in Sydney

The rich are getting even richer and the divide between the city and the bush is becoming increasingly evident. But more eye-opening is the increasing concentration of wealth developing in Sydney compared to the rest of the country. Full report

MARKET BLAST

Fairfax profits plunge 53 per cent

John Fairfax's net profit more than halved to $36 million in the December half as the newspaper publisher suffered the worst advertising recession in a decade and wrote off $11 million on the sale of its unprofitable Citysearch online directories to Telstra. Full report

- Range on sport catch up with News Corp

SULTANS OF THE STATES

Liberal renegade gives Labor a full house

Every state and territory government is, for the first time, in the hands of Labor after an expelled Liberal MP yesterday dumped the nation's last conservative administration. Full report

UNLATEABLE UNBEATABLE

Fox hunting outlawed in Scotland

Scotland's semi-autonomous assembly today voted to ban hunting with dogs, making it the first part of Britain to pass the controversial measure to outlaw fox hunting. Full report

ACTION SETTLED

Herald to say sorry to ex-police chief

A defamation case brought by former NSW police commissioner Tony Laver against The Sydney Morning Herald and former Liberal Party adviser Gary Stagg was settled today for an undisclosed amount. Full report

Figure 7.6: Hard newsbites on SMH home page, Period I: the news ‘in black and white’

In contrast, the headlines of lite newsbites appear in the same font size and type as the remainder of the newbite. Further, they are underlined and blue, drawing on the more recent conventions of the world wide web to signify that they are also hyperlinks. So in lite newbites, the Focus is conflated with a Link (a hyperlink to a story page - Figure 7.7).
Intertextually then, the visual design of hard newsbite headlines references the visual discourse of traditional news genres, while lite newsbite headlines reference the visual discourse of hypertext and the web. These distinctions in visual-verbal intertextuality contribute to the different ideological valuation of hard and lite newsbites, a recursive realisation of the classification signified by the design of the home page. The visual form of each of these two types of Focus realises a different intertextual function: **Tradition-Focus** and **Hyper-Focus** (Figure 7.7).

*Figure 7.7: Hard (left) and lite (right) newsbite from SMH home page Period I, showing different visual design of headlines*

The Focus in cataloguing newsbites is a heading, not a headline. It draws on the conventions of the world wide web, with light blue text accompanied by icons, and is therefore a Hyper-Focus (Figure 7.8). This Hyper-Focus is also a hyperlink, but does not function as a Link, because it does not take the reader to a different version of the ‘same’ story. Rather, it functions as a Navigator, as it takes the reader to the home page of a content section (Chapter 5).

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60 It belongs to a different class of item, but has the same function as the Focus in other newsbites.
In summary, in hard newsbites, the Focus is not a hyperlink. In lite newsbites, the Focus is conflated with a Link, and in cataloguing newsbites, the Focus is conflated with a Navigator.

7.4.1.1.2 Verbal Frame

In addition to making a distinction between hard, lite, and cataloguing newsbites on the basis of different kinds of structure, a distinction can also be made in terms of the presence and absence of certain structural elements. Hard newsbites on the SMH home page always have a Verbal Frame (a heading above the headline); lite and cataloguing newsbites never do (see Figure 7.7 above). The function of the Verbal Frame is to ‘frame’ the story (cf. Gumperz, 1982). It helps to clarify for the reader how a given newsbite - a particular news commodity - is of relevance to them.

7.4.1.1.3 Link

Another indication of the importance of verbiage to the news institution at this time is the form of the hyperlink of hard newsbites. Hard news stories in Period I always have a Link (a hyperlink to a longer version of the ‘same’ story) explicitly and separately identified. This hyperlink reads: Full report, a linguistic declaration that the newsbite is incomplete, and that to get the ‘whole story’, the reader needs to navigate beyond the newsbite to a story page. This kind of Link functions as an Invitation to the reader to navigate to the story page. As stated above, the headline in
hard newsbites in Period I is not a hyperlink. Partly because hard news provides the *raison d'etre* of the newspaper, the Link in hard newsbites is separate and explicit, and the wording of this Link is standardised. It signifies linguistically that the reader should be reading on, and that the newspaper does have the “full story”. Thus, despite the brevity of the newsbite, the newspaper maintains its interpersonal stance as an authoritative and credible source of news.

Lite news, by comparison, requires the institution to make no such assurances. It is attractive and appealing enough that interested readers will read as their interests dictate, and brief enough to be seen as a relatively minor diversion from the serious business of the newspaper. And in contrast to hard newsbites, the headline in lite newsbites is a hyperlink (more technically, the Link is conflated with the Focus). Therefore, lite newsbites have no need to include an Invitation, and do not.

Cataloguing newsbites also have a Link, but not an Invitation. The Link consists of a portion of the Event identified as a hyperlink (Figure 7.8 above).

### 7.4.1.1.4 Summary: System

At the rank of zone, it is possible to classify hard and lite news due to the ideational news taxonomy (Chapter 5). At the rank of text, there is structural motivation for a systemic opposition between hard and lite newsbites, and also for a third category of cataloguing newsbites. This structural distinction rests on the different functional elements of Tradition-Focus and Hyper-Focus, and the presence / absence of a Verbal Frame, Invitation, and/or Navigator. This is illustrated in Table 7.4.
Chapter Seven: Newsbites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>hard</th>
<th>SULTANS OF THE STATES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Liberal renegade gives Labor a full house</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every state and territory government is, for the first time, in the hands of Labor after an expelled Liberal MP yesterday dumped the nation’s last conservative administration.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Full report]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>lite</th>
<th>Pro Bono publico</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the name of Bono?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the lead singer of U2 doing advising world leaders?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>cataloguing</th>
<th>multimedia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A new exhibition at Sydney’s MCA uses the surrounding environment to be naturallyarty.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 7.4: Hard v lite v cataloguing newsbite**

The structural differences discussed above and evident in Table 7.4 can be represented systemically, as shown in Figure 7.9.

**Figure 7.9: Hard, lite, and cataloguing newsbites, SMH home page Period I: System**

As discussed in Chapter 3, reading from left to right, the system has an entry condition (**newsbite** in this case), and the square brackets signify that one choice must be selected. The blue diagonal arrows in the system mean is realised by. The symbol ^ means is followed by; + means a structure is present; / means is conflated with.

In summary, it is possible to identify systemic multimodal differentiation in the design of newsbites on the home page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in Period I.
Differences in the multimodal structure of hard, lite, and cataloguing newsbites, and in the design of their structural elements align hard newsbites intertextually with the visual discourse of print newspapers and the traditions of news institutions, while lite and cataloguing newsbites draw more on a different visual discourse, that of the world wide web.

Within the three basic categories of hard, lite, and cataloguing newsbites, more delicate distinctions can be made. Each category is now discussed in turn.

7.4.1.2 Hard newsbites: More delicate distinctions

More delicate distinctions can be made within the category of hard newsbites in Period I. The first hard newsbite on the page always has larger a headline than those below it. This difference in font size is consistent in every edition of the newspaper - it is systematic and functional. The larger-sized headline is aligned with so-called ‘screamer’ headlines in print newspapers, so it is here given the functional label **Scream-Focus**. In Figure 7.6 above, the Scream-Focus is worded: *Reith fingers bungling bureaucrats*.

It is always (and only) the first hard newsbite which has a Scream-Focus, so we can make a binary distinction between those hard newsbites that are sub-classified as **first** (realised structurally by the presence of a Scream-Focus), and those that are sub-classified as **following**. This distinction can be represented as a system, as Figure 7.10 illustrates.
7.4.1.3 Lite newsbites: More delicate distinctions

Among lite newsbites during Period I, it is possible to identify two distinct types of newsbite, standard lite newsbites and leading lite newsbites.

7.4.1.3.1 Newsbite: lite: standard

The first subtype is the type which most closely resembles hard newsbites, and is called here the standard lite newsbite. As explained above, it is differentiated from hard newsbites by the presence of a Hyper-Focus conflated with a Link. Figure 7.11 shows examples of this sub-type, which has a headline at the top of the newsbite, and in those cases where it has an image, an image below the headline and on the left of the newsbite.

Figure 7.11: Standard lite newsbites with and without image: SMH, Period I
7.4.1.3.2 Newbite: lite: leading

The second subtype of lite newbite is called the **leading lite newbite**. It is the first lite newbite on the home page, and visually the most salient, maximising the visual impact of the Head - or the ‘first screen’ - of the page (Chapter 6). These newbites have a top-bottom division, with the image at the top dominating the newbite visually. Unlike other newbites, the image in the leading lite newbite appears above all verbiage, with headline and story below. Its large size - the image in this newbite is the largest on the home page - and positioning above the verbiage differentiates this Illustration from others, and it is here given the functional label of **Lure** (Figure 7.12).

