

# Connecting media : understanding indexical practice

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# CONNECTING MEDIA: UNDERSTANDING INDEXICAL PRACTICE

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## Abstract

Much of the significance of human engagements with media result from the semiotic process of indexicality – meaning something by being connected to it. This paper argues for placing indexicality at the heart of any study of media practices, both studies of performance and imaginative engagements. The rise of new media, in which to own the means of consumption is to own the means of production, and social media, in which linking is the heart of the practices, has only increased the importance of indexicality as the central semiotic process in media practices. Drawing examples from fieldwork in Egypt, this paper is a programmatic call for an anthropology of media that puts indexicality at the center.

**Keywords:** *Egypt; ethnography; indexicality; practice; semiotics*

Much of the glamour of media practices is rooted in a fascination with the image and the associated semiotic process of *iconicity*. Many scholars have put iconicity – meaning something by resembling it – and *mimesis* – the human yearning to mimic, merge, and copy – at the center of human signifying practices, and speculations that language ultimately derives from iconic gesture predate Plato (Armstrong 2008). The notion that mimesis is at the heart of modern media was popularized in academic discourse by Walter Benjamin, who saw in the emergence of photography and related technologies a resurgence of the «optical unconscious» (Benjamin 1979: 240). Michael Taussig has argued for the primordality of mimesis, inherited from the aspirations of our ancestors to master nature by «controlling its copy» (Taussig 1993: 47), imitating the forces that shaped the earth and the creatures that inhabit it. Civilization, this line of argument contends, has repressed mimesis by subjecting it to the «organized control» (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972: 180) of the State and

technological capitalism. However, the free play of mimesis is re-enabled by the emergence of «mimetically capacious machines» (Taussig 1993: 20) such as the camera and subsequent, related technologies.

Other forms of motivated semiosis such as indexicality are not entirely lacking from such arguments. Indexicality refers to the capacity of signifiers to mean something by being connected in some way to their referents. Ong described film as inherently indexical because of its reference to the past moment in which light is exposed to the film to create the image (1982). More recent theorists, however, have tried to repress attention to indexicality by arguing, for example, that digital media is different because «the relation of digital representations to their material conditions of existence (which does exist) is so abstract as to be almost unattainable. For the digital exudes a fantasy of immateriality, in contrast to the fantasy of referentiality of the index» (Doane 2007: 143).

What these arguments have in common is a set of ontologies in which particular technologies have inherent semiotic principles that are realized in human interpretive action. Meaning, or at least the conditions of its production, are treated as if they cohere in the technologies themselves, and the texts they generate, rather than in the socially-constituted practices through which people engage with media texts and technologies.

This view undermines one of the fundamental strengths of Peircean semiotics, the integral interrelationship of iconicity, indexicality and conventionality in semiosis. In Peirce's work, a sign consists of a relationship between a signifier that stands for a referent to some interpretant (a person, but also a system, such as the cultural system in which this person is suspended) in some respect. This latter draws attention to the nature of the relation between signifier and signified recognized by the interpretant – is it a relationship of resemblance (iconicity)? Of connection (indexicality)? Of social convention (symbolism)? Much of the significance of human engagements with media requires us to attend not only to iconicity and socially-constituted codes, but to semiotic processes of indexicality. As we move beyond sender-message-receiver models of communication, textual exegesis, and speculations about technology, and begin to describe and analyze how people engage with technologies to create, share, interpret and consume media, we find their media practices are heavily indexical – they construct meaning by linking signs to other signs. In doing so, they produce new interpretive contexts which have social consequences for subsequent interpretive practices.

In Peircean semiotics, the meaning of a sign consists not in «decoding» an arbitrary system of signs but of exploring an unfolding and unpredictable series of signs that serve to represent a common object but also to comment on one another, so that meaning is revealed as a fluid and contingent process in which each interpretation alters the available range of meanings for subsequent interpretations. An overattention on texts, the technologies that produce them, and the images they contain, draws us away from attending to the ways people make links between texts and contexts as part of the everyday processes of making meaning.

