The message as vehicle, as sign, as content: A diplomat's viewpoint on discourse.

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Diplomats have their own appreciation of what constitutes "discourse". In my case this appreciation is integral to an effort to understand how intelligence, in the sense that word has in security matters, information if you wish, becomes discourse. These are not academic remarks but my specific viewpoint, as a diplomat interested in national security and for many years engaged in Arab affairs, on a subject that otherwise is indeed an academic one. It is somewhat the theory of a practice.

The appreciation of the message considered as the essence of information in any of its aspects, taking it for a vehicle, points to the fact that it always carries something from an origin to a destination.

If we see it as a sign it is, first of all, the sign of the existence of a sender and can by itself — even by not being sent, or received — constitute a message in the sense of content, provided it has previously been so agreed by sender and receiver: a sort of "yes or no" message.

The content is the cargo carried by the message as a vehicle. In this instance, the message can be purposefully misleading, to avoid the disclosure of its content and, in such a case, this "outer" content is in itself the container of an "inner" secret content which bears the real meaning whose transmission is pursued.

The difference between these angles of view is that technology might be powerful and sophisticated enough as to bar the message as a vehicle, even as a sign although this is more difficult to assure, but it shall inevitably be at odds with contents.

Many techniques have been developed to detect some words considered critical for their meaning, such as war, attack, kill, explode, *etc.*, determining by this the interest of a message, but it is very simple to accord upon a language which avoids these terms. Let alone the fact that terms can by themselves be misinterpreted or misleading.

Then, you can be watching anything coming from someone suspicious, but what if this suspect talks only about common, domestic subjects?

The basic idea is that security cannot be warranted only by technical means and devices, but needs a work of intelligence dealing with the ensemble of attitudes and trends as well in individuals as in groups under suspicion or not, if it is to prevent any kind of criminal deeds.

I think we can reasonably affirm that the basic unit of information is the message, purported to carry some meaning; that is why we call it a vehicle.

Even its absence becomes meaningful, inasmuch as it is signaling the absence or the incapacity, permanent or temporary, of the sender who is supposed to produce it. It is in this sense that we say that it constitutes a sign. And what it carries, its meaning, is its content.

All information deals with contents, and these are shaped by languages, cultures, idiosyncrasies: that is where troubles begin.

I. The message as a vehicle

Let us begin with what a message is as a vehicle, and the reach of technology in this context, that is to say what technology can and cannot do to detect, stop, modify or affect in any way the function of this vehicle.

Being a vehicle is essential to the message. The meaning of it, even if it be irrational, in no way dispossesses it of this condition.

In its initial forms, messages began to be transmitted probably through gestures and grumblings, then words spoken, then written words.

For millennia, the written word was to constitute the preferred way to transmit information. Advances in technology were aimed at making this written message reach its destination faster and safely.

Curiously, further advances led to a return of the spoken message. This is a recent development, as compared to the centuries during which the written text was king, taking us back to what it was before, some five millennia ago.

The vast majority of people were analphabet, but this did not affect this preponderance of written messages, especially because these were exchanged between leaders and ruling elites who, either knew how to read and write or had somebody to do it for them.

Any message is configured, thought, constructed, articulated and anounced in a specific language, and is likewise made to conform to its rules, modalities and idiosyncrasies.

This is important because both extremes of the message's path, *i.e.,* sender and receiver, must share the knowledge, comprehension and ability to express them in that language. Otherwise the vehicle becomes useless.

The mastery of a language is, from this point of view, valuable in two opposite senses: as an open vehicle between sender and receiver and as a closed one for those not familiar with it.

It is important to consider not only how many people use a language or how widespread it is in the world, but also, how crucial may become the knowledge of a language in a specific place.

This is true for spoken as well as for written messages.

The message is always supposed to communicate something; assuming this, can technology stop or deviate it, so that its purposed destination is never reached or its arrival is significantly delayed?

The answer is definitely yes, but only inasmuch as this message uses these technologies.

If this vehicle is circulating by any of those primitive but still active roads such as, for instance, gestures, verbal or mouth to ear transmissions, technology can detect it and record it but cannot stop or delay it.

And by the time technology does that, the message has already been delivered. Depending on the urgency of the matter, these detections and recordings might prove to be useless.

Also, if the message is in a language not familiar to those controlling it, the time lost in translation might be decisive.

