Chapter 8: News images on home pages

8.1 Introduction

Examining online newspaper home pages from a visual perspective leads inevitably to questioning the role of news images on home pages. In this chapter, the use of images on the home pages of the corpus is considered. All three newspapers use a large image on the first screen (or Head) of their home page, as is common on online newspaper home pages in general. In addition to these relatively large images, over time the SMH has also come to use thumbnail images extensively.68

The ‘rise of the visual’, and the popular hype surrounding the internet and the world wide web, have contributed to a common perception that online newspapers are somehow more visual, or more visually oriented than print newspapers (see section 1.1.2). An extension of this view would be that image prevails over language in the value system of online newspapers:

as one photo editor described it to me in citing the advantages of his newspaper’s Web site over the paper itself: “more pictures” and “all of them in colour.” (Perlmutter, 2003, p. 10)

At face value, the trend towards verbally-shorter news texts on online newspaper home pages would appear to support such a view, and news images are obviously an important element in online newspapers. Most home pages have a large image featured on the first screen, and story pages ‘lower down’ in the website’s hierarchy often feature larger images. Some newspapers also exploit the online

---

68 *Thumbnails* is used in this thesis to refer to small ‘thumbnail-size’ images as commonly used on online newspaper home pages and other websites, and not to mean ‘sketches’.
medium to present images in ways not possible in traditional newspapers. Any suggestion, though, that image is dominant over language on online newspaper home pages can be quickly discounted by perusing the extent to which each semiotic resource is used to communicate the news on any newspaper’s home page (see section 8.3 below). Images are increasingly important, but language remains the mainstay of newspaper reporting (see Barnhurst, 2002; cf. Hall, 1981).

In some ways, the thumbnail images common on the home page of the SMH and many other newspaper home pages are the photographic equivalent of newsbites: they are ‘little texts’ which are associated with the medium of the world wide web, but whose history can be traced from print newspapers. Also like newsbites, thumbnails seemed to have ‘slipped beneath the radar’ of critical scrutiny to a large extent, and the argument presented in this chapter is that they have an important role to play in the interpersonal and textual meanings construed visually on the home page. For these reasons, much of this chapter is focused on the use of thumbnails on the home page of the SMH.

In section 8.2, the use of larger images on the home pages of the three newspapers in the corpus is described. Following this, in 6.3, thumbnail images on the home page of the SMH are considered from a metafunctional perspective. In their historical and social environment, the thumbnails as used on the SMH home page have come to challenge the boundaries between writing and image, and this boundary is explored in section 8.4. Finally, section 8.5 presents the conclusions of this chapter.
8.2 Images on home pages

In the three newspapers of this study, there are both similarities and differences in the ways images are employed on their home pages over the data collection period. In this section, the use of images on the home pages of the BKP, the PD, and the SMH are considered in turn.

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

*Table 8.1: Home pages from the BKP with news images circled in red, dates of publication, and template-design time periods*
Turning first to the BKP, this newspaper had no news image on its home page from August 2001 to the end of 2005. From January to July, 2006, it featured one image on the first screen of the home page (Table 8.1).

Figure 8.1 shows all the images from the home page of the BKP in the corpus of this study (all from BKP Period IV - see Table 8.1). All these images are captioned, and accompany either the first or second newsbite on the home page.

The use of news images on the home page of the BKP in BKP Period IV has a number of similarities with the use of news images on the home page of the PD in PD Periods I and II. Over the data collection period, the PD home page featured one large image in PD Period I, and one large image plus two thumbnails in PD Period II (Table 8.2).
### Table 8.2: Home pages from the PD with news images circled in red, dates of publication, and template-design time periods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Home page PD Period I" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Home page PD Period II" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>published: March 27, 2002</td>
<td>published: March 3, 2006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8.2 shows the news images in the corpus from the PD over the data collection period, not including the thumbnail images.
In both the BKP and the PD, the positioning of the large image in the Head of the home page is obviously intended to engage readers. Each individual image could be analysed in detail employing analytical tools from SF-MDA (see Caple, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), and collectively for what they tell about the focus and development of each newspaper (e.g. the increasing inclusion over time of images of young women on stages at the expense of images of party officials is an interesting development in the PD, as is the correlation in the images between youth and female on one hand, and middle- or old-age and male on the other). Such analysis is beyond the scope of the current chapter, however, and the argument presented here is that the...
images shown above are similar to print newspaper images in a number of important ways.

In both newspapers, the large images on the home page function in a number of ways similar to print news images. Like press photographs, they are captioned, and recalling section 2.4.1, do most or all of the following:

- have high impact and can be ‘read’ quickly (cf. Griffin, 2004)
- reduce complex events and issues to the persons involved with them (cf. Hall, 1981; Machin & Niblock, 2006)
- increase the salience of their associated verbal story on the page (cf. Griffin, 2004)
- provide readers with recognition of, and more importantly proximity to the social actors in the image, so a collective visual memory of ‘who’ (if not ‘what happened’) can develop (cf. Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001; Hall, 1981; Trivundza, 2004)
- provide a hook, or lead-in point to a story (cf. Bicket & Packer, 2004; Griffin, 2004)
- are selected and ‘authored’ in a process which is both institutional and ideological (cf. Barthes, 1977; Darling-Wolf, 2004; Hall, 1981; Wardle, 2007, p. 265).
Additionally, all these images are in Visual Record Key. Photographs in Visual Record Key have:

highly constrained evaluative options that contribute to creating the rhetorical effect of ‘factuality’ and objectivity and, thus, the backgrounding of authorial subjectivity. ... They are captioned, naturalistic, visual depictions of some material reality. (Economou, 2008, p. 257)

In contrast to Visual Record Key, some newspaper images are more obviously ‘authored’, and photographic techniques such as cropping, enlargement, colour

|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|

*Table 8.3: Home pages from the SMH with dates of publication, and template-design time periods, and ‘first’ image circled in red*
saturation, and focus are clearly used for rhetorical effect. Images employing such devices in this way are in Visual Interpretation Key, and such images are often associated with non-news contexts (such as art and film genres) that can invoke predictable attitudes among the target readership (Economou, 2008, pp. 260-1). In short, photographs in Visual Record Key can be likened to ‘factual’ and ‘objective’ hard news reporting, while those in Visual Interpretation Key can be likened to ‘interpretive’ and ‘reflective’ opinion and commentary pieces.

Figure 8.3: Collection of ‘first’ news images from the SMH in the corpus
In comparison to the use of images on the home pages of the *BKP* and the *PD*, the *SMH* uses more images, and demonstrates more experimentation with their use in page design (Chapter 6) and newsbite design (Chapter 7) than the other two newspapers in the current study (Table 8.3). Looking at the large images on the first screen of the *SMH* home page (Figure 8.3), there is a tendency for the image in this ‘first’ position to feature one or more human faces in close up, and there is also a number of other image authoring techniques used.

The photo of the tall ship and gold bullion, and of the British Queen Mother and Ali G (Figure 8.4) from Periods I and II respectively are obviously ‘authored’ images. Other ‘authored’ images positioned at the top of the page tend to be collections of faces, and these are explicitly marked as ‘image complexes’ (rather than being presented as collages) by the use of framing (see Figure 8.4). The inclusion of a headline in the *Anarchy in the USA* image (see Figure 8.3) is similar to the use of headlines in images in feature newsbites on the *SMH* home page during *SMH* Period III (Chapter 7). This particular image, placed at the top of the page, is the only one of its kind in the corpus, and represents a marked design of the home page used for exceptional news events such as Hurricane Katrina, and the death of Australian media figure Steve Irwin (cf. Evans, 1976, p. 12). A senior editor at the *SMH* spoke to me about this as we discussed the use of home page templates.

**Ed:** We are templated. I wouldn’t actually say that the technology restricts us, but the reality of the site is that it is templated. So those pictures are that size in our template. You can’t decide that you’re going to run a bigger picture here in this spot. Now there are several versions we can use and you may have seen sometimes where we run a bigger presentation across the top of the site?

**JK:** Yes.
Ed: So we have the ability to do that within our template. We have that freedom to do that. So there are a number of different templates that we can put into practice depending on the size, I guess the weight that we want to give that story on the page.

(interview with author, July, 2007 - see Appendix C)

Collectively, the tendency towards using close-up images, and also to combining images into a single frame tends to push these images away from Visual Record Key, and towards Visual Interpretation Key.

The tendency in the ongoing application of the homepage template of the SMH is to have a close-up image of one or more faces in the first and largest image on the page (i.e. in 10 out of 15 images in the corpus). During SMH Period IV, where the
‘middle’ column consists of feature newsbites with relatively large images in a visual design similar to the first newsbite (see Table 8.3; see also Chapter 7), there is also a tendency to include close-up shots of one or more faces (i.e. in 24 of the 28 images in this position on the page in this corpus). In fact, of all 250 news images in the *SMH* corpus, 183 (or 73%) are close-ups of faces.\(^\text{69}\) This use of close-up shots of faces is consistent with the recognised role of news images in personalising the news, and also with the use of so-called ‘mug shots’ as discussed in section 2.4.1. So, while it is not a new phenomenon, the use of close-up images of faces is an interesting one as it is so prevalent on the home page of the *SMH*. This tendency is investigated further in relation to thumbnail images below.

