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Technologies, texts, translations: Meaning making in health care workplaces

In this talk, we explore meaning making in environments where health professionals work together on complex practical tasks: The Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and the Operating Theatre (OT). Taking these environments as case studies, we consider how ‘technology’ might be accounted for within a social semiotic framework. In the ICU and OT, technologies make available live information about the patient (e.g. their heart beat), e.g. on screens. Our aim is, first, to develop a social semiotic account of how this information is presented, visually and/or aurally; how and when team members engage with (‘read’) what is presented; and how in a variety of modes they communicate and respond to their reading of information. Second, we aim to characterize how technology ‘translates’ sensory information (in this case, about the patient), and how (some of) these translations are subsequently ‘translated’ by human actors (in this case, health professionals), prompting further action. Third, we reflect on our empirical examples to consider the primacy of technology in accounts of meaning making.