The Role of New Technologies on Contemporary Communication

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Human communication, in its various forms and systems of signs has allowed for the addition of cultural values along the course of human history, through their conservation and transmission from one generation to the next, a process which confers on culture its cumulative character. Information, specific to the human world, has, itself, a particular role. The information field, generalized, changes within us the feeling of time. Man’s relationship with nature, instead of being just lived, practiced in an obscure manner, gains a statute of stability, of consistency, which transforms it into a reality with its own laws and orderly permanence. Technical activity, edifying the world of technical objects and generalizing the objective mediation between man and nature, links man to nature through a connection that is much richer and well defined than that of the specific reaction of collective labor. The transformations of contemporary communication due to new technologies imply and insistently demand modifications especially in the area of human adaptability.

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1. Introduction

Culture is inconceivable outside of its communicational moment, because its establishment itself necessarily implies that perpetual exchange between sources and receivers, between created values and their broad socialization. In a metaphorical perspective, this moment of culture appears as an ensemble of communicating vessels which tend to equalize their levels, but which are fated to remain forever uneven, because the system is permanently open.

The receiving modalities vary along with the media. Conceptual knowledge and verbal transmission are the basis of “true culture”. Each medium contributes in its own way to the formation of culture. Cultural patterns, which are the configurations along which society guides itself, do not exist except within and by communication. Signs are constituted in codes through which communication is established and behavior adjusted. The code allows those who use is to ensure that they are dealing with a common message with a configuration that, in the cultural context proposes, implies or not one reaction or another. “Codes have in common the fact that they are cultural artifacts, instruments which, according to symbols, allow those who use them to recognize each other; they understand both the signs of a very different nature and the no less diverse rules that ensure their functioning; they are instruments destined to elaborate behaviors in order to maintain social coherence. The most familiar code is, without a doubt, language.”20 We must mention that the information source seeks a desired message through an ensemble of possible messages and that the message chosen may be made up from written or spoken words, images, music etc. We think of communication as transmission of information: meaning that when we communicate, we transmit information. The anthropology of communication initiated by the Palo Alto school, however, changes this perspective: the idea is that actually communication serves more likely for the structured, stabilizing or modifying human relations. The prime function of communication is rather one tied to the idea of relation, to the construction of human relations, than one of transmission of information. The error in interpreting communication is tied to a certain type of evolution that the West went through.

Communication is not, however, destined first of all and in its essence to supply information. This supplying of information is a late acquisition; communication is designed, as stated earlier, for the installation of relations, the establishing of structure, the modifications and stabilizing of relationships. This means that the problem which we should investigate in the context of communication is that of the attitude, behavior or action which comes as a result of communication. “Communication is, so to speak, angled towards changing the attitude of others, their decisions or behavior. This is what we are interested in the process of communication.”21

Information, specific to the world of man, has its own distinct role. The generalized information field changes the way we perceive time: the recoil effect, for a long time considered as a factor of objectivity, must take into account, today, the new actuality effect, the power of which is, at its limit, to intermingle with perception. The area of perception itself, which was limited and is limited, rigorously

20 René Berger – Ibid, pag.128
speaking, only to what they could grasp with their senses – a few meters for hearing, a few thousand meters for sight, a few centimeters for touch – extends to the entire planet and even beyond.

The space-time gap conditions, at the same time, the environment, its transmission and the receiver. In the case of the press, which uses writing, innumerable means are employed, according to various needs, to activate the impact: the font size of titles, page layouts (five columns for the first page), press pictures, etc. What remains is the fact that staggered transmission cannot catch up, by definition, to instant transmission or “live” transmission as it is sometimes called, associated mainly with radio and television.

"The abolishment of distances and physical barriers redirects our creations in the noticing and esthetic perception of real time. Telematics procedures open the way to a new type of "relational", which harmonizes the individual to the collective, letting through a glimpse of the birth of a new collective "intelligence" which he calls distributed intelligence"22.

