

Theorizing Text or Practice in the New Media Age

Susan Yell [Communication and Writing, Monash University]

Introduction: The Text/Medium Debate

The field of media and communication studies is in the process of transforming itself, largely in response to the emergence of new domains of research – those focussing on ‘new’ media of all kinds. David Holmes (2005: x-xi) argues that the emergence of these new post-broadcast and interactive forms of communication are forcing a re-evaluation and re-invigoration of the study of both broadcast and network media ‘in terms of medium or network form rather than simply content or “text”’. Holmes claims that the field has been characterised by a split between a focus on questions of textuality, semiotics, content and representation versus questions of the ‘actual structures of communication mediums (network and broadcast)’ (2005: 5). Contrasting linguistically influenced approaches to ‘media studies’, including Marxist informed ideology critique, New Criticism, semiotics and deconstruction, with more medium-focused work of scholars such as Marshall McLuhan and Guy Debord, he argues that since the 1970s the former have dominated over the latter (2005: 5-6). With the advent of the internet, and its rapid growth in the 1990s, there is a need to refocus on the social implications of communication mediums and networks, in not only disseminating ‘representations’ but in integrating individuals into a community (Holmes, 2005: 5; cf. Carey, 1988). New media have therefore provided the impetus for a re-evaluation of the role of textually-oriented versus medium-oriented approaches.

While acknowledging the study of media content remains relevant, Holmes calls for a renewed focus on ‘how technological infrastructures of communication ... need to be examined for an understanding of forms of connection, social integration and community’ (2005: 6). Central to his argument is the split between text and medium, a split which also manifests across a great deal of writing in communications, and which is variously expressed in terms such as content versus form, or representation versus interaction, or even signification versus information. While drawing attention to what he sees as a historical imbalance in the attention paid to content and representations in traditional media and communication studies, Holmes argues strongly for an integrated approach, in which researchers attend both to the texts and meanings, on the one hand, and on the other, the mediums and networks within and through which texts are circulated and communicative interactions take place.

Tiziana Terranova, writing on the cultural politics of information, makes a similar distinction. Postmodern theory, she points out, has analysed the culture of late capitalism as a culture of ‘floating signifiers’, in which all culture is commodity culture, ‘an industry of signification drowning in a sea of semi-random noise’ (2004: 52). However, such an analysis is difficult to reconcile with the persistence of a cultural politics in which signifiers are attached to socially segmented identities, and communication is structured around patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Drawing on the work of Manuel Castells, Terranova argues that a disturbing aspect of contemporary culture is the characteristic dynamic between ‘the power of the “space of flows” over the solidity of the “space of places”’ (2004: 52).

Here it is not so much a question of meanings that are encoded and decoded in texts but a question of inclusion and exclusion, connection and disconnection, of informational warfare, and new forms of knowledge and power ... that address not so much the play of meaning but the overall dynamics of an open informational milieu. (2004: 52).

In particular, Terranova claims, contemporary (late capitalist) culture is characterised by a new informational environment in which ‘the dynamics of information take precedence over those of signification’ (2004: 55).

Like Holmes, then, Terranova is arguing for a greater focus on the networks and mediums of communication, rather than texts and the significations of those texts. Or rather, both are arguing that communication theory, having developed an extensive repertoire of tools for the analysis of meanings (semiotics, discourse analysis, psychoanalysis and deconstruction), now needs to engage with the ‘dynamics of information diffusion’ (Terranova, 2004: 54) and the ‘socio-technical dimensions of media environments’ (Holmes, 2005: 7) in the new media and information age.

Both Holmes and Terranova are drawing attention to the large and ever-expanding field of network and technology theory, which encompasses the socio-technical aspects of communication, cybernetic theories of information, and the relations between society, the human and technology.¹ It is important to ask what place the concept of text may have in a theory of the networked society. Do such theories retain a place for the text? Can a re-configured concept of ‘text’ play a role in re-aligning cybernetic models with

their emphasis on information over meaning? Should 'text' within a networked theory of communication be understood as one nodal point among others, or as an information flow? Can 'the text' be part of the move to reformulate information flows in relation to affect, materiality and embodiment? While these are important questions, and interrogating the role of 'the text' in relation to the work of the technology theorists is a valuable task, it is beyond the scope of this particular paper. Instead, my more modest aim is to begin by examining those theorists of new media who explicitly work with the concept of 'text'. In doing so, I hope to unsettle some of the more persistent yet unhelpful assumptions about what a text is, in order to shift 'text' towards the concept of 'practice'. In this way I hope to lay the foundations for the further work of examining how text (as practice) can be situated in relation to medium and technology theories. In other words, I'm arguing that the concept of text remains an important focus for analysis. To collapse the notion of 'text' into a more general concept of information flows or networks elides the specificities and complexities that occur when something like 'text' is reconstructed within this new techno-social formation. Thus, I posit that, in the turn to medium-oriented technology theory, there is still a place for textually based research, but that in order to understand how the 'text' may relate to such theories, it is necessary to re-consider how the 'text' is (implicitly or explicitly) theorised.

