

# Only the receptor saves the communication

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*We must save communication.*

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## ABSTRACT

The book shows how the apparent triumph of communication in the modern societies has become a factor for its own weakness. While the functional dimension of communication has quickly flourished in the last 50 years, its normative dimension, responsible for the social bounds and the creation of a common project for the democratic societies, has been kept atrophied. To equilibrate both dimensions, avoiding that incommunication leads to the breakdown of democracy, we need to turn our attention to the receptor of communication, emphasizing respect and cohabitation among the cultures of our globalized world.

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**Palavras-chave:** Communication – social aspects, Communication in the politics, globalization

## RESUMO

O livro mostra como o triunfo da comunicação nas sociedades modernas se transformou num fator para sua própria fragilização. Enquanto a comunicação funcional, apoiada na técnica e na economia, floresceu rapidamente nos últimos 50 anos, a comunicação normativa, responsável por criar os laços sociais e garantir um projeto comum para as sociedades democráticas, manteve-se atrofiada. Para equilibrar as duas dimensões da comunicação e evitar que a incomunicação leve ao esfacelamento da democracia, é preciso voltar-se para o receptor da comunicação, buscando respeito e a coabitação entre as culturas do mundo globalizado.

**F**RENCH SOCIOLOGIST DOMINIQUE Wolton, director of the research center on communication of the National Center of Scientific Research of France (CNRS, in the French acronym), has developed for 30 years a reflection that places communication in the center of the concerns about the future of democracy, globalization and the relation among peoples and civilizations. His emphasis has been on political communication and its relations with culture and the identity of peoples – triad that he named “infernal triangle” and that he has been discussing in twenty books and more than a hundred articles throughout his career. Besides this expressive academic production, Wolton has directed since 1988 the magazine *Hermès* and, since 1998, has also coordinated the prestigious series of books *Communication*. In 2007, he created and took over the direction of the Institute of Sciences and Communication, also from CNRS, which intends to lead the studies in social communication in France.

His most famous book is *Elogé du grand public*, published in France in 1990 (in Brazil, released in 1996), in which his main theses are launched and discussed. Against the pessimism of thinkers who inherited the Marxist tradition, on one side, and the enthusiasm of the followers of new digital media, on the other, Wolton positioned himself for the open television networks threatened by the proliferation of thematic and segmented channels. For him, mass means of communication such as radio and television have the capacity to generate a space to share ideas which is vital for the maintenance of democracy and, more generally, of the values expressed by Illuminism, like freedom, equity and fraternity. Without the social bounds produced by means of communication aimed at the great public, in which general themes are placed in the discussion agenda, societies run the risk of ruining into cultural and religious ghettos. Ultimately, the total of freedom of choice offered by digital media favors the creation of closed communities, producing incommunication, distrust and violence.

In his book most recently published in Brazil, *We must save communication* (Paulus, 2006, released a year before in France), Wolton develops and updates these issues focusing on the rapid evolution of the panorama of communication and international politics in the last two decades. In the same period, Wolton published other books, as *War Game* (1992), *La dernière utopie* (1993), *Penser la communication* (1997), *Internet and Beyond* (1999) and *The other globalization* (2003). *We must save communication* offers a great summary of the issues discussed in these works, in addition to producing a reflection about the current stage of the ever-dynamic problem of the relation between the communication sciences and the political sciences. As Wolton himself explains, “the objective of this book is to maintain the reflection initiated in my

previous works about the statute of communication in our societies and about its role in globalization”. Dominique Wolton wants to expose “the fragility of communication that goes beyond its own triumph”, showing that it is precisely the omnipresence and apparent omnipotence of communication that renders it fragile and threatened.

There is no doubt, for Wolton, that the transformations in the sphere of communication represent the most important revolution in the last 50 years of the history of humanity: there is a growing flow of emitters, messages and receptors that connect faster and faster and in places more and more distant from each other. The old barriers of time/space were abolished due to the new digital technologies, and the rapid globalization of world economy. By communication, he explains, one must understand as a process of transmission of messages that possesses three inextricable dimensions: the technical, which involves the adopted instruments and routines, the economical, which involves the economy of the exchange of messages, and the cultural one, which regards the symbolic space where exchanges occur.

