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COMMUNICATION AS SOCIAL ACTION

ROBERTO VERALDI(*), MAURA ROMANO(**)

What I mean to underline, in the briefness of this exposition, is that there exist a communication procedure that characterize the main social process of man: the communicative action. Communication is an information exchange process between two or more physical subjects, happening around an object and in a definite context. According to Luciano Gallino, who deals with exploring the concept of communication, graduating and ordering from general to specific, we can summarize the topic as follow:

- Resources transfer: we have communication every time that "an ownership, a resource, a state is transmitted from a subject to an other". In this general definition several events, both physical and social, are included, as it is clearly possible to exchange material or non material resources. For example, the transfer of good and persons across communication ways and means, like roads, railways, cars and highways can be regarded as a kind of "communication" (and this was actually done until the industrial society). The concept itself of transport and travel is communication (Mattelart, 1994).

- Influence: it represents the behaviourist approach, that identifies communication with the stimulus/response reaction of every living being, without distinction between animal or human societies. Every behaviour that affects an other, with no regard to its intention, including the mere response to a stimulus or the unwanted ones, it's a kind of communication.

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- **Exchange of social values:** this makes communication being strictly a part of human society, according to those rules that are determined in a specific society. Signs, exchanges and language itself are referred to mental structures that control them. Meaning is placed on an anthropological level.

- **Information transfer:** communication is the transfer from a sender to a receiver of a message that is structured throughout various communication channels. In this case something immaterial is transferred (who transfers an information doesn't lose it). Information transfer implies the existence of a code (a shared language) that allows to codify and decode the message or text which is transferred.

- **Sharing of the same meanings:** Communication is restricted to those conditions that are required in order to allow two or more individuals to recognize each other in the exchange of signals. In this way we obtain a further and very selective transfer, although communication is actually possible even in presence of a minimal sharing of meaning, like belonging to a group whose motivations are only occasional.

- **Social unity:** the bigger semantic restriction can be obtained by regarding communication as the condition of "having basic behaviour elements or ways of living in common, thanks to the existence of set of rules", "social unity starting from individuals by using language and signs". In this case every different situation - i.e. two or more persons exchanging ideas, carrying a conversation or expressing very different ideas - are excluded.

It is very evident, even reading again the main theoreticians of the relational school, like Paul Watzlawick, Gregory Bateson, Don D. Jackson, that social life is settled and renewed throughout communicative process (Cesareo, 1999).

Briefly, according to the authors of the relational school:

- **It is impossible not to communicate**

- Every communication has a contents and a relation aspect
- The nature of a relation depends on the sequence of the communication punctuation among those who communicate
- Human beings communicate both with the numeric and with the analogical module. With the first mode (numeric) an arbitrary relation between name and "thing" which the name express is fixed (semantic convention); the second mode (the analogical) has its root in ancient times of human evolution. So, its validity is of a more general kind respect to the numeric mode of verbal communication, which is younger and more abstract.
- All communication exchange are symmetrical or complementary, depending on whether they are founded on identity or difference

We will now analyze, as we already told, that part of the communicative process that have relation with the communicative action.

In this attempt, I will use the bright pages of Pierfranco Malizia about the many aspects of communication as a cue, starting just from the procedure of communication.

- Briefly, the classical model of communication foresees:

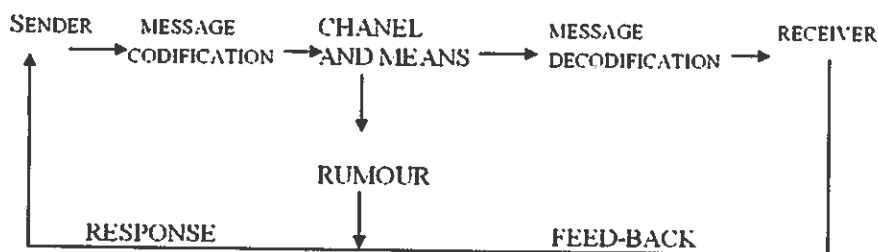


Fig 1 - Source: P. Malizia, 2006

The single elements are explained as follow:

1. The subject that sends a message to one or more subject, is the source or sender;
2. The process that translate in a symbolic shape the communication content is the codification;

3. the whole of symbols transmitted by the sender is the message;
4. the route made by the message is the channel;
5. the element the support and allow the route is the means;
6. What allows the understanding of signals is the decodification;
7. Who receives is the receiver;
8. the feed-back is the reactions following the message receive;
9. What comes after the feed-back is the answer;
10. What disturbs the communication process, being perhaps cause of a distortion, is the rumour.

