Hard and Soft Communication.
Umberto Eco´s Lecture at Festival della Comunicazione di Camogli in 2014[1].

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(Curation, adaptation and editing by Gustavo Cardoso and Caterina Foá from video[2] and text[3])

Everyone thinks they know what the word COMMUNICATION means, despite the fact it is often used in the most diverse circumstances. Although usually a reference in the theory of signs, St. Augustine is a good starting point for a discussion about communication. He saw communicating as serving to activate an idea that is in our own mind in that of another person. This activation of an idea in another person´s mind could occur through gestures, sounds, writing, visual expressions and so on. For example, since time immemorial we have talked about paths and routes of communication, such as the Roman roads, but also means of communication/transportation, such as cars, ships, trains, and aircraft. Think, for a moment, of the surprise of the tourist in Athens who sees large trucks with the word "*metaphora*" on them. At first, one admires the humanistic greatness of a Greek people that associates poetic artifice with vehicles, but then one realizes that these are just vehicles transporting goods, and in fact in the classical world transportation refers to the metaphorical artifice that transposes the meaning of a literal term to a figurative term. So transportation exists when I transfer an idea of mine to the mind of another person, and also when a parcel is transferred from Milan to Rome by mail.

Is this just a simple homonymy? It appears to be something much more intriguing and revealing than would seem to be the case at first sight. Communication is the most evident aspect of the phenomenon defined as semiosis. Communication is intention. Communication is the voluntary transmission of ideas, for someone to interpret them. Let us go back to the first communication theories, exemplified by the mathematical model in which one could summarize communication as the passing of a message from a sender to a receiver, using a channel based on a common code. This is indeed a model that was very good at characterizing the communication of very elementary messages, like those in Morse (code), which can be decoded and transcribed by a mechanical device. The theory also considered the channel through which the message passed (such as air, electric wires, or hertzian waves), but that channel was a purely mechanical component which did not affect the nature of the messages, except in cases of accidental noise.

With the development of semiotic studies, three other fundamental components of the analysis of the communicative process came to the fore. The first concerns the context, based on which the receiver can also individualize alternative codes from those intended by the sender, and those alternatives depend on the situation in which the receiver happens to be, including a set of their own competencies. Examples include the limited possession of the code by an immigrant who only knows a few hundred words of the language of the host country, or having a particular worldview, prejudices, systems of expectations, or topics of interest. In the sixties there thus arose the problem of the situation of receivers who might interpret the message in a different way from that understood by the sender. While the term 'code' is certainly too generic nowadays and has therefore been abandoned, it is worth remembering the case of a cannibal, for whom eating human flesh is something that can be characterized as licit and good, whereas for a Westerner it is the opposite. Another example would be how voters have interpreted Berlusconi's nighttime parties and presumed sexual activities: on the one hand, they have been seen in a moralistic sense and as inappropriate in terms of the behavior expected of a government leader; on the other, part of the Italian population has viewed this behavior as forgivable and even enviable (almost a sign of virility and the virtues of a *bon vivant*). So these are examples of the so-called communicative phenomenon of boomeranging – i.e. where communication with a given objective produces a different result from that intended by the sender. When we move from the elementary processes of interpersonal communication to mass communication, a phenomenon of huge new proportions seems to emerge.

The receiver who is well known to the sender in interpersonal communication has been fragmented into a community that may number thousands and millions of people about whom the sender knows nothing except a few generic characteristics (retired workers, young people, sportsmen, etc.). As such, and in the light of these new experiences, there arose the hypothesis that, in interpersonal communication between myself and one another, this sharing of codes, systems of expectations and values also often failed to occur as clearly and limpidly as expected – the case of ironic processes and misconceptions, misunderstood allusions or unshared conversational rules, for instance. So the theory of understanding the message, which in rudimentary terms we can call semantics, became more complex in a pragmatics associated with situations, circumstances and a whole sackful of notions that can separate the sender from the receiver. And the complications of the original communication model don't end there – the quality of the sender's credibility is one example. The Watergate scandal acquired a critical political dimension because it was revealed by the Washington Post, whereas if it had been reported by a magazine, such as Rolling Stone, it might have gone unnoticed, or its effects could have been minor.