7.4.1.3.3 Summary: System

On the basis of the discussion presented in this sub-section, the category of lite newbite can be divided systemically into two further sub-categories, **standard** and **leading**. Table 7.5 compares these two sub-types, and they are represented in systemic form in Figure 7.13.
Table 7.5: Lite newsbites in SMH Period I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>standard</th>
<th>leading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Park Mix</td>
<td>Banner lock off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Alman is back in top form with the upmarket dinner menu at 'period comedy Chequard Park'. Plus US votes Kylie the world's sexiest pop star. In Entertainment.</td>
<td>Tonight’s the night for Russell Crowe and all Souths supporters as League looks for redemption on the back of the reinstated Rabbites.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7.13: Lite newsbites in SMH Period I: System

7.4.1.4 Cataloguing newsbites

As discussed above, cataloguing newsbites have a graphic combining language with one or more icons as a heading across the top of the newbitez. This heading (not a headline) functions as the Focus (and is a Hyper-Focus - drawing as it does on the visual conventions of the world wide web rather than those of traditional, print newspapers). As a Hyper-Focus, it is conflated with Navigator because the hyperlink
Chapter Seven: Newsbites

takes the reader to the home page of a content section. The main text of these newsbites presents one or more stories from a given section of the newspaper, each with a Link (Figure 7.14).

While the cataloguing newsbite is always titled multimedia in Period I, another item, titled sports roundup, also appears on the home page during this Period, and has many similarities to cataloguing newsbites. The sports roundup item has a bullet list of sports stories, which constitute a menu of stories from which the reader can choose (Figure 7.15).

The menu items in the sports roundup have no Link - their hyperlinks are all Navigators. In appearance and structure, the sports roundup item is a hybrid, half newsbite, half menu. Systemically, it does not have a Link, and is therefore not analysed as a newsbite here.
7.4.1.5 Illustrations

Images (which function as Illustrations in newsbites) appear in hard, lite, and cataloguing newsbites. There are few (typically five or six) newsbites with images on each home page in Period I, but apart from leading lite newsbites, it is not possible to predict whether or not a newsbite will have an Illustration (see Figure 7.5 above). We can make a systemic distinction in all newsbites between those that are illustrated, and those that are not, as shown in Figure 7.16.

![Figure 7.16: Illustrations in newsbites, SMH home page Period I: System](image)

7.4.1.6 Tangents

A feature of hard, lite, and cataloguing newsbites is that they may or may not include Tangents (hyperlinks to stories and/or home pages of content sections related to the story reported in the Event of the newsbite) in addition to the Link (a hyperlink to a longer or modally different version of the ‘same’ story). In hard newsbites, Tangents typically occur below the Event (Figure 7.17).

![Figure 7.17: Hard newsbite with Tangents, SMH home page Period I](image)
In lite and cataloguing newsbites, Tangents may be positioned visually in the same way as in hard newsbites (Figure 7.18) or within the main verbal text of the newsbite (Figure 7.19). As with the use of hypertext font in headlines, this aligns lite and cataloguing newsbites intertextually more with the web, and less with traditional newspapers.
A systemic opposition can be made between tangenting newsbites (those that have one or more Tangents) and non-tangenting (those that have none), as illustrated in Figure 7.20.

Figure 7.20: Tangenting and non-tangenting newsbites, SMH home page Period I: System

7.4.1.7 Summary: System network, SMH Period I (mid-1999 - March 2002)

The three systems of hard/lite/cataloguing, illustrated/unillustrated, and tangenting/non-tangenting are simultaneous, and together constitute a system network at the rank of text. All the systemic oppositions in the visual-verbal design of newsbites on the home page of the smh online as discussed above are represented in the system network presented in Figure 7.21.

Reading from the left, newsbite is the entry condition, and the brace means that there are three simultaneous choices:

- **hard** or **lite** or **cataloguing**; AND
- **illustrated** or **unillustrated**; AND
- **tangenting** or **non-tangenting**.
Because a Lure (one type of Illustration) is an obligatory element in a leading lite newsbite, it follows that in the system network, if the feature leading is selected, then the feature illustrated must also be selected. This is indicated by the use of superscript \( I \) (for if) with the feature leading, and superscript \( T \) (for then) with the feature illustrated (i.e. IF leading is selected, THEN illustrated must be selected).

Representing newsbites systemically in this way shows at once their structural similarities and differences, and also the paradigmatic choices, or meaning potential,
available to the authors of the the home page as ‘designed into’ newsbites. In the next section, the design of newsbites in Period II is considered.

7.4.2 SMH Period II (March 2002 - May 2004)

The design of the home page of the SMH in Period II changed in a number of ways from that in Period I. In the News Coverage, this included a change from a Roman to a sans serif font, inclusion of overt verbal sub-classification of hard newsbites, and an increased use of images (Figure 7.22).

Moving ‘down’ to the rank of text, from Period I to Period II, hard newsbites, standard lite newsbites, and leading lite newsbites all remain essentially the same in terms of their visual-verbal design (Table 7.6).

One important change in Period II is that the Focus of hard newsbites becomes a hyperlink. Therefore, the Focus (whether Tradition-Focus as in hard newsbites, or Hyper-Focus as in lite newsbites) is conflated with a Link in every newsbite, and the structural realisation of a newsbite (the entry condition to the system network) consequently changes from Focus followed by Event, plus Link:

\[
\text{Focus}^\text{Event} + \text{Link}
\]

to Focus conflated with Link followed by Event:

\[
\text{Focus/Link}^\text{Event}
\]
Chapter Seven: Newsbites

Figure 7.22: SMH home page from SMH Period II (top) and basic visual-verbal taxonomy of news (bottom)

Systemically, the only changes between Periods I and II is the change in the entry condition, and the disappearance of cataloguing newsbites in Period II (Figure 7.23).
Chapter Seven: Newsbites

Table 7.6: Newsbites from SMH home page, Period I and Period II

Figure 7.23: Newsbites on SMH home page: System network, Period II

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7.4.3 SMH Period III (May 2004 - November 2005)

The changes in Period II represent a consolidation of newsbite design. In Period III however, significant changes in page design (as discussed in Chapter 6) are reflected in similar changes in newsbite design. Figure 7.24 shows a home page from Period III, and the basic taxonomy of news construed in the visual design of the home page (see Chapter 6 for discussion).

*Figure 7.24: SMH home page from SMH Period III (top) and basic visual-verbal taxonomy of news (bottom)*
This page design gives the home page authors three basic classification choices in the news taxonomy (up from two basic choices in Periods I and II), with further verbal sub-classification in the case of hard news. In line with Bateman’s observation cited at the outset of this section (i.e. section 7.4), the multidimensional access possibilities are relatively constrained here, at the rank of zone. By expanding the meaning potential ‘designed into’ newsbites (represented in SF theory as systems networks) at the rank of text, authors are offered more choice in the visual valuation of news on the home page. This section describes the paradigm of choices in newsbite design in Period III, and how this meaning potential is related to social and institutional developments in the construction of online news, and to design choices in the news taxonomy at the rank of zone.

7.4.3.1 Hard versus lite versus soft newsbites: Basic distinction

The representational taxonomy shown in Figure 7.24 is reflected in systemic oppositions in the design of newsbites. Figure 7.25 shows a sample of the three basic categories of newsbite on the SMH home page in Period III, with hard newsbites on the left, soft newsbites in the middle, and lite newsbites on the right. The structural elements shared by all newsbites are the same as in Period II: a Focus conflated with a Link, followed by an Event.

![Figure 7.25: Variation in newsbites: SMH home page Period III](image-url)
Hard newsbites (which have two primary sub-types), like their predecessors in Periods I and II, have an Invitation, as indicated in Figure 7.26.

![Image of hard newsbite with Invitation]

*Figure 7.26: Invitation in hard newsbite, SMH home page, Period III*

Lite newsbites have no Invitation, and their Focus is always a Hyper-Focus. As can be seen in Figure 7.24, some hard newsbites have a Hyper-Focus, some do not. It is primarily the presence or absence of an Invitation which structurally distinguishes hard from lite newsbites (Figure 7.27).\(^6^1\)

![Image of hard and lite newsbites with Hyper-Focus]

*Figure 7.27: Hard (left) and lite (right) newsbites with Hyper-Focus, SMH home page, Period III*

\(^6^1\) Width of newsbite is dealt with at the rank of zone (Chapters 5 and 6).
Soft newsbites (which have three primary sub-types), all share the structural features of a Border and an Invitation. Figure 7.28 illustrates.