If we accept this, like we actually do, it will be easier to say, like Watzlawick (1971) underlines (also quoted in Malizia), that:

1. *It's impossible not to communicate*, i.e., communication is something that we can't avoid and absolutely necessary; besides, communication is the mirror of any social behaviour or, we can better say, every social behaviour is, as a matter of fact, a communication process.

2. *Every communication has a contents and a relation aspects*, in a way that the second classifies the first; in other words, how we communicate qualifies what we communicate, even if, at least in line of principle, the contents should always be more relevant than the relations;

3. *the nature of a relation depends on the sequence of the communication punctuation among the subjects of communication*; if we want to give the right meanings to messages, we have to grasp all the steps of the sequence;

4. *all the communication exchanges are symmetrical and complementary*, depending that on being based on identity or difference; i.e., how the two subjects are placed.

5. *digital and analogical communication*: "verbal language has a complex and efficient logical syntax, but a weak semantic in the relation; instead, non verbal language presents a strong semantic and a weak syntax for the definition of relation" (Malizia, 2006).

Correctly, Malizia underlines that from these proposition we can derive some *particularity* that can result in a *confirmation*, "the message in which we approve [...] what the other subject told about himself or about

an argument; *negation*, [...] in which what the other told about himself or about an argument is denied; *disconfirmation*, [...] in which what the other told about himself or about an argument is not taken into account" (Malizia, 2006).

I will not go through this subject now, but I'll rather focus on some aspects of Habermas' theory.

The German author basically states that communication is a kind of interaction between subjects who relate each other exactly thanks to the communication process through a given means, language, that represents the shared system that can lead to success or to the agreement among the subjects themselves.

Therefore, it's a rational choice, "a rational action that tends to comprehension among the subjects, taking place in the course of the communication process" (Malizia, 2006).

Habermas (1977) shows noticeably like social action is provided of a meaning, that is both comprehensible and comprehensive. It is comprehensible, as it is shared by the subjects who interacts in a same cultural-historical context; it's comprehensive, as it includes the whole community, even those who could be a part of it.

The communicative action is then the means that make a *societas*, allowing to fulfil the social process with the strength and substance that give full meaning to *verbal behaviour*. That is, eventually, what allows to codify social behaviours as well and the essence itself of social living, the mode through interpersonal relations are settled, defined and developed and the *self* establish in the world (Habermas, 1997).

In conclusion, due to the nature of *communicative relation* (or of the communication process), communication can't be intended simply as a transmission of meaning between two or more subjects. At the same time that something is communicated, a particular relation, a specific interaction is suggested; social life itself is settled and renewed through communicative processes (Cesareo, 1999).

In addition to these classical processes, we should mention media communication and his nuances, but we will discuss this topic later.

Colour and significance on the web

In what Durker (Durker, 1993) first called Knowledge Society,

ruled by image and communication, the complex organizations (both public and private) use the Internet, Intranet and Extranet networks as their main instruments of visibility and communication, both internal and external. In the same way, single transmitter (think to the various sites of more or less public personages...) or collective aggregated users (as in the case of blogs, of sites such as YouTube, Wikipedia, Flickr and all those alimented by the same browsers, and, last but not least the immersive or virtual reality sites like the by now very popular Second-Life) use the net as an instrument to acquire, elaborate and exchange knowledge by means of communication. The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) represent then the main access channel to information and the principal interface to the world for those who communicate. In this context, thus, a new form of communication has progressively and more and more incisively imposed itself - the computer mediated communication (CMC), and the intrinsic peculiarities and features of the new digital instruments caused the skilful use of colour to reveal itself as an even more strategic issue than it was in the past - an all but marginal aspect in that peculiar communication process which, according to Thompson, assumes the traits of a *mediated quasi-interaction* (Thompson, 1998). Communication through the web sites, in facts, is impoverished of many elements that characterize face-to-face interaction (facial expression, gestural expressiveness etc.) and lacks also many factors persisting in the mediated interaction (such as the variation in the voice intonation in telephone conversations, etc.)¹; in this context of *mediated quasi-interaction* a careful utilization of colour cannot but give back to the utterance and to the communicative context a part of that richness that would not seem to characterize them.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the fact that the utilization of colour represents a relevant aspect of visual design, its implications have been hitherto little studied: if the colour of the "real" environments are held (by psychologists, architects, designers, etc.) important to the point of directly influencing our "perception of the world", then the same importance should be ascribed to the colours of the "virtual" interfaces - real cognitive and communicative environments into which we spend a great deal of our time.