Just as Holmes argues that the coming of the new media age has prompted a fresh consideration of 'medium', similarly I am making a parallel argument in relation to the concept of the 'text'; that is, that new forms of mediation enabled through the Internet, electronic mail, mobile telephony and digital communication technologies in general present challenges for still influential concepts of text and textuality. They invite a re-evaluation of the usefulness of particular concepts of the text as a unit of or basis for analysis. However, I am not implying that new media texts embody radically different characteristics to 'old media' texts, such that there is a clear ontological break or distinction which can be drawn. Rather, like Holmes' argument in relation to the second media age hypothesis, I am arguing that new media make more manifest and in Bolter and Grusin's terms 'remediate' the aspects of textuality and communicative practice that are nevertheless also discernible in old media forms (see Bolter and Grusin 1999). New media provide an opportunity to reiterate the rejection of the surprisingly persistent metaphor of the text as a container for content or representation.² This re-evaluation of the concept of the text is a necessary adjunct to the renewed attention to 'medium' in communication theory, in order to avoid the very logocentrism which risks being reinstated through the text-medium split.

In the following sections I will review the concepts of text stated or implied by two prominent new media

scholars. I will take a case study approach, referring to scholars who analyse new media with respect to their textuality, in order to indicate key trends in 'textual' approaches to new media. These studies (of hypertext, by Landow, and of new digital media, by Manovich), while outlining useful insights into how new media push at the boundaries of prior concepts of 'the text', also fall back on and in various ways reinstate limited and limiting concepts of the text. I will then outline several principles for a revised framework for theorising the text, and suggest how this framework can allow a closer integration of text-based and medium-oriented approaches to new media, through an understanding of text as practice.

New Media Research and Concepts of the Text

'New media' is a fluid category which encompasses a diverse spectrum of technologies and genres, from the ephemeral to the artefactual, from peer-to-peer interactive communication to centralised broadcast transmission, using mobile or fixed apparatuses of production and reception, and can incorporate any or all of verbal text, sound, print, graphics, and still and moving images.³ Claims made regarding the specific characteristics and consequences of new media depend on which new media are the object of analysis, and which disciplines inform the analytical framework. Table 1 indicates the diversity of approaches and per-

Object of analysis:	Analysed as:	Through the lens of:
Cyberspace/cyberculture (Bell 2001)	Cultural practice and cultural product	Cultural studies
Mobile telephony (Ling 2004, Katz & Aakus 2002)	Social practice	Sociology
Email, CMC, IRC (Baron 1998, Herring 1999, Werry 1996)	Language, verbal text	Linguistics
Hypertext (Landow 1992/1997) Cybertext (Aarseth 1997)	[New] textual form/s	Critical theory, literary theory
Information networks (Terranova 2004)	Information flows	Information theory, cultural theory
Comparison between new digital media and cinema (Manovich 2001)	New media objects, aesthetic texts	Media theory, software theory

[Table 1]

In this section, I will outline key arguments from Landow (1997) and Manovich (2001) regarding the distinctive features of new media texts. However, my purpose is not to register these as objective 'facts' about new media, but rather to examine, firstly, how these scholars' analyses of new media textuality problematise prior notions of the text, and secondly, the extent to

which their analysis of this problematisation reinstates particular notions of 'the text'. Their work illustrates the persistence of particular modes of thought regarding textuality, even where there is a commitment to searching for new metaphors and frameworks for understanding new media.

Hypertext has been identified as a new media form which challenges established concepts of the text. In his book *Hypertext 2.0*, George P. Landow argues 'hypertext radically changes the experiences that reading, writing and text signify' (1997: 57). Landow identifies a series of aspects of hypertext which problematise conventional notions of the text. These include hypertext's non-linearity (1997: 59), which is constituted through its linking into other texts (p.65), and its multiple beginnings and endings; and its looser, more porous boundaries, which 'destroy the notion of the fixed unitary text' (p.65). The writer's control over the text is diminished (p.64), while the reader 'can assume an authorial role by attaching links or adding material to the text being read' (p.57). Further, Landow claims that 'conventional notions of completion and a finished product do not apply to hypertext' (p.79). He invokes Derrida to suggest that hypertext exemplifies the Derridean notion of difference – the text as a network of traces 'referring endlessly to something other than itself' (p.79). This allows a decentering of the authority of the text, and changes the relation between 'the text' and its margins, intertexts and cited sources (pp.85-89). Thus hypertext 'moves the boundary of power away from the author in the direction of the reader' (p.89).

