

A libel against technological determinism

Um libelo contra o determinismo tecnológico

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ABSTRACT

In *Television: technology and cultural form*, translated into Portuguese for the first time more than forty years after it was written, Raymond Williams challenged technological determinism by showing information and communication technologies result from a complex historical-social causality. With a broad and contemporary approach, the ideas of this pioneer in cultural studies shed light even on such phenomena such as today's digital convergence, which he never experienced personally.

Keywords: Television, technological determinism, Raymond Williams

RESUMO

Em *Televisão: tecnologia e forma cultural*, livro que ganha – após mais de quarenta anos – sua primeira tradução para a língua portuguesa, Raymond Williams desafia o determinismo tecnológico ao mostrar que as tecnologias de informação e comunicação resultam de complexa causalidade histórico-social. Em abordagem contemporânea e abrangente, as ideias desse pioneiro dos estudos culturais lançam luz até mesmo sobre fenômenos que ele não chegou a vivenciar, como a convergência digital de nossos dias.

Palavras-chave: Televisão, determinismo tecnológico, Raymond Williams

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“IT IS OFTEN said that television has altered our world,” says Welsh culturalist Raymond Williams, defiantly, in the first paragraph of his anthological *Television: technology and cultural form*. One of the greatest classics in sociology of television, the book has now been published for the first time in Portuguese, after more than four decades since its original publication. Scholars of communication and culture are indebted to publishers Boitempo and PUC-Minas for filling this important gap in the bibliography on the subject in our language.

It is first and foremost a forceful manifesto against positivist approaches in the social sciences. Williams adopts as a starting point and guiding thread something that could well be considered a *Copernican revolution*: overcoming technocratic approaches in a view that considers television not in itself, but as a result of a socially and historically determined process.

In order to understand the meaning of this epistemological turn, it is necessary to note that, until that moment, the dominant strand in this area – well represented in orthodox functionalism, with its studies on the *effects* of the television medium – was based on the trick of isolating the environment in relation to its social determinants. This approach, called *technological determinism*, is a powerful and yet ingrained vision of the relationship between technology and social change. From this perspective, technological research is conceived as self-generating. Technology comes into the world “by an essentially internal process of research and development,” (p. 26) and then creates new societies and a new man.

It is surprising how the terms of this worldview are taken up again today in the debate on digital networks and interactive technologies, seen as promoters of a new participatory and democratic culture. The imagery built around the Internet tends to imbue it with the smells of abstract egalitarianism, just as, decades earlier, McLuhan’s sanctioning approach has conceived television as a detached agent of a new *electronic age* pregnant with emancipatory possibilities, in *global village* milestones¹.

Hence the topicality of *Television*. The book reveals remarkable scope by shedding light on phenomena that Williams did not come to experience personally, such as the digital convergence of our day. Today, as at that time, the need for a new emphasis still challenges the science of communication. It is necessary to bring up a different kind of interpretation, distinct from technicality in its ability to recover the social intentions underlying the processes of research and technological development.

Technological determinism is indefensible not only due to the first term of the binomial, which suggests substituting an autonomous and superhuman

¹ In *Television*, Williams classifies McLuhan’s theory as an aesthetic formalism intended to be social theory. It is not only technological determinism but also a socio-cultural determinism, as it seeks to cancel all questions about intentions and uses. “If the medium [...] is the cause, all other causes, all that men ordinarily see as history, are at once reduced to effects” (p. 136) Further, what orthodox sociology saw as effects – being therefore subject to questioning – is displaced in the name of physiological and psychological effects, in a sort of individualizing reductionism. The media are thus dissocialized and presented as gadgets connected to an abstract sensory-motor system, common to all men of all ages. Now, says Williams, “If the effect of the medium is the same, whoever controls or uses it, and whatever apparent content he may try to insert, then we can [...] let the technology run itself. It is hardly surprising that this conclusion has been welcomed by the ‘media-men’ [...]” (p.137).

technology for social and political relations. Equally problematic is the reductionist understanding that has been established about the notion of *determination*, traditionally understood in the sense of *prefiguration*. As Williams explains, “Determination is a real social process, but never [...] as a wholly controlling, wholly predicting set of causes.” (p. 139). Thus, it is necessary to replace schematic understandings with the idea of “setting limits and exerting pressures”². A social fact is never established a priori; on the contrary, it develops within a more or less open set of possibilities, constrained by social forces and pressures. In the case of television, this includes “the distribution of power or of capital, social and physical inheritance, relations of scale and size between groups” (p. 139).