The two first dimensions may be reduced to what Wolton defines as the functional dimension of communication, while the third is defined as the normative dimension of communication. The functional dimension depends only on the technique and the economy and emphasizes the transmission of information, the physical connection of people and the access to the new digital means. Of essentially humanist value, the normative dimension emphasizes the production of consensus and is anchored to the fraternity, to the respect for the other in the environment of cultural diversity of modern societies:

The normative dimension refers to the ideal of communication: to inform, to dialogue, to share, to comprehend itself. The functional dimension, as its name indicates, illustrates the fact that, in modern societies, much of the information is merely necessary for the functioning of human and social relations. To live, work, commute everyone needs to administer a large amount of practical information, and such information, useful for daily life and for society, is something totally different from the ideal of intercomprehension. These two dimensions of communication operate in a certain way according to the model of a double helix, just like the gene, in a continuous dynamic process.

Wolton shows that the overdose of functional communication generates in the users a hangover proportionate to its intensity and volume. Omnipresent, communication vulgarizes itself, loses value and starts to be treated as a discomfort. If before it was seen as democratic conquest born from illuminist

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ideals – freedom of speech and access to information – now communication, triumphant in the dominions of the technique and economy, sees the importance of its social role being corroded while it subjects itself to the superficiality of the contents of the society of spectacle. “The consequence of this process without conductor is a form of mediatic despotism with a style, ‘the media style’, and a simplification that imposes itself to everyone (...) From the simple to the simplistic, it is not necessary more than one step, which is frequently taken too fast, for good reasons in the beginning, but, after a certain moment, for simple mechanic effect of the power of media”.

Nevertheless, Wolton explains, it is a mistake to believe that the public does not bother with the growing vulgarization of mediatic contents. The receptors, contrary to what many communicators think, continue free and critical. They may even be ignorant, but still intelligent. If in the short run, they accept the game and consume a higher volume of information, in the long run they start to undervalue communication. The excesses of the current model of communication produce, as a collateral effect, a growing distrust about its value in a public more and more saturated with information.

The search for communication at any cost has also produced a progressive confusion in social roles that, in the past, were much more well-defined among professionals of information (journalists, broadcasters, editors, publicists etc), professionals of knowledge (scientists, intellectuals, professors etc) and professionals of action (politicians, governors, bureaucrats etc). The mediatic and real-time agora of computerized democracy scrambled these roles in such a way, brought them so close that the public cannot even recognize its authority anymore. Once more, distrust is established. Communicators in general and journalists in particular, are more and more criticized, discredited and suspected. To escape this cycle of mechanic and vulgarized transmission of events, “journalists must, remaining in their symbolic space, leave the news, look for the keys of comprehension of events, i.e. find the density of the story underneath the strength of happenings”.

In the society of generalized communication, the hangover of incommunication may make the dream of global village turn into the nightmare of the tower of Babel. The racial conflicts that have recently burst in the streets of the main French cities, the growth of the religious fundamentalism, the internationalization of terrorism and the war in Iraq are direct consequences of the political inability to deal with the issues brought by communication. More than ever, the “other”, the diverse, gained visibility and proximity due to the expansion of communicative networks. That is: the generalized communication has potentialized the incommunication in the kaleidoscope of languages, ethnics,

and cultures that constitute the present world. That because “the more the messages globalize themselves, the more the cultural differences of communication assert themselves”. There must be, therefore, a dislocation of communication to the pole of the receptor, which represents precisely the “other” which we cannot stop dialoguing with if we want to avoid total dissociation.