Landow's analysis identifies a number of characteristics which intuitively seem to apply to a range of new media forms:

- The difficulty of identifying the boundaries of the text;
- The problematising of linear narratives;
- The challenge to the notion that the text can be defined outside the act of reading;
- The collapse of the distinction between text production and text reception, and, in general;
- The rendering of the text as a slippery and unstable object.

Landow's contention is that hypertext exemplifies or foregrounds arguments regarding textuality, reading and writing made by critical theorists including Derrida, Bakhtin, Deleuze and Guattari, Barthes and Foucault. However, in describing hypertext as a 'post-modern, antihierarchical medium of information, text, philosophy and society' (p.89), it is worth pointing out that Landow is reading hypertext against the normative ground of the written text, and specifically the literary text.⁴ (A comparison with other kinds of print texts, such as magazines, or with spoken texts, might have suggested some points of similarity as well as

difference.) His analysis of hypertext as a radical new textual form is ultimately sustainable only by selecting the most iconic concept of the text as the measure of hypertext's difference; and in doing so he is re-instituting the same rigidities regarding 'the text' which are limiting a proper understanding of new media and indeed of textuality.

Lev Manovich, in his book *The Language of New Media* (2001), also interrogates the continuities and discontinuities between new and old media forms. Under the rubric of new media, Manovich includes web sites, virtual reality and virtual worlds, multimedia, computer games, interactive installations, computer animation, digital video and cinema, and human-computer interaction (2001: 8-9). For Manovich, the defining characteristic of the new media age is the 'shift of all culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution and communication' (p.19). Rather than focussing on some of the more commonly identified features attributed to new media (such as interactivity or hypermediacy), he suggests a different list of principles⁵ based on new media's status as computable data – 'graphics, moving images, sounds, shapes, spaces and [verbal] texts that have become computable' (p.20). In focussing on the 'language' of new media, Manovich identifies as his primary unit of analysis not the text but what he terms 'the new media object' (p.14). In doing so, he is seeking an inclusive term which encompasses commercial products, interactive media and new media art. While this term suits Manovich's analytical purposes, it has some problematic implications in thinking through the diversity of practices which can constitute 'new media'. In particular, it privileges a notion of text as product over text as process or practice. Informing Manovich's approach is his use of cinema theory and history, which serve as the 'key conceptual lens' (p.9) through which he analyses new media, along with print and the human-computer interface as complementary cultural traditions informing the development of new media.

Manovich's analysis of new media 'objects' proceeds through an interrogation of a series of oppositions between the concept of representation and various other terms, including simulation, control, action and communication. It is when discussing the opposition between representation and communication that Manovich most radically opens up the possibility of re-conceptualising new media in ways that do not privilege the text as (completed) product, and as a vehicle for representational meanings. Commenting on this opposition, he notes that:

Representational technologies allow for the creation of traditional aesthetic objects, that is, objects that are fixed in space or time and refer to some referent outside themselves. By foregrounding the importance of person-to-person telecommunication, and telecultural forms in

general that do not produce any new objects, new media force us to reconsider the traditional equation between culture and objects (2001: 17).

By representational technologies, Manovich means film, audio, video and digital storage formats. He opposes these to 'tele-technologies' or 'real-time communication technologies': telegraph, telephone, telex, television.⁶ Real-time telecommunication technologies enable what Manovich calls 'teleaction' (real-time communication, and action, at a distance), yet do not create any new media objects. This problematises a notion of new media textuality which relies on an aesthetic concept of the text. As Manovich rightly points out, an aesthetic paradigm has dominated thinking about the status of 'the text' (2001: 163). In support of this, he cites Barthes' influential article 'From Work to Text' (1997), in which Barthes describes a notion of text which anticipates the features of new media, yet still reverts to a classical notion of 'a reader "reading"', in the most general sense, something previously "written" (Manovich 2001: 163). Manovich goes on to raise a series of 'hard questions':

By foregrounding telecommunication, both real-time and asynchronous, as a fundamental cultural activity, the Internet asks us to reconsider the very paradigm of an aesthetic object. Is it necessary for the concept of the aesthetic to assume representation? Does art necessarily involve a finite object? Can telecommunication between users by itself be the subject of an aesthetic? Similarly, can the user's search for information be understood aesthetically? (2001: 163-164).