2. Audio-visual message and language

Doubtless, there are many points of incidence of television language and cinema language, which has allowed generalizations regarding “visual codes”, the elaboration of studies on the semiology of visual messages based on common analyses, etc.

Television, similar to cinema, puts us in contact with a complex communication phenomenon, within which iconic verbal and audio messages come into play either simultaneously or sequentially, conferring a contextual richness from which various connotations sprout. Information leaves the limited circle of connoisseurs and privileged individuals; it spreads in all directions in order to propagate in a mass field made up of new and diverse circuits. Without being directed towards a specific receiver, it impresses thousands of random receivers; it triggers more or less stable formations which may either crystalize in public or remain in a, so to speak, gaseous form. Homogenization is no longer an elite-only question; other processes appear. Mass information becomes a product; it takes part in the event; and is maybe capable of actually creating it. “Visual articulation, complex in and of itself (shapes which combine into signs, signs which may combine into collocations, x elements which may be created from the combination of signs23 integrated with the complementary articulations of sounds and words concur to the formation of the film or television receiver’s impression of being confronted with a message which gives him back reality”.

The problem of the analogy between an image and represented reality is one of the basic elements of language studies which operate with iconic signs, meaning also audio-visual language. The image is not the simple tautological reproduction of an object. Between the image and a certain part of reality there exists only a proportion of formal similarity, the iconic sign being not the analogue of objects but of the properties of the represented object. Or, as Umberto Eco mentions, the iconic sign builds a model of relations homologous to the model of perceptive relations that we build, knowing and rebuilding the object. Precisely due to this, the iconic nature of a message apt for reaching the receiver, that is to say decoded by the receiver, cannot be the result of an arbitrary option or an improvised act of the source. It is socially and historically determined, meaning that each society “sees” in a particular manner, “draws” or visually “represents” according to specific conventions.

The association of images in which reality is represented based on conventions known to the receiver from a previous experience becomes an iconic sign, being granted sometimes the power of a symbol and forcing the spectator to re-translate it in the language of interior discourse. In the case of the television viewer this interior discourse has a lower chance of occurring as compared to the cinema viewer, due to the discretism, the mosaic-like allure of both the image and television discourse in its entirety. The environment that determines the television viewer to shift in a relatively short timeframe to the perception of another message of a different nature, determines, it would seem, a certain superficiality of his intellectual participation. Television was born under the sign of the “live” and still bears the mark of this manner of transmitting an image.

3. The importance of communication technologies

It is obvious that technology manipulates spatial and temporal contexts serving as a background for communication. Engineers and technicians, through their accomplishments, unknowingly and remaining attentive to the functionalities of their technical instruments, manipulate, therefore, communication processes. The technical restraints of their instruments will act upon the direction of their users’ communication. This is what we observe, for example, in the case of the Internet, which places its users “in a different universe”. Navigation of the Internet network, through the modification of physical and sensorial referents which it implies, facilitates the appearance of new directions. This “other world” has precise characteristics. It is a space which is defined by opposition to the ordinary, day-to-day, “real-life” space. Travel breaks away from physical effort. “Journeys” are easy; we “navigate”. Actually we “click” words and hypertext images shown on the screen. We place ourselves within the texts or images on screen as all-knowing, more or less certain, just as we would place ourselves in physical locations such as

22 Fred Forest, Pour un art actuel, L’Harttman, Paris, 1998, pag. 54
23 Umberto Eco, „Semiole des messages visuel“, in Comunications, nr. 15/1970.
the cities of Iași or Bucharest. "Most often, the network becomes a global place which has almost lost its links to geographical space (presently, IT research is taking place so that the "navigator" may visualize hypertext links and see the relations structure of a series of pages, finding his bearings "as if on a map"). The impossibility of usual visual marking of the various information spaces in which one enters (a university, a research center, a library, an administrative center) is the origin of a fundamental disorientation. For now though, this particular disorientation gives us the new and fascinating sensation that we find ourselves in an unusual space". This is also a "world of silence", and such a world is, for an entire generation, the "other world". A world without "noise" both figuratively and literally. It is, therefore a world in opposition to the actual one, dominated by the noise of vehicles and cars, with fights and deafening conflicts of opinion; thus, an "ecological" world. We know that we are journeying in a "network" that occupies national territories and erases borders. The user enters world without a frontier. This is also a paradox in being in a world without actually being in it. There, we are free of any constraint or sanction (in a world without sanctions, disconnects are accidental and remedied). And the paradox is the basis of man’s fascination for "virtual worlds", worlds which exist without existing. This new world offers, thus, the feeling of ruling time and space. The need, in order to travel quickly, to connect at an hour when the network is less busy also takes its toll on the loss of temporal markers.

