

12 Multi-semiotic Communication in an Australian Broadsheet: A New News Story Genre

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INTRODUCTION¹

In exploring the rhetoric of science, Miller (1992) introduced the notion of “kairos” (often translated as “the right time” [p. 312]) as the critical occasion for decision or action. But kairos also has a spatial dimension with the notion of “opening” or “opportunity” being at its heart, thus giving us the notion of being in the right place at the right time. An organisation that I believe has in recent years recognised one such critical occasion, thus showing a clear understanding of the business of news dissemination, has been Fairfax Media Limited, a newspaper company that publishes *The Sydney Morning Herald* in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. There is no doubting the fact that the newspaper industry is in decline. Circulation has been falling all around the world, including Australia (Who Killed The Newspaper?, 2006), and the steady uptake of online consumption of news, especially among the younger generations, is hastening this decline. However, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (hereafter *SMH*) appears to have anticipated these changing winds through their strategic manipulation of the news story genre to now include news stories that rely heavily on visual stimulation. By this I mean that they now publish news stories that make use of a dominant news photograph with a heading and only a short caption. This new genre is termed the “image-nuclear news story” (Caple, 2008). As complete and independent texts in themselves, such news stories differ both in their function and structure from other more traditionally presented news stories. In fact, this new genre appears to be very much like the “newsbites” (p. 20) in the online version of *SMH*, as described by John Knox (2007) in his research into visual-verbal communication on online newspaper home pages. He describes newsbites as

operating as independent texts in their unique cotextual environment to construe actors and events according to the institutional goals and ideologies of the newspaper . . . newsbites function to highlight the stories valued by the institution of the newspaper as most important on a given day. Their social purpose is to present

the focal point of a news story with immediacy and impact. They afford the institutional authors of the newspaper the means by which to visually evaluate stories in terms of their comparative importance (including by size, relative positioning, headline font size and colour and inclusion of optional structural elements such as images), and are designed to attract readers to navigate to story pages in order to access longer (and/or modally different) versions of the “same” story. (Knox, 2007, p. 26)

Like newsbites then, image-nuclear news stories do also reflect the ideological position of the news organisation towards the stories and how they are valued as news. Unlike newsbites, though, image-nuclear news stories are independent stories in themselves and do not point to other news stories elsewhere in the newspaper. Thus, along with other design changes in the newspaper as a whole, *SMH* has demonstrated the rhetorical savvy necessary to position their newspaper within this new media field. At the same time, *SMH* has used this new news story genre to express cultural and social solidarity with its readers; a solidarity that *SMH* is exploiting to ensure that circulation figures are maintained.

In this paper I shall firstly outline the genesis of image-nuclear news stories and then explore how this news story genre has helped to provide *SMH* with a means of retaining an interested and stimulated reading public.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE NEWS STORY GENRE

It is a commonly held belief within socio-cognitive theories of genre that genres are sites of contention between stability and change (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). One such site of contention is the news story genre. During the last two centuries the newspaper industry has witnessed remarkable social and technological changes that have had an enormous impact upon how and what is disseminated as news to the public. In the 1920s, radio was predicted to decimate the circulation of newspapers, and then in the 1950s it was the turn of the television to kill off both radio and newspapers. Yet all three media platforms have prospered, albeit in somewhat more specialised roles, and have continued into the 21st century where they have been joined by the digital revolution and the rise of the internet. At the same time, the news story genre has evolved and has been shaped to better serve the needs of the contexts in which it is consumed.

The constant in the news story genre is the fact that it has existed since the inception of Australian newspapers and has always served the basic purpose of informing the reading public of the major happenings within a particular society. The change has been seen not only in the text stages and language features

of the news story genre, but also in the way that the story engages the reader interpersonally. In this section I shall briefly review the evolution of the news story genre in relation to one Australian broadsheet newspaper, *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

Since its inception in 1831, *SMH* has made use of the news story. At that time the generic structure resembled the narrative story structure, with the crisis event and orientation as macro-Theme coming at the beginning of the story, followed by a sequence of events that eventually led to the resolution of the event as a form of closure. The social purpose of these early news stories appeared to be to inform the reading public of the major events happening in the community. Thus, such stories were firmly entrenched in the ideational content, where the narrativisation of the event was driven by causation and temporality.

In the middle of the 19th century, the telegraph gave us the ability to electronically transmit the news around the globe. Because this was initially a somewhat unreliable technology, the telegraph forced journalists to re-order the information they gave over the wire so that the crux of the story could be gained before the transmission broke down. This ensured that the main idea of the story was captured. The details could be filled in later. However, whether or not this had a direct impact on the generic structure of the news story in newsprint is an area that is still contested today (see Pöttker, 2003). Nevertheless, changes in the news story structure were certainly occurring, especially towards the end of the century.

