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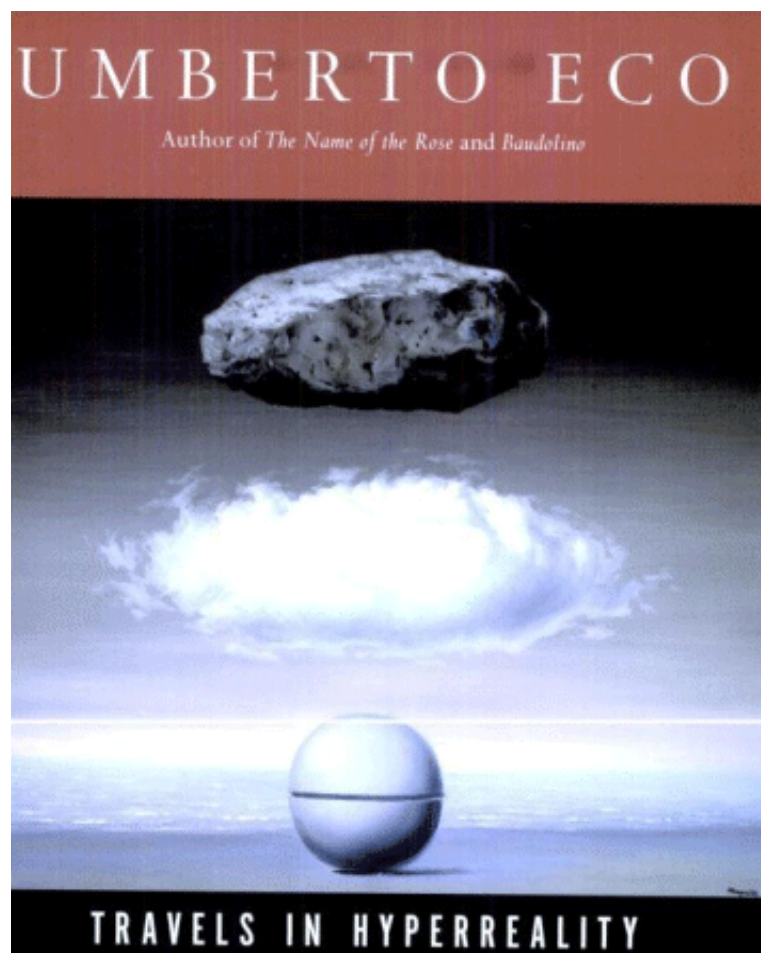
TOWARDS A SEMIOLOGICAL GUERRILLA WARFARE

by Umberto Eco

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Not long ago, if you wanted to seize political power in a country, you had merely to control the army and the police. Today it is only in the most backward countries that fascist generals, in carrying out a coup d'etat, still use tanks. If a country has reached a high level of

industrialization the whole scene changes. **The day after the fall of Khrushchev, the editors of Pravda, Izvestiia, the heads of the radio and television were replaced; the army wasn't called out. Today a country belongs to the person who controls communications.**

I'm not saying anything new; by now not only students of communication but also the general public is aware that we are living in the Age of Communication. **As Professor McLuhan has suggested, information is no longer an instrument for producing economic merchandise, but has itself become the chief merchandise. Communication has been transformed into heavy industry.** When economic power passes from the hands of those who control the means of production to those who not only control information media but can also control the means of production, the problem of alienation also alters its meaning. Faced by the prospect of a communications network that expands to embrace the universe, every citizen of the world becomes a member of a new proletariat. But no revolutionary manifesto could rally this proletariat with the words: "Workers of the world, unite!" Because, even if the communications media, as means of production, were to change masters, the situation of subjection would not change. We can legitimately suspect that the communications media would be alienating even if they belonged to the community.

What makes the newspaper something to fear is not (or, at least, is not only) the economic and political power that runs it. The newspaper was already defined as a medium for conditioning public opinion when the first gazettes came into being. When someone every day has to write as much news as his space allows, and it has to appear readable to an audience of diverse tastes, social class, education, throughout a country, the writer's freedom is already finished. The contents of the message will not depend on the author but on the technical and sociological characteristics of the medium.