4. Man’s relation to the world of new technologies

It is necessary to point out the possibility at our disposal, that of entering the technical object in order to find there the "human reality" which it bears. "The relation of man to nature, instead of being simply lived, practiced in an obscure way, is granted a stable, consistent state, which transforms it into a reality with its own laws and ordered permanence. Technical activity, by edifying the world of technical objects and generalizing objective mediation between man and nature, ties man to nature along the lines of a much richer and well defined connection than that of the specific reaction of collective labor. A convertibility of the human in the natural and of the natural in the human is instituted through technical schematism". In such a case, we "live" the object, we find ourselves, as related to it, in a state of embodiment; this happens when we wear glasses or drive a car. The instrument is, so to speak, an extension of ourselves, of our own body. It is relatively transparent (I don’t see my glasses but I do see through them). However, my perception of the world – as related to my natural perception - will be radically modified: it will be, at the same time, reduced and amplified. The embodiment relation is relatively simple and primitive. It risks, pure and simple, by the virtue of instrument’s quasi-transparency, to be forgotten, meaning that it is considered natural. The "ego" of the subject is an integral part of the machine. This situation does not take place without remembering the "immersion" phenomena in multimedia networks. The user forgets about the instruments which allow him to explore. These have become an integral part of the exploring being, which is not as "involved" in the virtual micro-world which it discovers, as it is in the instruments which make the exploration possible.

However, towards the technical object, man can adopt a different position because this technical object forces him to transform his relation with the world. He can, as Simondon inheres, detach from the human reality crystalized in the technical object and distance himself from it. The instrument becomes exterior, being at the same time timed to the world. Vision stops upon encountering the instrument but does not traverse it. The technical object is presented to us, thus, as something to be deciphered. We enter in a "hermeneutical" relation with it. It is what happens when we see the code of a program appear on the screen of a minicomputer. The instrument is transformed into something else. It is presented not as an extension of the body, but as an extension of language; as a text, in fact.

5. Reading the image

In his paper “Imaginea vizuală. Aspecte teoretice” (The visual image. Theoretical aspects), published by Marincas in the year 2000 in Timișoara, Lucian Ioniță asks himself what is the process through which we understand photographs and film? How do we understand a picture or a movie? What is the means of receiving the information transmitted through images such as obscure camera? Is it a spontaneous process, a natural ability, inborn or culturally instilled? Studies referring to members of human collectivities considered primitive prove that they do not know how to follow a movie. They perceive insignificant details of the movie but do not understand its general purpose. According to McLuhan, the explanation is that "many conventions of writing are included even in non-verbal forms of expression, such as cinema". The conclusion that can be taken away from this is that man cannot

27 McLuhan, Marshall, Galaxia Gutemberg,1975, pag. 74
understand a film without having gone through a certain initiation. The same opinion is shared by Jean Mitry: "Just as it is necessary for us to learn to read, we must learn to see, in other words, to notice the relations, suggestions that lay beyond the image, just as in literature they lay beyond words". However, certain aspects seem to contradict in away to some extent the above stated idea. Experience shows that spectators at the first viewing of a movie have no difficulty in understanding moving images. We may say that we are dealing with a problem of receiving in different registers, determined by the different previous experience of European spectators on the one hand, and of these communities on the other. Thus, we can explain the success and fast spreading of the cinema theater in all corners of the world, an impossible feat if we would not admit that spectators managed to understand movies from the very first projection, without any prior training. Toy Paul Madsen considers that: "Film is a language that we learned from a society drenched in mass-media, but from such an early age that it was inherent to us just as language, without being conscious of the effort or the process of its learning. Toddlers ingest television progranng along with their mother’s milk".