In the case of Australian news reporting, it was not until the end of the 19th century that the hard news story genre became entrenched as a distinct news story genre (Iedema, Feez, & White, 1994). Within the academic discipline of Journalism Studies, this news story structure is described as the inverted pyramid structure (Bell, 1991; Pöttker, 2003; Fulton, Huisman, Murphet, & Dunn, 2005; Conley & Lamble, 2006). Within Systemic Functional Linguistic circles, however, the hard news story structure is described as an orbital structure, centred on the notion of the nucleus^satellite structure (Iedema, Feez, & White, 1994; Iedema, 1997; White, 1997). It is the latter of these two perspectives that I shall focus on in this paper.

In the hard news story genre events are nuclearised and logical relations are disrupted (Iedema, 1997; White, 1997). The laying out of events leading up to the crisis point becomes more optional in the story, meaning that causation and temporality become less important organising principles. Rather, the news story now centres on a crisis point established in the headline and lead² (the nucleus), which then becomes the platform from which we leap into the remainder of the story. As Barnhurst and Nerone (2001) point out, headlines no longer functioned as titles or labels directing readers to the stories on the page, rather they

became a “pointed summary of the news” (p. 198), carrying “deeply embedded codes of news values and cultural values . . . ranging from the unusual and the timely to the powerful and the moral” (p. 198). Thus for the most part, the nucleus works to direct the reader towards the news values underpinning the inclusion of that story in the news, which also reflects the ideological positioning of the newspaper towards the events being covered. It is, then, the nucleus that attracts the reader into the story, and readers are now hooked into the story through the amplification of the ideational content.

Iedema, Feez and White (1994) also draw a distinction between news story types in that they describe both the hard news story and the soft news story. Soft news stories tend to deal in events that have a re-stabilising focus. They also make a distinction between different types of soft news story, depending on their social purpose. Media Exemplum is mainly concerned with exemplifying social and moral values; Media Anecdote with remarkable or unusual events that may challenge our sense of expectation; and Media Observation, with stories which record the passing of time, or events that reflect the established social order (Iedema et al., 1994).

Berkenkotter & Huckin (1995) make the assertion that all acts of communication necessarily build on prior texts and that “no act of communication springs out of nothing” (p. 17). As far as the news story genre is concerned, I believe that it is out of both of these generic histories mentioned above that a new news story genre has evolved, one that exploits the functional structure of the hard news story and that also incorporates the social purpose of the soft news story, Media Observation in particular. In the year 2000, *SMH* underwent a major redesign. More white spaces between news stories were introduced, captions were sometimes moved to the sides of photographs, rather than underneath them and in general, larger more aesthetically motivated photographs were used. It is after this redesign that a particular kind of story started to emerge and began to develop a unique social purpose of its own. A greater number of large photographs were to be seen on news pages, sometimes taking up three quarters of the page, with a short caption under the picture or to the side of the picture. The following story, for example, appeared on page 8 of *SMH* on August 4th, 2003 (see Figure 1 and Appendix 1).



FIGURE 1: SYDNEY MORNING HERALD, 04/08/2003, P. 8

The caption reads:

Just necking . . . mother giraffe Shani stands over her newborn calf Shaba, at San Diego Wild Animal Park. The park in southern California is home to two sub-species of giraffe, the reticulated giraffe and the baringo giraffe. Shaba is the 87th baringo giraffe to be born in the park.

This would be viewed as a fairly standard Media Observation, where the story is told through a salient, aesthetically motivated image and a caption that expands upon the story/event described. However, at the start of the caption there is a short, witty phrase “*Just necking . . .*” that is separated from the rest of the caption through the use of ellipsis. Here, the more common phrase “just checking” has been manipulated and as a result enters into a playful relationship with the image participants and the posture of the giraffes. So we could read the playful meaning in the extended neck of the mother giraffe or we could also read the protective gesture implied in “just checking” as the mother watches over her calf.

By 2004, the short abstraction that appeared at the beginning of the caption had moved to the position of heading³ above the image and the font type, condensed interstate—a sans serif font used for the heading—became unique to these stories⁴. Figure 2, a story from page 11 of *SMH* on June 24th, 2004 (see Appendix 2), clearly exemplifies the changes now evident in such stories.