We can thus all acknowledge that it is easier to buy a poetry book if it is produced by a specialized publisher than by one that forms part of the so-called 'vanity press'. However, this relationship of trust has become a little more confused with the emergence of the Internet. Whoever searches for product X online is rarely able to assess the source's trustworthiness and thus validate it. This is even more true of a student in the early stages of their education for whom homework is copy-pasting from Wikipedia – and the fact is that it would already be very good if that student were to use Wikipedia rather than a generic source. In the process of choosing novels to read as well, the practice of self-publishing that exposes us to the pitiful attempts of aspiring writers who have finally found a self-funded way to be read without being published has actually also produced works of high literary quality. A 'network fanatic' would somehow say that this practice enshrines a definitive democratization of taste – the user becomes a judge who defines what is good and what is bad. However, if we accept this point of view, then nor should there be a school that

teaches us when 'there' or 'their' aren't correct and 'they're' is. This presumption of democracy would put all of us on a level with Nobel Prize-winners (although then – and the hyper-democrats don't stop to think about this – no one would be capable of winning a Nobel Prize or reading a winner's work). The function of the so-called 'Gatekeepers', meaning all those mediating institutions that used to decide whether a given item of information should be communicated and interpreted in a certain way, would thus be a thing of the past. On occasion, Gatekeeping certainly took on a dimension of true censorship and monopoly of information, but at the same time acted as a guarantor. A publisher of high culture is a beneficial Gatekeeper who assures readers that the information it passes has been evaluated by trusted experts. The Gatekeeper can be mistaken, but at the same time, the receiver can be informed of the ideological connotation and the political and economic interests of a given Gatekeeper, and can decide, for example, whether to rely on the information selected by *Il Giornale* more than on that chosen by *La Repubblica*, or vice versa (as I would personally hope).

In the current situation, in which the function of everyday life / is losing ground and anyone can go online and select the news that interests them, the user's apparent freedom coincides with an objective loss, because they are faced with undefined influences without knowing what they are and where they come from. The Gatekeeping crisis is also associated with remote controls. I can decide to trust the news from Channel 7, or switch to another channel, or refuse to watch TG1, but a crowd of viewers can spend the early hours of the evening hopping between news programs, believing everything they see and hear, without becoming aware of the contradictions between the various stations. A revolution took place in the early 1960s, with a focus on the channel problem. In the elementary communication model, the channel was like a tube through which information passed. It was neutral, it didn't change the information, except in cases of accidental noise in which the receiver understood there was a technical problem but wasn't transmitted a message other than the one conceived by the sender. It was McLuhan who focused his attention on the medium, which was just another name for the channel. With the axiom "the medium is the message", McLuhan argued that, with the new electronic media, the medium could make the receiver so dependent on the channel that the nature of the message would become irrelevant. McLuhan's position was criticized, but, as a skilled observer of paradoxes, he observed that on many occasions, information remains constant and independent of the channel through which it passes. The fact that Italy declared war on the Allied powers on June 10, 1940 was unquestionable, whether people learned about it live by hearing Il Duce's speech on the radio, or by reading it the next day in *L'Osservatore Romano*. But it also remains unquestionable that, apart from the basic idea, the emotional participation of the receiver, and therefore the assessment of the event, were influenced by the nature of the medium. Albeit a generalization, one can say that McLuhan made use of paradoxes, but he understood something. Think, for example, of the controversy that arose in Italy when it was necessary to decide whether to switch from black-and-white to color television. At the time, the concerns were economic in nature, but the result was psychological. Color television started the reflux of the eighties, the loss of interest in messages and the pure taste of the wonders of the new media. And let us recall the political debate that rages on our television screens: with the exception of some special cases, the public is not interested in what is said about them, in part because the overlapping voices make the content of what is said irrelevant: the real message is the discussion, the almost arena-like confrontation between gladiators that is not won by the speakers' arguments, but by the skill of the retiarii. With the new media, there was another phenomenon. To begin with, communication was private, or rather was about control: the leader who spoke in a square to at most 200 thousand people. Private was,