In conclusion to this section, images at the top of the home pages in this corpus have a prominent position in the Head of the page (see Chapter 6), and clearly have an important role in engaging readers when they first access the website. There appears to be a tendency towards including close-up shots of faces (particularly, but not exclusively in the *SMH*), and this may be related to the size of images on computer screens (as compared to print newspaper pages) and the need for them to be easily read and engage readers directly and quickly (see section 8.3 following). In the *BKP* and the *PD*, these images are in Visual Record Key and tend to have similar features and functions to images in print newspapers. In contrast, the *SMH* uses overt image ‘authoring’ techniques to combine images, employing Visual Interpretation Key in addition to Visual Record Key, something that would not normally be expected, for example, in the main image on the front page of the *SMH* print edition.

\(^{69}\) This includes non-human faces and company logos - see below for discussion.
8.3 Thumbnails on the SMH home page: Image as image

This section examines the use of thumbnails on the home page of the SMH during the data collection period, and in particular the use of close-up shots of faces - or thumbnail faces - in hard news stories. Thumbnails function very differently to the way news images have traditionally functioned in print newspapers, and also function differently to other, larger images on story pages and home pages in online newspapers. Like larger images in print newspapers and on online newspaper home pages (in particular, so-called mug shots), close-up shots of faces are a common choice in thumbnail images, and an exceptionally common choice in the thumbnails from the SMH home page which are considered below.

Historically, photojournalism developed over the course of the 20th century as an valued institutional practice whereby ‘factual’ representation of actual events provide evidence for the newspaper reader, and a visual experience of the news event. The most highly valued images also capture the ‘critical moment’ of an event, and recontextualise that critical moment in an aesthetically striking manner (see Chapter 2; Caple, 2009). Thus, photojournalism has evolved with the development of hard news, and the two have existed in a symbiotic relationship. Institutionally, photojournalism needs the verbal reporting of hard news events for its existence; discursively, verbal hard news reports are enhanced by the inclusion of photographs which provide evidence of the events, ‘take the reader there’ visually, draw the reader to the written story, and also tell (an aspect of) the story in a way that words cannot.
Chapter Eight: Images

In the following subsection, the social, institutional, and technological conditions in which thumbnails (particularly thumbnail faces) have become a common feature on many online newspaper home pages is considered. Following that, thumbnails as used on the SMH home page over the data collection period are described from a metafunctional perspective.

8.3.1 Thumbnails and their environment

A range of factors - technological and institutional - mean that thumbnail images are well-suited to online newspaper home pages, and that close-ups of faces are likely to be effective in such thumbnail images.

The medium of the web page has different affordances from those of the traditional newspaper page. The first is that the web page must be viewed by means of a screen, which means that information on web pages must be visually ‘packaged’ for the screen.

Spatially large objects work against the affordances of the scrolling page, and if different elements of the page are intended to be viewed together, it is necessary to ensure that their size is such that they can fit on the same screen. In fact, the limited viewing area of the web page (as mediated by the screen) is widely disregarded in popular and professional discourses, and in the research on online news (see section 2.5.2), and it is partly because of the limitations of screen viewing that newsbites and newsbits are used on home pages. These short texts allow stories to be grouped together, and to be viewed simultaneously on the same screen. When verbiage is designed to occupy a small space, it is not surprising that the images that accompany
that verbiage are also spatially small. While there are exceptions to this principle, it is nonetheless the case that thumbnail images are common place on online newspaper home pages (see Barnhurst, 2002).

Images in online newspapers are usually relatively low in resolution so that pages can be downloaded and viewed by readers quickly. This low resolution, and the typically small size of images, mean that images which are too complicated and/or which have too much detail are less likely to work well on web pages (Zavoina & Davidson, 2002, p. 65), so images which can be quickly perceived are likely to be favoured. This development works with existing institutional practices, rather than creating new ones.

As every photojournalism student quickly learns, news organizations emphasize pictures with simple and immediate ‘impact’; they desire photographs that can be ‘read quickly and easily’, and that symbolically support the verbal text, often as a prompt or lead-in for the reader’s eye. (Griffin, 2004, p. 384)

A thumbnail face satisfies all these demands.

Thumbnail images are small in size, and overall they occupy significantly less space than the verbal text on the SMH home page, especially in the Primary column on the page. Size is one important element in the relative salience of objects on the page (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), and while this alone does not serve as a measure of the importance of images, newspapers historically value the written word highly. ‘In the modern newspaper, the text is still an essential element, the photograph an optional one’ (Hall, 1981, p. 226). A quarter of a century after Hall wrote this, his observation still applies (see Barnhurst, 2002), so it is perhaps not surprising that images are typically given less space than language on online newspaper home pages,
particularly when findings from eye tracking research also suggest that readers are
drawn more immediately to written text than images on these home pages (see
Chapter 2).

The relative importance of language over image in news is also shown by the
use of captions in print newspapers. Images are almost never given the status
(commonly enjoyed by language) of independent story-teller: a caption must be
provided to tell the reader ‘what the picture is’, and perhaps more importantly ‘what
the picture means’ (see Barthes, 1977; Hall, 1981). It is not uncommon for studies of
press photography to treat the ‘photo-caption item’ as a single unit of analysis, either
explicitly or by default (Fishman & Marvin, 2003, p. 34; see also Griffin, 2004;
Trivundza, 2004; Wardle, 2007). The fact that the thumbnail images on the home
pages in this corpus do not have captions\(^70\) is one of the features which sets them
apart discursively from news images as traditionally used.

Newspapers have evolved in Western, English-speaking contexts to
foreground the interpersonal: “the News Story begins at the point of greatest crisis,
intensity, or human impact” (Iedema, Feez & White, 1994, p. 112). This discursive
practice is the driving factor behind the Nucleus-Satellite structure of hard-news
stories in English-language newspapers (see Chapter 2). Because the interpersonal
‘peak’ of news stories has been ‘distilled’ to the top of the story over time, and
because the language of newsbites and newsbits on home pages consists of this
interpersonal peak of information, it is not unexpected that any images appearing in
this semiotic environment would similarly construe this interpersonal peak. The

\(^{70}\) This is because there is no ‘story’ in the image to be ‘translated’ for the audience, as argued below.
thumbnail faces in hard-news stories on the home page of the *SMH* also communicate a highly interpersonal semiotic value visually, and allow the story to do so in a way that language alone cannot (cf. Hall, 1981, pp. 236-7; Lemke, 2002).

Online publishing places very tight time demands on journalists, editors, photographers, and technicians. In an environment where a home page is updated several - sometimes many - times a day, editorial decisions and processes need to happen quickly, so the traditional editorial process of image production (planning, shooting, submitting, selecting, editing, and publishing) would place considerable pressure on the home page authors, pressure which the use of close-cropped thumbnails taken from current or archived images can mitigate (see Barnhurst, 2002, p. 484; Zavoina & Davidson, 2002, p. 62). Similarly, the economic imperatives of news organisations and the enormous demand for images in print publications with ‘the rise of the visual’ has contributed to the rise of photo agencies, and the strong trend toward freelancing in photojournalism (Hartley, 2007, pp. 556-7; cf. Machin, 2004). While the *SMH* continues to use images taken by their own photographers, this trend towards the use of image banks and archives is also consistent with the use of thumbnail faces, which can also be (and are) re-used for different stories, rather than requiring a new image each time.

In summary, the affordances of the medium discussed above are the relatively limited space on a single scrolling screen, the use of verbally short news stories on home pages, and the low resolution of images in online newspapers. The institutional practices discussed above are the preference for ‘impact’ images in newspapers, the higher institutional value placed on language compared to image, newspapers’
Chapter Eight: Images

preference for foregrounding interpersonal meanings in telling stories, the time constraints in the news production process in online publishing, and the trend in the industry towards the use of image banks and archives. Together, these affordances and practices contribute to a situation where close-up thumbnails of faces are by far the most commonly-used image in hard-news stories on the home page of the *SMH* in the corpus of this study.

The ways in which these images are used on the home page of the *SMH* in the current corpus are considered in the next section.

8.3.2 The use of thumbnails on the *SMH* home page

Newsbites on home pages hyperlink to a ‘longer’ version of the ‘same’ story on a story page by means of the Focus of the story and/or an Invitation (see Chapter 7). In *SMH* Periods II, III and IV, news images also function as hyperlinks to the story page. But thumbnail images used in newsbites on the *SMH* home page give little indication of whether there will be an image on the story page, or if so what that image will be.