![Figure 7.28](Image)

Figure 7.28: Invitation/Link and Border in soft newsbite, SMH home page, Period III

The division of newsbites in Period III into three basic sub-types is illustrated as a basic system in Figure 7.29. These distinctions demonstrate that there are structural differences at the rank of text that classify the newsbites into the three main categories, and that these are consistent with the visual categorisation made by the news taxonomy at the rank of zone above.

![Figure 7.29](Image)

Figure 7.29: Newsbites on SMH homepage, Period III: System
7.4.3.2 Illustrations and Tangents

As with Periods I and II, the choices of illustrated/unillustrated and tangenting/non-tangenting combine with the three basic categories of newsbite, forming simultaneous systems with the system in Figure 7.29 to give a system network as illustrated in Figure 7.30.

Each of the three basic categories of newsbite - hard, lite, and soft - is now considered in turn.
7.4.3.3 Hard newsbites: More delicate distinctions

Hard news is institutionally the most important category of news (cf. Bell, 1991), and it might be expected that the authors of the home page need more flexibility in designing hard newsbites than newsbites in other news categories. At the rank of page, hard news is valued textually as Primary, and for this reason also has high salience in the zone-rank news taxonomy (being the widest column). The systemic choices described below demonstrate how, in Period III, newsbite design allows the home page authors to value hard news stories relative to each other, in addition to valuing them against stories in other categories.

Turning now to the data, hard newsbites in the SMH in Period III share many of the features of their predecessors in Periods I & II. The Focus (headline) is in a larger font than the remainder of the text. Images, when they are included, appear at the left, under the Focus and to the left of the text of the Event. The Event (main verbiage of the story) is in black font, and the background remains white (Figure 7.31). Thus, key aspects of the basic design of hard newsbites in Period III are consistent with Period II. Nonetheless, there are a number of important developments in hard newsbite design, as discussed below.

Figure 7.31: Hard newsbites from SMH Period II (left) and SMH Period III (right)
7.4.3.3.1 Invitations

The verbiage of the Invitation (the explicit Link to a longer version of the ‘same’ story) in Period III changes from Full story to more. This is a minor change in the context of the development of the home page and newspaper overall, but it does remove the verbal implication that hard newsbites do not have the status of a ‘full story’. Further, the Invitation is no longer capitalised, a small move away from the standard written English which is highly valued in print broadsheets, and towards less formal typographical conventions more commonly found in other forms of screen- and computer-mediated communication.

This small change, then, can be seen in relation to changes in language use, and also the shifting alignment of online newspapers from a paradigm of print media towards a paradigm of online media (cf. Bateman, 2008; Chapter 5). From being positioned in relation to printed texts which feature standard written English, this small change (which is nonetheless scattered across every home page, every day during this design period) represents the emerging position of online newspapers in relation to screen-based texts and their linguistic conventions. One obvious example of this is the delivery of news to mobile phones, where news stories can be read along with sms messages, notorious targets for criticism from the ‘guardians’ of standard written English.

7.4.3.3.2 Verbal Frame

In Periods I and II, each hard newsbite includes a Verbal Frame (a heading above the headline which ‘frames’ the content of a newsbite). These have disappeared from hard newsbites in Period III. This can be explained in part at least with reference to the
overt verbal classification of hard news introduced in Period II (Figure 7.22 above) and continued in this Period (Figure 7.24 above). This move towards a more overt sub-classification of hard news means that each hard newsbite (except for those ‘above the fold’) is already verbally classified in terms of the newspaper’s content sections, and makes Verbal Frames somewhat superfluous. It also provides for a ‘cleaner’, less cluttered visual design (Figure 7.32).

Figure 7.32: Extract from SMH home page in Period II (top) and Period III (bottom) showing Verbal Frames and zone-rank verbal classification

7.4.3.3.3 Focus

More obvious, perhaps, than changes involving the Invitation and Verbal Frame are changes in the visual design of the Focus. The Focus in hard newsbites in Period III is, like the Event (or story), in a sans serif font rather than a Roman font. This is unlike Period I, where both Focus and Event are in a Roman font, or Period II, where the Focus is in a Roman font, and the Event in a sans serif font (see Table 7.7). Roman fonts - used since the earliest days of the European printing press - are associate through visual intertextuality with tradition and stability, while sans serif
fonts were produced as modern, functional alternatives to traditional fonts in the early 20th century, and carry this visual intertextual reference (Dabner, 2004; see van Leeuwen 2006 for a critical perspective on this approach to typographical meaning).

The change of fonts is another example of the move away from the tradition of the printing press and towards the contemporary conventions of the online environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Period I</th>
<th>Period II</th>
<th>Period III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Roman</td>
<td>Roman</td>
<td>sans serif</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Roman</td>
<td>sans serif</td>
<td>sans serif</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 7.7: Font types in newsbites on SMH home page, Periods I-III*

In addition to a change in font type from Roman to sans-serif, the colour of headlines changes from black to blue in Period III. The headlines in newsbites appearing at the top of the home page are a dark blue. They are not underlined, and are larger than other hard newsbite headlines on the page (see Figure 7.33).

*Figure 7.33: Top and topical hard newsbites, SMH Period III*
We can identify a distinction, then, among hard newsbites on this basis. Those hard newsbites appearing at the top of the page have a headline functioning as a Modern-Focus (i.e. the Focus draws on the visual conventions of both print newspapers and the world wide web), and are named here top hard newsbites. The remaining hard newsbites on the page can be identified by their underlined, light-blue Hyper-Focus, and are named here topical hard newsbites (Figure 7.34).

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 7.34: Top and topical hard newsbites: Basic system*

The label top news comes from the home page of the SMH, and its own labelling of the ‘unclassified’ stories appearing at the top of the home page in all four periods as top stories (see the menu of newsbits at the bottom of the first section of newsbites in Figure 7.35). The label topical news come from Bell’s (1991, p. 14) classification of news, where news classified as sports, business, computer, and so on is termed special-topic news.

Also, among top hard newsbites, a further distinction can be made between the first top newsbite (with the larger Focus, or Scream-Focus), and the following top
newsbites (Figure 7.33 above). This additional distinction provides a more delicate system for hard newsbites in Period III as shown in Figure 7.36.

Figure 7.35: Catalogues beneath top hard newsbites in Periods I - IV (top-bottom)
The headline of topical hard newsbites is explicitly signalled as a hyperlink by underlining and the light blue font conventional of hyperlinks (see Figure 7.33 above and discussion below). This is a significant change in hard-newsbite headlines from Periods I and II, once again aligning the design of newsbites more closely to texts of the world wide web, and representing another subtle contribution to the move away from the conventions of print newspapers.

Nonetheless, all hard newsbite headlines are in a larger font (and different font) than the remainder of text in the newsbite, and are in bold, so they are visually signified as headlines not only by placement, but also by size, style, and ‘weight’. Thus, the shift of visual-verbal intertextuality towards hypertext is not absolute. Compare, for instance, the headlines of lite newsbites in Period I (Figure 7.37). From this perspective, the use of a larger, distinct, bold font in hard newsbites in Period III retains at least some of the visual distinctions between headline and story which exist in print newspapers.

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62 where ‘weight’ is signified by bold font, making the text heavier and therefore more salient.
As with Invitations, the changes in the visual design of the Focus in hard newsbites in Period III (including font type and formatting) reflect a re-orientation of the newspaper’s identity, away from the tradition of print and towards the conventions of the world wide web. This is also indicative of the shifting relations between online newspapers and other genres in the global culture.

7.4.3.3.4 Bylines

Hard newsbites in Period III appear with or without a Byline, a structural element which did not appear in Period I or II, and which gives the name of the journalist (or agency) responsible for the story, and in some cases the journalist's position and/or ‘beat’. In some cases, it also includes the dateline.63

Where they appear, Bylines are in square brackets and in small, grey font beneath the headline and immediately before the story (see Figure 7.38). Newsbites with Bylines belong to the category of signed hard newsbites.

The inclusion of Bylines is likely to be related to a number of factors. The developing status of newsbites as news texts (cf. the discussion of Invitations above)

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63 The location from where the journalist researched the story.
may mean that at this stage of their evolution, these texts are ‘worthy’ of carrying a Byline.