FIGURE 2: SYDNEY MORNING HERALD, 24/06/2004, P. 11

Since June 2004, I have systematically collected all image-nuclear news stories that have appeared in *SMH*, and my corpus currently stands at 1000 analysed stories. In the twelve months between June 2004 and June 2005 480 stories were presented as image-nuclear news stories. The average per month during this period was 40, with March 2005 having the highest number in any single month, which was 61. This meant that each day's edition had on average two such stories on the news pages. Of the 480 stories, 473 (98.5 per cent) made use of the heading and of those headings 440 (93 per cent) included an element of play between the heading and the image. It is to this notion of play that I would now like to turn.

What is noticeable in these stories is the relationship that developed between the heading and the photograph. The majority of the headings in image-nuclear news stories (95 per cent of the total number of 1000 in the corpus) rely on the manipulation of common idiomatic expressions to fit the content of the photograph, as in the example in Figure 2. In this photograph we see a very large sculpture of the hand and arm of Chairman Mao, and a woman standing beneath the sculpture looking up towards the hand, giving us an idea of the size of this artwork. In using the heading "*Give the lady a big hand*" the author of this text has also availed himself of the literal meaning of the words used in this idiom. This interplay between the literal and the figurative has the effect of creating quite a humorous relationship between the verbiage and the image. Such play between image and heading can also extend to all manner of intertextual references, including cultural allusions, that the creators of the stories expect their readers to know and be able to decode.

What has also been an interesting development with this genre has been the kinds of events that have been portrayed in this playful manner. More and more stories dealing with essentially destabilising hard news events have also been

presented in this format. In the total corpus, 14 per cent of the stories are what I would traditionally term hard news stories. In fact, many of these were also reported in other newspapers published in the same metropolitan area using the more traditional news story structure, centred on a verbiage nucleus between the headline and lead. Of that 14 per cent of hard news stories in my corpus, 77.8 per cent include a playful relationship between the heading and image. Figure 3 is an example of one such story (see Appendix 3).

In the story in Figure 3, the heading makes reference to the sporting discourse of swimming, manipulating technical terminology such as (swimming) coach, the swim stroke front crawl and the marking out of the swimming pool into lanes, with the middle lane usually being the lane that the fastest swimmer will swim from in a competition. There is also another meaning that can be drawn from this heading and image in that given the dangerous conditions portrayed, the bus probably is driving along quite slowly. Thus we can also infer that the bus is carefully “crawling” along the street. The tone set up between heading and image is one established in play and humour. The caption, however, does not reflect this tone at all, and quickly moves into the destabilising nature of this event and the death and destruction that came with it. The caption reads:



FIGURE 3: SYDNEY MORNING HERALD, 26/08/2004, P. 16

A bus eases its way along a Manila road flooded by monsoon rains that closed schools and offices in the Philippine capital yesterday. Elsewhere in the region, Typhoon Aere brought floods and landslides to northern

Taiwan, where thousands were forced to flee their homes. Mudslides buried a church in the county of Hsinchu, killing a man and his daughter and leaving four others missing. Another four were washed away by floods in central Taiwan.

There is certainly nothing humorous about the events being described in this caption. Thus, the initial stance towards the story established in the heading and image stands in stark contrast to the actual events being described in the caption. This relationship will be dealt with more fully in the next section.

In this manner, then, I believe that *SMH* has developed a new news story genre over the past six or seven years and, as a reader of *SMH*, I feel that I have been guided through a period of enculturation into the genre. It started out as the increased use of striking and somewhat aesthetically motivated images that dealt primarily with soft news events. Then with the playful abstraction at the beginning of the caption moving to the position of heading, a much closer relationship between the heading and image was established. Finally, having been apprenticed into this special playfulness, what was initially reserved for soft news events was also applied to hard news events; such stories began appearing from July 2004 onwards.

If we examine the functional structure of this news story, we can see how I came to term this new news story genre the image-nuclear news story. It is a news story in which the heading and image usually combine in a playful manner, in that the heading often manipulates common idiomatic expressions in a way that enables the reader to decode the layers of meaning through the image, the verbiage or through both. Then the caption elaborates on the news value behind the story. By foregrounding this relationship between the heading and the image, in what I am calling the nucleus, this new news story genre generates a playful stance towards the event that has important implications for the interpersonal management of the text. This is because of the evaluative stance it establishes towards the news event. (Figure 4 shows the generic structure of an image-nuclear news story.) Furthermore, by deliberately manipulating the discourse, the newspaper is assuming knowledge on the part of the reader of the cultural allusions of the idioms, which in turn, enables the newspaper to express cultural and social solidarity with the readers.

