

Everything is code

Description

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â??He doesnâ??t give you questions. He doesnâ??t give you orders. He speaks in a code. I understand the code because Iâ??ve been around him for a decadeâ?• said convicted ex-lawyer Michael Cohen about his ex-boss (Trump) before the US House Oversight Committee on Wednesday.

As any student of semiotics knows, speaking in code is what we do â?? when we communicate. Itâ??s normal. To speak *directly* is the exception rather than the rule. In the kind of work Iâ??m involved in getting others to do what you think you want them to do is primarily an exercise in subtle influence, persuasion and suggestion, perhaps delivered as a â??nudgeâ?• rather than an order. Itâ??s the same in advertising. Only crude advertisers *direct* you to buy Weetabix â?? obviously, overtly, as a command.

Messaging is generally covert, and it works because of context, and familiarity with context. As Cohen said, â??I understand the code. Iâ??ve been around him for a decade.â?•

Direct, overt messages are in the company of commands, rules, instructions and orders, which work in some contexts, but also work against independent minded citizensâ?? built-in tendencies to plough their own furrows, follow their usual habits, and resist authority. In any case, you already have to be receptive and sensitive to the context for any messaging, direct or indirect, to take effect. â??Please fasten your seat beltsâ?• makes sense on an aeroplane or fairground ride, but not in a restaurant. Context is everything.



Code city

Iâ??m interested in ways that the city is saturated with codes. Many city features are hidden within code, or at least covert messaging. Navigation provides an obvious example. Thereâ??s a famous New Yorker cartoon by James Stevenson of a policeman giving directions to a town visitor. The thought balloon above the policeman shows a conventional map, with arrows charting the route to the visitorâ??s destination. Thatâ??s what this knowledgable local understands.

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But the thought balloon above the visitor shows a confused jumble of arbitrary map bits and a tangle of arrows. Navigational instructions require a degree of familiarity to be of use. To encounter a city for the first time is to encounter a series of coded messages. In time, seasoned residents can say â??I understand the code because Iâ??ve been around it for a decade.â?•

These *tacit dimensions* of language and social interaction are obvious. Hereâ??s whatâ??s interesting: under a coded system, what gets communicated is opaque to others in the room. Only the supposed recipient knows what the message is, or that there even is a message. Cities are full of it: layers of messaging intended or customised each for their respective constituencies. But then messages get intercepted, relayed, retranslated, recoded, diverted, distorted â?? and thatâ??s when the fun begins.

Bibliography

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Note

- See MSNBC youtube clip for a record of Cohenâ??s statement about code: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eqntws2NXQY
- Image above is a view towards â??The Shardâ?• building over the Thames from 20 Fenchurch Street, London.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. ciphercity
2. city
3. code
4. language
5. tacit

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