In this paper I want to bring together three concepts – indexicality, practice and ethnography – in order to call for an anthropology of media that attends to the central role indexicality plays in the everyday uses of media by human

beings in every part of the world. To begin, let's consider one case (from fieldwork in Egypt) of how people actually engage with media in the contemporary world.<sup>1</sup>

## Playing With Indexicality

Although it quickly became a major part of his life, Yasseen told me he couldn't remember where he first heard of Pokémon. The eleven-year-old Cairene boy knows he saw pictures of Pokémon in the pages of *Al Arabi Alsaghir*, an Arabic children's magazine, but he did not initially pay them much attention. What he remembers most clearly is buying a packet of Lay's potato chips at a kiosk near his school and finding a small, numbered plastic disk featuring a picture of a Pokémon monster, with its name and the word «Pokémon» rendered in Arabic script. The picture looked familiar, and later, when he got home, he checked through the magazines and found several such pictures. He turned next to the World Wide Web, where dozens of fan sites whetted his imagination. Then he discovered the animated series on Cartoon Network, available via Egypt's Nilesat. Shortly afterward, the series began to play dubbed in Arabic on Egypt's state television and he began to watch this in order to be able to talk about the episodes with fellow students at his school.

Pokémon involves an intertextual web of commodities in which each serves as an indexical sign for all the others, connecting diverse activities and goods across social, political and economic boundaries. Tim Jordan writes:

No single product ... constitutes Pokémon by itself. In addition to the various objects that make up Pokémon, there is a set of logics about what the Pokémon world «is» that ties all the varied products together as Pokémon (Jordan, 2004: 461).

Central to this set of logics is a logic of acquisition which is expressed through a storyworld that exists at the intersection of all the multiple entextualizations of Pokémon, and is evoked in the imaginations of consumers. It is a world not unlike our own, but inhabited by small monsters called Pokémon, which can be captured, tamed, collected, trained, and pitted against the Pokémon of other trainers. Defeated monsters do not die; they faint. Successful monsters «evolve» into more powerful forms. In its narrative entextualizations (television, movies, storybooks, comics), Pokémon features the adventures of 11-year-old trainer Ash and his friends as he collects, trains,

<sup>1</sup> Most of the fieldwork on which this paper is based was conducted at two schools in Cairo 2000-2001. Subsequent interviews at Lays Egypt, the Egyptian Radio and Television Union and Nilesat were conducted in the summer of 2005.

and duels his Pokémon. In its game entextualizations (Gameboy electronic games, computer games, card games), it allows players to virtually collect Pokémon and duel other players, both real and virtual. In its commodity entextualizations (stuffed animals, posters, t-shirts, etc.), it allows consumers to collect and display their favorite Pokémon. In all its forms, Pokémon is about acquisition, as the motto «gotta catch 'em all» (Arabic «*imsukuhum kulhum*») makes clear.

At the same time, global phenomenon like Pokémon, are experienced in localized forms which have their own local meanings in addition to their links to wider global communities. In Cairo, the plastic disks in Lay's potato chips were one of the primary media through which consumers like Yasseen encountered Pokémon. These plastic disks are called *tazu*, and could be collected, or used to play a game. The *tazu* were brainchildren of marketers at Lays-Egypt, the local branch of multinational food corporation Frito-Lay, which began including Pokémon *tazu* in their Lay's and Ruffle's brand potato chips in December 2000. Lay's had previously released sets of *tazu* featuring *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* but Pokémon was by far their most successful such campaign. This campaign brilliantly fulfilled the dual functions of contemporary advertising: it encouraged children to buy the product by linking it to popular social activity, while at the same time it reinforced the brand identity of Lays as a prestige commodity (in contrast to rival *Chipsy*) by linking it to an international referent.

Interest in Pokémon among Yasseen and his peers surged in early 2001 when Egyptian television began airing its Arabic version of Pokémon. Traditionally, children's television in Egypt had been largely limited to the festive season of Ramadan. The growth of satellite television – Egypt's Nilesat is the largest satellite TV provider in the Middle East – made daily children's television such as Cartoon Network available to the upper and middle classes. In response, local government channels had expanded children's programming on its regular broadcasting networks, and the American Pokémon series, dubbed in Arabic, became among the first daily television programs for children.<sup>2</sup>