These circumstances apply as well to written messages which, depending on the secrecy with which the delivery is made, can go perfectly undetected. And, if detected, the problem of translation remains.

The way technology has restored spoken words in the forefront of communications should alert us in two ways; first: old uses have not disappeared or lost their utility; second: people who are in principle excluded by their socio-economic and educational background, from access to technology, might, by the development of this same technology, be included in a world net of instant communication.

This is no negligible fact in areas where the common trait is analphabetism and the language employed is a dialectical version of a more widespread one so that, those eventually controlling these conversations, must not only be proficient in the language in question but also in this particular version of it.

Although many terrorist attacks were perpetrated and prepared by people with a medium level of formal education or even above, it is also true that many hot areas in different countries and international borders enter, by the characteristics of its population, within the frame described in the precedent paragraph.

If we wish to prevent an action planned in any of these areas, the same technology that allows us to watch them, allows these people to communicate with each other. And that is why knowing their language becomes critical.

Besides, it is less costly for those organising any move in one of these areas to recruit local people and introduce them to a cell phone or any easy-maneuvering device — and that's it. While the other side, to watch them or control their movements and communications must dispose of very costly material and equipment, having also to instruct and train the personnel for its profitable utilisation.

Concerning languages, another important aspect is idiosyncrasy. All

languages are a way of conceiving, understanding and considering the world as a whole, including people and their relationship with each other.

An outstanding example is a word strongly related to values, loyalty, feelings of appurtenance.

It refers, for most European languages, to the father: in English, "fatherland"; in Spanish, "patria", as in Latin wherefrom it is derived, from "pater": father.

Contrarywise, the word corresponding to approximately this meaning, in Arabic, refers to the mother: "ummah".

This implies something more profound than an apparent word puzzle. It shows how deep, wide and far reaching differences in the conception, understanding and consideration of reality between languages can be. These differences in perception reflect differences in conceptualisation so that we cannot safely suppose that they express identical realities only naming them diversely. These are different realities that overlap somehow with each other but not wholly, completely or accurately and most of all, not interchangeably.

The importance of this for our case is that we must take it into account for a correct understanding of somebody else's message, be it friend or foe. And in this, technology is of no practical help.

Technology may detect and control somebody else's communications, but not understand them fully and accurately.

We are responsible for putting these technological means and instruments to an intelligent and purposeful use; but the others — be they competitors, rivals, enemies — have at their disposal all these same means and instruments, the only real limit being whether they can afford them or not.

And those competitors, rivals or enemies might be using ways of communicating that escape, sometimes for their simplicity, from the net of those expensive, sophisticated and advanced devices.

The case of the struggle and fight against terrorism is that of an all out war. In this sense, one must be prepared for anything: the imaginable and the unimaginable too. Mostly because this confrontation intervenes — if it is not provoked by it — across different cultures who think, speak and relate in different languages.

These circumstances require from the analyst a vast, sensitive and flexible capacity for understanding the other and, as important, to be able to recognize who is or might become an ally or an enemy — or be forced, led or encouraged to become one.

So we must be careful about what is the cargo with which we load this vehicle, and this is a decision that also escapes the technological domain.

II. The message as a sign

The message as a sign points to several facts:

— First, there is a sender who,
— Second, is able and willing to communicate but
— Third, the message sent — unless by pre-established convention within its text — does neither prove by itself the identity of the sender nor the authenticity of its meaning.

Considering this, we may assume that it is on this aspect of the message that technology can be more useful, because it is able, under certain circumstances, to stop the flow of messages altogether.

If this is the case, the receiver can have only a "yes or no" message: the "yes" standing for "everything is normal" and the "no" for "we cannot communicate right now".

Then, if a delay is imposed in the transmission of messages and this goes undetected, it might introduce an element of confusion into the other camp provoking a situation which might in turn be turned to our advantage.

Moreover, if sender and receiver did not take the precaution of pre-establishing ways for the auto-confirmation of the authenticity of the message and/or of the sender's identity, this can be used as another means of introducing doubts amidst them.

Unless it is fixed as a rule of procedure, it is improbable that informal groups acting clandestinely would take this precaution. If they have taken it, we go back to the situation in which the message becomes a "yes or no" one. And by their answer or lack thereof we should be able to see whether they have detected our interference or not, interpreting their "yes or no" message for our own benefit.

This would be the situation, let us say, as perceived from the point of view of an eventual receiver whose communications we wish to detect or control.

