Multimodality's challenge to marketing theory: A Discussion

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A u c k l a n d   U n i v e r s i t y   o f   T e c h n o l o g y ,   N e w   Z e a l a n d

abstract

This discussion challenges conventional marketing theory regarding posters and billboards in the twenty first century. It argues against the prevailing dogmatic statement that a poster or billboard must communicate its message in mere seconds (Drewniarny and Jewler 2011). It also points out that convergence of traditional media with new communication technologies is challenging the notion that posters and billboards are still *most often* viewed from a distance by passers-by (Arens 2004).

In contrast, it proposes that assessing how people interact with billboards and posters from a mediated and multimodal discourse perspective is more useful. This involves looking at posters and billboards when they are actually in use rather than considering them only as they are present in the environment. The modal density foreground-background continuum (Norris 2004), the concept of a site of attention (Jones 2005) and the idea of the communicative space (White 2012) are multimodal discourse methodology tools that prove particularly illuminating in this context. While no empirical data is analysed as part of this discussion, mediated and multimodal discourse analysis of two specific examples from previous studies serves to illustrate the points made here.

introduction

marketing theory: background

Although 'marketing thought' can be traced as far back as the Greek philosophers Aristotle, Plato and Homer (Tamilia 2009), as an academic discipline it emerged as a branch of applied economics when the first marketing courses were taught in American universities in 1902 (Shaw and Jones 2009). While the field of marketing theory encompasses packaging, distribution, wholesale, retailing, pricing, merchandising, branding and marketing communications, this discussion is concerned exclusively with marketing communications; and in particular with marketing theory with regard to advertising communications.

There has been, and still is, a long-standing tension between the formalisation of knowledge (theory) about advertising and marketing and the practice of advertising and marketing as it emerges. Thus many of the acknowledged 'scholars' in the field were and are practitioners. Three theories in particular emerged from advertising agency practice and still form the basis of most university advertising and marketing textbooks (Hackley 2009), the AIDA model of communication (Kennedy 1924), the concept of the Unique Selling Proposition (Reeves 1961) and the notion of brand personality (Ogilvy 1963).

The AIDA model of communication has most bearing on this discussion since it proposes that a four-step sequence of communication needs to take place: *Attention*, *Interest*, *Desire*, *Action*. Despite questions over the academic and pedagogical value of the AIDA model, it remains an influential theory. Indeed 'today, typical advertising and marketing textbooks are a highly reduced composite of these [Kennedy, Reeves, Ogilvy] theories' (Hackley 2009: 93). How much longer this will remain the case is debatable though, as the AIDA model especially assumes a concept of passive reception, whereas with the advent of interactive media the idea of an active consumer is becoming important to both practitioners and academics (Stewart and Pavlou 2002).

Nevertheless, current academic marketing and advertising scholars echo the first principle of Kennedy's model when they declare that the first goal of advertising is to gain attention (Faber, Brittany and Nan 2012:27). I refer to two textbooks in this discussion as examples of the current approach to fundamental marketing communications pedagogy to establish the accepted guidelines of billboard design.

marketing theory: billboard design

Among the plethora of textbooks on advertising and marketing, two titles are widely in use in New Zealand universities: Creative Strategy in Advertising, by Bonnie L. Drewniarny and A. Jerome Jewler (2011) and Contemporary Advertising, by William F. Arens (2004). Both are written by American scholars and published in the USA.

A new edition of Contemporary Advertising has been published on average every three years since 1982. Arens gives a comprehensive up-to-date overview of every aspect

of modern advertising, with examples and case studies, under five main headings: *Advertising Perspectives* (exploring the evolution of advertising in free market economies, regulations, codes of ethics and both the local and international scope of advertising in society); *Crafting Marketing and Advertising Strategies* (examining consumer behaviour, market segmentation and market research); *Integrating Advertising with Other Elements* (describing how direct marketing, PR, sponsorship and corporate communications work together and separately to convey companies' and brands' messages to various audiences); *Creating Advertisements and Commercials* (covering everything from formulating an advertising brief to production processes across all media); and finally, *Using Advertising Media* (presenting the theory of how to apply advertising across print, TV, radio, digital and out-of-home media).