Several stationery and toy stores in upscale areas of the city had already begun importing small numbers of Pokémon paraphernalia – stickers, T-shirts, backpacks, and collector's

cards – for the expatriate community, whose children had encountered Pokémon back home in the U.S., Canada, Korea, Europe, Japan or the Gulf. The explosion of interest among middle class Egyptian children led to an expansion of imports, and the appearance of cheap pirated versions. When a school friend showed Yasseen the (English-language) playing cards, he was hooked. The cards, imported from the U.S., are expensive by local standards, running as much as LE 20 per packet.<sup>3</sup> To Yasseen, they are worth every piaster. He surfs the web almost daily, keeping track of changes in the international Pokémon card market. Knowing via the web what's happening with the Pokémon market, Yasseen is extremely annoyed by the slowness of the local market in keeping up with shifts in card publication, and he pesters his parents almost every weekend to take him up to the Renaissance Mall, where the first Egyptian franchise of Toys'R'Us has opened. His belief that this store is the best at keeping current with the Pokémon market is rooted in the indexical link he draws between the store and the cards: Toys'R'Us is an American chain, and Pokémon cards come from America, therefore Toys'R'Us can be expected to have the most up-to-date stock.

Keeping current is important to Yasseen because one of the functions of Pokémon is to generate indexical links between him and other collectors around the world. «Pokémon isn't only from the U.S.», Yasseen says. «It's from everywhere. All kids, all over the world, play Pokémon», Pokémon is just one of myriad international commodities – from Pokémon to McDonald's to Starbucks to Planet Hollywood – through which consumers in Egypt «connect» with the wider world of globalization they see represented for them in news media, advertising, soap operas (*musalsal*) and popular film (Abaza 2006, Peterson 2011).

Yasseen's parents recognize that the costs of his Pokémon are high, but they describe it as part of his education. «The web pages, the books and posters are all in English», his mother, Soraya, told me. Learning English is a key to the kind of social mobility they imagine for their son, and the primary reason his parents send him to an expensive private English medium school. Yasseen talks about Pokémon with his friends in Arabic, collects *tazu* and watches the program in Arabic, but many of his private play and collecting activities, particularly his web browsing, are deemed educational since they stretch him to use his English. Since the Arabic forms of most Poké-

<sup>2</sup> The American Pokémon series is a re-edited, re-scripted and English-dubbed transformation of the original Japanese animated series. The Egyptian series is an Arabic-dubbed version of the American series. Thus the American Pokémon series is a transformation of the Japanese original, but is the original hypotext to the Arabic transformations.

<sup>3</sup> At this time, twenty Egyptian pounds was about USD \$4.25, higher than the U.S. price, and a considerable amount in a country where the mean average income is estimated at USD \$1200.

mon names are transliterations of the English names, Pokémon has an inherent cosmopolitan feel.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, within the school, those students who can use English during Pokémon play often do so, expressing their ability to perform in this prestige language even outside of classroom activity. Pokémon thus functions as a class indicator, indexing not only disposable income but family styles of consumption and investment in children's commodities.

Yasseen attends the upscale Modern Language School (MLS) in the Ma'adi Gadida district of Cairo. The school doesn't agree with Yasseen's parents about the benefits of Pokémon. Yasseen once proudly displayed his Pokémon collection at the school but this ended after MLS banned Pokémon from the school grounds. Mrs. Maryam, an MLS administrator, told me that Pokémon «was getting completely out of hand». Children were playing with and trading *tazu* in hallways between classes and skipping extracurricular activities in order to play *tazu*. Moreover, children insisted on filling their notebooks with drawings of Pokémon characters, introducing Pokémon into their school essays and bringing up the games or cartoon shows in class discussions. MLS therefore did not only ban the disruptive *tazu* and trading cards, but *all* Pokémon objects and activities. Notebooks, pencil cases, stickers, t-shirts – all were forbidden on pain of confiscation.

Pokémon's uncontrollable intertextuality was at the heart of Mrs. Maryam's passionate dislike of it. The way Pokémon refused to stay «just» a cartoon but spread into every aspect of children's play, made it «a serious problem», she said. So serious did she deem it that it was not enough to ban Pokémon from school; children needed to be broken of their «obsession» with Pokémon. She spoke with frustration about the failure of parents to stop children from playing with Pokémon at home. «We cannot stop this craze without the parents», she said. «If the children do not play at school and then go home to play, it is as if we've done nothing».