for example, the military message, encrypted so it couldn't be read by the enemy. Private was the letter intended for the family or for one person, as in love letters. With mass communication, communication became public. That it was public was the sender's intention, while the receiver's community was statistically public. But little was known about the receiver's reaction, except for what could be ascertained through the communication's effects, such as electoral and commercial successes. In reality, in mass communication like that of newspapers or television, we don't know who the real individual receivers are. At most, we have quantitative data about a television program's audience, but no one could know exactly what programs I watched last night. Let's wait and see what happens with Facebook.

In principle, I communicate with a person I have chosen as my friend, but in reality my message can reach many others. When someone is wandering online and gets an invitation to make contact with someone else, with whom he then shares their pedophile activity, providing him with his own coordinates, he makes himself vulnerable to a form of external control and may tomorrow be monitored and perhaps pursued by the authorities. A recently published article by Zygmunt Bauman discusses whether social networks present themselves as an instrument for surveilling the thoughts and emotions of others and are thus used in that way by the different entities with the power of control. But all of this occurs thanks to the enthusiastic participation of those who take part. In other words, it is the first time in human history that the spied-on are collaborating with the spies, facilitating their work and feeling satisfaction as a result of that collaboration, because when they are seen, they know they exist. But it is also true that if anyone can know everything about everyone, when everyone identifies themselves with the sum of the planet's inhabitants, the surfeit of information cannot produce anything other than confusion, rumors and silence. This ought to worry those who spy. Because for the spied-on it is okay that everything they say and their most intimate secrets are known to at least their friends and neighbors and possibly their enemies as well, inasmuch as this is the only way for them to feel alive and an active part of the social body. One of the great revolutions of online communication is that of taking a large mass of people out of isolation and putting them in contact with the world. And we know how important a role this has played, particularly in countries where democracy was absent or null, by making it possible to overcome barriers created by censorship. Nobody can deny that political protagonists and even the Pope have communicated messages of notable importance via Twitter. It is true that these messages had already been transmitted by news agencies, but this saves time and reaches more receivers without mediation, while a news agency is now limited to reusing Twitter messages as news. In many cases, the online message is reappropriated by other media, and that is how politicians like Beppe Grillo become some of the biggest protagonists of the news every evening, despite refusing to actually speak on television.

And here we could open another chapter on the brand-new phenomenon of the communication of communication. What could we know if we wanted to have a view of the entire global conversation generated by Facebook? Practically nothing, because the prevailing function in such contacts is what in linguistics is called 'phatic' – one that does not consist of the transmission of information about the world, including private thoughts, but of maintaining contacts generally. Phatic communication includes things like 'How are you?', 'Good morning!', and even a 'like'. Thus, millions of other consensuses are lost in this way and tell us very little about receivers who, when reacting to something, become senders themselves. At most, the interpersonal communication allowed by social networks is lost amidst a global conversation whose content will never be known and which simply converses, full stop. This global circulation of communication runs the risk of fundamentally changing the concept of democratic consensus. According to the principles

of democracy – which Churchill called a terrible system, but one that must be adopted because all the others are worse – it is not certain that the majority is right, but the accepted hypothesis is that 51% made up of idiots can prevail over 49 % made up of sensible people.