Using Advertising Media is the section that deals with the theory of billboard design and its application as the most prolific form of outdoor advertising. Arens (2004) traces back *bill posting* as far as the Middle Ages when he says it was used throughout Europe. He concludes that outdoor advertising is an ideal medium for mediating 'a short, simple, and dogmatic message' especially if it is of local interest. He goes on to state that 'the recommended maximum for outdoor copy is seven words' (Arens 2004:584-585). He also recommends using large illustrations, bold colours, and simple backgrounds. Arens maintains that billboards, like all forms of outdoor advertising, are most often viewed from a distance that varies between 100 and 500 feet (30 to 150 metres) by people who are passing by.

Creative Strategy in Advertising is now in its tenth edition and offers an overview of the process of creating and producing advertising across all media. The authors break down the process into seven steps: solving the problem; capturing your creative potential; targeting a diverse marketplace; fact-finding; strategy; designing to communicate; convincing the client. They then set out the fundamental principles of working in print, writing for radio, working in television, using direct marketing and creating retail advertising.

The revised 2011 edition includes sections on interactive marketing and designing for the internet. Billboards and posters, though, are dealt with separately and considered under the heading of *Designing to Communicate*. Drewniarny and Jewler (2011:183) reiterate similar principles to Arens (2004) when they say, '…you need to communicate your entire selling message in an instant.' They concur with Arens and specify that when designing billboards and posters you should, 'Make the type bold and big,' and 'Keep the word count to no more than eight words, fewer if possible.' They remind us that the type must be read quickly and they establish that a standard outdoor poster and billboard is constructed in a proportion of one to two and a quarter or one to three and a half.

the marketer's view of attention
to advertising

Audience attention to advertising is most often commercially examined by marketers when they engage in monitoring unprompted and prompted recall of individual advertisements and campaigns. This usually involves quantitative research that seeks to gauge the memorability of a particular advertisement or campaign (Slater 1998). Such quantitative research seeks to measure whether attention *has been paid* to an advertisement after it has appeared. In contrast, this discussion is concerned with the attention a person *must pay* to an advertisement in order to successfully receive its message. Thus, the marketing literature informing this discussion with regard to attention paid to advertisements centres on two things: one, an aspect of consumer behaviour theory and two, an approach which marketers and advertisers might adopt in order to gain attention for their advertising in an age of information overload.

Olshavsky (1994:97) challenges what he describes as the accepted marketer's and advertising practitioner's view that getting attention is 'one of the most important communication objectives' of any advertisement. He argues that attention cannot be separated out from the cognitive operation of processing information. Because attention occurs with and results from information processing in the brain, Olshavsky establishes that attention conforms to Webster's New World Dictionary (1959) definition of an epiphenomenon: 'it is a phenomenon which cannot exist on its own and therefore cannot be an objective in its own right' (as cited in Olshavsky 1994:98). More importantly, Olshavsky shows that attention is an integral part of the way that people process information, rather than a separate process that must take place before anything else can occur. Olshavsky's contention that information processing simply cannot happen without attention is based on information processing theory as outlined by psychologists, Ericsson and Simon (1980) and earlier by Newell and Simon (1972). He then applies this information processing theory to theories of consumer behaviour and suggests some implications for advertising.

While Olshavsky's (1994) recommendations relate specifically to the potential of an advertisement to influence brand choice, the importance of his findings in this discussion are threefold. First, the notion that no-one *receives* any message at all if they are not paying attention is corroborated by his contention that attention is a vital element of information processing. Second, that attention cannot be separated from information processing points towards the mediated and multimodal discourse analysis approach which states that there is no demonstrable sequence of individual semiotic modes involved when we *read* a text: the semiotic sequence can be identified but all modes *fuse* to achieve a single, multimodal communicative action (Van Leeuwen 2005). Third, Olshavsky's description of attention as being integral in the process of information processing from a cognitive psychology perspective mirrors Norris' (2004) concept of modal density as being an essential element of any social interaction from a multimodal discourse perspective.

Advertising practitioner, Ken Sacharin argues that advertisers and marketers need 'a new set of methods for gaining attention' (Sacharin 2001:ix) in an age of information

overload. He proposes an approach that he calls attention mechanics. In order to outline attention mechanics, Sacharin uses the analogy of someone entering a crowded room and describes his methods for gaining attention under headings like enter, interrupt politely, yell occasionally, be brief, whisper, be different, touch, tell a story, mingle, and network. These methods range from suggesting the tone and manner that advertisers might adopt in their communications to thinking about new ways to link advertisements together (network) across different types of media. He concludes that the media planner's primary focus on ratings (claimed audience figures) will change to a consideration of how much attention is paid to individual marketing communications (Sacharin 2001).