Mrs. Maryam's concerns about Pokémon were part of a much wider public debate. The notion that Pokémon is bad for children had come to be shared by a large section of the Egyptian popular press. The press offered a number of very specific ways in which Pokémon was dangerous. An early and persistent claim was that Pokémon encoded, and thus somehow secretly promoted, Zionism. For example, it was claimed that one of

the symbols on the cards, a stylized asterisk, has six points and therefore is «really» a Mogen David, icon of international Zionism. Since the *tazu* and the TV show do not feature these signs, journalists suggested that the Pokémon monster Stario, a starfish with a jewel on his back, could also be so characterized.

The Arabic names of the Pokémon monsters are intertextual quotations from English Pokémon material, transliterated into Arabic. For Yasseen, who sees Pokémon as connecting him with a wider world, this only adds to the significance of the experience. But for those who lack the knowledge necessary to recognize this intertextual link, the names become empty signifiers, which can be made meaningful by linking them to some referent. The strange-sounding names of Pokémon characters, it was suggested, might mean diabolical things. According to a widely circulated flyer, the name of the black stone snake «Onix» means «Say no to God» (although it does not say in what language). These interpretive practices are classic examples of what Richard Parmentier has called «downshifting» (1994: 18), in which actual links of causality, origin, production, distribution, and flows of capital are systematically misrecognized and replaced with indexical signification that integrates the sign into a locally cogent system of meanings.

Criticism of Pokémon increased in Egypt after the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia issued a *fatwa* against the game in March, 2001, urging all Muslims to beware of this game and prevent their children from playing it so as to «protect their religion and manners». The ban was primarily aimed at the cards; the reason given for the ban was that the game «resembled gambling», because some cards are more valuable than others. But the Mufti also mentioned that many of the commodities contained Zionist symbolism, and that Pokémon promotes evolutionary theories that are incompatible with Islam. Several Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, therefore banned not only the cards but also all Pokémon commodities, and seized and destroyed those already on the shelves. The Egyptian press quoted all of this, and many editorials suggested Egyptian parents should do the same thing.

Yasseen does not read newspapers. After the Grand Mufti issued his *fatwa*, the children's magazines became silent about Pokémon, focusing instead on less regionally controversial aspects of international children's popular culture like Harry Potter. Yasseen nonetheless encounters these controversies

<sup>4</sup> While some Pokémon names, like the emblematic *Pikachu* retain their Japanese names, most of the Pokémon characters were given names that draw on English morphemes. Thus the fiery lizard *Hitokage* was translated into Charmander in English (a combination of «char» and «salamander»), which was subsequently transliterated into Arabic (*Tsharmandar*). No parallel effort was made to translate the English morphemes into Arabic morphemes.

through the medium of his older cousins, Adel and Ahmed, who quote articles to him. Yasseen's cousins used to collect *tazu* but destroyed them after their father read them stories about Pokémon from the newspapers. For several months, they harassed Yasseen about his collection. «They told me Pikachu was Jewish. They said if I buy Pokémon I am putting money into the pockets of the Israelis that they will use to buy guns to kill Palestinians», he told me. Soraya said Yasseen became increasingly depressed, torn between his passion for his collection and his fears that his cousins' stories might be true. «Finally I called my brother and I told him, don't let your sons talk to my son any more. They're messing with his mind». Adel and Ahmed, in other words, have troubled Yasseen's Pokémon practices by introducing another interpretive order, one which positions children like Yasseen as dupes of transnational evildoers. This new interpretive framework is troubling not because it contradicts the values Yasseen associates with Pokémon but because it evokes other values Yasseen also holds dear, and constructs a binary opposition such that one cannot hold both values simultaneously; acceptance of one requires rejection of the other.

Soraya has her own theories about who quotes anti-Pokémon stories and why. An account manager at a marketing firm, her salary adds significantly to the family's income. Her brother's wife, she points out, does not work. «All these families who are against their children playing with Pokémon can't afford it because their wives stay home. They want to believe the stories because it gives them an excuse not to spend money». <sup>5</sup> Multiple orders of interpretation require discursive practices for distinguishing between these orders. Metacommentaries about Pokémon produce or define multiple orders of interpretation. Soraya's metacommentary *on* these metacommentaries frames anti-Pokémon discourses as inauthentic, that is, as after-the-fact justifications for class-differentiating practices of education, consumption, and family structure. In constructing this frame, Soraya deictically positions herself and her son within the remaining order of interpretation, in which Pokémon play is legitimate, educational and empowering.

