

AUREL CODOBAN

From persuasion to manipulation and seduction. (A very short history of global communication)

Abstract:

This text will focus on the transformations of the practices and ideas of communication in recent history and in the context of the globalization. The lecture will examine first persuasion and then manipulation and seduction. These second issues are explained through the fact that in the context of the rise of mass as historical subject, conscience, and thus persuasion become obsolete. The approach examines the theoretical model of communication in this two historical contexts and concludes that a partial sector of communication, "therapeutic communication", tends to model nowadays the process of communication as such. Based on the new practices and theoretical models of communication a new type of ideology appears, an ostensive one.

Aurel Codoban
Professor,
Ph.D.,
Department
of Systematic
Philosophy,
Babes-Bolyai
University,
Cluj.
Romania.



Author of the books:

Repere si prefigurări (1982), Structura semiologică a structuralismului (1984), Filosofia ca gen literar (1992), Sacru si ontofanie (1998), Semn si interpretare (2001), Amurgul iubirii (2005)

Email: aurelteodor@yahoo.com

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I

I. A. Richards, an English literary critique and author, had offered in 1928 one of the first and, maybe the best definitions of human verbal communication¹: "Communication takes place when one mind so acts upon its environment that another mind is influenced, and in that other mind an experience occurs which is like the experience in the first mind and is caused in part by that experience."²

I. A. Richards was speaking about a certain sense of communication, about human verbal communication. Certainly, generally speaking there is communication in the animal world, especially among social animals and, as it is well known, man is a social animal. The first human communities were similar to some animal groups: they had a pyramidal structure of submission, reflecting the internal rapports of power, and the power effectively had by every member of the community. In this context we can't speak about real human communication, for here there isn't conviction. One's attitudes and behavior are affected by other factors: threats, physical coercion, but not conviction. Only the reduction of group pressure and the extension of the autonomy of the individual make conviction – influencing through language – necessary. Persuasion is the process by which a person's attitudes or behaviors are, without duress, influenced by other people through communication. Certainly, not all communication is intended to be persua-

sive; it can be also informing or entertaining. But communication in a peculiar human sense means influencing other minds through language!

The ancient Greeks were the first to be interested in influencing convictions, attitudes and actions or human behavior through communication. In the ancient Athenian society, power and power relationships began to be negotiated through communication. This means that through communication, convictions and attitudes, and, as a consequence, decisions, actions and behaviors, were influenced more or less explicitly, but consciously. This is what is called persuasion: the modification of convictions and attitudes through communication, with the purpose of influencing decisions, actions and behaviors corresponding to the intentions or interest of the persuading speaker – but only with the participation of consciousness, that is by assuming freely and consciously the responsibility. Ancient Greek persuasion is a kind of communication based on the presence of consciousness, on reasoning and logical argument: the persuaded person pays attention to what is communicated and comprehends it, including the basic conclusion being urged and perhaps also the evidence offered in its support. In order to obtain effective persuasion, the individual must agree with the point being made and, must retain this new position long enough to act on it. Thus, persuasive communication implies consciousness.

These types of influential practices, in which the Greek and Roman orators have excelled, were theorized in the rhetorical model of communication. Aristotle defined rhetoric as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.”³ And these means were: *ethos* (presentation of the character of the speaker as trustworthy), *pathos* (the emotions of the audience as aroused by the speaker), and *logos* (rational argument). The problem of explaining the following evolution of persuasion and of the rhetorical model of influencing communication appears in connection with these peculiar means of persuasion. For a good understanding of this problem let us remember two of Paul Watzlawick’s contemporary axioms. The first tells us that every act of communication has two levels: the relation and the content, in such a way that the first includes the second and as a consequence it is meta-communication. The second axiom indicates that man uses two forms of communication, digital (verbal) and analog (non-verbal, or bodily language); digital language has a very complex and comfortable syntax but does not have a suitable semantic for relation. On the other hand, analog language has a semantic but not a syntax suitable for relation.

If we compare the “*ethos*” and „*pathos*” on the one hand, and the “*logos*”, on the other hand, the distinction between relation and content in communication, and that between analog and digital language becomes the distinction between “*enunciation*” (“speech act” or “utterance act”) and “*utterance*”. In oratory, the “*utterances*” are determined or strongly conditioned by the “*enunciation*” (“speech act” or “utterance act”) and this is the case of “*ethos*” and “*pathos*” by comparison with “*logos*”. In Aristotle’s rhetoric the “*ethos*” and “*pathos*” namely “*enunciation*” (“speech act” or “utterance act”) overwhelms in a certain measure the “*logos*”, namely the “*utterance*”. In this overwhelming we can see the dominance of the speaker – a king, a chieftain, a holy man, a wise man – above their audience. This is the expression of a relation of power and in general, according to Watzlawick’s first axiom, the manifestation of relation in communication. In writing, utterance is, as such, autonomous because it is based on reasoning, on logic – the latter is the “*logos*” as means of persuasion in Aristotle’s rhetoric. The content of communication belongs to the “*logos*”.