Despite his reflections on the problematic dominance of an aesthetic conception of the text, Manovich is reluctant to give up the very paradigm which is creating the difficulties. His discussion of telepresence and teleaction acknowledges the inflexibility of this paradigm, yet Manovich is not willing to abandon the aesthetic perspective in order to re-think the 'teleactive' dimensions of new media. His discussion of 'teleaction' and 'telepresence' instead focuses on those new media which he says combine real-time communication at a distance with 'representational technologies' (e.g. remotely operated web-cams, virtual reality, remote bombing) rather than telecommunicative actions such as making a phone call or engaging in internet chat. It should be apparent that Manovich's distinction between real-time communication technologies and representational technologies is actually not tenable as an opposition between representational and 'non-representational' technologies – what is elided here is a recognition that phone calls and internet chat are also 'representational'. Communication theory rather than aesthetic theory suggests a different analysis: it is their capacity for synchronous commu-

nication and the ephemerality of that communication which separates the two categories. While Manovich acknowledges the different communicative functions and relations enabled by 'tele-technologies', his main emphasis in theorising the language and textuality of new media remains on a reified notion of text (and of new media) as (aesthetic) object. However, his discussion of teleaction does have the benefit of foregrounding the limits of a concept of text as object and as representation. Returning to the questions posed by Manovich (see above), I would suggest an alternative series of questions, which would enable us to think through the problematics of new media textuality, in ways which also push at the boundaries of what is meant by 'text':

- Is it necessary for the concept of the text to assume the priority of representation?
- Does the text necessarily involve a finite object?
- Can telecommunication between users by itself be understood as a textual practice?
- Similarly, can the user's search for information be understood as a textual practice?

The implied answers to these questions would shift the notion of text so that it encompasses: texts whose primary function is social connection rather than representation (cf. Malinowski's 'phatic communion'); texts which are not readily defined by their 'boundedness' in space or time (IRC dialogue, email exchanges); and new media practices which don't necessarily have a durable form but which nevertheless are textually mediated actions (online gaming activity, database searches, mobile phone conversations).

An Alternative Framework: Text as Practice

One response to the kind of critique I have been mounting is that it is perfectly justifiable to reserve the term 'text' (defined as object, product, representation, etc.) for those new media forms which have 'text-like' characteristics, and to adopt a different analytical approach for the more 'processual' or socio-interactive new media forms. Thus, for example, there is a rapidly growing body of empirical and sociologically informed work in new media, particularly on the mobile phone (e.g. Beaton and Wajcman 2004, Katz and Aakhus 2002, Ling 2004, Plant 2001, Urry 2002). This work foregrounds the ritual and social functions of mobile telephony, and explores the social contexts, networks and relations enabled by the use of these technologies, and their integration into (or disruption of) social life. That is, it focuses on new media as social practices but doesn't analyse these practices as textually produced.

It could be argued that these alternative approaches, methods and perspectives (the textual and the sociological) are appropriately motivated and soundly based in relation to the object of study – that is, the

particular characteristics of the new media technology or new media genre. New media, according to this argument, can be situated along a continuum according to whether they have the characteristics of objects/products, or are more like actions/practices. From this perspective, hypertext, computer games and websites are analysable as 'texts' – cultural forms which consist of representations and which exist as relatively durable objects (and therefore can be stored). Towards the opposite pole of the continuum might be situated online chat and various forms of telephony, including SMS (texting), which are relatively ephemeral and which seem to lend themselves to analysis not as representations, but as processes which enable various kinds of social connection and interaction. Such a rationale supports a split in focus and approach within empirical work in the field of new media studies – a split which arguably parallels the text/medium division which Holmes (2005) laments in the field of communication studies more generally.

However, an orientation towards analysing technologies as object-like or process-like cannot be justified solely in terms of its putative appropriateness or relevance to the study of a particular new media category. Whether we are studying hypertext, computer games, blogging or mobile telephony, each of these genres involves users deploying a repertoire of images, graphics, sounds and/or print to perform a social act, and (incidentally or not) to produce a textual output. Where should the boundary then be drawn between new media object and new media practice? This kind of division between the textual and 'non-textual' uses of mediums, or between object and process, produces limited and limiting notions of text, medium and practice, as I will argue more fully below. (One consequence to note briefly here, is that the question of how particular new (or old) media are deployed by users as social practices is considered as a question of medium and bracketed off from the question of their textuality.)

An alternative is to reject the necessity of making such category-based distinctions, and to adopt the position that there is no necessary and absolute separation to be made between text and practice. However, rather than rejecting the concept of text altogether, or restricting its use to those phenomena which to the new media analyst might appear stereotypically 'text-like', we need to expand and re-conceptualise the concepts of text and textuality. In order to do so we can draw on some existing but neglected principles and formulations, taken from the philosophy of language and from socially oriented linguistics and semiotics.⁷ These paradigms (speech act theory, systemic-functional linguistics and social semiotics) are distinctive in their insistence on some key principles which avoid the limiting tendencies in the concepts of text critiqued in this paper. In particular, four principles can inform an alternative approach to theorising texts

and/as practice:

1. All communication acts have a performative aspect. That is, all communication not only means but does something to someone (Austin 1962);
2. Texts are always/already social and communicative practices (Halliday 1978, 1984);
3. (New media) text analysis demands both a synoptic and a dynamic perspective (Hodge & Kress 1988); and
4. Texts/practices are multifunctional, concurrently embodying/realising ideational, interpersonal and textual functions (Halliday 1978, 1985).