### Ethnography and Indexical Practice

Yasseen's interpretive practices as described here are his own, engaging his imagination in a web of connections that are both pleasurable for their own sake – the pleasures of owning, ordering, and knowing – and because they link him indexically to a wider world. Play with Pokémon commodities posi-

tions him within the hierarchical order that organizes children's sociality in school, but also imaginatively situates him in a wider world of global children playing with Pokémon. These two concerns are linked by concerns with authenticity; children like Yasseen who are able (through English competence, family income and consumption decisions) to play with the imported cards and games, which are positioned as more «authentically» global than those who play with and collect locally produced *tazu*. Yet these practices are shaped by such social factors as family, class, and education. Activities like Yasseen's, multiplied many times, gave rise to reflections by parents, teachers, sheikhs and media pundits. These discourses led to various forms of media practices by teachers and Yasseen's own cousins, each of which in turn had recursive effects on Yasseen's own practices.

As long as our analysis of media is limited to the analysis of texts, or to the responses given by people to questions about their media use in quasi-experimental situations like surveys, interviews, and focus groups, we will see indexicality only if we look for it. When we engage in thick description of media practices, the indexical dimensions of human engagements with media leaps out at us.

By *media practices* I mean «the embodied sets of activities that humans perform with varying degrees of regularity, competence and flair» using media (Postill 2010: 1). The first, crucial values of a practice approach is empirical; it shifts attention from media texts and technologies to human activities that engage with and make use of these texts and technologies in various ways. A corollary of this is that it draws out attention to the ways experiences of media change as these are embedded in different kinds of broader practices – vegging out in front of the television (Peterson 2002), for example, as opposed to watching television as part of a date, or having the television on to keep one company while cleaning house or making dinner (Moore 1993). But a practice approach also incorporates theoretical concerns with agency (Bourdieu 1977), everyday relations of power (Foucault 1979), embodiment (Schatzki 1996), and historical process (Ortner 2006).

But it is the empirical aspect of practice theory – the focus on media texts and technologies in use as part of human activity – that makes for a natural link between practice theory and ethnography. Understood here as relatively long-term reflexive encounters between scholars and the people they are studying designed to produce intimate descriptions that reveals people's situated knowledge of the structures of everyday life. Ethnog-

<sup>5</sup> For more thorough descriptions of Pokémon in Egypt, see Peterson 2010, 2011.

raphy is marked by «thick description» (Geertz 1973), that is, descriptive attention to the myriad details that comprise everyday life among any community and which are necessary to recognizing the range of meanings activities have for the people engaged in them. But ethnography is also marked by «thick contextualization» (Ortner 2006), an effort to avoid the parsimony prized in laboratory science by including as many «variables» and external contexts the description points to, or which may possibly be relevant to the meanings of the activities being described. Practice theory is well situated to guide ethnographic enquiry and to analyze ethnographic data.

## Indexicality and Practice

Indexicality – meaning something by being connected to it – is at the heart of many media practices, both in performance and in imaginative engagements. Indexical signs range from those whose meaning entirely derives from context (such as personal pronouns) to those that identify a sign category («book») and link it to a context («*this* book») to signs where signifier and referent are connected by proximity, causality, ownership, origin or other relationship of contiguity. Whereas European semiotics, taking its initial cues from de Saussure, explores meaning primarily in terms of binary contrasts within fields of arbitrarily assigned social signification, American semiotics, derived from the work of Peirce, attends not only to arbitrary signs (symbols) but to such «motivated» sign relations as iconicity and indexicality. Moreover, Peircean semiotics assumes that iconicity, indexicality and conventionality work in combination as part of a dynamic process of semiosis. As icons, signs provide information about the world. As indexes, signs direct attention to some aspect of the world through the information provided by iconicity. As symbols, signs ground the information provided iconically, and the indication as to what this information applies, in a socially-constituted context. Indexicality plays the crucial role of linking real-world phenomena (objects, sounds, images, sensations) to the arbitrary domain of learned symbolic concepts and categories circulating within particular social systems. Pokémon exists as constellations of images and objects circulating globally, yet the value of these icons, from monsters to human characters to brand logos, relies on indexical linkages through which people connect them to locally relevant social categorizations.