For some time the severest critics of mass culture have been aware of all this, and they agree: "The mass media do not transmit ideologies; they are themselves an ideology!" This position, which I defined as "apocalyptic" in a previous book of mine, implies this further argument: It doesn't matter what you say via the channels of mass communication; when the recipient is surrounded by a series of communications which reach him via various channels at the same time, in a given form, the nature of all this disparate information is of scant significance. **The important thing is the gradual, uniform bombardment of information, where the different contents are leveled and lose their differences.**

You will have observed that this is also the familiar position expressed by Marshall McLuhan in his *Understanding Media*. But, for the so-called apocalypics, McLuhan's conviction

was translated into a tragic consequence:
Liberated from the contents of communication,
the addressee of the messages of the mass media
receives only a global ideological lesson, the call
to narcotic passiveness. When the mass media
triumph, the human being dies.

But Marshall McLuhan, on the contrary, setting
out from the same premises, concludes that,
when the mass media triumph, the Gutenbergian
human being dies, and a new man is born,
accustomed to perceive the world in another
way. We don't know if this man will be better or
worse, but we know he is new. Where the
apocalypticists saw the end of the world, McLuhan
sees the beginning of a new phase of history.
This is exactly what happens when a prim
vegetarian argues with a user of LSD: The
former sees the drug as the end of reason, the
latter as the beginning of a new sensitivity. Both
agree on the chemical composition of
psychedelics.

But the communications scholar must ask
himself this question: Is the chemical
composition of every communicative act the
same?

Naturally there are educators who display a
simpler optimism, derived from the
Enlightenment; they have firm faith in the power
of the message's contents. They are confident
that they can effect a transformation of
consciousness by transforming television
programs, increasing the amount of truth-in-

advertising spots, the precision of the news in the columns of the newspaper.

Both to them and to those who believe that "the medium is the message," I would like to recall an image we have seen in many cartoons and comic strips, a slightly obsolete image, rather racist, but a splendidly suitable example in this situation. It is the image of the cannibal chief who is wearing an alarm clock as a necklace. I don't believe that cannibals so adorned exist any longer, but we can translate the original into various other experiences of our everyday lives. The world of communications, for example, is full of cannibals who transform an instrument for measuring time into an "op" jewel.

If this is then it is not true that the medium is the message; it may be that the invention of the clock, accustoming us to think of time in the form of space divided into regular parts, changed some people's way of perception, but there are undoubtedly others for whom the clock message has a different meaning.

But if this is so, it is still equally untrue that acting on the form and contents of the message can convert the person receiving it. For the receiver of the message seems to have a residual freedom: the freedom to read it in a *different* way. I say "different" and not "mistaken." A brief look at the mechanics of communication can tell us something more precise on this subject.

The communication chain assumes a Source that, through a Transmitter, emits a Signal via a Channel. At the end of the Channel the Signal, through a Receiver, is transformed into a Message for the Addressee. Since the Signal, while traveling through the Channel, can be disturbed by Noise, one must make the Message redundant, so that the information is transmitted clearly. But the other fundamental requirement of this chain is a Code, shared by the Source and the Addressee. A Code is an established system of probabilities, and only on the basis of the Code can we decide whether the elements of the message are intentional (desired by the Source) or the result of Noise. It seems to me very important to bear in mind the various links in this chain, because when they are overlooked there are misunderstandings that prevent us from observing the phenomenon with attention. For example, many of Marshall McLuhan's theses on the nature of the media stem from the fact that he uses the term "media" broadly, for phenomena that can be at times reduced to the Channel, and at other times to the Code, or to the form of the message. Through criteria of economy, the alphabet reduces the possibilities of the sound-making organs but, in doing so, provides a Code for communicating experience; the street provides me with a Channel along which it is possible to send any communication. To say that the alphabet and the street are "media" is lumping a Code together with a Channel. To say that Euclidian geometry and a suit of clothes are media is lumping together a Code (the elements

of Euclid are a way of formalizing experience and making it communicable) and a Message (a given suit, through codes of dress -- conventions accepted by society -- communicates an attitude of mine towards my fellows). To say that light is a medium is a refusal to realize that there are at least three definitions of "light." Light can be a Signal of information (I use electricity to transmit impulses that, in Morse code, mean particular messages); light can be a Message (if my girlfriend puts a light in the window, it means her husband has gone out); and light can be a Channel (if I have the light on in my room I can read the message-book). In each of these cases the impact of a phenomenon on the social body varies according to the role it plays in the communication chain.