This aspect was emphasized with the diffusion of writing. Plato noted that writing destroys oratory, which was the privilege of the king and of the father, because it separates the “utterance” from the “enunciation” (“utterance act”). And Plato was right. The diffusion of writing after the invention of the printing press in modern times has brought persuasion from the external, relational aspect of discourse (“ethos” and “pathos” in Aristotle’s rhetoric) to the internal, logic or poetic aspect. In modernity, reasoning and logical argument on one hand, and imagery and rhetorical figures on the other, have become important. And because modernity emphasizes knowledge, it establishes a sort of similarity between education and persuasion: modern persuasion closely resembles the teaching of new information through informative communication: it focuses on the content of communication.

II

One day Benjamin Franklin needed an important law book. He knew that another congressman has this book, but that man was a political enemy who often argued against Franklin ideas. In spite of this situation, Franklin wrote a polite letter and asked his adversary to borrow the book. After a few days he returned the book followed by a thankful letter. Then, Franklin was astonished to notice that the man ceased to argue against him with the same conviction and rage. In a normal way, reciprocity obliges us to return a favor to those who had made us a favor before. In this case not only the congressman did a favor against his initial hostile attitude, but he didn’t wait for a similar favor and yet did another. Why did the opponent congressman act in this way? Why did he, against his first hostile attitude, grant a favor after another?

This anecdote sends to yet another way of influencing communication: manipulation. I think all of us have knowledge of rhetorical procedures, but I am not so sure if all of us know something about manipulation techniques. Therefore I will give some examples, which illustrate different type of techniques of manipulation, their rules or mechanisms.

Do you know what a “free sample” is? A good place for free samples is the supermarket, where customers are frequently provided with small cubes of a certain variety of cheese or meat to taste. After that, many people buy the product, even if they might not have liked it especially well. A “free sample”, is a sort of a gift and, as such, can engage the rule of reciprocity. (Maybe, this example has become so well known that doesn’t work any more.)

A friend asks you for an amount of money that you think he will not be able to return, and you refuse. Then, the friend reduces drastically his demand and you lend him the money. That is “the door-in-the-face” technique: ask for something too big, and then get the thing you wanted. Also here the rule of reciprocity seems to be in act: because the other became rational in his demand and made a concession, you feel the obligation to make a similar concession.

A psycho-sociological experiment showed us that if one asks us on the street “what time is it?” and we answer him, and then he asks for change to make a phone-call, we are inclined to give him the money with an increase probability than in the case he hadn’t asked about time and/or we hadn’t answered. That is “the foot-in-the-door” technique: you ask for something meaningless, and get something important. Here the mechanism of consistency is at work: most peoples have the tendency to be and look consistent within their own words, beliefs, attitudes, and deeds. The best explanation for these

phenomena is offered by Leon Festinger's book *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Row, Peterson and Co., Evanston, White Plains, 1957).

When a colleague is collecting money for another colleague's anniversary, he is frequently asked: "How much the others have given?" If he is honest, he will tell the real average sum. If he is manipulative, he will tell us the biggest sum, making us to give a bigger sum than we wanted. In this case the principle of social proof is in act; it states that one important means people use for deciding what to believe or how to act is to look at what the others believe or do.

Even if persuasion often appeals to other resources, such as emotions, it is mainly based on a logical address to consciousness: its content is primarily conscious. Manipulation appeals to the cultural programming of the individual, to the basis of the stereotypes of thinking, frames and schemes, to what could be called a prior encoding of the individual. According Alfred North Whitehead, civilization advances by extending the number of operations we can perform without thinking about them. And manipulation is, according to Robert B. Cialdini, "the ability to produce a distinct kind of automatic, mindless compliance from people, that is, a willingness to say yes without thinking first. The evidence suggests that the ever-accelerating pace and informational crush of modern life will make this particular form of unthinking compliance more and more prevalent in the future"⁴ The experiments he undertook, have led Freud to the conclusion that the hypnotic order is justified by consciousness, during or after the execution, without the acknowledging of any immixture. In manipulation precisely the reverse is the case: the justification is inscribed in our consciousness from the very beginning by education, culture, religion, and the order is hypnotically executed as soon as the manipulator triggers its program. Liberty as a prerequisite, the lack of constraint in manipulation, solves the problem of the well functioning of this programming. It is true, our liberty is the one which triggers, in accordance with our education, the responsibility and coherence of our actions.