Indexicality can produce meaning in many ways. A sign may be genuinely connected to its referent by some real world process and recognized as such. Egyptians in Egypt mostly

recognize Pokémon as an American global phenomenon, and the Arabic Pokémon is in fact a transliteration and translation of the English language products created by Nintendo North America.<sup>6</sup> Yet Pokémon also simultaneously indexes a sense of «Japaneseness» that reflects knowledge of their origins with a Japanese game company. Finally, as in the case of the many rumors in Egypt about Pokémon, the signs can index connections that are not empirically true but which nonetheless correspond to socially shared beliefs and reflect cultural concerns.

By *indexical practices* then, I mean activities in which people employ indexicality as part of their active meaning-making within specific social fields. Indexical practices are, for example, central to identity construction. People construct themselves as particular kinds of persons by the ways in which they speak and act, which are understood by those around them as indexing their character; but they also explicitly use indexes to link themselves to relevant social categorization such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, caste, etc., or to persons, places and objects that serve as signs of particular social characteristics. Media texts and technologies play crucial roles both as indexical signs and as vehicles for signification. Using the example of Yaseen's Pokémon play, I want to define and describe at least five different levels of indexicality, or indexical orders (Silverstein 2003: 193) to which media scholars should routinely attend.

## Intertextuality

Perhaps the most well-studied form of indexical practice is *intertextuality*, creating meaning by mimicking media elements from one context to another. Intertextuality, that is, involves the active social process of appropriating a discourse or discursive element from one setting (decontextualization) and replicating it in another (recontextualization) (Bauman and Briggs 1990, Briggs and Bauman 1992, Silverstein and Urban 1996) *as well as* the recognition of those links by media consumers as part of their media interpretation. Intertextuality is particularly crucial for those phenomena like Pokémon that rely on the cross-media promotion and transmedia storytelling that were glossed by the term *convergence*.

Intertextuality leaps out at us when we consider contemporary multimedia phenomena such as Pokémon. First, Pokémon itself, as a global multimedia phenomenon, exists only as a vast cluster of mutually referential texts and related technologies. There is no master text for Pokémon, and no primary

<sup>6</sup> And while the icons have remained the same, the Pokémon products in North America have been thoroughly redesigned from their Japanese originals to reflect US cultural contexts (Katsuno and Maret 2004).

medium of expression. Pokémon exists simultaneously as an animated television series, an electronic game, a comic book, several movies, myriad books, posters, notebooks, stickers, stuffed animals, and more. Pokémon is an exemplar of Baudrillard's «simulacrum», a set of representations in which each is a replica or close transformation of another, and no original exists (Baudrillard 1995, Jameson 1984).

Second, there are very real links made between Pokémon and local institutions capitalizing on, and adding to, the vast global intertextual network by creating new intertextual references. The idea behind the intertextual quoting between Lay's and its Pokémon *tazu* and advertisements was twofold. First, to appeal to the schoolchildren who are the primary consumers of the snack-sized chips bags, and second, to metonymically link their international brand to internationally recognized symbols, building on local conventions that generally associate higher status to international products over locally-manufactured products (see Peterson 2011).

### Paradeixis

Intertextuality thus refers to a concrete set of discursive and mimetic indexical processes involving texts that inter-refer to one another through shared graphic images, slogans, representations of actions, and other elements. The social meaning of these intertextual references involves another level of indexical practice, which I will call (with a nod to Gerard Genette) *paradeixis*. Paradeixis refers to the practice of building indexical networks that have social consequences (Genette 1998).

The indexicality of Pokémon, the fact that the Pokémon texts and technologies available in Egypt point to related texts and technologies in other parts of the world allows Yaseen to imagine himself as part of a community much larger than his school, his neighborhood, even his country. His privileging of particular modes of Pokémon play (imported cards over local *tazu*) he associates with the world outside Egypt, and his insistence on buying them at a store whose U.S. franchise (expressed iconically by its name and logo) allows him to create a cosmopolitan identity that expresses his position as a member of Egypt's upper class elite (see Peterson 2011). Yet the intertextuality of Pokémon came to mean something very different to school administrators, who acted on the principle that Pokémon cards, games, stickers, notebooks and backpacks, and even children's drawings of the characters, carried the realm of play into the realms of work and learning, where they did not belong, and so had to be disciplined. Still other Egyptians associated a moral stigma to the gaming cards and *tazu* on the basis of media reports from the Gulf states.