¹ With the partial exception of videoconference communications, chat through webcam, telephonic conversation on the web, etc.

To comprehend the effects that the visual impact of colours has on the fruition of the communicated message, and to understand how it guides the web surfers who roam the cyberspace in search of information, it is essential to start from an analysis of the structural - and therefore also communicative - properties of the internet sites.

Web sites assume the shape of complex spaces of significance (Legris-Desportes-Bitoun, 2003) whose complexity resides in their being *multimodal*, or, as Cosenza holds, *multisensorial*². In fact the communication is not realized by the textual contents alone, or by the images alone or by the sounds alone, but the transmission of the meaning will be the outcome of the intermingling of several expressive codes: on the web the *significance* and the relative institutional representation of the *enunciator* will be realized by *pluricode* contents (Ciotti-Roncaglia, 2000), i.e. by co-action of images, graphic elements, animations, sounds, videos and texts which communicate jointly, in an integrated way, by means of their interaction (Ferraro, 2004).

On the web, then, paralinguistic³ element (i.e. all those element which concur to determinate the fruition of the text and of the textual meaning even though they aren't properly text) constitute themselves as important factors of definition and contextualization of the communication, even when they don't represent its object. In this way a semantic sphere is outlined, which could be described as "synaesthetic"⁴, i.e. a sphere where the production of meanings is constituted by the simultaneous action of seve-

² For *multimodality* or *multisensoriality* of the net, some authors mean *multimediality* in the acception defined centripetal by Ciotti and Roncaglia, i.e. the "convergence of different contents and of several typologies of data and codes" (Ciotti, Roncaglia 2000, 342); other authors interpret it as "saying the same thing in different ways turning, according to the case, to one or another of our senses" (Negroponte 1995, 70), or also as "the sense is produced by the combination of sound, graphic images and written text" (Gallino 200, 93). In all this cases the term *multimediality* doesn't put the stress on the physical support through which the information is exchanged (mean or means in convergence), but on the various linguistic codes and on the different senses interested by on-line communication. Here, and in accordance with Cosenza (cfr. Cosenza 2004, 21), we prefer to define *multimodality* or *multisensoriality* what is considered *multimediality* in its centripetal acception.

³ To make the concept clear, we can formulate a parallelism with the function carried out by paraverbal elements (as for example tone, volume, rhythm, voice intensity etc.) in the determination of sense in the sphere of verbal communication.

⁴ On *synaesthesia* see: Pozzato 2001, 261; Floch 1995 and Landowski 2004.

ral sensory levels, where signification is produced by the strong mingling of text, sound, graphics and images with a direct consequence not only on the ways of fruition of what is communicated, but also and above all on the configurations of communication on the side of the *enunciator*. The effect of this *sensorization* of writing is to increase exponentially the role of colours in the management of the perceptive action of the user and in the control of the communicated meanings. In order to master the sense effects of his communication, the *enunciator* will be endowed with the task of managing the choice and utilization of colours as well as of all every other elements that he is going to include in his webpage: on the web everything, from functional to aesthetic requires to be coordinated (Regouby, 1998).

We could trace the roots of this assumption in the well-known theory of the scholars of Palo Alto School (Watzlawick, Beavin, Jackson, 1967): *the impossibility not to communicate* asserted by them reminds us that in face-to-face communication meanings are produced not only through words, but also, for example, by means of non verbal codes, both kinesics and proxemics, and that even not communicating in reality is communication, as it transmits the will not to communicate. In the same way, in computer mediated communication, the meaning is produced not only by written text but also by elements of paralinguage (Paccagnella, 2000) like the colour of the fonts or the background on which the text can be read; the immediate consequence is that not to choose and not to use strategically the colours will not prevent the enunciator to produce anyway an effect of signification on the receiver, and this is the reason why colours shouldn't be individuated and defined on the basis of criteria dictated by mere randomness, but by causality.