To elaborate, each hard-news newsbite with a thumbnail on the *SMH* home page hyperlinks to a story page. Of those story pages to which hard-news newsbites with images in the corpus hyperlink, 55% have no image at all; 11% have a completely different image (i.e. with no relation to the thumbnail on the home page); and 34% have an ‘expanded’ or otherwise altered version of the thumbnail accompanying the ‘longer’ story.\(^7\)

---

\(^7\) This part of the data analysis was conducted subsequent to the data collection. Of the 94 hard-news newsbites on the *SMH* home page in the corpus, the longer, hyperlinked story could not be accessed in 14 cases at the time of the analysis. Therefore, the figures given here regarding images in hyperlinked
as texts ‘in their own right’ (Chapter 7), but also serves as evidence that, like newsbites, thumbnails function ‘in their own right’, and not simply as ‘edited-down’ versions of images available elsewhere in the online newspaper.

In the corpus, a total of 250 news images appear on the home page of the *SMH*, 192 of which are thumbnails. Only those thumbnails in hard news stories (i.e. classified as hard news in news taxonomies on the home page - see Chapter 6) are considered in this section. This decision is based on the traditional roles of photojournalism in relation to hard news, and the contrast that thumbnail images in hard news stories present against hard news images in print newspapers.

Of the 192 thumbnails in the *SMH* corpus, 94 are hard-news images (see Figure 8.5). A break down of the number of hard-news images during each of the four design periods is shown in Table 8.4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Hard-news images in corpus</th>
<th>Home pages in corpus</th>
<th>Average number of hard-news images per home page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Period I</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(mid 1999-Mar 2002)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Period II</strong></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Mar 2002-May 2004)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Period III</strong></td>
<td>38</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(May 2004-Nov 2005)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Period IV</strong></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Nov 2005-Aug 2007)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>94</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 8.4: Hard-news images on home pages by design period*

Stories come from 80 of the 94 newsbites (85.1% of the relevant stories in the corpus). This limitation applies only to these figures.
Table 8.4 shows that the general trend across the four periods is an increasing average number of hard-news stories which include images on each home page. This increase in hard news thumbnails is matched by a progressive increase in all news images on the home page. This is in line with what may reasonably be expected, as the institutional authors of the SMH home page develop greater expertise in packaging news in this new medium, and online newspapers have concurrently emerged as an authentic news medium in their own right, rather than simply being a vehicle for ‘shovelware’ (Chapters 6 and 7). In addition, image use in hard news has become more systematic with each re-design of the SMH home page, in line with greater regimentation of content sections and the number and pattern of stories within each section (see Chapter 6).

Figure 8.5: Hard-news thumbnails on the SMH home page over the data collection period
Of the 94 hard-news thumbnails, 73 (78%) were close-ups of faces (human and non-human) or company logos.\textsuperscript{72} These figures are presented in Table 8.5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>hard news images</th>
<th>all news images (includes hard news)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>face</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>logo</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>face/logo</td>
<td>73 (78%)</td>
<td>183 (73%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>21 (22%)</td>
<td>67 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>94 (100%)</td>
<td>250 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Table 8.5: Images on the SMH home page during data collection periods}

The significant minority of hard-news images (22%) which are not faces are typically iconic, depicting elements such as environmental actors (e.g. bushfire, cyclone, jellyfish, forest), urban features (e.g. homes, water, bus), social institutions (e.g. ports, stock exchange), social groups (e.g. tradespersons), and sports (e.g. skating, surfing). This makes them, for the most part, quickly recognisable and ‘easy to read’ in a way similar to faces. These images share a number of other similarities with thumbnail faces.

Firstly, they do not ‘tell stories’. With few exceptions, the thumbnail images give no sense of the events that have taken place. Rather, they characterise an actor involved in the events (this is discussed further in the following section). In the exceptions (such as the image of a bushfire), the ‘event’ depicted can be interpreted as a social actor. Consider the story of which the bushfire image plays a part:

\textsuperscript{72} Company logos are considered here as the face of a human collective, and therefore thumbnails of company logos are counted as thumbnail faces (see Mouzelis, 1995 for discussion of collective social actors; Latour, 1999 for discussion of human and non-human social actors).
Crews battle bushfire in western NSW
Almost 200 firefighters are battling to contain a bushfire in a central western NSW national park.

(SMH, January 5, 2006)

Grammatically, the bushfire is a Participant (a Goal) in the two clauses where it is represented. This practice of turning events into things is a feature of many registers of English (e.g. Martin, 1993; van Leeuwen, 1996), and (as argued below) can be seen in this multimodal register as a feature of online newspaper discourse. In this instance, it can be argued that the thumbnail answers the question What happened? (A: There was a bushfire), and therefore portrays an event. But it can equally be argued that it answers the question Who was involved? (A: A bushfire [and firefighters, both of whom battled]), and therefore portrays a participant in the event, based on the verbal representation of the event.

This feature of thumbnails contributes to the next similarity between thumbnail faces and other thumbnails in the corpus. These images can be used with any story where the represented participant features in the verbiage, because they do not have what Trivundza calls the “generic conventions of photojournalism, with the criterion of newsworthiness and its inherent emphasis on time and place” (Trivundza, 2004, p. 491). In fact, they are ‘timeless’ and ‘placeless’, as the following short multiple choice exam illustrates.

Choose the headline that matches the image:

1. 
   a. The future of bus city - clogged streets
   b. New bus timetable delayed again
   c. STA to buy 300 new buses: Carr
2. **a. Extreme climate events to increase: Garnaut**  
**b. Flood fears as Clare hits WA**  
**c. Katrina lashes New Orleans**

Viewed this way, the non-face thumbnails, like the thumbnail faces, rely on the verbiage to locate the image in time and space, which makes these images re-useable.⁷³

In summary, thumbnail images in hard news stories on the *SMH* home page function as images independently from images used in stories on story pages, and also function differently from the ways in which photographs are used with hard news stories in print newspapers. Thumbnails on the *SMH* home page in the corpus are not captioned, and portray participants in the story rather than events. They are ‘authored’ (selected, cropped, otherwise manipulated) in such a way that they are easy to ‘read’, and that makes them ‘timeless’ and ‘placeless’ and therefore possible to use repeatedly. Like other news images on the *SMH* home page in the corpus, the majority of these images (73%) are close-ups of human faces, labelled here **thumbnail faces**.

The following sub-sections examine these images from a metafunctional perspective.

### 8.3.3 Thumbnails and ideational meanings

This section looks at ideational meanings, or the ways in which thumbnails portray a version of events or experience. As discussed above, hard-news thumbnails on the

---

Chapter Eight: Images

SMH home page add little or no experiential content to the verbal text of their newsbite. They do not portray events, nor provide evidence for the events of the story. They do not illustrate ‘what happened’, and except in rare instances they do not give any information about the events of the story which is not also provided verbally.74

Applying Kress & van Leeuwen’s (1996) visual grammar of images to analysing the representation of events in these thumbnails, they construe neither narrative processes, which “present unfolding actions and events, processes of change, transitory spatial arrangements” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 56), nor conceptual structures, which “represent participants in terms of their class, structure or meaning” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 56). Rather, these thumbnail images appear to represent a single Participant, or “the subject of the communication” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 46), which cannot ‘tell a story’ on its own, but can be read as participating in the story told by the verbal co-text.

In terms of the Circumstances of these images (i.e. their Setting; the Means, or elements beyond the main Participants in the image which are used in the event(s) depicted; or the Accompaniment, or elements that are ‘with’ the main Participants) (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, pp. 71-3), in essence these images have none. They are almost always completely de-circumstantialised (Machin 2004), which is what gives them their ‘timeless’ and ‘placeless’ quality as discussed in the previous section. In his analysis of the Getty image bank, Machin comments:

A key characteristic of the vast majority of Getty images is that the background is either out of focus, or eliminated altogether – many of the images are made in the studio, against a flat background. By

74 This is not to say that information can be ‘translated’ completely between language and image. Rather, the point is that the image can be deleted without any significant loss in the ideational meaning of the story.
means of such decontextualization a photograph is more easily inserted into different contexts ... . (Machin, 2004, p. 320)

In Figure 8.5, the background in almost every image is either completely obscured by the subject of the image, or completely indistinguishable. Thus, an image of an individual, animal, social group, environmental actor (and so on) can be used with any story in which that individual (animal, social group ...) is written about should the editors of the newspaper so choose, and it is indeed common for these images to be re-used when social actors appear in a number of stories over time as mentioned in the previous sub-section. This also allows for the Getty-like practice of image-banking, where necessary. A senior editor at the SMH commented on the use of thumbnails, particularly thumbnail faces on the SMH home page.