There are at least three different paradeictic frames in operation. For the schoolchildren, the intertextual web of Pokémon allowed it to be many things to many people. It was a many-layered medium through which they could express peer hierarchies. Not only did the kind and nature of Pokémon entextualizations speak to issues of class by exhibiting how much discretionary income parents would spend on relatively expensive luxury goods, but Pokémon allows the creation or reproduction of status through demonstrating knowledge of Pokémon, skill at game play, ability to draw the characters, ability to quote lines or recount an episode, and so forth (Peterson 2010).

For Mrs. Maryam, though, the intertextuality signified the opposite, weaving many things into one. The intertextual capacity of Pokémon to link so many commodities together meant that it refused to stay «just a game», that is, a practice that could be restricted to categories of «leisure time» and restricted from categories of «work» and «education». Through Pokémon's multiple iconic signs on pencils, notebooks, t-shirts, stickers, lunch boxes, and myriad other commodities supposed to be tools within the social field of «schoolwork», Pokémon continues to exert a powerful hold on children's imaginations. It also extends from practices of play into such practices as essay writing, note taking, and class discussion. For Mrs. Maryam, this represents that breakdown of a necessary cultural order. Because Pokémon is quoted through so many different texts and activities, every entextualization becomes a symptom of the same underlying disorder.

A disruption of a *moral* order was framed by those who resisted Pokémon as dangerously foreign. Connections based on where Pokémon products are manufactured, how they are distributed and where money spent on them flows transnationally are «downshifted» (Parmentier 1994) into an alternative indexical order already present in the Egyptian cultural repertoire. According to this model, Pokémon disrupts the moral order as a foreign intrusion that seduces children into activities that are both anti-Islamic and unpatriotic. Debates over the potential moral implications of Pokémon in the Gulf states offer an alternative transnational authority which can be indexed in support of local Egyptian debates.

### Lifestyle Emblemization

Particular clusters in indexical signs may come to signify a particular lifestyle, a process Michael Silverstein refers to as «lifestyle emblemization» or «convention-dependent-indexical iconicity» (Silverstein 2003). In the Egyptian case, the media presents an image of global (non-Egyptian) Pokémon players who are adept in a technical vocabulary of Pokémon play. By



learning this language, and particularly by learning it in English – through such media as videos, Internet and magazines – young Egyptians employ it as a prestige register. Thus, the language of play becomes a way of speaking that indexically entails certain notions of prestigious social classes or genres that lie outside Egypt. Among Egyptians, as for many in the third world, the hegemony of places like the US and Japan «make their middle classes the international standard» (O’Dougherty, 2002: 4). When English-speaking Egyptian kids use this register in the *actual context* of playing Pokémon, they become the «cosmopolitan person» that is iconic of the metaphorical «fashion of speaking» employed by children living abroad, eliciting prestige as a result of this high level of performance. The social fields in which media play particular functions, have specific values and can be used to achieve social goods.

### Hyperdeixis

Hyperdeixis involves the creation of new forms of media out of old in ways that transform the indexical relations that give these new forms meanings.<sup>7</sup> Pokémon players often receive Pokémon cards as part of their play, or by trading them, and the value of the cards may shift (for the students) as they are linked to the contexts in which they won them. Because the focus is on the transformation of indexical linkages (rather than the intertextual quoting in itself), hyperdeixis particularly refers to various ways in which people embed media texts in their everyday lives. One parent at MLS who would not allow her son to buy Pokémon goods told me she had discovered he was using his considerable artistic talents to draw pictures of fellow students (in a Manga-style) interacting with various Pokémon characters. Such media localize and personalize the global commodity in ways regular consumption cannot, and bring considerable status and popularity to the young artist.