While his outline of attention mechanics is largely focused on changing marketing's approach to media selection, buying and use, his consideration of two things in particular are of specific importance to this discussion. First, Sacharin (2001) spends part one of his book describing what he calls 'the information blizzard' and its effect on marketing and advertising (2001:14). He argues that, from a marketing perspective, there is a pre-internet world and a post-internet world. In the pre-internet world he states that *information density* was far less. For example, he states that the average news sound bite in the 1960s lasted 42 seconds, whereas in 2001 it had been reduced to eight seconds (2001:15). Significantly, Sacharin comments that society may be developing a form of attention deficit disorder; something that this discussion argues against. Second, Sacharin acknowledges the difficulty of measuring attention. He points out that while neurological and biological science can accurately measure specific brain activity, 'it's not feasible to keep everyone hooked up to brain scanning equipment all the time… [so we need to rely on]… reasonable surrogate measures' (2001:182). Sacharin offers the idea of a footprint of attention as one of these measures. His version of the footprint of attention is the tracking of the different types of media that can be sequentially used to disseminate individual elements of a total marketing message. He talks about messages mediated via traditional media (TV, radio, print and billboard) leading people to messages online where *traffic at the page* and resulting action (inquiries and sales) can be monitored.

When looked at from a multimodal mediated discourse perspective though, Norris' (2004) notion of modal density answers this need for a surrogate method of assessment of the attention where brain scanning is impracticable, and it is arguably a more useful and accurate way to assess attention paid to individual marketing messages.

the concept of attention economics

While Sacharin (2001) sees the *information blizzard* as a barrier to gaining people's attention, Goldhaber (1997a, b) envisages a world in which individual attention becomes both a commercially valuable *commodity* and the basis for a new kind of economy. Indeed, Goldhaber (1997b:1) points out that information itself can be seen as less valuable than the attention we need to pay to it. His explanation of this theory begins with a reminder that economics is generally defined as 'the study of how a society uses its scarce resources.' It continues by highlighting the fact that since the advent of the internet, 'we are drowning in information' (1997b:3). It is far from being a scarce resource. Attention, though, is a scarce resource in societies where people have easy access to new communication technologies.

Moreover, attention will always be in short supply in such societies because the amount of available attention per person cannot be increased in any way.

Goldhaber (1997a) also explains how, in the new economy, attention can have a direct effect on the flow of money and gain a dollar value in its own right. He cites (1997a) the potential value of Facebook as a company were it to be floated on the stock exchange[1] and points out that, unlike traditional media, the value of which was calculated on the size of its audience, it is not the figure of 825 million people who use Facebook that matters most, it is how long each person spends on Facebook every day that makes the site so valuable. Equally, Goldhaber points out that money will never be able to buy attention. I can pay you to listen to me reading the telephone directory, but I cannot ensure that you won't drift off and daydream while I'm boring you.

From a mediated and multimodal discourse perspective, Jones (2005) contends that *sites of engagement* outlined by Scollon (1998) are more accurately described as *sites of attention.* He acknowledges that this assertion is founded on Goldhaber (1997a, b) and that 'in an age of information overload, what gives value to information is the amount of attention it can attract' (Jones 2005:152). This discussion builds on and expands Jones' view, when it explores not the dollar value of attention in any single communicative action, but the level and quality of attention a person needs to employ in order to successfully receive an unsolicited marketing message.

attention from a mediated and multimodal discourse analysis perspective

Discourse analysis began as a study of linguistics and has since developed beyond the analysis of texts to consider questions about the actions people take with them (Norris and Jones 2005). In his study of news as a discourse Scollon's (1998) specific aim is to reconstruct the language used to describe the production of the news and to define a more comprehensive description of its actual, real time reception by readers and viewers than linguistic analysis alone affords. In doing so, Scollon defines a methodology that provides a vital basis for analysing both the production and consumption of media texts as social interactions. Essentially Scollon (1998) summarises three key ways in which the term *mediated discourse* can be understood. Firstly, it is applied to media communications (e.g. newspaper, magazines, radio, TV and film). Secondly, Scollon (1998:6) identifies computer-mediated discourse as 'rapidly' increasing at the time and suggests that the focus should be on 'communications in which the computer – most often in the form of email or internet communications – is the primary medium of communication between two or more participants.' We might argue today that either this should not be regarded as a separate category from media communications or that it should be considerably expanded to include cell phones, mp3 players, laptop computers, tablets and other personal communication devices that may not yet exist. Thirdly, Scollon applies the term to any mediation involved in common everyday exchanges, no matter what mode of

communication is employed (written, spoken or by means of signs). Thus any instance of communication is seen as a social interaction with both the producers and the consumers of mediated messages designated as social actors. Among the specific terms used when applying mediated discourse analysis three are of particular interest and significance in this discussion: *mediated action*, *sites of engagement*, and *mediational means* or texts.