If what you’re asking me is why so many of them are of people, then I’d say it’s because the stories usually are, and so therefore if we’re running a story about, say, Conrad Black, to have a photo of Conrad Black in that picture. We do use sometimes small generic images to denote something - a police story perhaps, or perhaps a court story where we aren’t able to use photographs for legal reasons - we’ll use that. (interview with author, July, 2007)

In comparison to images typical of photojournalism in print newspapers, we can characterise thumbnails on the SMH home page as operating with a much more limited visual grammar. Participants are portrayed, but Events and Circumstances are not. This means that, ideationally, thumbnails rely on the verbal co-text to communicate a newsworthy message in a way that press photography traditionally has not.

Turning then to image-verbiage relations in the thumbnails on the SMH home page, in Royce’s terms, the relation is typically one of **intersemiotic repetition**, 75 A convenient co-occurrence of this is that the newspaper can draw on any available image of the actor depicted, thus avoiding the necessity of sending photographers out to document stories as they occur.
where “a lexical item ... encodes the same experiential meaning encoded in the visual”
newsbites in Figure 8.6, the images of John Brogden and Kim Beazley are a visual
repetition of the verbal naming of these people in the story. The images help the
reader ‘put a face to the name’, but tell nothing about where the images were taken,
what kind of event is being reported, or any aspect of the story that adds to or
provides evidence for the verbal content. The headlines could read Brogden defeats
Obama, or Beazley kidnaps baby, and the same images would be equally effective.
The same is true of every thumbnail face in the corpus, with one exception.76

The thumbnails can often be related to different verbal representations of the
same social actor in a single story. To exemplify, the image in the top newsbite in
Figure 8.6 is related to the grammatical participant Brogden in the headline, and the
grammatical participant NSW Opposition Leader John Brogden in the lead. Similarly,
in Figure 8.7, the image is related to the grammatical participants London Bomber, I,

---

76 In the single exception, there is deixis in the verbal text which can only be resolved with reference to
the thumbnail face: i.e. this woman and her. The image is still decontextualized and portrays a single
actor, and not an event.
and a soldier in the headline, and One of the four London suicide bombers, his, and Muslims in the verbiage. While the thumbnails visualise these verbal representations, they do not convey any other new information (i.e. information that is not provided in the verbal story). Rather, they function to visually represent a central element in the verbiage, and bring it to the ‘front’ of the story, as a way of orienting readers to the newsbite (see the discussion of interpersonal and textual meanings in the following sub-sections).

Figure 8.7: Newsbite with thumbnail from SMH home page, September 2, 2005

Thus, the ideational meanings construed in these images are very limited. The minimum amount of visual information necessary to identify a social actor (individual or collective, human or non-human) is provided, and in terms of portraying experience, the images add very little to the verbal text of the news story.

Moving beyond newsbites to the role of thumbnails on the entire home page, ideationally, the home page relies on verbal text to present hard news - thumbnail images play almost no role in ‘presenting the news’. Figure 8.8 shows the Primary column of hard news on one SMH home page from each of the four design periods. At the top of Figure 8.8, the thumbnail images are blacked out and the text remains. At the bottom of the figure, the verbal text of the hard-news column is whited out and

---

77 Logico-semantic relations between the image and each mention in the verbiage may differ - see Martinec and Salway (2005) and Royce (2002).
only the images remain. A reader faced with the top half of Figure 8.8 would ‘get the news’. A reader faced with the bottom half would have little or no idea about any of the news events reported on the home page. This illustrates the ‘semiotic division of labour’ (Matthiessen, 2007), or extent to which each semiotic resource (language and image) contributes to providing the content of hard news on the home page. It also raises the question of what meanings thumbnails contribute. If they provide so little ideational content, then why include them at all? The answer to this is that they provide important interpersonal and textual meanings in newsbites and on the home page as a whole, and these are explored in the following sub-sections.

Figure 8.8: Hard news from SMH home pages, Periods I-IV (L-R): Text minus image (top), and image minus text (bottom) (originals in colour)
8.3.4 Thumbnails and interpersonal meanings

In the preceding section, the argument is presented that thumbnail images on the SMH home page in the corpus contribute relatively little in terms of ideational meaning. To some extent (when compared with stories on story pages, for example), a similar argument can be made for the verbal stories in which they appear - both newsbites and newsbits on the home pages of online newspapers are verbally brief:

the net paper texts must compete for reader attention by means of links from the [home] page. Using a link to catch a reader to a story means feeding the reader with much poorer information on the story content than when the story presents itself spread out on the page of a [print] newspaper. (Holmqvist et al., 2003, p. 669)

In order to compensate for the relative lack of ideational information (i.e. information about events), these short multimodal texts on newspaper home pages increase the interpersonal information load by finding ways to engage readers visually (for example, through the use of different font sizes, and colour) and verbally (for example, through the use of more intensified language in headlines and leads - cf. White 1997). Thumbnail images also play an important part in ‘increasing the interpersonal load’ of newsbites, and we turn now to look at the interpersonal meanings of thumbnails on the SMH home page in more detail, first in terms of their meanings as texts in their own right, then in terms of the role they play in newsbites, and finally in terms of their role on the home page, and in the discourse of the entire newspaper over time.

In Kress & van Leeuwen’s visual grammar, close-up shots in images construe a level of intimacy between the viewer and the object in the image (analogous to the relationship between the dominance of an object in one’s field of vision, and physical
distance), whereas long shots construe a more public relationship (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). This is the visual construal of one kind of interpersonal meaning. In almost every instance, the hard-news thumbnails on the SMH home page are close-up shots. The intimacy between the object construed in the image and the viewer which this signifies is not limited to the 67 (of 94) thumbnails that are close-ups of human faces. Images of a glass of water and a shark, for example, construe an intimate distance between the viewer and object depicted (see Figure 8.5 above); even the images of a bushfire and a stock exchange fill the viewer’s field of vision (as construed by the boundaries of the image) signifying an intimate relationship between viewer and object depicted (see Figure 8.5 above).78

At the same time, the small size and extreme ‘intimacy’ of these thumbnails reduce the effectiveness of other choices in construing interpersonal meanings visually. For example, manipulation of the vertical angle of photographs construes interpersonal meaning: high shots looking down on the object construe power on the part of the viewer, and low shots looking up construe power on the part of the object viewed (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). The manipulation of this vertical axis, however, has less effect in intimate shots (Figure 8.9). Theoretically, intimacy (distance of shot) and power (vertical axis) are independent variables, but in practice they appear to be related (in thumbnail faces, at least), and the intimacy signified in an extreme close-up ‘spills’ into other interpersonal meanings, including gaze and horizontal orientation (Figure 8.10). Therefore, the overwhelming choice to construe social actors at an intimate distance (80 of 94 images, or 85%) limits the impact of

78 When a bushfire is close enough to fill your field of vision, you have a very close visual, aural, olfactory, physical relationship with it.
other choices typically available, and typically manipulated for meaningful effect in print newspaper images.

![Figure 8.9: Thumbnails showing a range of camera angles on the vertical axis](image)

Nonetheless, the high degree of intimacy construed in these images means that each hard-news story which includes a thumbnail is ‘personalised’ to an extent that would not be possible without the image, and without the shot being framed in close-up: thumbnails construe a relationship between the depicted Participant and the reader that language cannot.

![Figure 8.10: Newsbites with thumbnails showing a range of camera angles on the horizontal axis](image)

Individually then, the thumbnail faces on the home page of the *SMH* contribute to the interpersonal meanings of newsbites. Collectively, they also contribute to the interpersonal meaning of the entire home page as a visual sign. The relation between the reader of the home page and the content is determined by a range of factors, including, on the home page of the *SMH*, thumbnail images, and especially

426
Chapter Eight: Images

thumbnail faces. And given the central role of the home page in readers’ experience of the online newspaper, thumbnails on the home page contribute also to the interpersonal stance of the entire newspaper, and the interpersonal positioning of readers.

As discussed above, individual newsbites are personalised by the use of thumbnails, and in particular thumbnail faces which ‘populate’ the home page with news actors. Cumulatively, the impact of thumbnail faces on the home page can be seen as a personification of the news. That is, the hard news as presented on the home page is visually populated with faces, and as a result the public issues and events construed there are personified. In order to explore the significance of this, Habermas’s notion of the public sphere is helpful.

For Habermas, the public sphere “refers neither to the functions nor to the contents of everyday communication but to the social space generated in communicative action” (2002, p. 359, italics in original). He continues:

For the public infrastructure of such assemblies, performances, presentations, and so on, architectural metaphors of such spaces recommend themselves: we speak of stages, forums, arenas and the like. These public spheres still cling to the concrete locales where an audience is physically gathered. The more they detach themselves from the public’s physical presence and extend to the virtual presence of scattered readers, listeners, or viewers linked by public media, the clearer becomes the abstraction that enters when the spatial structure of simple interactions is expanded into a public sphere (2002, p. 359, italics in original).