"It could be said that the first films, those of the brothers Lumière, were not movies per-se, but simply "cinematic photographs", and that the new specific language had not yet appeared. The distinction is real, but it only moves the question by one step: do we learn to understand a photographic image or not? We should remember another fact, children, from a young age, follow and seem to understand movies addressed to them. Can we speak of a form of learning? Parents talk, name objects, and enter into dialogue with the child. Their physical actions are, most of the time, accompanied by a verbal action. The child, in turn, speaks, and the parents have the possibility to correct his mistakes. None of these things are valid in the case of dynamic images, films or television. Neither the parents nor the children “emit” images. They are simply receivers, which is a very distinctive state as compared to that of a speaker of a natural language. It is true that they could draw certain subjects, but this happens at an age when the child has already proven that he recognizes what is visually represented. Just as true is that parents show children albums of animals, along with explanations such as “this is a lion” or a horse, or a bear, etc. Through these, certain links between names and images are formed but not the ability to identify the shape per-se, meaning to notice its component parts and its defining structure. The child will differentiate the image of a horse from that of a lion, not because he learned what the respective animals are called but because their images themselves are different; and he can notice this”. Let’s review: we came to take into account opinions and arguments which support two mutually exclusive statements: on the one hand, that in order to understand a movie or a photograph a prior initiation is necessary and on the other, that film and photography are accessible to anyone. "This opposition has, still, a relative character; this is what we propose to show next. Along with the antinomy of "figurative/non-figurative" another could be proposed, a complementary one, which lays on an axis the notions: "specular image", which tends towards the quality of images obtained through plane mirror reflection, in regards to the precision of detail rendering, of glow interval, etc. Their most jarring property is in provoking in the viewer what has been called the "impression of reality", of being or having been there, in other words, the sensation that in front of their eyes is precisely the subject being photographed, filmed or transmitted live on television. In the other direction are “non-specular images”, which tend to depart from the model of plane mirror reflection, remaining, still, figurative. Even though an exact line of division cannot be drawn between the two categories of images, the difference is."

If the cinema theater is considered the demiurge of an imaginary world and, according to Edgar Morin, even of an imaginary man, television reveals its specificity, first of all, through the possibility of offering to man a wide contact with the real, in opening for him windows towards the world, shrinking the distance between the subject and the object and giving the object back in its “reality”. Of course this reality is easier or more pronouncedly affected by the “partiality” of the camera and the optics of the emisor, but nevertheless, within the framework of live broadcasts, the transfiguration of the real, of the existential fact is not akin to the nature and proportion of its transfiguration in cinema.

The identifying of transmitted moments, editing and projection, in the case of live broadcast, determines the superposition of real time if televisual time, which enforces in equal measure the technical, psychological, artistic problem both in what relates to the phenomenon of “emission” as well as the phenomenon of “receiving”. The images being broadcast live are not always an extremely faithful reflection of the real event, such as may be believed, but more or less an interpretation of it. The camera can bring on the screen significant images of the real event, images that function in a semiotic manner or, by opposition, images that don’t say anything or that, by capturing insignificant details, alter the logic of editing and, it is implied, the process of decoding the images in the mind of the television viewer, as well as the process of internal discourse. With this last phrase we reach another controversial problem tied to verbal language and the non-verbal elements in the filmic and cinematographic message.