Figure 7.38: Newshite with byline, SMH Period III

Additionally, the institutional acknowledgement of multiple publication of journalists’ writing is a potential factor. The expansion of print newspapers into the online environment has been complex and raised fundamental issues in institutional and social practices of newsgathering and reporting. Issues underlying disputes over ownership and online reproduction of stories written by freelancers (Boczkowski, 2004a, p. 55 ff.) may apply also to staff journalists. And as online newspapers play a more important role in the practices of the institution and in the social practices associated with ‘news’ more generally, journalists are more likely to seek explicit recognition of their work in online newspapers, in addition to print publications (cf. Cawley, 2008).

I asked a senior editor at the SMH about the reasons for the introduction of Bylines in Period III.

Ed: I don’t know to tell you the truth. I wasn’t aware that we had a situation where we weren’t necessarily using bylines. I’m not aware of that. Generally, most of our stories in the paper would carry a byline, or [be] attributed to the wire service which it may have come from: Reuters, or Australian Associated Press ...

JK: I’m talking about the home page now.
Ed: I don’t know. Sometimes we might use the name, sometimes not. Particularly if you’ve got someone like, as I was saying before, someone who might be well known in that area, and this might come up in sport. People follow Mike Cockerill in soccer for example. People who are well known - in politics for example, our people who we can guess that people will come and want to know that that’s their article. (interview with author, July, 2007 - see Appendix C).

This suggests another reason that Bylines were introduced. As the online ‘arm’ of the newspaper has developed, and the institutional practices of publishing the SMH online have become established and integrated with those of the print edition, the newspaper has developed expertise in online publishing, including a greater understanding of the online audience (see Appendix C). This growing expertise in online publishing can be expected to be ‘fed into’ the redesign. The newspaper has become increasingly adept at marketing its commodity, and Bylines are one way in which this is done.

7.4.3.3.5 Time

Some hard newsbites include the time of publication in the same position as the Byline, but in red font (Figure 7.39). These newsbites belong to the category of timed hard newsbites.

![Image of newsbite with time of publication](image)

Figure 7.39: Newsbite with time of publication, SMH Period III

The inclusion of time of publication is a reflection of the fragmentation of the ‘daily news cycle’ of print newspapers (Bell, 1991; Boczkowski, 2004a; Cawley,
2008; Perlmutter, 2003; see also Appendix C), an increasing institutional commitment to the currency of news (also evident in the inclusion of ‘Breaking News’ sections, now typical of online newspaper home pages), and perhaps most importantly, the commitment to the appearance of providing up-to-the-minute news.

### 7.4.3.3.6 Byline and Time: Simultaneous systems

Hard newsbites may include Byline, Time, both Byline and Time, or neither Byline nor Time (see Table 7.8). Systemically, this means that the options of signed/unsigned, and timed/untimed are simultaneous. These choices are available with hard newsbites, but not lite or soft newsbites, and are added to the choice of top/topical as simultaneous systems within a system network describing hard newsbites, as illustrated in Figure 7.40 (cf. Figure 7.36).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>newsbite: hard: timed</th>
<th>newsbite: hard: untimed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hard: signed</strong></td>
<td><strong>Hard: unsigned</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Parkin departed for US; FBI says he’s ‘welcome’</em></td>
<td><em>Smile the team sulph</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Daily Telegraph</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Byline: Hard: Signed</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Reeled whole killed with explosives</em></td>
<td><em>Dwelling is the future of the e-Train</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Signed by: Cond</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Dwellings are</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Signed by: Editor</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Dwellings are</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Signed by: Editor</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Dwellings are</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.8: Paradigm of timed and signed newsbites, SMH home page, Period III

### 7.4.3.3.7 Hard newsbites: Conclusion

In conclusion to the discussion of hard newsbites on the home page of the SMH in Period III, it is possible to identify a number of small changes in the visual-verbal design of hard newsbites from Period II to III. Individually, each is relatively minor, but collectively they reflect three trends. The first is for changes in page design (such as the verbal categorisation of news at the rank of zone) to be accommodated in hard newsbite design (e.g. the omission of Verbal Frames). The second is for hard
newsbites to draw increasingly on the conventions of online (and other electronic) texts (e.g. the design of headlines; the change in the wording of the Invitation). The third is a greater recognition of the validity of online forms of news (and newsbites in particular) and their centrality to the business of the institution of the newspaper (e.g. the wording of the Invitation; the inclusion of Byline and Time). These social and institutional factors have led to changes in the structure of hard newsbites, and these structural changes realise systemic oppositions, or developments in the multisemiotic meaning potential of these short news texts. In the following section, lite newsbites in Period III are discussed.

Figure 7.40: Hard newsbites on SMH home page, Period III: System network
7.4.3.4 Lite newsbites

The *SMH* has a longstanding tradition as a respected broadsheet (as the print Masthead proudly proclaims: *First published 1831*). Hard news represents the mainstay of the *SMH*, and matches the expectations of the established *SMH* readership. In contrast, lite news focuses on the ‘private sphere’ (Chapter 2), and is more tabloid in nature. For this reason, it is perhaps not surprising that lite newsbites have no sub-types in Period III, in contrast to the changes in hard newsbites (above), and the development of a number of new visual-verbal conventions in soft newsbites (below).

Lite newsbites in Period III share the same features as standard lite newsbites in Periods I & II, with the exception that headlines are in a slightly larger and slightly different font than the remainder of the newsbite, and are in bold. The fonts used in lite newsbites in Period III are the same font type as hard newsbites in the same period, but a slightly smaller size. Lite newsbites in Period III may have Tangents and/or Illustrations, but have neither Time nor Byline (Figure 7.41).

*Figure 7.41: Topical hard (left) and lite (right) newsbites, SMH Period III*
7.4.3.5 Soft newsbites: More delicate distinctions

The greatest change in newsbites in Period III reflects the greatest change in page design in this period, and that is the newly-introduced column of soft news (Figure 7.42). As explained in Chapter 2, the term *soft news* is widely used in the literature on the mass media to refer to news that is “not time-bound to immediacy” (Bell, 1991, p. 14; cf. Iedema, Feez & White, 1994, p. 138-54).

There are three clearly distinct types of soft newsbites in Period III: leading soft newsbites, feature soft newsbites, and cataloguing soft newsbites. Each shares the structural features of a Border and an Invitation (Figure 7.28 above), and each is described in turn below, before turning to a consideration of the implications of these developments in newsbite design.

7.4.3.5.1 Newsbite: soft: leading

The first soft newsbite on the page is the **leading soft newsbite**. Figure 7.43 shows two examples of leading soft newsbites from Period III. These newsbites are obviously a continuation of the **leading lite newsbites** in Periods I and II. They are re-classified in the zone-rank taxonomy from lite to soft (moving now into a different column from standard lite newsbites), and at the rank of text they share systemic features with other soft newsbites in Period III that they do not share with lite newsbites.
Leading soft newsbites have an **Invitation**. The background of the text area is shaded grey (the only newsbite on the page where the main body of text is not set against a white background), and this shading functions as a **Border**, visually denoting the spatial boundary of the newsbite.

The font and its size are the same as lite newsbites (and, therefore, slightly smaller than hard newsbites), but the headline font (blue, bold, and underlined) is the same size as the font of the remainder of the story, in contrast to both hard and lite newsbites. Clearly, the visual impact of the image is more important in drawing readers to these newsbites than the headline.

**Tangents** are an optional feature in leading soft newsbites, but an **Illustration** is obligatory. Obviously, the Illustration - the **Lure** (Table 7.1 above) - is designed to have a visual impact on the ‘first screen’ (or the Head) of the page. As in Period I and Period II, it remains the only newsbite on the homepage where the image is above all text in the newsbite. The size of the image has increased by something in the order of 100% over the size of the corresponding image in Period I and II. Composite images are often used in these newsbites in Period III (a feature of leading newsbites in all four periods), and this is discussed further in Chapter 8.
7.4.3.5.2 Newsbite: soft: feature

Scrolling down the page, the next type of soft newsbite the reader meets is the feature soft newsbite (Figure 7.44). Like leading soft newsbites, features are polarised top-bottom, and the Illustration dominates the newsbite visually and functions as a Lure. At the same time, the Lure is conflated with the Focus of the story. Interestingly, this resembles the design of magazine covers and pages, and also the features pages of some print newspaper sections (cf. Economou, 2008), an alignment which is in contrast to the changes described above in hard newsbite design.64

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64 This may account (in part) for why this newsbite design did not continue into Period IV.
Like leading soft newsbites and hard newsbites, feature soft newsbites have a verbal **Invitation** worded: *more*. They have a grey frame which functions as a **Border**. Features are always illustrated, and always non-tangented.