It is important to note that these principles are semi-otic rather than purely linguistic – that is, they apply not only to verbal sign systems but to any medium. The first three principles are closely related. While lip-service is regularly paid to the notion that texts are social acts of meaning making which take place in particular social and cultural contexts, the concept of 'text' and the practice of textual analysis often slip back into reified notions of text (as noted above). Social semioticians such as Hodge and Kress (1988) argue that classical structuralist semiotics has focussed on the sign system (in Saussure's terms, the *langue*) at the expense of *parole* (the actual performance of communication acts). Instead, for social semiotics the fundamental unit of meaning is not the sign but the text (Lee and Poynton 2000), and meaning making is both a social act/practice and a communicative process. According to social semiotics, a dual focus is thus required, viewing the text as product (a set of choices from available codes and systems – the synoptic view) and as process (an event unfolding in space and time – the dynamic view) (Hodge and Kress 1988: 264). In this perspective, the 'text' encompasses dynamic meaning-making practices and not merely the more-or-less durable output of those practices.

It could be argued, as noted above, that whether we see texts as synoptic or dynamic is contingent on the characteristics of the particular medium or technology, and that there is a continuum from 'product-like' (synoptic) to 'process-like' (dynamic) – that is, texts are either (more or less) synoptic or (more or less) dynamic. However, while there are useful comparisons to be made in these terms, both perspectives are necessary – the synoptic and the dynamic – for the analysis of new media. Indeed, the characteristics shared by most, if not all, new media (fluidity of boundaries, breakdown of the distinction between production and reception) necessitate both perspectives.⁸

The fourth principle, which social semiotics draws specifically from functional linguistics and the work of M.A.K Halliday, is the tenet that all acts of meaning making (i.e. textual practices) are multifunctional (see Halliday 1985, Halliday and Hasan 1985). That is, all texts combine the functions of encoding experience

or representing the world (the ideational function), and constructing and negotiating social relations (the interpersonal function). Both these functions are enabled by a third function, the textual function, which is how the textual practice is realised through the resources of a particular medium (Halliday and Hasan 1985). For example, in simple terms, and without engaging in the more technical aspects of systemic-functional analysis, a newspaper headline such as 'Government may give bird flu shots to all Australians' is performing three functions: representing a state of affairs in the world (what the government proposes to do about bird flu); positioning the newspaper's readership in a relation with that information, and more broadly with the newspaper (expressing the potential rather than definite status of the policy, interpellating the readership as 'all Australians'); and in using limited textual resources (written language, which according to the generic constraints of the newspaper headline must be brief and concise, and large, bold type, in a particular font size, indicating the ranking of the story in relation to other stories in the paper).

To apply these principles to a new media practice, a blog in which the blogger provides daily entries about their cat is representing (the ideational function) the minutiae of the cat's latest exploits, while simultaneously establishing a relationship (the interpersonal function) with their audience (expressing attitudes and emotions and eliciting an affective response, encoding intimacy through the disclosure of personal information, and potentially providing the basis for a potential ongoing connection where the blog is visited daily), and is doing all this by drawing on the textual resources available through the medium (linguistic and visual codes, technological features such as the ability for the blog's readers to post responses, the capacity to set up hotlinks, etc.). In this way we can understand the blog as text and as practice. We can avoid giving primacy either to the textual outputs of the blogger's activity (the format, the combination of images, words, links, etc.) or to their dynamic, 'teleactive' dimension, the changes to the blog over time, the types of social engagement or interaction which take place. Both aspects are interwoven, therefore demanding analytical perspectives that are likewise interwoven.

There are several advantages of adopting the framework outlined above. First, the framework explicitly builds in equal importance to the interpersonal and textual functions of communication, avoiding giving primacy to the representational function and thereby reducing textual analysis to a matter of 'content', re-invoking the transmission model of communication (see Carey 1988, Schirato and Yell 2000). Second, it enables uses of new media to be understood not as static acts but as dynamic processes and practices which are fluid, interactive and often jointly produced (e.g. SMS, chat), and which are about building and maintaining relations not just transmitting or retriev-

ing information. Third, it makes explicit the meaning potential of mediums, and the structural and material resources they make available for users to communicate and produce texts with. Analysis of meaning as 'representation' is incomplete without considering the choices users make in producing their messages – choices among mediums (email/SMS/voice) and within mediums (the language of texting, formal grammar and punctuation, use of emoticons, etc.).