Norris and Jones (2005:5) define the term mediated action as 'the real time moment when mediational means, social actors and the sociocultural environment intersect.' This definition is of specific relevance to this discussion because it takes our focus beyond the presence of each billboard text at any particular location to include a detailed examination of the individual actions that combine to construct the higher-level action (Norris 2004) of reading, or responding to, any message(s) mediated by a billboard. A higher-level action is made up of chains of lower-level actions and it is bracketed by a distinct opening and closing (Norris 2004; Norris and Jones 2005). For example, the higher-level action of reading may begin by a person picking up a magazine, then opening the page before actually focusing on the text. Equally, the higher-level action of reading might end by closing the magazine, but this may be preceded by someone entering the room and causing the reader to look up.

The concept of 'the site of engagement is useful to the study of mediated discourse to focus our attention on just those moments when texts are actually in use, not just present in the environment' (Scollon 1998:12). From this definition is it clear that a site of engagement designates far more than the place at which a message is displayed or the technological hardware that delivers the message. Indeed, Scollon initially defined a site of engagement as 'the window opened through the intersection of social practices in which participants may appropriate a text for mediated action' (Scollon 1998:11). Most importantly, he developed the concept further so that the notion of a site of engagement concentrates our focus on the specific points which the active participants are paying attention to (Scollon, 2001). In this way, the notion of a site of engagement goes beyond traditional concepts of time and space and in doing so becomes more useful as an analytical tool. Scollon (2001:159) concludes that rather than seeing actions as occurring in or at sites of engagement, it is more correct to say that actions occur 'as sites of engagement.'

Crucially, then, analysing the composition and reception of a message on a poster or billboard in reality is thus understood to go beyond applying a simplistic sender-receiver model; it entails a mediated action involving a poster or billboard as a mediational means between social actors within a site of engagement.

Multimodal discourse analysis (Norris 2004) developed out of the recognition that all interactions involve more than one communicative mode. For example and as outlined elsewhere (White 2012:392), in this discussion multimodal discourse analysis applied to examining the reception of the message(s) mediated by NZ Army interactive posters reveals that the higher-level action of *reading* the message(s) involves the social actor employing the modes of listening (to a cell phone ringtone), gaze (at the cell phone screen and towards the site of the poster), object handling (the cell phone) and proxemics

(moving towards the site of the poster and then scrutinising it close-up). Such analysis shows that without any one of these modes, receiving a meaningful message successfully is not possible.

Moreover, the age of information overload itself has given rise to a more recent refinement of the notion of a site of engagement. Jones' study of people interacting via internet chat rooms led to a redefinition of sites of engagement as also being sites of attention. 'Sites of engagement are, then,' he says,

> made up not just of the physical spaces we inhabit, and the timescales and trajectories that flow into them, but also, and more to the point those aspects of space and time that we are inclined to pay attention to. We construct sites of engagement through our attention.

> (Jones 2005:152)

two recent campaigns

In an earlier article (White 2010:385-386) I used Norris's concept of modal density to analyse a 2007 campaign of *interactive posters* created by Saatchi & Saatchi (New Zealand). These posters clearly challenge conventional marketing theory pre-requisites for billboard and poster design: they do not feature bold colours, simple backgrounds (Arens 2004) or big, bold type (Drewniarny and Jewler 2011). Instead Bluetooth transmitters are fitted to outdoor poster sites so that when a person walks anywhere within a few hundred metres of the poster, their cell phone rings and they receive an SMS text message that reads: *This is a training exercise for the NZ Army. You must rendezvous with a field engineer in your immediate area. You have 30 secs to locate him and text back the co-ordinates.* If the challenge is accepted, that person must then look around for a location in which they might find the *field engineer*; the NZ Army poster is located nearby. The posters themselves (Figures 1, 2 and 3) are subtly divided into numbered and lettered grids. By looking closely at a poster a person might discover the grid location of a camouflaged soldier and then be able to send back an SMS text reply with the correct co-ordinates locating the *field engineer*. If the correct co-ordinates are texted back within 30 seconds, the respondent receives the following SMS text message in reply: *Congratulations. You've transferred vital information for terrain analysis to the hq. You've got what it takes. Go to army.mil.nz/careers to achieve your full potential.* If incorrect co-ordinates are texted back or the *mission* takes longer than 30 seconds, the respondent receives the following SMS text message: *Sorry, you need a little more practice. Go to Force9.co.nz for further training, more missions and to achieve your full potential*.