Like leading soft newsbites, features sometimes use wordplay for comic and rhetorical effect, and this often plays on intersemiotic relations between text and image (cf. Caple, 2008).

![Feature soft newsbites, SMH Period III](image)

**Figure 7.44: Feature soft newsbites, SMH Period III**

### 7.4.3.5.3 Newsbite: soft: cataloguing

The third type of soft newsbite is the **cataloguing soft newsbite** (Figure 7.45). These newsbites have a heading which hyperlinks to the home page of a content section, and therefore functions as a **Navigator** (Table 7.1). Cataloguing soft newsbites have an **Invitation**, worded: *more*, a grey frame functioning as a **Border**, and a white background. **Illustrations** and **Tangents** are optional. In contrast to all other
newsbites in the *SMH* of Periods I, II, and III, the optional Illustration in cataloguing newsbites in Period III appears on the right-hand side of the newbite.

![Illustration of cataloguing newsbites](image)

*Figure 7.45: Cataloguing newsbites, SMH Period III*

Like the cataloguing newsbites in Period I, cataloguing newsbites in Period III ‘promote’ a particular content section of the newspaper with the Navigator, and by previewing the content of at least one news story with the Focus and Event. In this way, they provide a number of entry points to the newspaper for the reader. Functionally then, they are different from ‘features’ which hyperlink only to one story page.

In Period I (above) and Period IV (below), cataloguing newsbites constitute a separate systemic category of newsbites. In Period III, however, they share important structural features with leading and feature newsbites, and therefore belong with these other sub-categories in the category of soft newsbites.
7.4.3.5.4 Summary: System

The three categories of soft newbite - leading, feature, and cataloguing - are represented as a basic system in Figure 7.46.

Figure 7.46: Soft newbites on SMH home page Period III: System

It is clear that soft news is presented as a visually distinct category of news on the home page of the SMH in Period III, both taxonomically at the rank of zone and systemically at the rank of text. The importance of images in soft newbites is demonstrated in the use of Lures in the first four soft newbites on the home page.

There seems to be some consistency with the historical value placed on the ‘written word’ over images in the value system of ‘quality newspapers’ (see Bicket & Packer, 2004), with language dominant in the ‘more important’ hard news, while image is dominant (at least at the top of the page) in the ‘less important’ soft news.

Nonetheless, the use of images and Navigators appears to represent an increasing sophistication in the ability of the newspaper to offer a variety of entry points for the readers of the SMH, suggesting that the newspaper is actively developing ways to ‘market’ the commodity of news stories to its readers, and to
‘deliver’ readers to the advertisers paying for space on story pages in content sections of the newspaper.

7.4.3.6 Summary: System network, *SMH* Period III (May 2004 - November 2005)

Overall, Period III represents an increase in the diversity of the visual design of newsbites. More varied and delicate distinctions within the category of hard newsbites can be identified. Leading newsbites have expanded in size and salience, demonstrating a significant shift in the text-image balance on the first screen of the home page. Features are another example of the increasing importance of image.

These developments provide the authors of the home page with a greater array of choices in presenting news, and more importantly in valuing newsbites relative to one another than was available in Periods I and II. This reflects a greater understanding of the affordances of the medium (on the part of both authors and readers of the newspaper), and an increasing responsibility placed on the visual semiotic in valuing the news on the home page.

The system network for newsbites on the home page of the *SMH* in Period III is produced in full in Figure 7.47.
Figure 7.47: Newsbites on SMH home page, Period III: System network
There are two ‘if-then’ conditions in this system network, indicated respectively by the superscript $I_1, T_1$; and $I_2, T_2$. Firstly, as in the networks for Periods I and II, a Lure (one type of Illustration) is an obligatory element in leading soft newsbites and features, so in the system network, if either leading or feature is selected, then illustrated must also be selected. This is indicated by the use of superscript $I_1$ with leading and feature, and superscript $T_1$ with illustrated (i.e. IF leading or feature is selected, THEN illustrated must be selected). Similarly, features never have Tangents, and so are always non-tangenting. This is indicated by the use of superscript $I_2$ with feature, and superscript $T_2$ with non-tangenting (i.e. IF feature is selected, THEN non-tangenting must be selected).

This system represents the ways in which the authors of the home page can value news stories relative to each other on the home page. Hard newsbites have systemic choices ‘built in’ to their design which other newbites do not (for example, to identify the author in a Byline, to show the time of publication in the Time, to increase headline salience). Each hard newbite can be: first OR following OR topical; AND signed OR unsigned; AND timed OR untimed; AND illustrated OR unillustrated; AND tangenting OR non-tangenting. While these last two choices are also ‘designed into’ other newbites on the home page, only hard news provides the home page authors with this degree of choice - 48 possible combinations of systemic choices for each hard newsbite. Recalling the issue of ‘multidimensional access’ on online newspaper home pages as raised by Bateman (2008), the degree of choice available to authors of the home page in valuing hard newsbites alone suggests that constraints at the rank of page are compensated at the rank of text, a point taken up at the end of this chapter.
Turning to soft newsbites, leading and feature soft newsbites are always illustrated, showing the importance of images to soft news as presented on the home page. These and other evolving practices in newsbite design show that the newspaper is exploring ways in which to provide entry points to the home pages and story pages in as many content sections of the newspaper as possible to their readers, and this provides the authors of the home page with an array of choices for story telling on the home page.

Thus, by taking a social-semiotic perspective on the design of newsbites, it is possible to see how the institutional values and practices of the SMH are ‘built into’ the design of these very short texts, and how the meaning potential of newsbites has expanded with the re-design of the newspaper in Period III in ways that are consistent with the social contexts of mass-mediated communication, and the institutional context of the newspaper.

The expansion in meaning potential also demonstrates the degree to which semiotic power is vested in the design template of the home page, and raises questions about the process of design change, and who is involved in this process (see Chapter 9).

7.4.4 SMH Period IV (November 2005 - August 2007)

In November 2005, the design of the home page of the SMH once again changed significantly. As discussed in Chapter 6, the redesign of the website and home page
resulted in a new news taxonomy on the home page. In this redesigned taxonomy, the Superordinate news is sub-classified into main and soft (Figure 7.48). As discussed in Chapter 6, there is further sub-classification at the rank of zone.

Moving from the rank of zone to the rank of text, newsbites in Period IV can be categorised into four main classes, one of which does not map onto the zone-rank taxonomy. The developments in newsbite design from Period III to Period IV reflect developments in technology, institutional values, and the ubiquity of online newspapers, and these developments are discussed in this section. In the next sub-section, the four basic classes of newsbites on the home page during Period IV are described.

7.4.4.1 Basic distinctions

All newsbites in Period IV share the structural features of a Modern-Focus (a headline drawing on both the visual conventions of the world wide web and print newspapers), an Event (the main body of the story), and a Link (a hyperlink to a longer or modally different version of the ‘same’ story). The Focus and Link are conflated. In this period, the four basic categories of newsbites are: hard, lite, feature, and cataloguing.
Figure 7.48: SMH home page from SMH Period IV (top) and basic visual-verbal taxonomy of news (bottom)
7.4.4.1 Hard newsbites

Hard newsbites in Period IV are a continuation of hard newsbites from earlier periods, though in Period IV all have a **Modern-Focus**. Table 7.9 compares hard newsbites from Period III and Period IV.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period III</th>
<th>Period IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>newsbites: hard: top</td>
<td>newsbites: hard: top</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pay for private water even if dams are full</strong></td>
<td><strong>Time to cut and run, Brashley</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney's dams are full, and the Government is planning to sell water to private operators.</td>
<td><strong>Tom Allard</strong>: The US, Australia and its allies have now seriously considered pulling their forces out of Iraq. Kim Beazley said, ... More troops bound for Afghanistan: report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scullin dips a toe into the water with Kurnell test plant</strong></td>
<td><strong>Australian troops pull out! It’s safe to speak now</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>newsbites: hard: topical</td>
<td>newsbites: hard: topical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3G’s slim call in new services, subsidies</strong></td>
<td><strong>Girl’s agonising death ‘preventable’</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telstra executive Richard Venn has introduced a new mobile services package for mobile devices.</td>
<td>The death of a seven-year-old girl who was choked on the top of a box jellyfish near Barmah and Cape York Peninsula was avoidable.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 7.9: Hard newsbites from Period III and IV*

7.4.4.1.2 Lite newsbites

Lite newsbites in Period IV are visually similar to hard newsbites (Figure 7.49), but have less structural potential than hard newsbites (as discussed further below).