Practice, Medium and Processual Perspectives

However, this is not to imply that the analysis of new media begins and ends with text considered as a localised practice. To this type of analysis at the local or micro level needs to be added a consideration of how the communication practices intersect with and are both shaped and enabled by wider contexts, networks and institutional relations. It is at this point that the concept of text as practice begins to interface with the concerns of medium-oriented approaches. One such approach is processual media theory.

Rossiter and Cooper argue that while approaches to new media such as political economy (and, I would add, conventional textual theory) tend to treat the media as objects, a processual media theory 'describes situations as they are constituted within and across spatio-temporal networks of relations, of which the communications medium is but one part, or actor' (2005: 100). A processual media theory would take into account 'the plurality of forces ... which condition the formation of a practice, code or meaning' (Rossiter & Cooper 2005: 98). This would require that the representational (ideational), social (interpersonal) and material (textual) dimensions of practices be situated and understood in relation to the contingent and dynamic forces and conditions which allow events and practices to occur without determining them, including:

- Institutional factors and settings;
- Information flows and their dynamics (including questions of affect and duration); and
- Networks both as the relatively fixed architecture of mediums and technologies but also as the fluid and constantly reconfiguring sets of relations between the actors (human/non-human/post-human) which constitute those networks.⁹

How might the perspectives of processual media theory be combined with an analysis of text as practice? The case of the Abu Ghraib prison abuse photos can illustrate the possibilities for a processual analysis of the text as (communicative) practice, and also how the concept of practice provides a link between a localised analysis of text (i.e. within a bounded and finite spatio-temporal location or context) and a wider analysis of the relatively unbounded and proliferating life of 'the text' across multiple contexts and mediums. It

is certainly possible to begin with an analysis of the Abu Ghraib photos as finite texts – the photographs themselves, locally contextualised as practices which occurred in a particular time and at a particular place. Analysis could consider these visual texts in relation to their ideational ‘content’ (visual representations of the abusive acts performed by Western guards upon Iraqi prisoners), the interpersonal meanings encoded (the encoded relations of dominance and oppression, of human and non-human status; the emotions of impassivity or enjoyment versus fear, anguish or humiliation) and the textual codes of the photographic medium (framing, camera angle, focus, point of view, etc.). This analysis would then require that the act itself of photographing what is depicted be analysed as a practice – the textual practice enacted by documenting the acts of abuse, and the social relations constituted through the viewer’s interpellation as a spectator of those acts and images.

However, the analysis cannot end there – to decode the static images and to analyse them as a set of practices which occurred at Abu Ghraib prison is to seriously limit one’s understanding of these texts. The analysis needs to be extended to understand the photos as practices and events which have a non-finite duration in time and which proliferate in a contingent and unpredictable way across institutional settings and contexts. The Abu Ghraib photos are textually realised practices in which the communicative act (text) changes in its transmission and movement across contexts. They are constrained but not determined by the institutional, technological and ideological factors which produce the conditions of their possibility. These include the discourse of the ‘war on terror’, the hierarchical relations within the institution of the military (and specifically the military prison), the new sociotechnical relations enabled by the technology of the digital camera and also of email as a transmission medium, the ‘de-professionalisation’ of photojournalism and the general ‘democratisation’ of communication networks.

The textual practices (both of taking the photos and of participating in the spectacle that is portrayed in the photos) are re-constituted and re-contextualised in a rapidly proliferating series of information flows, using the electronic networks of email and the internet as well as those of conventional broadcast and print media. The photos as both artefacts and practices become implicated in a seemingly endless stream of discourse – in newspaper articles, blogs, TV news and talkback radio debates. Their analysis must take into account their duration as a communicative event-series, their affects across different contexts, the architecture of the networks and mediums through which they circulate, and the ways in which at each point or node they are re-contextualised and re-made (by populist talkback hosts such as Rush Limbaugh and their callers, by critical commentators such as Susan

Sontag, by the U.S. military and politicians explaining these to the public or at a military trial).

To view new media (and indeed old media) texts as practices is thus to recognise the numerous challenges presented to the notion of ‘text’ as traditionally conceived by the changed architecture of the network society as well as the different capacities of new media technologies. A re-formulated analytics of new (and old) media textuality requires that texts be seen as communicative practices whose movement through time and space has radical implications. Such an analytics must be capable of recursive analysis of texts as dynamic practices, that is, the analysis needs to trace the shifts in the representations, social relations and social acts that the text as practice is performing as it moves.