Any communication being originated in an area we suspect might be harboring dangerous activities or coming from persons we also suspect for similar or related reasons, should make us become alert and pay special attention to them, even if the apparent content of these communications seems unimportant.

Technology offers efficient means to fulfill such a task. This analysis should take into consideration the language, context and cultural background in which this communication occurs, and must be undertaken by personnel capable of performing it accordingly — if we wish it to be more than mere bureaucratic vigilance.

This intercourse is a two way road. To be useful, our control and

detection should go undetected; otherwise, its purpose could be easily marred or deviated.

Such a sign would be important for the other side because, knowing that they are being watched, they might deploy a set of actions and/or messages intended to deviate or distract our attention from their actual purpose. Also, they might do so just on the supposition that they might be being watched.

These are tasks which are out of reach of soley technological means.

It is opportune to recall the reflections of Professor Emeritus Martin E. Marty of the Chicago University: "I've learned that how we communicate is as important as what we communicate".[1]

This he says when referring to the way words such as "jihad" and "crusade" are understood by Westerners and Easterners:

> Take the term "jihad", for starters… Those who want to inspire hatred of Muslims... tend to define it as a murderous campaign against non-Muslims. But scholars and moderate Muslims will tell you that the word's root concept is 'struggle' — and that the struggle often refers to the one within ourselves over our own failures. The word crusade inspires a similar misunderstanding. For many Christians, it is an honorable endeavor... Among Muslims, however (and many Eastern Orthodox Christians, for that matter), "crusade" evokes images of bloodthirsty warriors exploiting the land and people as they traveled to the Holy Land — a land that was holy not just to them but to their enemies as well.[2]

I think it assumes very accurately how difficult an understanding of one another might become, even when using the same words.

According to our understanding — of those terms just quoted or others similar to them — we will assume that they imply either hostility or friendship.

We could be fooling ourselves or playing into the other's hands out of our own prejudices and misconceptions, either by losing the opportunity of securing alliances or by dismissing real threats.

So, we may conclude that while technology enhances greatly our capabilities to communicate and detect or control other's communications, these capabilities can also be profited from by the other side and this detection and control bases its efficacy in remaining undetected themselves. Considering all this, the value of technology remains as ambiguous as that of

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[1] Martin E. Marty, "Inter-religious dialogue helps, but don't expect utopia", *The Beyrut Daily Star* (9 August 2007).

[2] *Ibid.*

any other instrument: it depends upon the use we are capable of making of it.

III. The message as content

We have, so far, taken into account the "outer" parts of the message: the hull but not the husk, for they are not separate parts, but shape instead the frame that determines its functionality. Let us deal now with its pulp, which is its content that gives it a sense and a purpose.

The simplest way to hide something is to put it on display, so that nobody would pay attention. The apparently most innocent actions and conversations usually are the best disguise. And then, you cannot — and ought not to — control everybody all the time, at risk of ending up not controlling absolutely anything.

Very expensive and sophisticated means can and most probably will be sidestepped by primitive and easy procedures, like using little known dialects or recruiting for messengers or deliverers — even without the recruit's knowledge — people beyond any suspicion because of their appearance.

What is interesting about contents, information and communications is that, though not appearing dangerous or suspect or risky for us, they can nevertheless be very harmful for our projects or our purposes.

This includes not only the case of classified information that for different reasons a government or an organisation would not like to become public.

News or information — messages them all — that common wisdom would tag as actual and factual truth. But then… how many ways do you have of telling a tale so that the hero becomes the villain — and *vice versa*?

Not to speak of the background of that story. This might lead reasonable and well informed people to perceive that a government is in crisis, a currency is going to be devalued, a stock market is to plummet and so on and so forth.

Because truth, when you are going to base your actions upon it, is what you believe to be true — nothing more, nor less.

When we add to this that languages and cultures have their own perceptions and conceptions of reality, these not being always translatable or explainable to people of other cultures: *e.g.* "fatherland" and "ummah"; and then, that the same term — as with "jihad" and "crusade" — when seen from the other's side conveys a meaning which is, for any practical purpose, just the opposite of the one we confer it, we feel led directly into confusion.

And confusion there is.

The problem with contents sprouts from here, from these misunderstandings and understatements which lead us to believe that we are talking about the same subject when we are instead referring to different things entirely. This

might sound too radical but is often the case.

The bearing of all this on security is varied and important.

To begin with, if you do not understand the reality that you want to affect or modify, the most probable result of your actions shall be a failure.