The communicative strength of colours, which is analyzed here in consideration of on-line communication, can be deduced from Wunenburger's considerations about colours and images. In facts, if it is possible to assume a pre-eminence of visual-sensory representations over linguistic representations - as no linguistic transcription placing us in front of a sign can compete with the perceptive ecstasy of vision and with sensory and emotional richness of seen things (Wunenburger, 1997) - the colours in internet sites communication will strike two different perceptive levels, with important implications on the fruition of information and on the navigability of the site. Let us see how it happens taking as a significant example the web sites of complex organizations (whether public or private or no profit etc.) which undoubtedly represent the most diffused tipology among the communicators on the web. The relation between

colours and the fruition of information could be observed through 1) the visual identity of the site, and 2) through its usability and accessibility.

Visual identity of the site

The problem of colours significance is one of prominent complexity which, according to Wittgenstein - theoretician of a *grammar of colour* - cannot but be traced back into a language-game: the colours will have a sense (and thus will communicate) not much on the basis of visual experience and of empirical observation, but inside a system of relations among concepts, definitions and semantic rules⁵ (Wittgenstein, 1977). It is on this aspect that internet sites play when they assume the shape of institutional image vectors using colours as transmission factors of corporate identity, i.e. when they rely on the possibility to constitute a system of semantic relations (a language-game, that is) which correlates - into this signification system - corporate values and concepts with the virtualization of the same values and concepts realized through the colours of the same site. But let's proceed with order.

Internet site could be defined as today's most important means of organizational communications: enterprises give an image of themselves and of their product and services communicating through television and radio spots, through promotion campaigns on papers and on wall posters, through illustrative pamphlets and brochures, by means of press conference and organizing events. But they communicate their identity even and above all through the pages of their internet sites. To this purpose - and in a space of signification that we have seen as being extremely complex for the variety of forms of communication that it can contain - colours cannot but become strategic instruments to outline and to transmit the visual identity of the *transmitter/emisor-organization*. Working on visual identity mainly through colours means promoting the constitution of a mnestic image⁶ that will allow the receiver to trace visual enunciations back to the visual identity of the site (Flosch, 1995) and then, by association, to the transmitter of the communication. A positive consequence of this opera-

⁵ For example, Wittgenstein states that, watching a picture in black and white, we could assert that the gentleman portrayed has blonde hairs even if in the picture they appear to be gray, and the personal experience of the observer will lose any relevance in comparison with the meaning that the colours will assume into the concepts and the linguistic rules that we learnt to apply (cfr Wittgenstein 1977, 18)

⁶ In this sense, as Wunenburger reminds us, the mnestic image "recovers, thanks to the perceived, an actual intensity, and this allows the acknowledgement of the identity of impressions and thus of their temporality. The one of the images is a strange game, showing how mnestic image doesn't survive alone, but can revive drawing his own life from the very strength of present" (cfr. Wunenburger 1997, 46, 47).

tion will be the shortening of distances between *corporate identity* and *corporate image*, i.e. between the image of itself built by the organization and the image perceived by the public (on the subject of corporate identity Bettetini, 1999). This approaching will produce a double effect: on the one hand, obviously, we will obtain a strengthening of the recognizability of the organization communicating through the site; on the other hand we will have an attenuation of the threshold of virtuality of the medium as a consequence of the reduction of the distance separating the real organization from its virtual representation, as these result to be tendentially converging.