Television, therefore, is not the result of a closed technological research process. Television systems were foreseen and actively imagined, “not in utopian but in technical ways” (p. 32). In a complex set of interconnected fields, systems of mobility and transference in production and communication, whether in mechanical and electrical transport, or in telegraphy, telephony, radio and image, worked as stimuli and responses within a general period of social transformation. In many places, through seemingly disconnected paths, these stimuli and responses were gradually isolated and technically defined.

There is, from this perspective, links – not always direct or easily identifiable – between a new type of society, more complex and volatile, and the development of modern communication technologies. In the foreground, this relationship is directly causal: the incentives for improvements in technology have come from communication and control problems in military and commercial systems, whose needs have led to the definition of priorities on their own terms.

However, as society developed, new types of information were claimed. This demand was deeper than any specialization to political, military or commercial information could meet. It was related to new perceptions of mobility and change, well documented at least since Baudelaire’s (1996) essays. They were not merely abstract yearnings, but experiences that were then already lived, which led to profound redefinitions of the function and process of social communication. As Williams explains (p. 15),

In a changing society, and especially after the Industrial Revolution, problems of social perspective and social orientation became more acute. New relations between men, and between men and things, were being intensely experienced, and in this area, especially, the traditional institutions of church and school, or of settled community and persisting family, had very little to say.

²This idea is dear to Williams and appears not only in *Television* (p.139) but at various points in his work (Williams, 1977: 87, 1979: 356, 2011: 44).

Williams identifies two seemingly opposite tendencies, which have occurred in a connected way in modern urban-industrial societies: on the one hand, the growth of physical mobility; on the other, the growing confinement of people in small living spaces – the so-called *home, sweet home*. This reality has helped shape many of the priorities of technological production. Initially, improvements were made to public lighting and transportation systems – the major railways were the symbol of this phase. Later, new communication technologies began to focus, beyond physical mobility, on a kind of sociological mobility that connected the private home to the needs of public life.

The institution of broadcasting helped to reconcile these contradictory pressures of industrial capitalism. They were born, more directly, from the dissolution of old forms of productive settlement, characterized by the tiny scale. Thus increased the distance between workplaces and dwellings – and between them and the public administration. At the same time, along with the growth of social struggles, there were improvements in wages and living conditions, including the expansion of free time.

These effects resulted in the emphasis on the improvement of the small family home which, apparently *private* and *self-sufficient*, could not in fact be maintained without external and regular means of supply, which included not only supplies but also information *from outside*. This situation of simultaneous mobility and confinement – which Williams called *mobile privatization* (p. 38) – was intensely explored in modern drama through distressed and incomplete characters in their homes, apprehensive in their windows, eagerly awaiting messages that would allow them to grasp trends that can influence their lives. Williams quotes, in this sense, Ibsen and Chekhov; in the same vein, we could mention Poe (1985), E. T. A. Hoffmann (2010) and, at the same time, the Hitchcock of *Rear window* (1954).

Therefore, the author explains, “In no way is this a history of communications systems creating a new society or new social conditions” (p. 32). What happened was the opposite: new social needs brought to light – always within certain pressures and limits – their corresponding technologies. This process, however, did not take place by spontaneous generation; it was conducted and led by the manufacturing industry. The history of television is by no means a history of isolated inventors. It is, above all, the history of large manufacturing corporations of technical apparatuses such as EMI, RCA and the like, in which “independent” inventors have found technical and financial shelter.