The democratic principle establishes that a purely quantitative criterion be used in order to avoid '*Bellum omnia omnes*' – 'The war of all against all'. Those in the majority govern. Although this refers to an impenetrable value system, it ends up being a mistake, in the sense that it counts the quantity and not the quality of the opinions expressed. In online conversation, given that it is not possible to know how many adhere to a certain way of thinking, a qualitative reaction prevails. And any opinions expressed, even though they may be in a minority, may at any given time enjoy the consensus of all of us. I don't remember which discussion program it was, but while the guests were speaking, the screen showed viewers' Twitter comments, in quick succession. Although everyone contradicted each other, the impression was that people spoke off the top of their heads, like when we are watching and commenting on a football game at the café. Discussions about sport are characterized by the fact that they are hot-headed: people say things more in thrall to the argument and the dispute itself than to the debate, and the floor is available even to those who would fail a blood-alcohol test. But the myriad discussions during thousands of café conversations about football have never formed an opinion, dying instead at birth. On the contrary, when café conversations become Twitter subjects, they acquire the dignity of a source that may in some way be considered worthy of notice – as we can see, they are even carried by television channels – and in that case the medium truly becomes the message. But these opinions do not translate into the form of consensus, as occurs in the quantitative control of democratic participation. Instead, they turn into shouting by the crowd, and what should be democratic participation becomes rumors from a mass of people. If a function incorporates a communication, even if it is just asking the ice-cream-shop employee for a cone, we leave our intimate and private space in order to be able to have a social interaction, albeit in a minimal way, as in the case of ice cream. This is what happens if I write a letter to open my heart to someone else and tell them how much I like them, or when we write a poem or a novel to share our thoughts and emotions with thousands. For those who completely immerse themselves online, we link ourselves to another, but without being sure who that other is, and thus it is that a loving relationship can be established with a retired master-sergeant of the Carabinieri who presents himself as a ballerina in search of an affectionate friendship.

At its extreme limit, the relationship that is established online condemns both the receiver and the sender to total loneliness and a total inability to communicate with the girl next door.

I entitled this speech 'The Soft and Hard Aspects of Communication'. We used to think that on the face of it the channel, the tool – which can comprise a courier on horseback, a mail cart or radio waves – is Hard. In principle, the tool never interfered with the nature of the message. A letter's content didn't change, whether it was written on parchment or paper, or was sent by post or by carrier pigeon. The message, on the other hand, depended on the program and the relationship between the content of the message and the code – it was Soft. And what characterized the Hard side was the time it took – hence the excruciating wait for a reply and the long communication intervals during which the sender wondered if the receiver had received the letter and how they would respond, while the receiver eagerly waited for the letter to arrive. The relationship began to change with the wireless telegraph, the radio, and the telephone. The telegraph allowed immediate reception and response, but still involved mediation instances (going to the telegraph, the transcription by the telegraph operator, and the new transcription on arrival, as well as the time it took to deliver the message – except, of course, in the case of those communications of a military nature). Radio

and television allowed for immediate transmission, but not a response. The telephone permitted instantaneous action-reaction relations between the sender and the receiver, but only occupied part of our day, and took time if we had to resort to the mediation of a telephone exchange. The real revolution came with the computer, e-mail, and mobile phones – with them, the relationship is immediate in temporal terms. When it comes to both the nerd who spends their nights online, and those who call compulsively, those we see walking on the street talking to someone, and those who give us an update on their personal life on the train, what we have is a process of questions and answers that doesn't take any time. How does this hardware modification affect the nature of the message? For the mobile phone, the situation is intuitive and has been studied extensively. Except in extreme cases, the mobile-phone addict doesn't speak or respond in order to communicate urgent thoughts or facts, but to keep in touch. Usually, they speak for no real purpose. This sidesteps their loneliness, but relegates them to a purely virtual relationship in which the personalities of the sender and the receiver become more and more useless. With traditional communication, what happened was different: *a priori*, the participants knew where the sender was, and the sender had an idea of the receiver's physical location. With a mobile phone you can talk to someone who believes you are in Australia but then finds out that you actually answered the call on the corner of the same street. The possibility of territorially locating the speaker disappears – in some cases this can be a positive thing, in others negative, be it due to illegality or to lies. This happens more with e-mail. Let me consider an event I witnessed personally... A guy (we'll call him Pasquale) spent a few years at a company, where he was highly regarded for his courtesy by both his superiors and his colleagues. He may have been feeling unsatisfied, but he didn't let it show. Pasquale was sent abroad on a mission that required a high level of trust, and kept in touch with colleagues via e-mail. A friend told him (by e-mail) that he had been slighted: one of the projects he was working on before he left was considered insufficient and entrusted to someone else, who did it again. Whether this was accurate or not, Pasquale was understandably very angry. When we are irritated by an alleged injustice, in a moment of anger we are ready to say that whoever has hurt us is an imbecile, that 'they' never understood us, that they made us crawl, and that we want to send everyone to hell. Then we tend to let our anger melt away, ask for a meeting (for which we prepare ourselves for several difficult nights) and, in a firm and pained tone, ask for explanations. If we are far away, we write a letter, reread it before sending it, and correct it multiple times until we achieve the most effective tone. After getting the news, Pasquale, on the other hand, immediately (possible thanks to e-mail) wrote to the person responsible for the alleged offence, calling him a scumbag and accusing him of having granted commercial favors in exchange for sexual services. When that person angrily replied (via e-mail), asking him if he was crazy, Pasquale became even more incensed, detailing the physical assaults the colleague would have been subjected to if it hadn't been for the geographical distance between them.