Conclusion: Reprise of the Text vs Medium Debate

I have argued in this paper for re-conceptualising the frameworks available for theorising texts, in particular, new media texts. In doing so, I have critiqued particular analyses of new media texts which have been skewed through their focus on a specific subset of new media technologies or forms, and also in terms of the traditions of old media selected for comparison. I have argued instead for a conceptual framework which re-theorises new media as both objects and processes, and that the most appropriate theory of textuality for this framework is one which sees texts as communicative acts and social practices, enacting and interweaving the multiple functions of representation, social interaction and text formation. The study of new media requires that we move to post-representational and processual perspectives on texts, analysing them not only as representational forms but as dynamic meaning flows, practices which are textually realised (through material signs), but always enacted through shifting sets of relations among the producers/readers/users of those practices. Theorising texts as practices in this way enables a rapprochement between text-oriented and medium-oriented approaches. In fact, the two approaches can be seen to be linked in several ways.

First of all, to return to the arguments of Holmes and Terranova with which I opened this paper, these rely on binary distinctions between medium and text, information and signification, form and content. While Holmes’ and Terranova’s emphasis on the first term in each binary over the second term is to some extent a rhetorical device, there is a danger that this merely reinstates conventional and unhelpful concepts of text, signification and content. Meaning and signification are not confined to the level of the text, nor can they be easily equated with ‘content’ or ‘representation’. This implies that the structures and architecture of communication networks and mediums can’t signify/mean. Yet signification is best understood as an active

process of making meanings and thus an operation that can be performed at any level – in other words, even a communication structure at the level of a medium or network can be read as meaningful. Indeed, Terranova's argument that the structures of inclusion and exclusion in informational milieux encode a cultural politics implies this.

Furthermore, how texts mean cannot be reduced to a matter of 'representation'. This invokes another binary, that of representation/interaction. The implication here is that there is nothing more to texts than 'representation', that is, that the study of textuality can be reduced to the analysis of the 'content' of texts. Conversely, it implies that interaction (or connection/integration) should be analysed at the level of the medium, not the text. Instead, I am arguing (following functional linguistic theory) that all textual practices perform both functions – they both represent and (inter)act.

Secondly, a strict delineation between a text-oriented approach and a medium-oriented approach is not sustainable when it comes to the analysis of the politics of meaning, as consideration of a new media event such as the Abu Ghraib prison abuse photos shows. As 'texts' whose social and political meanings are shaped by their movement through information networks, they require analysis which is both synoptic and dynamic, and which takes account of the conditions of possibility which shapes their rapid movement across contexts.

Ultimately, the distinction between medium-oriented and text-oriented approaches may be less a question of incompatible conceptual frameworks, disciplinary approaches (cultural studies/theory versus sociology) or analytical techniques (textual analysis versus ethnography) than a difference between macro and micro analyses of new media, with the concept of 'practice' providing a bridging term between the macro dimension of mediums, networks and information dynamics, and the micro dimension of the localised acts or events which link actors (human and non-human) to these macro contexts. This paper hopes to make a contribution towards enabling new media scholars to incorporate both kinds of analysis in productive ways (as is occurring in audience studies); perhaps the principles outlined here can enable a more 'janus-faced' form of textual analysis.

Notes

1. As exemplified by, among others, the work of Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Andrew Feenberg, Manuel Castells and Bruno Latour.

2. Jeremy Gilbert (citing Peter Osborne) suggests that structuralist semiotics has promoted this understanding of text as representation, due to the influence of its 'founding concept', the sign-as-referent, which has

had the effect of producing a dominant analytical approach to the text as a unit of signification and representation (Gilbert 2004: 11-12). One area of communication studies which rejects such models is reception studies – the 'turn to the audience' has done much to challenge the idea of the text as self-contained unit of meaning.

3. New categories and combinations are continuously emerging; for example, the Australian press recently announced a trial of digital television transmission to mobile phones through a system known as DVB-H, short for digital video broadcasting – handheld (Paul Heinrichs, 'Hold the phone, it's time for my show', Sunday Age, 26 June 2006: 3).

4. This is ironic given Landow's use of Derrida – as it re-instates the kind of privileging of the written text which Derrida aimed to deconstruct in his critique of logocentrism and the speech/writing dichotomy (Derrida 1988).

5. His list is: numerical representation (i.e. composed of digital code); modularity (composed of modules/elements assembled into a whole); automation; variability (customization); cultural transcoding (translation of a cultural logic into computer logic) (Manovich 2001: 20).

6. Somewhat oddly, Manovich excludes radio from this list (2001: 17).

7. Systemic-functional linguistics emerged from the 1970s onwards led by M.A.K. Halliday, and is a non-idealist and descriptive linguistics which rejects the 'competence-performance' distinction espoused by Chomsky, and argues that language (indeed all semiotic systems) are produced in and through actual practice or behaviour (Halliday 1984). Texts are viewed as social practices – in technical terms, the realisation of meaning potentials differentially available to socially situated users. They are not merely 'representations', but performative social acts. Social semiotics was the rubric adopted by a group of Australian semioticians working in the 1980s onwards (notably Kress 1985, 1988; Threadgold 1986, Hodge and Kress 1988, Kress and Van Leeuwen 1990, Lee and Poynton 2000), and strongly influenced by the work of Halliday and his seminal book *Language as Social Semiotic* (1978). Drawing on Marxism, critical theory and post-structuralism, social semiotics aimed to re-insert the social and the political into the semiotic analysis of communication practices, and to avoid the arid structuralism of Saussurean semiotics.