However, speaking of the “other” is, in other words, to focus the attention on the role of the receptor of the messages. It is to raise the binomial alterity and identity, to recognize the contact and the necessity of living together that is higher and higher among cultures, whether in the international sphere or in the national one, with the growing presence of migratory flows. The receptor is, therefore, the utmost challenge of future communication, the pointer of the balance of every communicative process that intends to be democratic. “Communication is a very complex process of negotiation among the ideologies and the representations of the receptor, which allow him/her to filter what comes from the exterior. Yes, the receptor is always active, whether reading, listening, watching or using his/her computer. Yes, the receptor is the great enigma of communication, an enigma whose interest is growing with the globalization of information and communication”. For Wolton, only a communication that respects the culture, the ideologies and even the stereotypes of the receptors, legitimizing their right to have opinions and ways of thinking different from ours, has the possibility to avoid that the inevitable incommunication among people, communities and cultures degenerate into conflicts.

Wolton calls the “third globalization” this necessary role of catalyst for the great world events that needs to be assumed by communications, which consists in “taking into account the issues of culture and communication and, in order to administer the cultural diversity, which has become an important fact on the contemporaneous world, have the will to build the cultural cohabitation”. The stages of globalization are explained as the following:

The first globalization was political (the UN and the construction of the board of the international community). The second is economic (related to the economic liberation since the 1980s). The third, cultural, refers to the growing importance of the cultural and communication issues. The economic globalization does not suppress the cultural identities, but reinforces their roles. The more open the world is, the more the peoples have the need for roots and respect of the cultural identities. The cultural cohabitation is the way to administer peacefully the third globalization, i.e. the emergence of the infernal triangle (identity – culture – communication) in international relations. There is neither a global culture nor generalized crossbreeding or cosmopolitanism; there is the necessity

of respecting cultural diversity, organizing the cohabitation of cultures over a democratic basis.

But how can one assure that the globalization from normative communication happens the desired way? For Wolton, first of all we must revalue the sciences of men and society and in particular the sciences of communication, which have an important role to play. “These subjects know the difficulty of the relations among knowledge, power and communication; they know the necessity of cohabitation of the knowledge and the obligation of interdisciplinarity”. In the private sector, for example, the globalization of companies produces the necessity of indispensable competences in terms of multicultural management and human development. In other terms, Wolton explains, “the nomenclature of professions connected to information and communication is in absolute expansion, on the same proportion which communication ‘assumes’ the society”.

Other essential sciences to put globalization on the tracks of normative communication are anthropology and geography. In other words, the pursuit for cultural and geographic roots of cultures. It was illusionary to think that the virtualization of communication would eliminate our physical connections with the territory, with our roots. On the contrary, it amplified the necessity of recovering the sense of belonging to a community spatially located, of pursuing the affirmation of traditions inherited from ancestors, of valuing the religious and cultural inheritance of the generations that anteceded us. It is a mistake, according to Wolton, to force people to abandon this anthropologic wealth for a cold and abstract universalism. What we must do instead is to utilize the existing wealth in this diversity; it is once more to organize the cohabitation of visions of world, to admit that our societies are more and more multicultural.

The great experimental space for these challenges of globalization, according to Wolton, is Europe unified and more and more multicultural. The success of the project of European unification will be reference for the rest of the world. The union of the member countries, which started from economy and technique, now faces serious difficulties in the sphere of cultural relations, such as the expansion of communitarism, the creation of ghettos, the limitations of civil rights to the 4 million immigrants and their descendants. This is the moment for normative communication to assume its appeasing dimension. The last chapter of the book is dedicated especially to the situation of France, origin of the values of Illuminism, essential to democracy (and Francophone, since French is today spoken by 300 to 400 million people, out of whom only

60 million are French), but today more and more dominated by a cultural and territorial nationalism that excludes diversity.

For Wolton, it is the country which is responsible for giving an example to Europe and to the world, taking the corpse of identity out of the closet. If France succumbs to communitarism, if it chooses segregation – which today, given the visibility facilitated by digital media, has become unbearable and generator of immediate reaction –, it will have wasted a historical chance of once more showing the world the path to be followed, updating its ideals of liberty, equity and fraternity in the face of the new panorama of globalization. It is a choice between what he calls refuge cultural identity, of entrenchment, or relational cultural identity, of opening and acceptance of the contributions of cultures that surround us. If Wolton's analysis is correct, the future of globalization and democracy depends, ultimately, on the kind of identity we choose to practice. **M**