Home pages mediate a relatively new public sphere. At the same time, they carry the long institutional history of newspapers, where ‘the spatial structure’ of the ‘simple

---

79 The high percentage of close-up shots of human faces in larger images on the home page as discussed above also contributes to this.
interaction’ of telling a story has evolved into the widely-shared and -understood genres found in newspapers.

These genres are not the same as those found in the coffee houses, clubs, letters, and journals of 16th and 17th century Europe from which Habermas (1991) traces the evolution of the bourgeois public sphere. By their mass-mediating nature, newspapers are a less personal form of human contact. But by personifying the news on the home page, thumbnail faces make this public sphere (in which the authors and readers of the newspaper interact) more familiar than would otherwise be the case.

Like traditional hard news images, thumbnail faces exploit the ‘natural relationship’ between photographic images and human visual perception of the material world. Unlike traditional hard news images however, they do not perform the evidential or documentation function by which images in a broadsheet contribute to the newspaper’s authority. Rather, individuals’ interpersonal experience of social life (specifically, visual contact with social actors in social settings) is construed in these images. Regardless of whether readers recognise the various individuals in the thumbnail faces, these social actors are offered up by the newspaper to be publicly shared by the community of readers, and therefore mediate the interpersonal orientation of the reading public to the issues and events reported.

In the ephemeral discourse of the SMH, thumbnail faces represent a continuous stream of personified issues and events open for negotiation among the readers and writers of the newspaper. They provide an immediately accessible currency in this public sphere, one which directly addresses the ‘promiscuous’ readers
of online newspapers (Thurman 2007). Simultaneously, more entry points (and more engaging entry points) into the content sections of the website are offered to the reader, and a greater number of hits on a wider variety of pages can be recorded.

Over time, the use of thumbnail faces contributes to a particular kind of discursive relationship that regular readers come to expect from the *SMH*, and go to for that experience. Kress & van Leeuwen (1996, pp. 28-9) contrast the visual design of the front page of *The Sun* (published in the UK) and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (published in Germany). The difference between the design of each page is stark, and Kress & van Leeuwen elaborate, commenting that newspaper readers:

> are habituated to a complex set of practices, which, we would suggest, have far-reaching effects on the formation of their subjectivity and identity. If each of these papers is thought to be reader-friendly by its readers, then each is a very specific kind of friend - and each set of readers a very specific set. (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, p. 30)

In the act of reading (as in any other semiotic act), the readers of the *SMH* negotiate their complex identities as social actors (e.g. as an online newspaper reader; as a member of particular social circles; as conversant in the ‘news of the day’). That is, their news reading practices, and their continuing interaction with the *SMH* home page over weeks, months, even years contribute to the ongoing negotiation of each individual reader’s identity. Concurrently, as part of the same process, each reader’s affiliations with other individuals and groups is continually negotiated in the emergence and dissipation of common attitudinal orientations towards publicly shared persons and the topics and events with which they are associated (see Knight, 2010; Knox, Patpong & Piriyasilpa, 2010). On this broader timescale then, the shorter-timescale functions of thumbnail faces (i.e. personalising individual stories, and personifying the public sphere of the home page and newspaper) contribute to
establishing and maintaining complex affiliations among the community of SMH readers. And it is this bonding function of news discourse that thumbnail faces are particularly well suited to contribute to over time.

Bonding is concerned with the way the [readers] of a [newspaper] are positioned interpersonally to create solidarity. In cultural institutions like [newspapers], Bonding is concerned with making [readers] feel welcome and as though they belong, not just to the [home page and the website], but to a community of like-minded people. Such feelings of belonging are also crucial to the long-term survival of the [newspaper]. (Stenglin 2004: 80)

While Stenglin’s (2004) research is on the semiotics of three-dimensional space and the practices of museums, her arguments regarding bonding in museums apply equally to newspapers, and the argument here is that bonding occurs not on the timescale of a single, personalised story; nor on the timescale of the personified discourse of a given edition of a newspaper; but over the course of months, years, and decades of interaction between a newspaper and its readers. Bonding is an interpersonal process, and the primarily interpersonal nature of thumbnail faces affords this social-semiotic process in the online reading practices of SMH readers.

Attracting and maintaining a readership is essential for the commercial survival of a newspaper; some even argue that it is the main goal of the newspaper’s editors to build a loyal audience (Thurman 2007, p. 301). Caple (in press) discusses the different discursive events in which readers of the print SMH can participate, including reading ‘image nuclear news stories’ (which feature large, aesthetically pleasing photographs and playful headings) and hard-news stories (cf. Singer 2006). “By sharing such experiences with their readers, the newspaper is able to create a

---

80 The original quote from Stenglin discusses museums and their visitors, rather than newspapers and their readers.
sense of togetherness, inclusiveness and affiliation, and it is around these shared feelings that we bond” (Caple in press).

From a journalistic perspective, the use of thumbnail faces reflects institutional news values and the importance of communicating events of significance which resonate with the community of SMH readers. As a senior editor at the SMH commented in regard to thumbnail faces:

the close-up nature of them is you get greater impact from having them in close-up. And people because they’re human. Stories always work best when you can make a contact with them. (interview with author, July 2007 - see Appendix C)

From a marketing perspective, thumbnail faces are one aspect of the online ‘news product’, by means of which the news institution develops and maintains a readership which meets its commercial imperatives to sell advertising space to its customers. As online promotional material aimed at potential advertisers in the SMH explains:

A leader in the Australian online news and information market, smh.com.au - together with theage.com.au - has transformed the way Australians get their news.

Complementing the traditional strengths in news, business, technology and sport is smh.com.au's rich approach to travel, entertainment and lifestyle readers. Our sections burst with opportunities for readers to interact with the brands, including blogs, videos and multimedia specials.

Through quality and innovation, smh.com.au delivers an engaged and loyal audience for advertisers. (Fairfax Digital Adcentre n.d.)

Thumbnail faces play an important role in the relatively new and evolving discursive practices of presenting hard news on the SMH home page. This role facilitates achieving the journalistic imperatives of making stories “human”, and finding a way for the audience to “make a contact with [these stories]”; and the marketing
imperatives of presenting “opportunities for readers to interact”, and making the audience “engaged and loyal”.

Thus, in terms of the interpersonal meanings they construe, thumbnails contribute to personalising newsbites, personifying the home page, and over time, contribute to both the ideological and commercial objectives of the online newspaper.

8.3.5 Thumbnails and textual meanings

Having considered the hard-news thumbnails on the SMH home page from an ideational and interpersonal perspective, in this sub-section, a textual perspective is taken on the composition of thumbnails themselves, and also on the textual meanings they contribute to newsbites, and to the home page.

Press photographs make textual meanings in their compositional choices. Highly valued newspaper photographs tend to “vacate the centre of the frame” where possible, and align key participants in images around so-called “hot spots” in the photographic frame (Caple, 2009). Based on ‘insider knowledge’ of these institutional practices, and her analysis of a corpus of hundreds of newspaper photographs, Caple has built on Kress & van Leeuwen’s visual grammar to develop a textual grammar of the composition of news photographs.

The compositional choices typically made by news photographers include centring an object; moving an object off-centre and balancing it diagonally with another (either with another object within the frame, or outside the frame and implied by a vector); mirroring an object in the frame; and presenting a number of matching,
serialised objects within the same frame (Caple, 2009). As can be observed in Figure 8.5, of the 94 hard-news thumbnails under discussion here, 78 (83%) are centre-frame. A small number (5 of 94, or 5.5%) have two faces serialised or balanced; a small number have the object placed slightly off-centre; but it is generally not possible to ‘vacate the centre’, nor to compose thumbnails around hot spots. Thumbnails are too small to exploit the semiotic potential of photographs to place actors in relation to one another (or to their surroundings) by the use and manipulation of foregrounding and backgrounding, vectors, framing, or focus.

Thus, the compositional choices available to the authors of the SMH home page when using thumbnails are, again, limited when compared to the choices available with larger photographs. Due to the small size of the images and the fact that the faces fill most of the frame, compositional choices are also extremely limited. Most faces are centred in the image and dominate the frame, thus making them highly salient in the image. The textual meanings which are construed by these images when considered as texts in their own right (as opposed to considering their interaction with the verbiage they accompany) are relatively consistent collectively, and are rarely manipulated for communicative effect (i.e. the faces are almost always centre-frame).

As discussed in the previous sections, in hard-news newsbites on the home page of the SMH, thumbnails bring a central element in the verbiage to the ‘front’ of the story, and orient readers interpersonally to the newsbite (cf. Martin, 2002, p. 322).

Note that the orientation of the face in relation to the camera, and the direction of the gaze, are interpersonal aspects of visual communication (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).
In this way, they can be seen as functioning as interpersonal Hyper-Theme in newsbites (Martin 1992; Martin & Rose 2007).