With the virtually universal diffusion of communications, flows of information reach the remotest corners of the world. Symmetrically, news from those remotest corners arrives everywhere. So, we all can know almost simultaneously what is going on anywhere else. It is just a matter of technology and access.

This is a question of messages as vehicles. We bring it here to underline the importance that contents may acquire.

Let us recall some elements:

— News are edited in a specific form, responding to: interests, opinions, idiosyncrasies derived from a certain language and culture as used by a certain government or group.

— For most of the people, these news come as facts, because they usually do not have the means or the information to analyze them critically.

— This biased information is what normally becomes public opinion, as reflected in polls or otherwise.

When this flow of information comes from external — *i.e.* foreign — sources, it influences the public opinion in our own country. Sometimes, even referring to local events because, though we might try to correct them or neutralise its impact, the doubt persists as to which is the true version.

Considering that international media are concentrated in a few hands, most of them, also, belonging to holdings that gear many different sorts of businesses and act from a selected group of countries, it is easy to suppose that they shall not facilitate any news to transpire, even less, be diffused worldwide, that might harm their interests.

The bearing of this on internal security is evident. Reflecting on these matters this paradox came to me: How come we are so worried about controlling all sort of weapons — from nuclear to chemical to those of mass-destruction and so on and so forth — and yet we do not pay attention to something that as a means can be — and alas, is — used to provoke and produce so much trouble?

I must immediately stress that I am not against any freedom, of press or any other; I just say that, given the present conditions of our world, it would be naive to suppose that information is always the result of an arduous and sincere pursuit of truth.

This link between security and information is something any intelligence service should keep in mind, even if there is very little that can be

done. The spreading of rumors, considering the educational level of the people among which they circulate, can lead to a situation in which confidence in the official news is lost, giving way to the wildest versions of real or concocted facts.

When international pressure is applied to any country or group of countries to compel them to do or not to do something, or to adopt or not to adopt some specific policy, be it economic, political or otherwise, the reaction might be of compliance or of defiance. And frequently, the reasons for both attitudes originate in a miscomprehension of the other side's situation and motives.

These misunderstandings emerge from discrepancies that run deeply in each culture. And by the same token by which you cannot totally identify different concepts (for instance, "fatherland"/"ummah") although they might refer to similar ideas or aspects of reality; institutions and ways of social organisation and relationship created or brought into being in any one society, cannot be transplanted to another as if these were one size fits all pieces of clothing.

This is the danger of a unified way of thinking or, rather, of trying to apply it indiscriminately to any situation anywhere in the world.

Of course, there are similar and related traits that can be found across diverse cultures and societies. We are all human beings and these diversities are the result of the variety of answers which humanity has come up with throughout history.

Understanding, comprehension and conviviality are possible even across cultures and ways of living that appear at first sight so distinct.

Also, that there are paths for international cooperation that go beyond the usual frame First World/Third World or North/South.

Technology can furnish all the data we might wish for, but not the comprehension or understanding capable of putting it all together and making it useful for our purposes, whatever it may be.

Conclusion

I think that after these reflections we may conclude that technology is able to furnish us with the means to assure security.

But the comprehension of the risks, the challenges and the opportunities facing us, depends upon the intelligent and reasonable use to which we are capable of putting them.

This comprehension must extend itself to the motives, situation and circumstances as well of those we consider our friends as of those we consider our rivals or our enemies.

In the case of the former, it is the only way of helping them solve their

problems that, in a world interconnected by instant communications, is also the way of helping ourselves.

For the latter, there is no other way of beating them but by knowing them, their motives, their situation and their circumstances.

Long centuries of practicing diplomacy should be a stout support for obtaining good results in any of these cases.

But leaning on history for help, though it is inevitable and unquestionable, may also be misleading when we ponder how most of our prejudices and misunderstandings sprout from that very source.

For the message history delivers to us is as tainted with our own conception based on our own culture as any other domain of perception and thought. With the aggravation that history displays amidst the prestige due to the past, conferring on it a sort of halo of tradition and of proven wisdom as well.

So, as much as we must be vigilant of the use we make of the technological means at our disposal and mistrust their effective possibilities, we ought to scrutinise our perception of facts to avoid the traps our own way of thinking contrives to snare us in.

Intelligence should therefore be applied both ways: towards the others and their reality as they understand it, and to the reality we take for granted ourselves.

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