In the previous study I showed how the message the posters mediate is not intended to be understood in a mere two or three seconds (Drewniarny and Jewler 2011) but it engages a reader's attention for at least 30 seconds. I also showed how Norris' (2004) concept of modal density to describe the construction of a higher-level action and her outline of the foreground, mid-ground and background continuum allows the assessment of levels of attention by distinguishing, in a heuristic sense, levels of attention/awareness. I was able to show that the social actor actually is foregrounding the action of finding the field engineer, no matter what else is going on around them.

Multimodal discourse analysis allows us to define the action of finding the field engineer in the poster as being 'constructed through the modes of gaze (at the poster) and proxemics (to the poster)'; and 'unless these modes are employed with high modal density the social actor would not be able to locate the camouflaged soldier' (White 2010:292). Equally, 'Norris' methodological framework shows the communicative modes of gaze and proxemics taking on high intensity. This high intensity is a sign of the high modal density employed. The high modal density in turn signals that the social actor is foregrounding the action of finding the field engineer, no matter what else is going on around them' (White 2012:393). Crucially, then, Norris' (2004) methodological framework for analysing multimodal interaction provides tools which indicate that the level of the attention being paid by the social actor in order to interact with the NZ army poster can be assessed as being extremely high.

Figure 1: NZ Army poster created by Saatchi & Saatchi (New Zealand).

Figure 2: NZ Army poster created by Saatchi & Saatchi (New Zealand).

It is clear that the NZ Army posters constitute sites of engagement constructed though the demonstrably focused attention of any social actor interacting with the messages they mediate. Moreover, the analysis shows that the interactive posters 'successfully gain the social actor's attention, hold the social actor's attention (through a series of actions) and the attention a social actor pays during the interaction is intense (has high modal density) ' (White 2010:395) for what we can be sure is at least 30 seconds (the time given to find and text back the location of the camouflaged soldier). Again, at the very least, this begins to challenge the conventional marketing notion that a billboard should be designed to mediate its message in an instant (Drewniany and Jewler 2011; Arens 2004). Examining the social actions that combine to create the higher-level action of receiving a message, then, shows there is potential for a poster or billboard to engage its audience beyond the time it takes to simply comprehend its text.

In considering the amount of time spent with unsolicited marketing messages we need also to take into account the idea that people are either unwilling or unable to engage with such messages. Writers like Sacharin (2001) believe we spend our lives battling through an information blizzard and warn us about the threat of society developing a type of attention deficit disorder. The CEO of Google adds credence to such notions when he announces, 'There were five exobytes of information created in the entire world between the dawn of civilization and 2003. Now that same amount is created every two days. No wonder we're sort of overloaded' (Schmidt 2010). In this context, mediated and multimodal discourse analysis once again proves more enlightening than conventional marketing theory. Specifically, Jones' (2005) contention that sites of engagement are more accurately described as sites of attention is helpful for two reasons. First, it acknowledges the increasing claims on every individual's attention and second, it opens a door to understanding whether the blizzard is really as overwhelming as it may seem. This is particularly true when we trace the antecedents of Jones' concept. The name is inspired by Golhaber's attention economies (1997a, b) but the theoretical basis is in Scollon's work. Scollon (1998:135) draws the distinction between looking at texts when they are actually in use and looking at them merely as being 'present in the environment.' I would argue that conventional marketing theory tends to look exclusively at texts as being present in the environment when it sets out its rules for design and time taken to communicate. Such an approach acknowledges an audience's busyness in a general way only. In order to examine the process of gaining attention, holding attention and assessing attention levels in more depth, an understanding of posters and billboards as mediational means enabling the mediated action of communicating one or more messages is more revealing.

space and location

What first drew my interest in the NZ Army campaign was the use of Bluetooth technology to attract people's attention and the fact that an SMS text message shifts the social actor's focus of attention to the NZ Army poster, even though that social actor is not necessarily in the immediate vicinity of the poster itself. This, at the very least, begins to challenge the conventional marketing belief that 'outdoor advertising is generally viewed from 100 to 500 feet away by people in motion' (Arens 2004:585). More importantly, it suggests that space is an important factor in defining the sites of engagement around any single communicative action. Space, in fact, takes on a social semiotic function when it encapsulates 'an intersection of social practices and mediational means that make that action the focal point of attention of the relevant participants' (Norris and Jones 2005:139).