The cause-effect reaction, the statistical necessity, appearing in manipulation due to the accessing of the programming of the human being through education, shows us that the manipulating subject passes over beyond the field of consciousness of the manipulated, that he treats him like an object. This is the main fault of manipulation: giving up persuasion brings about a transformation of the relationship between two subjects in a subject-object relationship. The difference is that in manipulation there is no need for a hierarchy conferring superiority to the speaker, of the manipulator over the receptor as in persuasion. Again, as different from persuasion and seduction, manipulation cannot be confessed because this would bring the action of the subject from the programming level to the conscious level. Manipulation is a technique because it inflicts behaviors using programming language procedures, just like in computer programming. Manipulation uses the discourse as a simple action.

The other communication procedure used instead of persuasion is seduction. Manipulation is effective in political communication and in marketing, seduction, on the other hand, in advertising. Seduction was often examined before, but almost all the time from a moral and religious perspective. Baudrillard was the one who imposed a new view, from the perspective of communication. Post-modern seduction is apparently the reverse of manipulation: in this case the subject offers himself /herself as an object, but as an object - secret, miraculous, strange - that is missing to the other in order for him/her to be "entire/whole". The object of seduction, the object that seduces, is the object of desire. Baudrillard observes that "the subject can only desire, the object seduces": "the

seducer cannot be what he/she is only if he/she is nobody", only if his/her subjectivity is annulated. Its charm is "an opening, liberty, void effect, a modality for making place for kairos, occasion"; in seduction no one acts: we could talk only about simulation and appearance. Seduction is closer to persuasion than to manipulation, because it is a praxis, as it focuses on a subject, even if the seducer becomes an object. If manipulation uses nature to communicate, seduction, while annulling the subject, naturalizes the sign. In the naturalization of the sign, in transforming the possible or virtual world of signs in reality the action of signs is at work for the profit of seduction. Seduction lives from communication and in communication, and its reality is only a communicational one.

Seduction is based on the promise of happiness or pleasure that results from the naturalization of the sign, from the inversion of the semiotic genesis, which went in the first movement from nature to culture. The installation of arbitrary signs (Saussure) or symbols (Peirce) is undertaken through the process of taking distance from reality, a process measured by the double articulation of sign. It is an upward movement: from index, symptoms, signals, symbols, through iconic signs (analogy) towards arbitrary signs and symbols. This movement is the one with which begins religion, culture, civilization, and human liberty have begun. It has only a virtual reality, meaning that the terms used are the result of re-signification in the play of signs; it is just a virtual world, a world of the possible. In certain conditions, defined by psychology, a naturalization of signs takes place and it transforms the signs, the significations as realm of the possible - as illusion - in reality for the subject. Therefore the seduction inverts the movement that formed Peirce's semiotic pyramid, (which resulted from distancing movements of signs from nature). From the point of view of psychoanalysis, the effect is a substitution of the principle of reality with the principle of pleasure or a transformation of the secondary process in a primary one (Freud). Seduction promises something that it cannot give: an entire, total happiness, without discontinuity and tiredness; just like in movies, or in commercials!

The postmodern seduction is a phenomena focused on masses, because it is interested in quantity, just like manipulation, and in its difference from persuasion which is individualized. In the context of the rise of the masses as a historical subject, conscience, and thus persuasion, becomes obsolete. The modern masses (Elias Canetti) are no longer a community of autonomous conscious individuals, but a crowd of individuals with rather unconscious reactions. Moreover, in post-modernity it is linked, with the rising of advertising and the practices of promotion, to a new age in the evolution of the masses: the apparition of the mass of netertainment, composed by isolated individuals. Postmodern seduction addresses to the masses of entertainment (Peter Sloterdijk).

A final observation comes from the Eric Berne's "Transactional Analysis", which illustrates very well the slogan that if two people talk, there are six persons who exchange messages. Berne's theory argued that at any given moment each individual (in a social context) will exhibit a Parental, Adult or Child ego state and that individuals can shift from one state to another. Transactional analysis is concerned with diagnosing which ego state implements the message and which one receives the message in communication. Manipulation and seduction can be very well understood from the point of view of "transactional analysis": Manipulation is a Parent-Child transaction and seduction a Child-Parent transaction. But Eric Berne's "Transactional Analysis" is a psychology of human relationship and in this way it emphasizes the relational aspect in communication.

III

We have started with the Aristotle's rhetorical model in which both aspects of communication - enunciation (utterance act) and utterance, or in general: relationship and content - were in a relative equilibrium (with the dominance of relation, however). From antiquity until the nineteenth century, rhetoric, as a general theory of communication (a theory on how to convince an audience), was one of the basic liberal arts that had to be mastered by any educated man and one of the most important subjects taught in Western educational institutions. But during the last three centuries it has changed remarkably. In parallel with the dissemination of written communication since the invention of the printing press it was gradually transformed from the art of "winning men's minds by words" into an art of writing. Corresponding to the change in the general communicative situation, the increased flow of information and an important increment of the quantity of knowledge, it concentrated on the logical means of persuasion and somehow left aside the others. As a consequence of evolution, the content of communication was emphasized.