*Figure 7.49: Hard (left) and lite (right) newsbites, Period IV*

7.4.4.1.3 Feature newsbites

Feature newsbites in Period IV (Figure 7.50) have a Lure, and are similar in design to leading soft newsbites from Period III (which appeared at the top of the page).
7.4.4.1.4 Cataloguing newsbites

Cataloguing newsbites in this period provide the reader with entry points to content sections of the newspaper by way of at least one Navigator, as well as by way of a Link to a story page from a particular section. They have a Verbal Frame, and the Illustration is always to the right of the Event. There are a number of different sub-categories of cataloguing newsbite (Figure 7.51), and these are discussed below.

7.4.4.1.5 Tangents and Illustrations

In Period IV, Tangents combine freely with all categories and sub-categories of newsbites, and therefore represent a simultaneous system with the either/or choice of hard / feature / lite / cataloguing (as in Periods I, II and III). Illustrations, however, with two exceptions (which are discussed further below)
are an obligatory structural element of all newsbites except hard newsbites in Period III.

7.4.4.1.6 Summary: System network

The four different kinds of newsbites as briefly described above are represented systemically in Figure 7.52, together with the simultaneous system of tangenting/non-tangenting. Each category is discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

![Figure 7.52: Basic system network of newsbites, SMH Period IV](image)

7.4.4.2 Hard newsbites: Simultaneous delicacy

Hard newsbites in Period IV share many of the structural features of the hard newsbites of Periods I, II and III (Table 7.8 above). As with the developments from
Period II to Period III, the inclusion of similar structural elements (e.g. Focus, Event, optional Illustration, optional Byline) in essentially the same spatial arrangement (e.g. headline at top, image at left) on white background. Viewed historically, the developments in hard newsbite design from Period I through to Period IV, while significant when mapped systemically, can be seen as evolutionary, not revolutionary (Figure 7.53), consisting of a range of subtle changes which can be explained in relation to social and institutional factors.

![Figure 7.53: Hard newsbites from SMH Period I, II, III & IV](image)

**7.4.4.2.1 Focus**

In Period IV, hard newsbites can again be sub-categorised on the basis of the visual design of headlines. Consistent with Periods I - III, the Focus of the first hard newsbite on the page is in a larger font that all other headlines in Period IV. The
Focus of the remaining hard newsbites appearing at the top of the page (i.e. not under any verbal classification heading) is in turn, in a larger font than the Focus of hard newsbites appearing further down the page (i.e. under separate classification headings such as *Business*, *Sport*, and so on). Consistent with Period III, these newsbites are named **first**, **top**, and **topical** hard newsbites respectively (see Table 7.10).

| newsbite: hard: first | **Flood fears as Clare hits WA**
9:12AM | Gusts of up to 185kmh continue to lash WA’s Pilbara coast this morning as Cyclone Clare moves inland.

→ Video: *Cyclone in WA*
| newsbite: hard: top | **Not enough money to patrol beaches**
SOPHIE GYLES AND AAP | The debate over the safety of swimmers in Sydney has come down to money.

→ Sydney surfers still swim with the sharks
| newsbite: hard: topical | **Doctors move to end Sharon coma**
Doctors treating Ariel Sharon hope that the Israeli Prime Minister will show signs of consciousness as he is resuscitated from a drug-induced coma.

→ Heir apparent has to learn mentor’s tactical skills

*Table 7.10: First, top and topical hard newsbites, SMH Period IV*

In Period IV then, there are three distinctions in the Focus of hard newsbite headlines, signified primarily by font-size (with ‘first’ newsbite headlines also in bold). In contrast to earlier periods where the design of the Focus realised one of a number of binary choices (Figure 7.36 above), the distinction in Focus in Period IV can be seen as a cline realising the three categories of first, top, and topical realised by headlines occupying three distinct points on a scale (Figure 7.54). This distinction is represented systemically in Figure 7.55.
Unlike Period III, first, top, and topical hard newsbites in Period IV all have 
headlines of the same colour, and none are underlined. This provides for a greater 
visual consistency on the page, resulting in a ‘cleaner’ design and a more consistent 
and intuitive realisation of the paradigm for readers to follow (cf. de Vries, 2008).

At this stage of the analysis, it is possible to take a historical perspective on 
headline design on the SMH home page over the four design periods. In Period I, hard 
newsbite headlines visually reference print newspapers (e.g. larger font, black colour, 
bold), while lite newsbite headlines reference the world wide web (e.g. same-sized 
font, blue colour, underlined). The two are mutually exclusive, and there is no middle 
ground. Over the four periods, there is a move away from this binary opposition 
(Tradition-Focus and Hyper-Focus, respectively) and towards a combination of the 
two (Modern-Focus). To illustrate, Figure 7.56 compares headlines from hard
newsbites appearing on the SMH home page in Periods I, II, III, and IV (proportions are accurate). Viewed in this way, the shift in headline design over time, which moves away from the conventions of print and towards the conventions of the world wide web, is clear. Verbally, the grammar of headlines (see Halliday, 1985a, pp. 372-377) continues to signify their function.

Figure 7.56: ‘First’ hard newsbite headlines from Periods I, II, III, and IV (top-bottom)

7.4.4.2.2 Invitations

In Periods I, II, and III, each hard newsbite has an Invitation (a link to a longer or modally different version of the 'same' news story - worded Full Report in Periods I and II, and more in Period III). In Period IV, there is no longer an Invitation in hard newsbites (Figure 7.57).

Figure 7.57: Hard newsbites from Period II (top), Period III (middle), and Period IV (bottom)
This can be explained with reference to a number of factors. Firstly, in Periods III and IV, the use of blue headlines which change appearance when ‘rolled over’ with the cursor (see Figure 7.56 above) signifies that the headline is a hyperlink (systemically, the Focus is conflated with the Link). This makes Invitations redundant.

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 7.58: ‘Ten years on the Web’, SMH Periods III & IV*

After more than ‘ten years on the web’ (a fact the *SMH* overtly proclaimed at this time - Figure 7.58), the institution of the newspaper can make assumptions about its readership not possible in earlier years. In their discussion of writing for hypermedia and the use of hyperlinks, Cotton & Oliver comment:

> One needs to know whether the audience is going to need to be gently introduced to the medium or whether it will find such an approach patronizing. (Cotton & Oliver, 1997, p. 71)

The *SMH* readership at this time is far more likely to have the online literacy skills necessary to navigate the newsbites and pages of the website without the verbally explicit cues that were necessary in earlier years, particularly when hard newsbite headlines took the visual form of a ** Tradition Focus**. Considering the developments in the design of the Focus and Invitation in hard newsbites (Table 7.11), it is possible to chart a general development away from the two functions of Focus (realised by headline) and Link (realised by hyperlink) being separated in form, to their co-
existence and conflation, to a point where there is no longer a need for a separate Invitation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Period I</th>
<th>Period II</th>
<th>Period III</th>
<th>Period IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus</strong></td>
<td>black Roman font</td>
<td>black Roman font hyperlinked</td>
<td>blue sans serif font hyperlinked</td>
<td>blue sans serif font hyperlinked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Invitation</strong></td>
<td>Full story</td>
<td>Full story</td>
<td>more</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 7.11: Temporal development of Focus and Invitation in hard newsbites*

An additional factor is the institutional status of newsbites as texts in their own right. Online newspaper readers read newsbites as self-contained stories as they scan the home page for the relatively few stories they will read in more depth (see Chapter 2). Each newsbite can be seen as a Full story, whether or not a longer version of the ‘same story’ is accessed by the reader. At this stage of the historical development of online newspapers (and in particular the *SMH*), newsbites have become established as a fundamental element in the process of reading the news online. It is assumed that readers who want to read more know how to do so.