When we examine the particular social actions that combine to create a higher-level action (reading, listening, locating, etc.) that becomes an instance of discourse in real time and results in someone paying attention or receiving a mediated message, we can identify a series of social actions. Yet, while we might identify the space each action occurs in, there is a need to describe the various spaces that are collectively essential to that message being received by the social actor. Thus, while Van Leeuwen (2005) describes modes *fusing* to create a single communicative action, I have proposed the concept of a *communicative space* (White 2012), which grows out of the need to describe all the

spaces that *fuse* in the mediation of any single communicative action. As outlined in White (2012:148), *communicative space* comprises all physical spaces constituting an essential part of the site of engagement. The physical space occupied by billboards conforming to established parameters is a site measuring approximately 6 metres x 3 metres (Drewniany and Jewler 2011). Taking Arens' (2004) view that most people receive a message mediated by a billboard while they are *on the move* and using his idea of their distance from the actual billboard, we can say that the *communicative space* of a typical billboard extends between 30 and 150 metres. The *concept of the communicative space*, though, becomes more useful when it is applied specifically with regard to a social interaction with a particular billboard. Thus I applied multimodal discourse analysis to an exploding billboard (Figures 4 and 5) for *Deadline Couriers* created by Colenso BDDO in 2007 (White 2012).

Figure 3: NZ Army poster created by Saatchi & Saatchi (New Zealand).

bang goes marketing theory

In July 2007 a single billboard for Deadline Couriers existed for only eight days at only one geographical site on Nelson Street in Auckland, New Zealand. Nevertheless, at least 1.3 million people saw that one billboard and it can still be viewed today. The Deadline billboard (Figure 4) mediates two messages: *This billboard will self destruct in (a reducing number of) days* and *When Deadline Couriers give you a time, they mean it*. A webcam set up across the street also live-streamed the billboard site on the internet for eight days.

Figure 4: Deadline billboard before explosion.

My mediated and multimodal discourse analysis of the *Deadline Couriers*' billboard revealed that the physical billboard for *Deadline Couriers* makes use of a conventional communicative space to mediate its message. I also identified four sites of engagement associated with this conventional *communicative space*: 'vehicle passing by on the street [social actor - driver]; vehicle passing by on the street [social actor - passenger]; pavement prior to the explosion [social actor - passer-by]; pavement on the night of the explosion [social actor - spectator]' (White, 2012:147). The web camera across the street, though, which live-streamed the count-down, designates other *communicative spaces* and resulted in social actors creating four more sites of engagement: computer screen/web page leading up to explosion via live-streaming; computer screen/web page after the explosion via YouTube; computer screen/blog page prior to explosion; and computer screen/blog page after the explosion.

Figure 5: Deadline billboard during explosion.

The communicative spaces created by these technological convergences differ remarkably from the 30 or 150 metres associated with 'conventional' billboards. Indeed, such a billboard is transformed from what Arens (2004) calls 'outdoor advertising' and becomes, like TV, radio, newspaper and magazine communication, 'indoor advertising' - no longer constrained by its physical dimensions. As discussed in the previous study (White 2012:147), the social actor receiving the messages may be more or less focused on the higher-level action of reading the billboard depending in which *communicative space* they are located.

If we were to examine each site of engagement using the concept of modal density (Norris 2004) and plotting social actions on the foreground – background continuum we could assess the level of attention a social actor is employing to construct each action. In my previous study, for example, I showed this approach produces a clearer understanding of how billboards work than conventional marketing theory suggests. Even within the first site of engagement from our list - vehicle passing by on the street [social actor - driver] – multimodal discourse analysis proves more revealing. Marketing theory seems to assume that a driver is concentrating on driving and needs to be momentarily distracted if he or she is to take notice of a billboard. Mediated and multimodal discourse analysis, though, acknowledges that such a social actor driving past the *Deadline billboard* is unlikely to be exclusively foregrounding the higher-level action of driving - employing high modal density to carry out this action - because in reality, we know that a driver may also be listening to the radio or CD, talking to a passenger or being distracted by passengers in the car. Thus the higher-level action of driving may well employ less than the highest level of modal density and may even be mid-grounded by a social actor (Figure 6).