During the first half of the twentieth century Harold D. Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld and Kurt Lewin have been singled out as the founding fathers of the new field of research on persuasive communication. When, at the end of Second World War, persuasion and rhetoric rose again, it did so in the form of two distinct and distant branches:

New Rhetoric (Perelman, Olbrechts-Tyteca, and Toulmin), interested in logical argumentation, in reasoning, and Poetics (Gerard Genette, Groupe m) interested in the rhetorical figures as figures of poetical discourse.

But both branches were interested in the aspects of the content, even if this content was considered to be language itself.

Behind this final triumph of the content of communication in modern times a new theory was created and promoted by psychiatrists like Milton Erickson, Leon Festinger, and Eric Berne and later, by their followers - Paul Watzlawick, Richard Bandler, and John Grinder. They preferred another concept for the effects of communication, a concept broader than persuasion - influence - a concept that included manipulation and seduction and emphasized the relational aspect of communication. The Encyclopedias, the standardized storage of knowledge, have recorded quite lately this silent evolution. Until the seventies the encyclopedias contained only the term persuasion. Since the eighties, manipulation is frequently included, and after Baudrillard's *De la seduction*, published in 1979 and translated in English in 1990 this term was introduced too.

After postmodernism and in the context of globalization this new model of communication became more than visible, became bright and radiant, and this because globalization, through mass-media and the new technologies, has pushed further the implementation of manipulation and the techniques and procedures of seduction in political communication and advertising. The new theoretical model of communication and the new practical skills of communication, which emphasize both the relational aspect of communication, come together.

What conclusion can we draw on the turn from information to relation in the theory and practices of communication? This change is a very important one and indicates a change of paradigm, according to Kuhn's theory, or, maybe, a change of episteme according to Foucault's ideas. Let's us summarize and outline the main characteristics of the new paradigm or episteme:

With regards to the theoretical aspect, it can be noted that the theoretical model is rather therapeutic, than rhetorical, or informational. A partial communication sector, "therapeutic communication", tends to adjust, in general, to the process of communication.

Regarding communication, it can be noted that its essential concept, judging from its effects, is that of relation and not of content. We are moving from communication as information, or informational transfer, toward communication as relationship, and from the structuralist model of sign as unmotivated to the model of communicative situation.

For these theories the point of departure of communication isn't the soul (consciousness), but the body. The change is meaningful because in this way communication is granted to animals too and does not denominate solely a human behavior.

In the theoretical model of communication we can detect a displacement from text to image and, in general, from the digital, unmotivated sign to the analogical, motivated sign (emoticons, figures instead of words: "4" = "for"). This is obvious in mass media communication and the visible consequences are the passage from knowledge to spectacle and from a textual ideology to an ostensive⁵ - denotative, directly or manifestly demonstrative - ideology, the shift from invocation through words to showing through images. But our civilization was built against the charm or seduction of images - that was the case of Plato -, or against idolatry - that was the case of Jewish prophets (Vilém Flusser).

In the theoretical model, communication appears a passage from the reductive approach to otherness toward the acceptance of a plural alterities. This is also valid for the relation with the ego, for everyone's relationship with his self, which becomes plural, and even for the old, Socratic adagio regarding this ego: „Know thyself” becomes „Communicate good with thyself”.

It is obvious now that this new episteme is based more on analogy than on unmotivated, differential or digital signs, as Foucault has said. Maybe the sign was considerate unmotivated, differential or digital only because it was understood from the point of view of information, of the content of communication, from the viewpoint of modernity, generated by the conflict between reform and counter-reform (as Ioan Petru Culianu, a Romanian scholar has argued). But this episteme of communication, which emphasizes the relational aspect of communication, isn't merely a return to the analogies of the Renaissance, for the images of our culture are produced electronically, being created by digital programs.

In the end, a final question remains: what are we to do with the new, ostensive ideology? I think our mission is to provide a critique of pure and practical communication so as to avoid the charming of our minds by our means of communication.

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2 I. A. Richard, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner:
London, 1928, p. 17

3 Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1355b[25] in *The Works of Aristotle*, Vol. II, *Encyclopaedia
Britannica INC.*, Edited by W. D. Ross, p. 595

4 Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence, Science and Practice*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston,
London, 2001 4th edition, p. X.

5 ostension = the action of showing, exhibiting, or making manifest; exhibition,
display, manifestation; an instance of this (Oxford English Dictionary)