8. It is important not to reserve the term 'text' for the synoptic view and 'practice' for the dynamic view (this would merely reinstate a binary opposition); the dual perspective on text as both synoptic and dynamic could instead be indicated by using the term 'textual

practice' or 'communicative practice'. This avoids privileging either 'text' or 'practice'.

9. This is where the work of the technology theorists, including Tiziana Terranova, Manuel Castells, N. Katherine Hayles, Bruno Latour and Andrew Feenberg, can inform the analysis.

Bibliography

Aarseth E (1997) *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* Johns Hopkins Baltimore & London

Austin JL (1962) *How to do things with words* Clarendon Press Oxford

Baron N (1998) 'Letters by phone or speech by other means: the linguistics of email' *Language and communication* 18 133-170

Barthes R (1977) 'From work to text' in *Image Music Text* trans Stephen Heath Fontana London 155-64

Beaton John & Wajcman Judy (2004) *The Impact of the Mobile Telephone in Australia* Discussion paper presented to the Australian Telecommunications Association Conference September 2004 URL (viewed June 2005): <http://www.assa.edu.au>

Bell D (2001) *An introduction to cybercultures* Routledge London & New York

Bolter JD and Grusin R (1999) *Remediation: Understanding new media* MIT Press Cambridge Mass

Carey James (1988) *Communication as culture: essays on media and society* Routledge London & New York

Derrida J (1988) 'Signature event context' in *Limited Inc* Northwestern University Press Evanston

Gilbert Jeremy (2004) 'Signifying nothing: 'culture' 'discourse' and the sociality of affect' in *Deconstruction is/in Cultural Studies* Culture Machine 6 URL (consulted Oct 2005) <http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk>

Halliday MAK (1978) *Language as social semiotic* Edward Arnold London

Halliday MAK (1984) 'Language as code and language as behaviour' in RP Fawcett et al (eds) *The semiotics of culture and language* Vol 1 3-35 Frances Pinter London

Halliday MAK (1985) *An introduction to functional grammar* Edward Arnold London

Halliday MAK and Hasan R (1985) *Language, context*

and text: aspects of language in a social-semiotic perspective Deakin University Press Burwood

Herring S (1999) 'Interactional coherence in CMC' *Journal of computer-mediated communication* 4(4) URL (consulted June 2005): <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol4/issue4/herring.html>

Hodge R and Kress G (1988) *Social Semiotics* Polity Press Cambridge

Holmes D (2005) *Communication theory: media, technology, society* Sage London

Katz JE and Aakus M (2002) *Perpetual contact: Mobile communication, private talk, public performance* Cambridge University Press Cambridge

Kress G (1985) *Linguistic processes in sociocultural practice* Deakin University Press Geelong

Kress G and Van Leeuwen T (1990) *Reading images* Deakin University Press Geelong

Landow GP (1997) *Hypertext 2.0: The convergence of contemporary critical theory and technology* Johns Hopkins University Press Baltimore & London

Lee A & Poynton C (eds) (2000) *Culture and text: discourse and methodology in social research and cultural studies* Allen & Unwin St Leonards

Ling R (2004) *The mobile connection: the cell phone's impact on society* San Francisco: Morgan Kaufman/Elsevier

Manovich L (2001) *The language of new media* MIT Press Cambridge Mass

Plant S (2001) *On the mobile: The effects of mobile telephones on social and individual life* Motorola URL (consulted Jun 2005): http://www.motorola.com/mot/doc/0/234_MotDoc.pdf

Rossiter N & Cooper S (2005) 'Processual media theory and the study of new media: Towards a new research approach' in K Kwansah-Aidoo (ed) *Topical issues in communications and media research* Nova Science Publishers New York 95-115

Schirato T & Yell S (2000) *Communication and cultural literacy: an introduction* Allen & Unwin St Leonards

Terranova T (2004) 'Communication beyond meaning: On the cultural politics of information' *Social Text* 80 22(3) 51-73

Threadgold T (1986) 'Semiotics-Ideology-Language' editor's introduction in Threadgold T et al (ed) *Semiotics Ideology Language* 15-60 Sydney Association for

Studies in Society and Culture Sydney

Urry J (2002) 'Mobility and proximity' *Sociology* 36(2)
255-74

Werry CC (1996) 'Linguistic and interactional features
of Internet Relay Chat' in S Herring (ed) *Computer-me-
diated communication: Linguistic, social and cross-
cultural perspective*: 47-64 Benjamins Amsterdam