Foreground-background continuum

Modal density

Driving   Talking with passenger(s)

Listening to radio/music

Decreasing attention

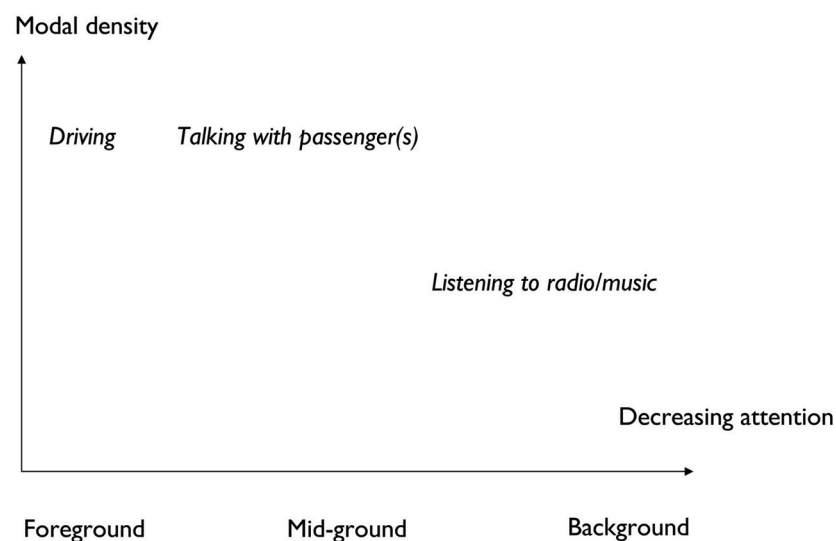Foreground   Mid-ground   Background

Figure 6: *Deadline Couriers* Modal Density graph (White 2012).

In my previous study I argued that it is this decrease in or dilution of the level of modal density employed in the higher-level action of driving which allows another action to take place – interaction with the billboard. Moreover Norris' model allows us to verify that, for those drivers who receive one or more messages mediated by means of the *Deadline billboard*, interacting with the billboard must entail a higher modal density than listening to music, talking to passengers, etc. I also suggested that a similar analysis of each of the sites of engagement associated with the *Deadline billboard* should reveal different levels of attention employed at each site in order for a social actor to construct the higher-level action of receiving its mediated messages (White 2012).

c o n c l u s i o n

Mediated and multimodal discourse analysis of posters and billboards (White 2010, 2012) challenges the precepts of conventional marketing theory regarding the design of posters and billboards and the reception of the messages they mediate in an age of information overload in two important ways. First, by showing exactly how social actors construct the higher-level action of responding to a poster or billboard, it suggests that the still prevailing dogmatism of the marketing theory statement that a poster or billboard must communicate its message in mere seconds (Drewniarny and Jewler 2011) should be reviewed. Second, by showing that new technologies can and are increasing the number and nature of the sites of engagement associated with any single poster or billboard, mediated and multimodal discourse analysis highlights a need to reconsider the marketing notion that posters and billboards are still most often viewed from a distance that varies between 100 and 500 feet by people who are passing by (Arens 2004).

The modal density foreground-background continuum (Norris 2004) and the concept of a site of attention (Jones 2005) help shed light on whether we actually do spend our lives battling through an information blizzard (Sacharin 2001). Understanding where attention is focused as part of any given social interaction gives a clearer view of how behaviour is organised than simply acknowledging people's general busyness. This is critical because marketing theory states that one of the primary functions of advertising and marketing communications is to influence people's behaviour (Arens 2004; Drewniarny and Jewler 2011) and Jones (2005:152) states, 'attention is organised around behaviour and behaviour is organised around attention.'

Finally, mediated and multimodal discourse analysis allows those physical spaces that constitute an essential part of the site of engagement within which a message is mediated to be examined as a single semiotic unit. When the mediation of a message is seen as a single communicative action (Van Leeuwen 2005) it becomes clear that such spaces do not operate as separate geographic sites but are more accurately described as a single *communicative space* associated with a particular social interaction. This concept of the *communicative space* both adds to and extends the application and utility of mediated and multimodal discourse analysis and it provides an additional approach to understanding marketing communications.

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