This double outcome will produce a retroaction on the *noise effects* caused by information overload and by visual overload of the net: this results in avoiding, or, at least mitigating the risk that the great quantity of sites and information composing the internet universe - i.e. the noise - could disorientate the user. So, an aesthetic-visual treatment of the pages that in the coloring draws on the colours of the logo - *symbol* of the company and of its values - will facilitate the association of the site with the transmitter whose image and voice it becomes, and with all the meanings that it means to communicate. To this purpose a careful management of colour is important not only as far as chromatic treatment of the home page is concerned, but also for all the pages composing the site. In facts, as Nielsen reminds us (Nielsen, Loranger, 2006), by now browsers, or search engines, have become real *reply engines*, that is, more and more often the users gain access to sites taking directly the information responding to their search without passing through the home page, but browsing directly on internal pages. That's why attention to the treatment of colours should be bestowed to all the pages. Moreover, colour is strongly orientating in every moment of web navigation even in consideration of the fact that an uniform chromatic visual format will grant uniformity to the site and to the information contained in it: sites composed by visually uneven pages produce an *estrangement effect*⁷ because of which, changing page, the user will have the impression not to be on the same site anymore (Finocchi, Romano, 2006). This disorientation could cause uncertainties on the identity of the transmitter and the reader could find it difficult to identify the real source of the information with negative repercussions in terms of reliability and trustworthiness of communication. The choice of a uniform chromatic dominant will thus play a strategic part on the user's perception,

⁷ It's a sensation of bewilderment that could be averted by looking fixedly some elements of the page like the header, the navigation bars, the foot of a page, the presence of a logo and its positioning, and above all the background colour of every page.

accomplishing another very important function: the function to *legitimate* the enunciator, i.e. to consent to the enunciating organization to valorize and establish itself as a reliable and institutionally appointed to communicate subject.

Usability of the site and information accessibility

Colour in internet sites produces signification not only on the level of identity, but also playing a role in the distribution of functional meanings, that is in the management of pragmatic aspects of the user-site relation. Colour then, will affect not only the visual (and thus perceptive - sensory) aspect of the interface, but it will operate also on another level, a level concerning the access to the contents and their availability: in facts, as Visciola maintains, the relation between aesthetic and usability is a very strong one (Visciola, 2006). Thus an analysis intending to study how colours communicate in the cyberspace can't evade observing colours aesthetic-perceptive-sensory impact on a sphere of the receiver that we could define as *cognitive*, but also the functionalist-perlocutory impact of the same colours that will affect the modalities by which the web surfer moves himself in the site. The reading of an internet site is very different from the sequential reading of a book: the navigator looks through the pages appointing his attention on elements that we could define as "of prominence", and only later he dwells upon the information that interests him. In this context colours are elements whose aesthetical properties are fundamental in addressing and guiding the perceptive course of the receiver in the research for elements of prominence, and thus in his fruition of the information. In facts, through the use of colours it's possible to give rise to parallel and multilevel courses of reading, so to attribute more or less emphasis on given information to facilitate the "quick glance" to the reader: for example texts or parts of a text could be posed on a prominent level and the in relief compared with other contents of the page. Also, a chromatic differentiation of the semantic nodes composing the navigation bar could represent a device marking the borders of the forms and stressing the pregnancy of each of the forms thus defined. (Wunenburger, 1999). This will lead to a diversification in the fields of contents, especially if colour differences will be observed in the corresponding return pages. Colour thus becomes an important *semantic indicator*. Experts in usability like Nielsen and Loranger suggest to make a *minimal* use of colour in orientating the user among the various interest areas in order to avoid the bewildering *harlequin effect* on the page; they also advise to pay a particular attention to

the chromatic matching of colours and to the level of contrast between font and background colour, so to facilitate the reading of contents (Nielsen, Loranger, 2006). We can see, then, how colour management affects the accessibility of internet sites, that is, how it can contribute in emphasizing or removing obstacles from the perceptive course of the users hindering or facilitating the fruition of the information transmitted by the site. The importance of colour in the accessibility of internet sites is emphasized by the many norms regulating its uses⁸, especially since about the 8% of men and the 0,5% of women is affected by some form of Daltonism or of chromatic blindness that prevent them to distinguish certain colour matching (Nielsen, Loranger, 2006). For this reason we should not rely only on colours to discriminate different information; instead we should try to do so that the important elements of the page could be given enough prominence through a visualization in a scale of grey.

Graphics is then an integrant part of the writing process on the web, and the colours - that could seem only purely aesthetical factors - assume instead a strategic importance in the signification process, and thus for the effectiveness of communication.

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⁸ Think for instance to what is established on the use of colours in matter of accessibility of the internet sites by the law January 9 2004, n.4 "Dispositions to facilitate disabled persons access to computerized instruments" (the so called Legge Stanca); by the Recommendation of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C); by the standards defined in paragraph 1194.22 Section 508 of USA Rehabilitation Act or by the technical specification defined in matter of accessibility by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO).

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