**7.4.4.2.3 Byline and Time**

The practice of including a Byline and/or the Time of publication continues from Period III into Period IV. In Period IV, the font size of the Byline is slightly larger than in Period III and appears in CAPS, which gives the Byline a higher visual salience within the newsbite. The Time is still in red font, and still follows the Byline where the two appear together (Table 7.12).
The fact that these two elements remain virtually unchanged suggest that they are a successful aspect of design, functioning effectively in the social and institutional context as discussed in section 7.4.3.3 above.67

The choices of signed/unsigned (based on the presence/absence of a Byline), and timed/untimed (based on the presence/absence of Time) are simultaneous with each other, and with the choice of first/top/following above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>signed</th>
<th>Period III</th>
<th>Period IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>signed</td>
<td>Signed: Luna Park neighbours to shush</td>
<td>Signed: Not enough money to patrol beaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graphic: Luna Park neighbours to shush</td>
<td>Graphic: Not enough money to patrol beaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>timed</td>
<td>23,000 dead, 2.5m homeless after quake</td>
<td>23,000 dead, 2.5m homeless after quake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>signed &amp; timed</td>
<td>Trapped and tormented: woman survives 8-day ordeal</td>
<td>Trapped and tormented: woman survives 8-day ordeal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.12: Signed and timed hard newsbites from Periods III and IV

7.4.4.2.4 Verbal Frames

In the corpus of Period IV, Verbal Frames are, on rare occasion, used in hard newsbites. There are two instances of Verbal Frames naming the author of opinion pieces, one instance of a Verbal Frame placing a newsbite in a wider social context (A-LEAGUE GRAND FINAL), and one evaluating the newsbite according to the value system of the newspaper (EXCLUSIVE) (Figure 7.59).

67 Compare, for example, in Period III, feature soft newsbites which visually resemble print magazine and print newspaper features pages, and are not found in Period IV.
This option gives the authors of the home page an additional choice in the valuation of hard newsbites. Systemically, the choice of whether or not to include a Verbal Frame (i.e. framed/unframed) combines freely with the choices of first/top/topical, timed/untimed, and signed/unsigned for hard newsbites, and is therefore modelled here as a simultaneous system (see Figure 7.60).

7.4.4.2.5 Illustrations

In Period IV, lite newsbites, feature newsbites, and cataloguing newsbites all have images, but not all hard newsbites have images. Therefore, in this Period, the choice illustrated/unillustrated is modelled as a more delicate option in the category of hard newsbites, rather than as a simultaneous choice for all newsbites on the home page as in the first three periods.
The paradigmatic change in the choice of illustrated/unillustrated from being a universal choice on the home page, to being limited to hard newsbites, can once again be understood in relation to the historical status of ‘the printed word’ in ‘quality’ newspapers, and suggests that in the SMH online, the commodity of verbal reports of hard news events is still valued highly enough by the institution and the readers to stand without an image on the home page. Conversely, other news categories are always illustrated, consistent with the ‘rise of the visual’ and the growing importance of images to visual communication on the SMH home page.

7.4.4.2.6 Summary: System network

The basic structure of hard newsbites is largely unchanged between Periods III and IV. In isolation, each of the changes that have been made is relatively minor. But paradigmatically, there are a number of simultaneous choices available to the authors of the SMH home page when writing hard newsbites in Period IV as outlined above, and represented systemically in Figure 7.60. What is significant about this system network, especially when viewed in comparison to the choices ‘designed into’ hard newsbites in earlier periods, is the degree of choice that news designers and news authors have for the multimodal presentation and valuation of hard news.

The authors of the SMH home page have at their disposal 96 possible structural combinations, or systemic choices (including tangenting/non-tangenting) by which they can value hard news relative to other hard news, in addition to valuing it relative to other content on the home page. This degree of choice is not available with any of the other categories of newsbite, implying that the institution places importance on the ability to distinguish hard news in ways more subtle and complex.
than is possible in the composition of pages (e.g. Head-Tail, Primary-Secondary) at the rank of page, and with zone-rank verbal classification (e.g. \textit{WORLD}, \textit{NATIONAL}). Hard news, it appears from this perspective, remains the ‘core product’ of the \textit{SMH}.

\textbf{Figure 7.60: Hard newsbites, SMH Period IV: System network}
7.4.4.3 Lite newsbites: Increasing delicacy

There are two sub-categories of lite newsbites in Period IV: standard lite newsbites and transitional lite newsbites.

![Image](smh.com.au)

Figure 7.61: Lite newsbites on the first screen, Period IV

7.4.4.3.1 Newsbites: lite: standard

Standard lite newsbites appear under the zone-rank verbal classification of \textit{TIME OUT}, across the bottom of the Head (or ‘first screen’) in the main column of the page (Figure 7.61). They have a grey background which functions as a Border (Figure 7.62) and which differentiates them from hard newsbites in the same column.
7.4.4.3.2 Newsbites: lite: transitional

Transitional lite newsbites (Figure 7.63) were an innovation at the time they first appeared on the *SMH* home page. A single space on the page shows a number of newsbites one by one, appearing and disappearing in turn by animation (Figure 7.64). This use of animation to ‘rotate’ newsbites, a device which ‘expands’ the space available on the page (see Djonov, 2005), is now commonly used on online newspaper home pages.

Transitionals can be distinguished systemically from standard lite newsbites by the presence of Animated Scrolling, and by the presence of a Scroll Tool (allowing the reader to speed up or reverse the animation sequence). In this corpus, each animation sequence includes four, five, or six transitional newsbites. Transitional lite
newsbites appear in the right column on the page, and are the only newsbite in this column where the image is to the left of the text.

Figure 7.64: Animation sequence of transitional lite newsbites, SMH home page, 27 March, 2006

7.4.4.3.3 Summary: System

Table 7.13 compares standard and transitional lite newsbites and Figure 5.65 construes them as a system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>newsbite:</th>
<th>lite:</th>
<th>standard</th>
<th>transitional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>lite:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>transitional</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.13: Lite newsbites, Period IV

Standard lite newsbites and transitional lite newsbites are grouped on the basis of structural similarity - the obligatory Illustration is followed by the Event, and
unlike hard newsbites which they visibly resemble, they include a Border, but never include a Byline, Time, or Verbal Frame. Beyond this, structural differences allow us to identify two categories of lite newsbites as shown in Figure 7.65.

![Lite newsbites, SMH Period IV: System](image)

Figure 7.65: Lite newsbites, SMH Period IV: System

Lite newsbites are analysed here as a systemic category at the rank of text, yet this category ‘cuts across’ their placement in the news taxonomy at the rank of zone. Like cataloguing newsbites in Period I, this represents, in a limited way, an ‘opening up’ of the meaning potential available to designers by ‘playing off’ different ranks against each other. While developments such as the introduction of animation are obvious to all, the subtle interplay between design choices at different ranks is likely to remain opaque to readers of online newspapers.

### 7.4.4.4 Feature newsbites: Increasing delicacy

Like leading soft newsbites and feature soft newsbites in Period III, feature newsbites in Period IV are polarised top-bottom, with a large image functioning as Lure and placed above all verbiage. They can be sub-classified into two types, leading feature newsbites and classified feature newsbites (Table 7.14).
Table 7.14: Feature newsbites, SMH Period IV

Figure 7.66 represents soft newsbites on the SMH home page in Period IV as a system.

The use of large images all the way down the page reflects the growing importance of images in the visual communication of news on the home page. Lures also act as entry points to story pages in various content sections, and using this design in every verbal category of news down the page provides consistency for the reader, and once again a ‘cleaner’ design.
Chapter Seven: Newsbites

7.4.4.5 Cataloguing newsbites: Increasing delicacy

Cataloguing newsbites in Period IV have a number of sub-types. All have Navigators, but the primary division is based on whether the newsbite has Tabs and the Navigator stands alone (tabbed cataloguing newsbites) (Figure 7.67), or whether the Navigator is conflated with a Verbal Frame (titled cataloguing newsbites) (Figure 7.68).

![Figure 7.67: Tabbed cataloguing newsbites, Period IV](image1)

![Figure 7.68: Titled cataloguing newsbites, Period IV](image2)
Titled cataloguing newsbites may also have a menu of Navigators beneath the Verbal Frame (Figure 7.69). These distinctions are shown as a system in Figure 7.70.

Figure 7.69: Titled cataloguing newsbites with Navigator Menu, Period IV

Figure 7.70: Cataloguing newsbites, SMH Period IV: System

The developments in cataloguing newsbites maintain the (obviously effective) design elements which give readers entry points to home pages and story pages in content sections, consistent with the cataloguing newsbites of Periods I and III.
Tabbed cataloguing newsbites are another example of the experimentation with animation and the ‘expansion of space’ it can provide.

**7.4.4.6 Summary: System network, SMH Period IV (November 2005 - August 2007)**

The systemic choices on the home page of the *SMH* in Period IV are shown in a single system network in Figure 7.71. There are two *if/then* conditions in the network, indicated by the use of superscript *I* (for *if*) with the features *lite* and *cataloguing*, and superscript *T* (for *then*) with the feature *non-tangenting* (i.e. IF *lite* or *cataloguing* is selected, THEN *non-tangenting* must be selected).