And since an e-mail message can be sent to several people at the same time, Pasquale sent a copy to the head of the company and other colleagues, adding a few more thoughts about the regard he had for the firm, which he said he firmly believed was no different from an organic compost heap.

Was this in fact an original way of resigning? Not at all. Everyone is convinced that Pasquale wanted to go on working for the company, and that the (alleged) problem he experienced was not dramatic – perhaps his informant exaggerated. Pasquale probably wrecked his career. What happened to him? He received disturbing news and the e-mail encouraged him to react immediately, as well as to excessively publicize his reaction. Isolated from the world, alone with his anger, it was only in front of the computer screen that the darkest part of his soul became overwrought.

The message he received short-circuited his unconscious self, leaving him no time to consult his superego as he would normally have done. The machine put him in immediate contact with the whole world, but imposed its accelerated rules on him, forcing him to forget that over the centuries the social contract has required other tempos of action and reaction.

This shows us that even electronic mail (at least as big an invention as intercontinental aviation) poses problems similar to those caused by delayed correspondence, only in the opposite sense, to which we have to adapt psychologically. The hard thus produced the soft. So now we can go back to the apparent synonymy I mentioned at the beginning, between the transmission of ideas and physical transport. The mode via which the message is transported can often interfere with the nature of the message itself, in the form in which it is received. In ancient times people communicated out of necessity linked to family and social life, but also received smaller doses of communication through mythical tales, heralds, news brought by travelers, images in temples, commemorative columns, and, in the most evolved societies, schooling. The practice of writing was restricted to elites. With the invention of the printing press, other social actors came into close contact with written communication, and thus, later on, with the journals and newspapers that began to appear. But even these forms of communication were reserved for those who could read and write, or who gathered to listen to the reading and commentary of sacred texts by the priests of their religion.

The fact is that it is only possible to talk about a public communication that is capable of extending to every social class with the emergence of radio and then television, which overcame the cultural limitations of alphabetic communication. What we are seeing today is an exponential growth in the amount of information available to each social class. Not only through multiple television channels, but also through newspapers, advertising posters, the cinema, supermarkets, mass meetings, and of course the Internet. Today's receivers receive a volume of daily information which cannot be compared to that received by their ancestors in past centuries, or to that received by their parents in the second half of the last century.

That volume is such that it exceeds any normal person's capacity to absorb it. And so specialists have begun to have to resort to abstracts in order to know what is happening in their field. The result cannot be more than a form of absorption, which varies unpredictably from individual to individual, according to their social role.