But, to stay with the example of light, in each of these three cases the meaning of the message changes according to the code with which I interpret it. The fact that light, when I use Morse code to transmit luminous signals, is a signal -- and that this signal is light and not something else -- has, on the Addressee, far less impact than the fact that the Addressee knows Morse code. If, for example, in the second of my hypothetical cases, my girlfriend uses light as a signal to transmit in Morse code the message "my husband is home" but I continue to refer to our previously established code, whereby "light" means "husband absent," my behavior (with all the ensuing unpleasant consequences) is determined not by the form of the message or its

contents according to the Emitting Source but by the code I am using. It is the code used that gives the light-signal a specific content. The move from the Gutenberg Galaxy to the New Village of Total Communication will not prevent the eternal drama of infidelity and jealousy from exploding for me, my girlfriend, and her husband.

And so the communication chain outlined above will have to be modified as follows: The Receiver transforms the Signal into Message, but this message is still the empty form to which the Addressee can attribute various meanings depending on the Code he applies to it.

If I write the phrase "no more," you who interpret it according to the English-language code will read it in the sense that seems most obvious to you; but I assure you that, read by an Italian, the same words would mean "not blackberries," or else "No, I prefer blackberries"; and further, if, instead of a botanical frame of reference, my Italian reader used a legal one, he would take the words to mean "No, respites," or, in an erotic frame of reference, as a reply: "No. brunettes" to the question "Do gentlemen prefer blondes?"

Naturally, in normal communication, between one human being and another, for purposes connected with everyday life, such misunderstandings are few; the codes are established in advance. But there are extreme cases, and first among them is that of aesthetic

communication, where the message is deliberately ambiguous precisely to foster the use of different codes by those who, in different times and places, will encounter the work of art.

If in everyday communication ambiguity is excluded, in aesthetic communication it is deliberate; and in mass communication ambiguity, even if ignored, is always present. We have mass communication when the Source is one, central, structured according to the methods of industrial organization; the Channel is a technological invention that affects the very form of the signal; and the Addressees are the total number (or, anyway, a very large number) of the human beings in various parts of the globe. American scholars have realized what a Technicolor love movie, conceived for ladies in the suburbs, means when it is shown in a Third World village. In countries like Italy, where the TV message is developed by a centralized industrial Source and reaches simultaneously a northern industrial city and a remote rural village of the South, social settings divided by centuries of history, this phenomenon occurs daily.

But paradoxical reflection also is enough to convince us on this score. The American magazine *Eros* published famous photographs of a white woman and a black man, naked, kissing; if those images had been broadcast over a popular TV channel, I presume that the significance attributed to the message by the governor of Alabama would be different from

that of Allen Ginsberg. For a California hippie, for a Greenwich Village radical, the image would have meant the promise of a new community; for a Klansman, the message would have signified a terrible threat of rape.

The mass communication universe is full of these discordant interpretations; I would say that variability of interpretation is the constant law of mass communications. The messages set out from the Source and arrive in distinct sociological situations, where different codes operate. For a Milanese bank clerk a TV ad for a refrigerator represents a stimulus to buy, but for an unemployed peasant in Calabria the same image means the confirmation of a world of prosperity that doesn't belong to him and that he must conquer. This is why I believe TV advertising in depressed countries functions as a revolutionary message.