A Hyper-Theme is neither a lexical nor a grammatical element, but a discourse-level phenomenon (typically a sentence or paragraph) which “gives us an orientation to what is to come: our frame of reference as it were. Beyond this, the hyperTheme is predictive; it establishes our expectations about how the text will unfold” (Martin & Rose, 2003, p. 181). Headlines serve as Hyper-Themes in newspaper texts in that they orient the reader to the text, predicting what is to come.

Martin (2002) demonstrates how, in multimodal texts, images can function as a visual interpersonal Hyper-Theme. In examining the Australian government’s Bringing Them Home report (among other texts), he looks at the use of images typically occurring at the beginning of sections of the text, and the way they orient the reader interpersonally to the verbal content of each section. Similarly, Caple (2008) identifies large press photographs as Hyper-Theme in the ‘image-nuclear news stories’ in her corpus (see also Economou, 2006). Like the images discussed by Martin (2002), Economou (2006), and Caple (2008), the thumbnails on the SMH home page function as an interpersonal Hyper-Theme, working visually with the large, coloured font of the Focus and orienting the reader interpersonally to the news story.

Interestingly, this newsbite design works together with reader behaviour as measured in the Stanford-Poynter eyetracking study. Heatmaps are a way of presenting eyetracking data, and indicate the percentage of participants in the research
whose eyes fixate on a certain part of the page. Figure 8.11 shows the heatmap data on a mock home page made for the EyeTrack III project (Outing & Ruel, 2004). Red indicates 100%, orange about 75%, blue about 40%: the cooler the colour, the fewer participant eye-fixations on that part of the page.

Figure 8.11: Heat map data from EyeTrack III (source: Outing & Ruel, 2004)

The only thumbnail image on this mock page is at the top right, but interestingly, the heatmap indicates that eye fixations concentrate on the locations on the page where hard-news newsbites are located on the SMH home page. This may be
fortuitous, or may be a result of careful planning as the SMH editorial staff are aware of this research (Appendix C). What it suggests is that the hard-news thumbnails on the SMH home page are likely to orient the readers of the page to the newsbites, and function effectively as interpersonal Hyper-Theme.

Moving from newsbites to the role of thumbnails on the home page, online newspaper home pages have been described as featuring ‘lists’ of stories (e.g. Barnhurst, 2002; Bateman, 2008). On the SMH home page, the ‘list’ of hard news stories is punctuated by thumbnail images in a way similar to the punctuation of lists in more traditional, paper-based documents with bullet points. Figure 8.12 illustrates how, over a relatively short period of time, the use of hard-news thumbnails has changed from being relatively random, to being a systematic feature of the visual organisation of verbal text on the SMH home page.

As Figure 8.12 illustrates, the thumbnails in the ‘list’ of hard news stories on the SMH home page function in a similar way to bullet points, and also in a way not totally divorced from the use of decorated initial letters in illuminated manuscripts (see section 8.4 below), and the use of large initial letters in contemporary print-newspaper feature stories. Seen this way, the affordances of computer-mediated communication and the evolving practices of online news discourse are combining with evolving features of written language (such as typography and punctuation) to organise information on the home page. This perspective is explored in detail in section 8.4 below.
Figure 8.12: Increasing consistency in thumbnail placement on the SMH home page:

Primary ‘hard news’ column, Period I-IV (L-R)

To summarise this sub-section, hard-news thumbnails on the home page of the SMH have relatively few compositional choices available due to their small size, and to the other constraints set out above, and offer very limited choices in comparison to the images typical of print photojournalism. In terms of their role in newsbites, they function as interpersonal Hyper-Theme, orienting the reader to the content of the story. And finally, on the home page, they function textually to punctuate the page in a way that contributes to its visual texture as a cohesive, compositional unit.
8.3.6 Thumbnails as images: Conclusion

Thumbnail images and close-up images of faces have historical precedents in the print press. The use of thumbnails and thumbnail faces on the SMH home page, and on many other online newspaper home pages, can be seen as the continuation and adaptation of the existing practice of using mug shots in print newspapers. But on the SMH home page, the use of thumbnails in hard news stories is distinct from hard news images in print newspapers in a number of ways.

Employing the tools developed by Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) and Caple (2009), it is apparent that many of the systemic options available to photographers, photo editors, and page editors working with print pages are not available in the authoring of thumbnails for the home page, for a variety of reasons.

Thus, the hard-news thumbnails on the SMH home page are not hard news images as we have come to know them; they play a very different role in the construal of news. Ideationally, they represent a participant rather than telling a story and rely on the verbiage they accompany to make meaning. Interpersonally, they function to attract attention, to personalise and personify the news, and to bond with readers in a way words alone cannot do. Textually, they work to bring a participant ‘to the front’ of the story as interpersonal Hyper-Theme, and function like bullet points on the page, punctuating the news on the home page. These aspects of thumbnails have emerged in a particular technological and institutional environment as described in section 8.3.1 above, and it is clear that they represent a new social practice in the reporting of hard news.
While this section has considered newsbites from a range of perspectives, there are other aspects of the historical and discursive environment in which they have emerged that have not yet been considered. In the following section, thumbnails are examined from three perspectives, and their status as images on the home page of the *SMH* is reconsidered in light of this.

### 8.4 Thumbnails on the *SMH* home page: Image as language

The argument in the previous section is that the choices available to photo editors, page editors, and page designers when using thumbnails are limited. Firstly, almost every thumbnail on the *SMH* portrays a social actor (human, social, environmental). An image not immediately and overtly connected to the verbiage will generally not suffice. Further, all thumbnail images on the *SMH* home page are decontextualised, so the choice of visually situating actors in relation to different contexts is not available: all context is provided by language. Due to the thumbnails’ extreme close-up nature, other choices in the interpersonal grammar of images (e.g. construing power on the vertical axis) are either ‘washed out’ to a large extent, or not ‘in play’ at all. And compositionally, thumbnails restrict photo editors for the most part to centred, single-object images.

By reducing the typical structural configurations in images (e.g. actors but not scenes; close-up, but not long shot; centred, but not aligned with compositional ‘hot spots’), and also, therefore, their possible combinations, thumbnails as used on the home page of the *SMH* effectively reduce the possibilities usually available in the
‘grammar’ of news photographs (on the syntagmatic axis), and therefore the potential visual meanings available to the authors of the SMH home page (on the paradigmatic axis). In fact, the choices available with thumbnails are so limited, that there is a question as to whether these images share a ‘grammar’ with other images, or whether their potential to make visual meaning has been reduced to the point where their signification draws on other semiotic paradigms.

In this section, this line of argument is followed with reference to three historical trajectories. Viewing thumbnails on the home page of the SMH in relation to the historical development of photojournalism, to the historical development of typography, and to the historical development of punctuation, can lead us to question whether these thumbnails are functioning as images, or whether they are functioning as language.

### 8.4.1 Historical perspective I: News photography

The history of news photography is discussed in Chapter 2, and the contrasts between photojournalism as it has emerged in the 20th and early 21st centuries, and the use of thumbnail images in hard news on the home page of the SMH home page are discussed there and also in section 8.3 above.

In short, thumbnails represent a narrowing of the possibilities of news photography, and contrast many of the typical features and functions of photojournalism, presenting a distinct contrast to news illustrations of the 19th century, to news photographs from the mature photojournalism tradition of the 20th century, and to more recent developments in the use of images in news story-telling in
online newspapers such as image galleries and slide shows. A number of these distinctions are listed in Table 8.6.

The hard-news thumbnails on the home page of the *SMH* can therefore be seen as distinct from the news images produced by the longstanding practices of photojournalism. They are different kinds of text, that make different kinds of meanings, in different ways.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features and functions</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>carry aesthetic value</td>
<td>Caple (2007, in press)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perlmutter (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tied to a specific event, or the ‘here and now’ of a story</td>
<td>Trivundza (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provide ‘evidence’ for the events reported</td>
<td>Barthes (1977)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Griffin (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hall (1981)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Huxford (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Machin &amp; Niblock (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schwartz (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wardle (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zelizer (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provide ‘evidence’ that the newspaper was ‘at the scene’</td>
<td>Barnhurst &amp; Nerone (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>capture the ‘critical moment’</td>
<td>Barnhurst &amp; Nerone (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caple (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perlmutter (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tell a story</td>
<td>Barnhurst &amp; Nerone (2001)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 8.6: Some typical features and functions of photojournalistic images not shared by thumbnails*
8.4.2 Historical perspective II: Typography

Language has been written for at least 5,500 years (Crystal, 1987; Halliday, 1985b), and emerged from a functional need to retain a record of linguistic communication (a need not met by speech) as human groups began to settle in permanent locations (Halliday, 1985b).