Describing a set of young girls playing on an international school playground, Peterson (2010) points out that Pokémon can escape commodities altogether through creative hyperdeixis:

These girls were playing a form of Pokémon, a multibillion dollar industry of games, toys, videos and movies, apparel and other franchised commodities. Their play made no immediate use of any of Pokémon’s thousands of commodified forms. Yet the play indexed the commodities; without the videos and playing cards, their game could not exist. The children

spontaneously invented a game played only with their bodies, which nonetheless relies on a shared experience of consumption carried into the playing field from other contexts. These girls’ play is both an example and an emblem of processes of localization. In creating their game, the girls disembedded elements of Pokémon from their usual contexts of use, creatively transformed them, and pragmatically put them to work in a new context, toward an immediate, practical and very social goal (Peterson 2010: 234).

### Metadeixis

The metadeictic level is one of the most interesting, because it involves deliberate discursive efforts on the part of social actors to articulate, evaluate and often constrain the meanings of indexical links. Metadeictic discourses are public representations of indexical relationships, stories people tell about how and why things are interconnected. Metadeixis occurs when media accounts attempt to define or clarify the nature of indexical relations between a recontextualized cultural form and its original referents (real or imaginary). Metadeixis is often at the heart of moral panics (Cohen 1980) and social dramas (Wagner-Pacific 1986).

The concerns about the possible negative effects of Pokémon offer a clear case of a metadeictic debate, that is, a debate over the nature of the links Pokémon indexes. Play involves being serious about something that is not at all serious. Play thus creates a tension in many societies as educators, religious leaders, psychologists, politicians and others worry about play: what is a reasonable amount of play and what is a dangerous obsession that may harm an individual or society at large? What constitutes play and what constitutes work are, of course, cultural distinctions related to those issues of taste and education that construct kinds of persons.

But more private conversations between parents, within families and between parents and educators are also important, as these are the locations in which people try out the discourses they’ve heard through media, receiving affirmation or disagreement over the positions they assume. Soraya’s theories about who quotes anti-Pokémon stories and why, is also a metadeictic discourse, one that comments on how and why people position themselves in particular places within the local universe of discourse about Pokémon.

<sup>7</sup> I use the term «hyperdeixis» following Genette’s (1998) discussions of intertextuality, particularly his discussion of the relations between hypotext (an origin text from which elements are appropriated) and hypertexts (transformed texts whose original is the hypotext). Here, of course, I am focusing on the creation of indexical links and not mimetic transformations.

## New Media

Surprisingly, given the ubiquitous association of the terms «connected» and «link» to new media, iconicity is also frequently overstressed in semiotic study of the Internet and its many related technologies. Partly, this is related to the importance of graphics to the success of the Internet itself: «The ability to manipulate pictorial information is certainly a crucial reason for the explosion of the Internet and the Web since the mid-1990s. Without images, with computer-mediated interactions limited to the alphanumeric set, electronic communication might have been forever circumscribed to computer professionals and a few crucial business / military applications, as it was for a few decades» (Codognet 2002: 45).

The rise of new media, in which to own the means of consumption is to own the means of production, and social media, in which «sharing» through linking is the heart of media practices, has only increased the importance of indexicality as the central semiotic process in media practices. Intertextuality is everywhere in new media through ease of replicability («cutting and pasting»), sharing, and creating hyperlinks that not only point to, but lead to, indexed texts. The capacity to comment on and share entire texts leads to regular hyperdeictic practices. Locally these build up into varied paradeictic practices valuable and valued in particular social fields (as a very general example, consider the uses of Facebook in its country of origin, and the political uses to which it was put by Arab users in North Africa during the 2011 uprisings). Own-

ership of particular technologies (Mac versus PC, iPhone versus Android) and engagement in particular media practices, aided by corporate branding campaigns, can lead to lifestyle emblemization, which can be quite different in different local contexts. Metadeictic discourses arise again and again as people evaluate and seek to clarify the meanings of these indexical practices.

Clearly, empirical research on the indexicality of media practices with social media and new media is urgently needed.

## Conclusion

The media saturated universe in which we live is more complicated than any variation on text-message-receiver approach can possibly encompass. It is a world of texts-in-circulation, in which cultural forms are appropriated, transformed into new media forms, circulated through multiple formal and informal circuits, further appropriated and transformed into yet new forms. In each node of every circuit, human engagements with media include not only passive consumption, but also (and more often) transformation, appropriation, resistance, sharing, and many other possibilities.

Most importantly for my argument, as texts circulate, they accumulate meanings as they point to prior nodes in the networks of their global flow. Recognition of this fact necessitates an approach to media that puts indexicality at its center.

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