The complexity of the system network is representative of two important trends in the genesis of the *SMH*. The first is the developing sophistication in presenting the news commodity in this medium. This is shown, for example, in the use of animation in transitional lite newsbites and tabbed cataloguing newsbites. Further evidence can be seen in the increasing use (and importance) of images, now obligatory in all but hard newsbites; and in the design of headlines, which are consistent across the page, and draw on conventions of both print newspapers and the world wide web. Neither the authors nor the readers of the *SMH* require an explicit verbal hyperlink in Period IV: the home page has outgrown Invitations.
The second trend reflected in the system network is the growing status of newsbites. Their institutional status as valid texts in their own right is reflected in the
absence of Invitations, in the presence of other structural features such as Byline and Time, and also in the range of design choices available in newsbites on the home page. The overall complexity of paradigmatic meanings available to the home page authors shows that the newsbites appearing on the home page are institutionally highly valued, and this institutional status has led to a wide and flexible range of meaningful choices being built into the design of these short texts. At the same time, the continued institutional value placed on hard news in particular is evident in the degree of choice available in the presentation of hard newsbites relative to other sub-categories.

7.4.5 Summary: Newsbites in the SMH over four design periods

The analysis above shows the changes in newsbite design over the data collection period, which are more broadly representative of the four design periods of the SMH online from 1999 - 2007 (see Chapter 4). Over time (particularly in Periods III and IV), there is an increasing degree of paradigmatic choice available to the authors of the home page in how they present the news, and a general tendency away from the conventions associated with print newspapers (and print texts more broadly), and towards those of the world wide web and other screen-mediated environments.

The developments in newsbite design indicate a number of things. First, there is increasing expertise and familiarity with the online medium on the part of designers, authors, and readers of the news. Second, there is an increase in the institutional status of newsbites. And third, emerging from these two factors, there is increasing expertise on the part of the newspaper in selling the commodity of news in this medium.
7.5 Newsbites: Conclusion

Newsbites are little texts, and can easily ‘slip beneath the radar’ of readers and researchers of online newspapers. Their brevity, and their superficial resemblance to newsbriefs (section 7.3.3) are probably contributing factors to this situation.

However, newsbites have their own structure, which has evolved as a result of historical and social factors, and which functions uniquely in the semiotic environment of the online newspaper home page. They function to give the focal point of a given news story, to engage the reader and provide them with one or more entry points to content sections of the newspaper, and to value the news they report relative to other news on the page.

Newsbites are a new genre, and for a social institution which has worked with the printing press for centuries, it is not surprising that the SMH (and other online newspapers) drew significantly on the traditions of the print newspaper in the design of newsbites before developing greater expertise in the presentation of news on home pages. What is more surprising perhaps is the speed with, and extent to which the design of newsbites diversified and took up the affordances of the online medium, as demonstrated in the discussion and analysis of newsbites in Periods I, II, III, and IV above. The rapid expansion of meaning potential in newsbites over the four periods can be observed by comparing the system network from each of the four periods (Figure 7.72).
The BKP and the PD did not exploit the design potential of newsbites to nearly the same extent as the SMH during the data collection period of this study, though the paradigmatic options in newsbites did expand in the PD over the data collection period, and has expanded a number of times subsequently in the case of the BKP. Beyond the three newspapers studied in this thesis, a cursory examination of the home page of a range of online newspapers demonstrates the degree of choice at the rank of text described here is not limited to the SMH, nor is it limited to broadsheets, nor is it limited to newsbites, as at the time of writing the potential of newsbits to be differentiated by font colour and size, and image are exploited on the home pages of some tabloid online newspapers such as The Sun and The News of the World in the UK.

Figure 7.72: Evolution of meaning potential: SMH Periods I - IV

If we model culture as a complex of genres (Martin & Rose, 2008), the developments in newsbites show the rapid development of an aspect of culture, or phylogenesis (Chapter 3). Compared with the evolution of print newspaper genres (see Chapter 2), the evolution of newsbites is occurring so quickly as to be on a
completely different timescale to print news genres. The development of newsbites as charted in this chapter represents phylogenesis on an ontogenetic timescale. Why is this occurring?

In the high-demand environment of the newsroom, communicative impact and economy of expression (visual and verbal) have come to be highly valued. Further, the valuation of stories relative to each other is central to the business of the mass media, so there is strong imperative on the institution to develop this ability in the online environment, and particularly on home pages given their crucial role in the newspaper. The challenge is to bring the meanings which have evolved over centuries of institutionalised practices aimed at producing print pages into a medium with which the institution has only a few years of experience.

But because web pages are viewed on screen, the established institutional communicative practices by which news stories are valued on print newspaper pages cannot be transferred directly from print to web pages. Therefore, the functionality of the print page, if it is to be retained, requires a ‘redistribution’ of the ‘semiotic division of labour’ (Matthiessen, 2007) when news is presented on the web page.

Together with the analysis in Chapter 6, the analysis in this chapter demonstrates that: (1) such a redistribution has taken place, and descriptions of home pages as being ‘like front pages’ do not capture the ways in which home pages construe meaning multimodally, and (2) the functionality of print pages has been retained, but by different means according to the affordances and constraints of the
medium. This challenges descriptions of home pages as merely lists of news stories, in which the semiotic possibilities of print are lost.

Recalling again the quote from Bateman as discussed at the outset of section 7.4 above:

The online page is then 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)

In fact, what the analysis presented here exemplifies is that the potential for valuing news has not necessarily diminished in online newspapers, but that the ways in which these multimodal meanings are made has been ‘reconfigured’ in the new semiotic environment, and a share of the semiotic burden on the page has been ‘pushed down’ from page design to newsbite design. Newsbites (viewed collectively on the screen) take up systemic design options which work with the affordances of the new medium, allowing the news institution to maintain the kind of ‘multidimensional’ flexibility they are accustomed to in presenting news in print, while conforming to the more rigid requirements of web page templates which bring consistency to news presentation on the computer screen.

Meeting these contradicting demands (flexibility in design to value news, versus consistency in design to aid navigation and therefore communication) is something which, in some institutional contexts could be a long process of evolution. In newspapers however, the dual demands of editors and readers are fundamental to the successful functioning of the newspaper, and without successful resolution of the contradiction inherent in using templates, the communicative, ideological, and
financial success of the newspaper is at risk. There is, therefore, significant imperative for news design to resolve this quickly.

Under these demands, the publishing practices of the newspaper create an evolutionary environment for semiotic practices whereby variations in practice can take place rapidly, with unsuccessful attempts being jettisoned quickly, and successful attempts surviving to be taken up repeatedly. This is due in part to the rapidity and high frequency of publication of newspapers - daily in Periods I and II of the SMH, and minute-by-minute by Period IV; in part also to the ability of news institutions to track which story pages are accessed and which are not.

Eyetracking studies (Chapter 2) tell us that readers of print newspapers tend to look over the whole paper, hence the ‘design as map’ metaphor applies to the entire print newspaper, as the collective design of pages guides readers through the events of the day. In contrast, online newspaper readers scan the home page searching for the few stories they will read in depth. The authors of the online newspaper have a limited time, and the space of a single page, to do the ideological work of the design of an entire print newspaper.

Over the data collection period, the SMH (and other online newspapers observed over this time, including to a lesser extent the BKP and PD) have moved away from simple lists to building the ideological work of design into newsbites. The online newspaper home page does not employ design as a map, but presents design as choice.
The increasingly intricate ‘coding’ of choice in newsbite design in hard
newsbites in the SMH (Figure 7.72) is implicit: to include or not Tangents, Verbal
Frames, or Illustrations; to signify a story as top or topical by headline design; to flag
immediacy by including Time, or ‘promote’ the story by including a Byline. These
choices are ideological: they value the stories, and position the actors and events in
relation to each other, to the news institution, and to the readers subtly, but
systemically.

Diversification in the presentation of soft and lite news in feature newsbites
and cataloguing newsbites increasingly construes news as a commodity, and readers
as consumers with a visually diverse array of choices at their disposal. But the choices
of hard, lite, soft, or otherwise, and the other choices available to news consumers, are
designed by the authors of the newspaper, who set the paradigmatic possibilities for
the consumers of their product.

To conclude, newsbites are evolving at breakneck speed, and this evolution
can be seen in relation to a wide range of factors. Textual factors that impact on
newsbite design include choices in design at the ranks of page and zone. Broader
social factors include changes in the news cycle from daily to rolling, the ‘rise of the
visual’, the evolving reading practices of online newspaper readers, and the gradual
realignment of online newspapers from a world of print texts, to a world of online
texts. From this perspective, the little texts labelled here as newsbites provide a
surprisingly rich window on the evolving culture of individual institutions, and the
globalised media more broadly.