There was ... a resource ready to hand: people had been making visual images for tens or hundreds of generations, so it was natural to exploit this ability and map the visual representations on to language. This enabled language to satisfy a new range of functional demands. (Halliday, 1985b, pp. 39-40)

The writing systems which emerged in different geographical and cultural locations around the world took different paths, but over millennia, each evolved from language being encoded in images, to being encoded in conventional symbols which bore increasingly less iconic resemblance to the linguistic meanings they signified (see Barnhurst, 1994; Halliday, 1985b; Lester, 2006).

Image and language had come together to produce writing, but have generally been considered separate semiotic systems. The history of decorated and illuminated manuscripts, however, provides us with evidence of the two working very closely together. Nordenfalk (1992, p. 1) discusses the manuscripts of Homer and Euripides, explaining how illustrations served a textual function, appearing at the beginning of each section of text and therefore, in the absence of page numbers and indices, orienting readers to (each section of) the text. He continues:

The function of the first cyclic illustrations of the Bible was probably similar [to the manuscripts of Homer and Euripides]. Whether placed in the text or, beside, in the margin, the illustrations (mostly simple drawings) served as a kind of pictorial rubrics [sic]. That would explain why in a later stage of the development we also find them collected, like a list of contents, at the beginning of the book, as, for example, in the oldest preserved illustrated codices of the Gospels. (Nordenfalk, 1992, p. 1; cf. Bland, 1958, p. 29)
Though they functioned in harmony, image and script were generally kept separate in Western manuscripts until the mid-seventh century. But around this time, the decorated initial emerged as a standard feature of illuminated manuscripts (Nordernfalk, 1992, pp. 78-9). The use of decorated initials - elaborately drawn initial letters integrating letter and decoration artistically - increased in the manuscripts of 11th century Western Europe, and by the 12th century, they had developed from decorated into ‘historiated’ initials, which incorporated illustrations in addition to decoration (Bland, 1958, pp. 55-57). “In the historiated initial text is intimately combined with illustration and the fusion of text, illustration and decoration is complete” (Bland, 1958, p. 57; cf. Alexander, 1978, p. 9).

Decorated and historiated initials continued to be used in manuscripts, until Gutenberg’s printing press in the 15th century signalled the demise of the manuscript and decorated letters (Alexander, 1978), and the birth of typography. It is worth noting though, that enlarged, decorated letters were used in the Gutenberg bible, and that these enlarged letters survive in a more conservative form in many current English-language newspapers, where feature articles (and sometimes their sections) are often introduced with an enlarged initial (see Lester, 2006).

In contrast to the artistic values which led to the decorated letter, precision, and even ‘invisibility’ have been considered the hallmarks of good typography, which has been viewed as a ‘vehicle’ for text, something which ‘carries’ the meaning from the writer to the reader in the cleanest, most efficient, and most unobtrusive way possible: “typography was considered a self-effacing art which should not get in the way of the words themselves” (van Leeuwen, 2005a, p. 27).
The most well-known challenge to the status quo in typography came in the early twentieth century with the Bahaus school.

Our age, with its very different aims, its often different ways and means and highly developed techniques, must dictate new and different visual forms. Though its significance remains undeniable, to think today that the Gutenberg Bible represents an achievement that can never again be reached is both naïve and romantic rubbish. (Tschichold, 2001, p. 116)

Tschichold and his contemporaries eliminated many of the variations typically found between letter forms, and in so doing fundamentally changed typography and won the ire of traditional typographers (Sandusky, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2006).

In the late twentieth century, the widespread use of personal computers and developments in word processing software put the tool of typography in the hands of almost anyone with a personal computer (van Leeuwen, 2005b). As isolated computers became increasingly networked at the turn of the twenty-first century and the world wide web continued its development, individuals and organisations used the web to achieve their social objectives in this new semiotic environment. This included online newspapers, who found in the web a medium well suited to many of their institutional imperatives (such as wide audience reach, and cheap, rapid delivery - see Boczkowski, 2004a).

The internet has transcended the boundaries of time and space in a way hitherto unseen, and new communities have formed and continue to develop, placing new demands on the semiotic resources of (for example) language, design, colour, image, video, sound, and music: stretching and testing their limits and the boundaries between them. These new forms of semiosis impact also upon typography.
Interactive media have introduced a new visual language, one that is no longer bound to traditional definitions of word and image, form and place. Typography, in an environment that offers such diverse riches, must redefine its goals, its purpose, its very identity. It must reinvent itself. And soon. (Hefland, 2001, p. 106)

The traditional boundaries of typography are being explored from a number of (trans-)disciplinary perspectives. Designers are pushing the visual boundaries of typography and blurring the distinction between image and word (Pescatore Frisk & van Middelkoop, 2005; van Leeuwen, 2006); similarly investigation into ‘kinetic typography’ explores how typographic movement interacts with the semiotic environment, and what this means for (and tells us about) evolving processes of communication (Hillner, 2005). More generally Crow (2005, p. 198) argues for an “undeniable pattern amongst young designers of using text-based software to enable image-based language systems”. These approaches are complemented by work being done in the field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) where research into graphical user interfaces and iconic communication can be seen as approaching the boundary between typography and icon/image from ‘the other direction’ (e.g. Yazdani & Barker, 2000).

In this environment, van Leeuwen (2006) argues that typography is advancing through a process of change. He points out that traditionally, typefaces have been seen to have their own irreducible character or identity, and are described and classified either on this basis and/or in historical terms (cf. Dabner, 2004; Lester, 2006, p. 139).

By providing a series of examples where typography is stretching its traditional limits, van Leeuwen provides evidence for Hefland’s assertion that:

We need to look at screen-based typography as a new language, with its own grammar, its own syntax, and its own rules. What we need are new and better
models that go beyond language or typography *per se*, and that reinforce rather than restrict our understanding of what it is to design with electronic media. (Helfand, 2001, p. 107)

Further, van Leeuwen looks at the distinctive features of typography (such as *weight*, *slope*, and *curvature*), and organises these into a system network of paradigmatic oppositions, which “opens up a potential for ‘grammar’, for formulating syntagmatic rules, rules of inclusion (‘both…and’) and exclusion (‘either…or’)’” (van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 153; cf. Crystal, 1998).

The significance of van Leeuwen’s (2006) paper for the argument presented here is as follows. Typography has developed to the point where the visual potential of type (once pushed to the edge of image in the decorated and historiated initials of illuminated manuscripts) is once again expanding. It is now possible (and even necessary according to many working in the field) to model it as a mode with its own grammar (i.e. meaningful structural elements and combinations) and therefore potential to make meaning in ways not possible since the rise of the printing press.

This ‘opening up’ of the possibilities of typography is in direct contrast to the emergence of thumbnail images on home pages, where the meaningful choices possible in news images have, in the thumbnail, been narrowed to the point where they construe the “irreducible character or identity” of one of the participants in a newsbite. These two trajectories then, news photography and new typography, appear to be converging, but from different directions.
8.4.3 Historical perspective III: Punctuation

As language expanded to perform new functions in the written mode, inevitably written and spoken language came to differ. These two modes are suited to different contexts and different purposes, but despite this:

> the omission of prosodic features from written language is, in some respects and under certain circumstances, a genuine deficiency. There is, on the other hand, a device that is used in order to partially overcome this deficiency; this is the device of punctuation. (Halliday, 1985b, p. 32)

Halliday argues that, beginning with Greek alphabetic writing, punctuation evolved over centuries to serve a number of functions (see also Robertson, 1969). In historical sequence, these began with boundary markers (initially to indicate pauses when reading texts aloud) such as the current full stop, comma, and colon. Subsequently, marks denoting pauses came also to contrast with other status markers which evolved to indicate questions, where information is demanded (the current question mark, dating to the 8th century - Parkes, 1992); and a number of speech functions all marked currently by an exclamation mark (dating to the 14th century - Parkes, 1992) including exchanges of goods and services (e.g. commands, offers), expression of attitude (exclamations), or establishing social contact (calls and greetings - Halliday, 1985b). These can all be opposed to statements where information is given (marked with a full stop - see also Crystal, 1987; Robertson, 1969; Salmon, 1992).  

As with the development of orthography, the long process of codification and standardisation of English punctuation was intensified with the technology of the printing press (Parkes, 1992; Salmon, 1992). Attempts to codify punctuation in

---

82 Of course there were other developments in punctuation not discussed here, such as the development of the semi-colon, parentheses, and quotation marks.
English date back at least to the 16th century (Salmon, 1992), and by the 17th or 18th century most of the conventions we recognise today in English punctuation were fairly well established (Robertson, 1969; Salmon, 1992).

But at 11:44am on September 19, 1982, a new technology, a new social context, and a new form of communication had led to new demands being placed on English. In an electronic bulletin board discussion on how to designate humour in online fora, Professor Scott E. Fahlman suggested the key stroke sequence colon + dash + close-parentheses, i.e. :-) be used “to denote comments meant to be taken lightly” (Digital smiley, 2007).83 This represents an important development in punctuation, as the emotional attitude of a writer in relation to an extended stretch of written text could be encoded, and the use of such emoticons in computer-mediated communication has now been studied from a variety of perspectives in a range of settings (e.g. Kim et al., 2007; Krohn, 2004; Nastri et al., 2006; Walther & D’Addario, 2001; Westbrook, 2007; Witmer & Katzman, 1997).