Some theoreticians deny the discursive possibilities of iconic language, reducing its function to the simple reproduction of an object. Others, au contraire, maintain that in certain circumstances, independent of the presence of certain explicit linguistic elements that accompany images, they may have

28 Mitry, Jean, Dictionnaire du cinéma, Paris, Librairie Larousse1963, pag. 5
a sense, a verbal connotation. Umberto Eco, for example, pleads for the idea of the ambivalence of visual and audio, observing that certain verbal expressions have visual connotations, just as messages composed from iconic signs can have a verbal connotation. In different terms, what represents a veritable television or cinematographic message, even in the absence of an explicit verbal element, contains, implicitly, this element. Defending this idea, Emilio Garoni observes that the non-verbal, the image in a cinematographic or television message, respectively, could not interpret in and of itself a semiotic component, therefore its image configuration could not be perceived per-se, if a possibility of verbal reformulation (at least partial) would not be present, implicitly or explicitly, in the message itself. This idea is in accord with that of Boris Eichenbaum about the process of “interior discourse” in the mind of television viewers. From this perspective, Christian Metz’ known formula of film discourse “language without a language” could be reformulated in terms of: “language without a language, associated to an interior verbal language”. Thus we arrive at the request of considering visual messages as true messages, along with other criteria and based on that of the semiotic function of the images which it trades in. We keep in mind, as a consequence, the necessity of new research, particularly in those fields of message production that operate, par excellence, with images; in the absence of the verbal or in the presence of certain summary linguistic elements, such as that of television advertising or animated movies, for example, very often we are confronted with a cryptic language or with images which don’t make sense to the receiver. The opportunity of using in visual representation, in the elaboration of television imagery of conventions largely recognized by the public, is understood; precisely because the degree of perception of the message, its intelligibility, depend on the measure to which the receiver understands within it an ensemble of signs which they can identify in their own repertoire.

Communication, even anonymous, is still communication. Today, new types of links correspond to the state of dispersion specific to the masses. Listeners and spectators which branch simultaneously on the same event do not constitute, of course, a community, and not even a communion, even though it is hard to refute the idea that they tend towards it.

6. The transformations of contemporary communication

It is interesting to see what goes on when information requests the broadcast of news to a larger number of receivers, in a faster manner and as cheaply as possible. It can enlarge and accelerate its rhythm of distribution. This is what happens with mainstream, heavy circulation media. However, regardless of how the prices may be and how fast the means of transportation, press, as well as the book, remains a written object which requires a special language and for this reason is limited by the frontiers of language. Some journals and periodicals remedy this situation by publishing translations; in order to dampen the limitations of linguistic frontiers and the relative slowness of the verbal message, press then turns to photography; a change which we may consider major. The communication of photography is devoid of concepts, proposing a global image within which, after a reader’s quick glance, a still diffuse message is sketched. As opposed to language, which is articulated in sequences and phrases, which therefore, develop in time, the image is offered from the start as a field in which we enter, not step by step and through successive visits, but through instantaneous “assembly”-type operations and linkage. The photographic message is, however, never alone in the press; a caption always develops its meaning. On the one hand, the image has an impact with an almost instantaneous effect on the reader of any linguistic community he may be part of; on the other, the text orders the image along the intelligibility characteristic to the language of the receiver. Therefore, from the image to the print and from the print to the image, a double movement takes place, which both modifies and accelerates communication. We are, however, so used to this procedure, that we barely realize some of its effects.

Graphic and verbal communication do not result from the addition of the two means: they propose, effectively, a new type of communication which journals, magazines, comics, leaflets, banners and insignia use. What is happening with information now, however, when its transmission speed rises defying the simultaneous translation and the text-image hybridization, the limit of which is very quickly reached. The acceleration of information is not taking place as we might imagine, through the acceleration of the production and dispersal of printed messages or by the acceleration of translation: verbal and iconic communication is transformed in televised image. Kinetic visualization produces a new “generalized tele-medium”. Thus, a mutation occurs. One may object, still, that image does not change anything in the autonomy of the linguistic system. The broadcast of the Gulf War, even though it was directly addressed to hundreds of millions of spectators, was transmitted in the language of each receiving country. However, we should be mindful of our conclusions. On the one hand, commentators were expressing themselves each in their respective linguistic system. Though, staying in this point would mean no less than admitting the nature of the new fact that is generated here: when an event has a verbal origin as it usually happens, and as it happened up to now, all that which is linked to this event is conceived, transmitted, broadcast, explained and commented based on the verbal framework that gave birth to it and that is established both in and through language, but when the event has, as was the case of the broadcast of the Gulf War, a televisual origin, the languages of the respective receivers are not enough to explain the images, and the images surpass the frame of the commentary, garnering a new identity for the message in which everything is conceived, transmitted, broadcast, explained according to the moving image which makes up its underlying principle. Traditionally, commentary was almost exclusively text-based: gloss, annotation,
commentary, interpretation, etc. However, televised commentary is based only on images, starting from an initially "linguistic" piece of information, the live broadcast of which makes the most skilled commentator in the impossibility of "verbalizing" at the same time it unfolds.