As a consequence of this fact, the concern that presided, in its beginnings, the development of television was not with the production, but with the transmission of contents. If in the cinema the issue of content was settled prior to

that of distribution, the opposite occurred in the broadcasting. “It is not only that the supply of broadcasting facilities preceded the demand; it is that the means of communication preceded their content.” (p. 37). This economically pragmatic use of the media – conceived not as instruments for the diffusion of high contents, but as a means of *earning money* with transmissions – explains why the first theoretical model of communication, based on the sender-receiver dualism, was conceived in the scope of engineering, only later being turned to sociology.

When the question of production was effectively raised, it was finally resolved, according to Williams, “parasitically” (p.37). There were debates and public occasions, sporting events, classes, auditorium shows, theatrical and cinematographic drama, as well as other opportunities available, many of them preexisting on the radio, for transmission by the new means. Much of the television material is nothing more than exploitation of previously existing forms. There lies much of television’s sociotechnical superiority: it gathers in a single space what was previously dispersed.

But the originality of Williams’ thinking is to observe that the adaptation of many of these cultural forms led to important qualitative changes. There are, first of all, the emergence of new forms, with their own internal conventions, such as the documentary drama and the television series. However, the greatest of all innovations may not be in any of these specific ways, but in television itself as such. So many uses of this medium have been focused on the restatement of inherited forms that it is always difficult to clearly perceive its most characteristic traits. It is not just the surprising conventions of quick act, the new experiences of visual mobility, the unusual contrast of angles, colors and shapes. Over and above that, attention must be paid to the very way in which television organizes itself internally, providing new answers to what was demanded by an equally unprecedented social experience.

In dealing with this question, the innovative concept of *flow* is inaugurated, which seeks to explain how the TV distributes its contents. For Williams, broadcasting operates an important shift: the notion of sequence as *programming* shifts to the idea of *flow*. As the author points out, the word *program* comes from the traditional theater and music halls. It condenses forms of experience prior to the dynamism of modern industrial societies.

Television mixes elements that, in previous communication systems, were presented separately. A book dealt with a single subject in a well-defined logical sequence. A public debate, as well as a play, were specific occasions delimited in space and time. In broadcasting, these and other events are available contiguously and simultaneously. They are mingled, overlapping each other in “a flow series

of differently related units in which the timing, though real, is undeclared, and in which the real internal organization is something other than the declared organization” (p. 102).

The organization in flow operated changes in the notion of interval, which was deeply revalued. Previously the breaks were *natural*: between the movements of a symphony or the acts of a play, or between the different blocks of news of a newspaper. Later, the *natural* time for the interval became any convenient time. The important thing now is to keep the audience, to ensure attention to specific themes and to direct opinion from a seemingly disordered flow, but which has as a guiding thread an established *structure of feeling*³.

When talking about flow, once again it is impossible not to remember the Internet. This characteristic reached another level in the virtual media: from television *vertigo* we passed to what, on the web, could be defined as the most complete *schizophrenia* in flow. Not coincidentally, Williams argues that “this general trend, towards an increasing variability and miscellaneity of public communications, is evidently part of a whole social experience” (p. 98). This process, which has been active since the earliest days of broadcasting, is the same that we find on the basis of today’s digital convergence, but with the difference of an entire era.

A leading author of the first generation of cultural studies – a discipline that conceives culture as a field of struggle around social significance – Williams crowns his dense reflection with analysis and propositions about the future of television. As he warns already in the first chapter of the book, today we have become so used to a broadcasting model that we tend to believe that this situation has been predestined by the technology. Nothing could be further from the truth. Current models have, in fact, resulted from social and political decisions, which were so widely ratified that they have taken on the appearance of inevitable results.