HOW INTERTEXTUALITY BREEDS SOLIDARITY

The organising principle of the image-nuclear news story is that the nucleus establishes a playful orientation to the event being reported. In my corpus of 1000 image nuclear news stories, 95 per cent of them enter into a verbal-visual play in the nucleus. The photograph and the heading work together to draw out



FIGURE 4: FUNCTIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE IMAGE-NUCLEAR NEWS STORY

intertextual references that not only draw on the reader's knowledge of idioms but also call for a wide-ranging cultural and world knowledge to unpack the play not only in the verbiage but also in the image. It is to this playful relationship that we turn in this section and to how this nuclear function helps to build a community with the readers of the newspaper.

According to Chang (2004), an idiom is a “conventionalised multiword expression whose syntactic, lexical and phonological form is to a greater or lesser degree fixed, and whose semantics and discoursal functions are opaque or specialised, also to a greater or lesser degree” (Chang, 2004, p. 9). His definition also covers cultural allusions which may appear in the form of quotations, catch phrases, slogans and proverbs that are instantly recognisable within a particular cultural context. It is these idiomatic expressions making direct cultural allusions that have important implications in the interpersonal management of image-nuclear news stories.

By deliberately manipulating such idioms for stylistic effects to fit the context in which they are used, the text producer is, then, assuming that the reader has knowledge of the cultural allusions of the idioms. Thus, it is a certain kind of reader—one that has extensive cultural, general and linguistic knowledge and is able to engage with the multiple layers of play and meaning potential in these texts—that *SMH* is attempting to attract. As McCarthy states, “idioms are communal tokens that enable speakers to express cultural and social solidarity” (1998, p. 145, cited in Chang, 2004, p. 76). Punning or wordplay serves to membership the readers into “belonging to a community with shared linguistic and cultural values” (Grauberg, 1989, cited in Chang, 2004, p. 105). Of course,

an important effect of being able to form such a community of readers is that *SMH* can then articulate quite accurately the demographic that is its readership to advertisers.

Another important effect of this manipulation of heading and image is that *SMH* can use this playful stance towards the story to establish the newspaper's ideological or evaluative stance towards the news, one that it expects the readers to share. By invoking both the literal and metaphorical meanings in the heading, the newspaper editors who write these stories hope to share with their readers this value-added re-reading of the heading, and it is through the sharing of this evaluation of the news and appreciation of the play that these two groups bond. This can be further argued from the point of view that the nucleus, that is, the heading and image, in image-nuclear news stories can be construed as the hyper-Theme (Martin, 1993, 2001) of the whole text. The notion of hyper-Theme comes from the work of Martin (1993, 2001) in investigating how interpersonal meaning is negotiated in multimodal texts. Martin argues for a correlation between higher order Theme and New and evaluation and what is placed in the position of hyper-Theme establishes the method of development of the rest of the text, which he labels higher order interpersonal Theme. In the case of image-nuclear news stories, the hyper-Theme can be thought of interpersonally as well as textually because this textual peak of dominant image and playful heading at the front of the story affords the interpersonal. With this playful evaluation of the news dominating the first take on this story, we then view the rest of the story from this position of evaluative stance. Thus, as texture, the image and heading function as an evaluative Theme, naturalising the stance from which the ensuing verbiage can be read.

CONCLUSION

Newspapers along with magazines, radio and television have long been posited as the media of the public sphere (Habermas, 1974), a sphere which “mediates between society and state, in which the public organises itself as the bearer of public opinion” (p. 50). Indeed, newspapers are seen as the “bearers and leaders of public opinion” (Habermas, 1994, p. 53). Thus they carry enormous influence over how and what the public thinks. In *SMH*, a news story genre has emerged in which a news event is couched in an evaluative Theme that has strong implications for how that story should be read. It attracts a certain kind of reader, one who not only appreciates the aesthetic in good press photography, but also who wants to be challenged in the way that he/she reads the news. By introducing such news stories to the editorial pages, *SMH* has demonstrated great awareness of the potential of the internet and other media platforms to threaten its future. It is also a newspaper that realises the importance of main-

taining a loyal readership, one that can share in and can exchange with other readers this common approach to how the news is viewed. In the last three years, *SMH* has enjoyed increasing circulation (Fairfax Media, 2007), which is no mean feat given that newspapers across the world are in decline. Clearly, this is a newspaper that knows the essence of good timing.

NOTES

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² In the UK, this is known as the “intro”; in America and Australia, the lead.

³ I have used the term “heading” rather than “headline” to distinguish this news story genre from the other more established news story genres.

⁴ In more recent times, however, this font has also been used for other headlines, in particular in sub-headlines on other stories.

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