In other words, whereas a medieval priest knew what his parishioners knew, today no one knows what individual X knows, not even individuals in the same social and intellectual category. School was the entity that ensured a certain filtering of communication, with all its possible degenerations, censorships, memory gaps, and decisions about socially or ideologically relevant information. But today, that same school is threatened with an abundance of information, in that the exclusive source of communication is no longer the teacher, but all the different channels that reach young people, even in class, via computers, mobile phones, iPads and so on. The result of this communicative excess is not computable, nor can we predict which phenomena may produce this semiotic hypernutrition, or whether the current receivers and their descendants will know how to draw up other selection criteria. A single phenomenon seems to be manifesting itself, with effects that are already evident, such as the loss of the memory of the past. Not only that distant form of memory, but also the closest one. At the age of ten, I knew, and I was taught at school, that twenty years earlier, and ten years before my birth, the head of the Italian government during the March on Rome was Facta – i.e. the person whom the fascist creed taught me was 'Cowardly Facta'.

Today, as is clear to those who teach not only in primary education, but also at university, young people know very little about what happened ten years before their birth – which, for a college freshman today,

means not knowing what happened in 1986. Let us try to remember what memory meant to Man – memorizing things people need to know, such as what the growing seasons are, laws in the case of lawyers, or the Hippocratic principles in the case of doctors. Because there were no easily transportable means of formally recording information – clay tablets and parchments were unique examples that were difficult to reproduce given their high cost – memorization techniques were developed to recall certain data that were important to social life and indispensable to survival. The memory of the man of the past was therefore infinitely more highly trained than ours. With the invention of the printing press, information became transportable, but only for the educated classes. We should remember how hard Diderot and the creators of the Encyclopedia found it to access the deepest memories of the crafters and guardians of ancestral wisdom, so that they could then finally transfer them to a record. 'Register' and 'record' are magic words. In the age of global communication, everything is registered or recordable. At the very moment something is said, it becomes a fact and is recorded and registered. We live under the illusion that it is not necessary to remember because all it takes to know what we need to know is to touch a screen, and each person can behave like those scholars who, having accumulated a huge number of books, think they have everything they need, whereas in fact that knowledge – which in other times they would have had to memorize – is actually kept in hibernation. Hence, we can say that the younger generations do not practice the art of remembering because they know that memory is no longer indispensable, nor are schools concerned with exercising it. The lack of a need to exercise memory makes university students stop trying to memorize what the teacher says, only attempting to take necessarily incomplete notes, and as a result, subsequently only remembering what they wrote and not what they heard and then forgot. This decline in memory is one of the most tragic problems of our time. The problem I am talking about concerns the masses and not just a few university students. I want to recall a phenomenon that started to emerge when libraries began to have photocopiers – just in North America at the time. When I was preparing my degree thesis in the early 1950s and consulting dozens of books, I had to prepare citations for subsequent use. With the appearance of photocopiers later on, I used to photocopy multiple pages, and having them reassured me. Someone had recorded everything they needed, because they would need to memorize that knowledge. Recording techniques – a new frontier of communication techniques – take us out of the communicative relationship with so many authors, recording everything but at the same time risking remembering and knowing nothing. The ultimate drama. Paper and parchments have survived centuries and we have books that are still new although they were published almost 500 years ago, but we don't know how long digital media will survive for. We don't know, because we have had them with us for less than 500 years, and so it hasn't been possible to carry out an experimental verification, and we don't know how long the information we have will last because we already have current machines (computers, laptops etc.) that can no longer read the information recorded on Paleolithic 'floppy disks' just a few decades ago.

90-95% of the messages circulating in our volatile world are not certain to remain. The only way to freeze words, as Rabelais used to say, is still writing, but writing on paper is becoming ever more obsolete in favor of writing on keyboards and digital formats that run the risk of serious disappearances of content in the event of accidents and technical failures. I don't want to be apocalyptic here, and I would note that the adventures of communication still have many twists, studies and surprises in store for us. Jeremy Rifkin warns us that the new means of communication will permit the creation of renewable energies, reduce marginal costs and, through 3D printing, create the Internet of things, in a never-before-imagined fusion between the Hard and the Soft. And here we can go back to the apparent synonymy I mentioned at the

beginning, between the communicative relationship and transport: they seemed to be two different phenomena, but we have seen how often the message's mode of transport can interfere with the nature of the message itself and the way it is received.

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