Thus, in discussing the vectors of the dispute over the future of television, Williams returns to his vision of the transformative process, pioneered in *The long revolution* (2001). We live a continuous process of change that does not exclude moments of radicalism. This process is never topical, although it is defined at every moment. It is composed of seemingly disconnected and time-staggered transformations, continually confronted by the pressures of the *status quo*. It is “a difficult revolution to define, and its uneven action is taking place over so long a period that it is almost impossible not to get lost in its exceptionally complicated process.” (Williams, 2001: 10).

This point must be well understood if we are to influence the institutional definitions taken at all times amid intense disputes. In the 1970s, when *Television*

³To trace the notion of structure of feeling from the very beginning of its development, cf. Williams and Orom (1954) and Williams (1993, 2001). For a succinct and precise explanation of the concept, cf. Williams (1977: 128-135).

was written, what was at stake were the institutional solutions that would shape the *new modes of television* then in the making: cable TV, satellite broadcasts, videocassette and videotape markets. Today, these *new forms* are profoundly conditioned by the advent of digital convergence, in the context of which there is a widespread dispute. It will define the extent to which the new communication model will serve the purposes of democratization of information and culture.

Faced with this reality, as goes the popular song, “one must be attentive and strong”. After all, once a model is established, it is always more difficult to change it. As Williams cautions, whenever there is heavy investment in a specific institutional format, there will always be a complex of constraints placed by financial institutions, cultural expectations, and specific technical developments. That is why it is necessary to look at the primordial moments of definition: they often establish situations of fact that prolong and influence later developments.

In our own time, new information and communication technologies erupt at every moment. They can transform institutions, policies and uses or simply reinforce the forms and senses that underlie the existing order. In Williams’ words,

It is ironic that the uses offer such extreme social choices. We could have inexpensive, locally based yet internationally extended television systems, making possible communication and information sharing on a scale that not long ago would have seemed utopian. These are the contemporary tools of the long revolution towards an educated and participatory democracy, [...]. But they are also the tools of what would be, in context, a short and successful counter-revolution, in which, under the cover of talk about choice and competition, a few para-national corporations, with their attendant states and agencies, could reach farther into our lives, at every level from news to psychodrama, until individual and collective response [...] became almost limited to choice between their programmed possibilities. (pp. 162-163)

The reality of corporations reaching “farther into our lives” and assuming multiple forms of control sounds prophetic and is dramatically updated. It is not just the fact that the growth of economies of scale in communications reinforces the monopolization of the television sector. It is also a matter of the fact that concentrative institutional models, created in the early days of broadcasting, continue to reproduce in the once promising field of the Internet. In it, giants like Google and Facebook direct choices from algorithmic definitions that still today seem to many merely *techniques*.

But it is necessary to consider the new technologies together, in their possible combinations, so that we have the real dimension of their social effects. Today,

as Williams predicted, controlling companies of several of these technologies exclude smaller providers and are able to monopolize news and entertainment services. In this context, the siege of cultural diversity and variety of opinions is deepened. “Most inhabitants of the global village could not say anything in these new terms, while some corporations and some powerful governments [...] would speak in ways never before known.” (p. 156)

In such a context, it is legitimate to foresee the growth of forms of resistance, many of them assuming the character of marginal cultural systems – a “cultural underground”, in Williams’s words (p. 158). This resistance, however, occurs in unequal conditions, without this underground being able to follow the best definitions of broadcasting. Still, the process can open the way for innovative institutions and practices. “It is from this generation, raised on television”, Williams predicts, “that we are continually getting examples and proposals of electronic creation and communication which are so different from orthodox television [...]” These examples and proposals, which will henceforth dictate much of the development of technology, are not the fruit of “some autonomous process directed by remote engineers” but a matter of “continually renewable social action and struggle” (p. 143).

Depending on the social context in which they are situated, that is, on the social relations within which they are organized, the media and culture can serve to expand or restrict democracy. They can contribute to the realization of high purposes of dissemination of information and knowledge or, paradoxically, to bring the plight of entire populations into the darkness of stupidity. None of this is inscribed in technology. What the true transforming purpose is demanding of everyone, in the face of these contradictory options, is taking a firm stand. ■

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