In the broader history of punctuation, the emergence of emoticons can be seen as a continuation of a long process.

Punctuation was developed by stages which coincided with changing patterns of literacy, whereby new generations of readers in different historical situations imposed new demands on the written medium itself. In order to perform new functions symbols from different systems of aids to the reader, including annotation marks as well as features of layout and display, were gradually combined into a general repertory of punctuation, which came to be accepted everywhere. (Parkes, 1992, p. 2)

83 Wikipedia (Emoticon, 2007) traces the history of emoticons to the 19th century.
Thus, over centuries, punctuation has evolved in the visual resources it deploys, and the meanings it can convey, from ‘pointing’ textual boundaries, to indicating more interpersonal meanings such as speech functions and attitude (Figure 8.13).

![Diagram of punctuation evolution]

**Figure 8.13: Truncated visual summary of the evolution of punctuation**

On a much shorter timescale, since the introduction of the smiley emoticon, the potential to punctuate attitude and emotion has expanded, and a wide range of keystroke sequences - some language-specific and some more universal - now exist as emoticons (Nishimura, 2003). Further, the affordances of computer-mediated communication have led to the use of icons in place of keystrokes. It is now common in online communication environments (e.g. IRC, web fora), email software packages, and word processing software packages, that keystroke sequences typically used to

![Examples of emoticons]

**Figure 8.14: Examples of emoticons which can be automatically generated from keystrokes (originals of bottom row in colour)**
denote an emoticon can be automatically converted into icons such as those in Figure 8.14.

In fact, there are now thousands (perhaps hundreds of thousands) of icons freely available on the internet which can be directly inserted into messages. These not only provide a greater array of possible attitudinal expression (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005), but at the same time exploit the affordances of colour, visual art, animation, and even photography to allow writers to express and/or construct (aspects of) identity such as gender and appearance (Figure 8.15), to the point where we are now witnessing an expansion in the meaning potential of punctuation (in the potential to express interpersonal meanings) unlike anything seen in the history of writing.

*Figure 8.15: Examples of emoticons construing attitude and identity (originals in colour)*

The trajectory for interpersonal punctuation as charted in this section begins with boundary marking, moves to punctuating speech function, and then to punctuating attitude and identity. At the same time, the prosody of punctuation spans (potentially) longer stretches of text, with the punctuation of attitude and identity through emoticons now able to spread over entire messages.

---

84 The animation of these emoticons is not possible to demonstrate in a static document. All emoticons downloaded freely from: [http://www.msnhiddenemoticons.com/](http://www.msnhiddenemoticons.com/)
The textual and social developments in punctuation in many ways parallel those in the development of the new typography. Written communication in CMC environments is exploiting the imagic potential of writing in ways which were not technically feasible on the printed page, and were not socially necessary in the communicative contexts most readily mediated by the printed page. In using ‘the new punctuation’ of emoticons, writers are able to punctuate their texts in ways not formerly possible, and therefore to mean in ways not formerly possible. And in the process, the boundaries of image and language are fundamentally challenged.

8.4.4 Thumbnails: Convergence of image and language

The argument of this section is that the three semiotic trajectories charted above - news image, typography, and punctuation - converge in the thumbnail images used on the home page of the SMH, and therefore that image and language converge. According to Halliday, writing “evolved from the coming together of two independent semiotic systems: language, on the one hand, and visual imagery on the other. Writing begins when pictures are interpreted in language” (1985b, p. 14, emphasis in original). This suggests, then, that in order to sustain an argument that the thumbnails on the SMH home page straddle the boundaries of image and language, they must be shown to realise some aspect of the system of language, or perform some linguistic function.

There are two specific elements of the system of language that these images construe, and these are discussed in section 8.3 above. First, thumbnails on the SMH home page function as Hyper-Theme in newsbites. And second, they function as punctuation on the SMH home page.
In the previous section, it was mentioned that Martin (2002), Economou (2006), and Caple (2008) identify images which function as interpersonal Hyper-Theme. This raises a key question. If other images can function as Hyper-Theme, why interpret thumbnails on the SMH home page as language? Why are they not images functioning as Hyper-Theme?

The homepage of the SMH is unlike the texts discussed by Martin, Economou, and Caple in a number of important ways. As a webpage, the SMH home page uses typographic features such as font-size, -colour, and -type in ways not afforded by the (predominately) black-and-white printed page. Individual texts on the home page are much shorter, and the verbiage is much more fragmented than the extended discussion and argumentation in the Bringing them Home report and in the news features described by Economou. Similarly, while the images in the report analysed by Martin and the news texts analysed by Economou and Caple are large and visually dominant on the page, the thumbnail images on the SMH home page are of such a small size that they are on the same scale as the text in the headlines with which they appear. Visually, they are embedded within their newsbites rather than standing separately from them or dominating them, suggesting that they are related in a way that larger images and accompanying text are not. For instance, the Lures in other newsbites on the SMH home page feature close-up shots of faces as regularly as the thumbnails in hard-news newsbites (section 8.2 above), but they have the potential to construe meaning in ways that thumbnails cannot do effectively. Thumbnail images are paradigmatically different from larger images (see the introduction to this section, 8.4).
Historically, typography and punctuation have developed along with the semiotic environments they have come to inhabit. In CMC environments, we find typography occupying new domains of meaning, and visual icons (emoticons) which perform linguistic functions. At the same time, in the new genre of the online newspaper, and specifically on the home page of the *SMH*, we find small images on the scale of print, which function differently from the way press photographs have functioned over the last 100 years (as explained in the previous section). This raises a question: has the meaning potential of the news image contracted, or has the meaning potential of typography expanded? The crossing of the commonsense boundary between image and text has historical precedent (e.g. in the very beginnings of writing, in the use of images as tables of contents in ancient manuscripts, and in historiated initials as discussed above). From this perspective, like the new typography, like emoticons, and like mathematical symbolism (O’Halloran, 2005, 2008), the thumbnails on the home page of the *SMH*, appear to be a challenge to notions of where language ends, and where images begin.

**8.4.5 Thumbnails as language: Conclusion**

In summary, when viewed as images from a photojournalistic perspective, the hard-news thumbnail images on the home page of the *SMH* represent a reduction in the potential of image, and a departure from many of the valued functions of journalistic images. These thumbnails, in their specific discursive environment, instantiate paradigmatic choices from linguistic systems, whereas their paradigmatic possibilities in relation to image systems are very limited. When viewed from other historical perspectives, they parallel the use of decorated and historiated initials in illuminated
manuscripts, and the emerging and expanding practices of typography and punctuation in new media. And when viewed from a functional perspective, they perform the textual function of bulleting, and the interpersonal function of Hyper-Theme, suggesting we can view these thumbnails as an expanded graphology of the home page, i.e. as language, rather than image.

8.5 Images: Conclusion

The home pages of all three newspapers in the corpus of this study use images, though the ways in which they use them vary. The BKP uses no images at all in BKP Periods I-III, and then only one relatively large image on the Head of the page in BKP Period IV. The PD uses a large image in the Head of the home page in both PD Periods I and II, and also thumbnails in PD Period II. The SMH demonstrates a much greater use of image on its home page than the other two newspapers, with thumbnails and larger images used extensively.

The large images used on all three newspapers’ home pages have similarities with news images used in print newspapers, though further research comparing such images in print and online newspapers (and especially on print front pages and online newspaper home pages) using the analytical tools of SF theory may indicate differences in the kinds of image used in these different media. Other areas deserving of attention and not covered here include the use of images on story pages, and also emerging image-based genres which are now commonplace in online newspapers, such as image galleries and slide shows.
The thumbnails in hard news stories on the home page of the *SMH* online represent a kind of visual discourse quite different from the historical use of images in hard news in print newspapers. These differences can be explained in part by technological and institutional factors relevant to the authoring of these images. But when analysed more closely, and considered in light of historical trends in typography and punctuation, thumbnail images can be seen as an instance of expansion of meaning on the expression plane of language, rather than a contraction of meaning on the content plane of image.

The discussion of thumbnail images in this chapter concentrates on the home page of the *SMH*, and the claims are not intended to be generalisable to all online newspapers, nor to websites in general, nor to thumbnail images in general. What is observed here is an instance of the rapid and varied evolution of semiosis in new media, one of the many form/function conflations that has rapidly appeared in online newspapers and elsewhere on the world wide web. Such configurations will continue to emerge and evolve, and some will fall by the wayside as new genres such as online newspapers evolve and adapt to their rapidly changing institutional and discursive environments.