The problem of mass communications is that until now this variability of interpretation has been random. Nobody regulates the way in which the addressee uses the message -- except in a few rare cases. And here, even if we shift the problem, even if we say "the medium is not the message" but rather "the message depends on the code," we do not solve the problem of the communications era. If the apocalyptic says, "The medium does not transmit ideologies: It itself is ideology; television is the form of communication that takes on the ideology of advanced industrial society," we could now only

reply: "The medium transmits those ideologies which the addressee receives according to codes originating in his social situation, in his previous education, and in the psychological tendencies of the moment." In this case the phenomenon of mass communication would remain unchanged. There exists an extremely powerful instrument that none of us will ever manage to regulate; there exist means of communication that, unlike means of production, are not controllable either by private will or by the community. In confronting them, all of us, from the head of CBS to the president of the United States, from Martin Heidegger to the poorest fellah of the Nile delta, all of us are the proletariat.

And yet I believe it is wrong to consider the battle of man against the technological universe of communication as a strategic affair. It is a matter of tactics.

As a rule, politicians, educators, communications scientists believe that to control the power of the media you must control two communicating moments of the chain: the Source and the Channel. In this way they believe they can control the message. Alas, they control only an empty form that each addressee will fill with the meanings provided by his own cultural models. The strategic solution is summed up in the sentence "We must occupy the chair of the Minister of Information" or even "We must occupy the chair of the publisher of *The New York Times*." I will not deny that this strategic

view can produce excellent results for someone aiming at political and economic success, but I begin to fear it produces very skimpy results for anyone hoping to restore to human beings a certain freedom in the face of the total phenomenon of Communication.

So for the strategic solution it will be necessary, tomorrow, to employ a guerrilla solution. What must be occupied, in every part of the world, is the first chair in front of every TV set (and naturally, the chair of the group leader in front of every movie screen, every transistor, every page of newspaper). If you want a less paradoxical formulation, I will put it like this: The battle for the survival of man as a responsible being in the Communications Era is not to be won where the communication originates, but where it arrives. I mention guerrilla warfare because a paradoxical and difficult fate lies in store for us - I mean for us scholars and technicians of communication. Precisely when the communication systems envisage a single industrialized source and a single message that will reach an audience scattered all over the world, we should be capable of imagining systems of complementary communication that allow us to reach every individual human group, every individual member of the universal audience, to discuss the arriving message in the light of the codes at the destination, comparing them with the codes at the source.

A political party that knows how to set up a grass-roots action that will reach all the groups that follow TV and can bring them to discuss the message they receive can change the meaning that the Source had attributed to this message. An educational organization that succeeds in making a given audience discuss the message it is receiving could reverse the meaning of that message. Or else show that the message can be interpreted in different ways.

Mind you: I am not proposing a new and more terrible form of control of public opinion. I am proposing an action to urge the audience to control the message and its multiple possibilities of interpretation.

The idea that we must ask the scholars and educators of tomorrow to abandon the TV studios or the offices of the newspapers, to fight a door-to-door guerrilla battle like provos of Critical Reception can be frightening, and can also seem utopian. But if the Communications Era proceeds in the direction that today seems to us the most probable, this will be the only salvation for free people. The methods of this cultural guerrilla have to be worked out. Probably in the interrelation of the various communications media, one medium can be employed to communicate a series of opinions on another medium. To some extent this is what a newspaper does when it criticizes a TV program. But who can assure us that the newspaper article

will be read in the way we wish? Will we have to have recourse to another medium to teach people how to read the newspaper in a critical fashion?

Certain phenomena of "mass dissent" (hippies, beatniks, new Bohemias, student movements) today seem to us negative replies to the industrial society: The society of Technological Communication is rejected in order to look for alternative forms, using the means of the technological society (television, press, record companies ...). So there is no leaving the circle; you are trapped in it willy-nilly. Revolutions are often resolved in more picturesque forms of integration.

But it could be that these nonindustrial forms of communication (from the love-in to the rally of students seated on the grass of the campus) can become the forms of a future communications guerrilla warfare -- a manifestation complementary to the manifestations of Technological Communication, the constant correction of perspectives, the checking of codes, the ever renewed interpretations of mass messages. The universe of Technological Communication would then be patrolled by groups of communications guerrillas, who would restore a critical dimension to passive reception. The threat that "the medium is the message" could then become, for both medium and message, the return to individual responsibility. To the anonymous divinity of

Technological Communication our answer could
be: "Not Thy, but our will be done."