The phenomenon is new. According to linguists, the structure of language changes only slightly, very slowly and according to the ways tied more to their internal economy than to external actions: "The phonetic system and fundamental type are extremely conservative, observes Sapir, even though their appearance might contradict that. The desire to maintain the system, the tendency to counterbalance and infract upon this system through a complicated suite of supplementary transformations, takes centuries or even millennia. However, one may ask the question of whether the conditions of new media, and especially visual information, are not about to modify this status quo. With television, you are presented first with the moving image and then, even if the commentary continues to pass through linguistic forms, the spectator follows the show, doubtlessly, in agreement with the verbal explanations, but first on the continuous background of images to which he is more sensitive as they are, and could only be, less verbalized. Starting from here, we can ask ourselves if language, put in contact with the image (with an image, which does not have to have a traditional role of illustrating a text or a word) will remain intact. We will see that the new means, embodying the current system, transform the whole of communication time. The notions of "author", "reader", "public" which sufficed up to this point, are finding competition in a new series of term, "listener", "viewer", "receiver" which attest that this communication is no longer exclusive to writing or printing. The problems which regard it appear from a new association which seems to better cover the generic terms of "emisor" and "receiver". As soon as the concept is regularly confronted with the image, for the viewer there appears an opportunity to take note of a certain insufficiency of the former as compared to the latter. Verbal communication is composed of discursive operations which are adjusted from one stage to another; a defining instrument, the concept works by starting from a stable situation. Visual image not only has a global effect, but possesses also the quality of spontaneity, tied to the situation on train to establish, along with all of the implied accidents, that which has not yet come to pass. Operating in real time, through the contrast of substance-shape, it comports an immediateness which cautions the dissociation of time and space that language makes: linear analysis being replaced through global impact.

At the cinema or on television, the impression of reality is even greater. In fact, anyone who goes into an obscure hall loses contact with the exterior reality, as well as with the closest neighbors, and the only thing that matters is what goes on the big screen. Visual image becomes all-ruling, tyrannical. The cinema surpasses photography because it is the only one able to inject in the reality of image the reality of movement, realizing and imagining to a point theretofore unreachable. For a long time, the novel was granted the merit of realizing the imaginary, at least for as long as it dominated verbal communication. Since the imaginary can today be realized at the cinema, on television or at the computer, isn't it, perhaps, preferable to admit that we are not speaking about the imaginary, in general, but of a specific one, tied to the particular medium, which is precisely cinema, television, the computer? Doubtlessly, there is no "most powerful reality", just as the expression "the most accurate impression" makes no sense unless within a system of determined communication.

7. Conclusions

We must, therefore, conclude that today there exist many realities. And the impression of the most present reality seems to belong to the radio, television and internet, when broadcasting live. Each system of communication has its own complexity which contributes to the general running complexity. Even if these conclusions remain schematic, they show us that the contrast of the emisor to the message differs considerably by the way in which we have to deal with a natural channel (voice, physical presence of the interlocutor, mimicry, gestures), with an artificial channel (cinema, radio, television, press) simple or complex, implying a dominant sensation, visual or auditory or both at the same time; and according to whether or not we are speaking of an artificial symbolic channel, such as language or writing or a mechanical artificial language, such as radio and television. The new technology of message transmission is about to profoundly change our psychology.

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