

THE ROLE OF TELEVISION IN SHAPING DEMOCRACY: AN OLD DREAM WITH A BIG FUTURE?

O PAPEL DA TELEVISÃO NA DEFINIÇÃO DA DEMOCRACIA: UM VELHO SONHO COM UM GRANDE FUTURO?

Abílio Almeida

Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade, Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal

Dominique Wolton

Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, France

Dominique Wolton (1947) needs no introduction within social sciences and outside the Anglo-Saxon sphere. There are 35 works by the French sociologist spread across 26 countries and 23 languages. Outside the academy, his recognition is equally wide, belonging, for example, to the National Order of the Legion of Honour, the highest French distinction established by Napoleon and limited to only 75 living people. With a PhD in Sociology, he admits that his main objective is to study communication in an interdisciplinary fashion, focusing on the relationship between the individual, technique, culture and society. Among the many books published, the following stand out for discussion: *Éloge du Grand Public. Une Théorie Critique de la Television* (In Praise of the General Public: A Critical Theory of Television; Wolton, 1990); *Penser la Communication* (Thinking Communication; Wolton, 1997); *Internet et Après? Une Théorie Critique des Nouveaux Médias* (Internet and Then? A Critical Theory of New Media; Wolton, 1999); *Sauver la Communication* (Save the Communication; Wolton, 2005); *Informer N'est pas Communiquer* (Informing Is Not Communicating; Wolton, 2009); and *Communiquer, C'Est Négocier* (To Communicate Is to Negotiate; Wolton, 2022).

1. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

In this interview¹, Dominique Wolton reflects on the role of television in the formation of democracy and today's media environment, recalling its function as a popular instrument capable of promoting social emancipation.

Wolton provides a brief historical overview of the phenomenon and discusses some of its challenges over time, highlighting the search for political and financial independence. He also emphasises the importance of preserving diversity in programming and not losing sight of the public interest.

¹ March 1, 2023.

Dominique Wolton also talks about the importance of public service broadcasting and its decline in many regions today. However, he points out that it is vital as it is perhaps the only way to continue to offer programmes that may not have a large audience but are interesting and contribute to cultural diversity.

The interview concludes with a vision for the future of television, emphasising the need for a renewed focus on people and the general interest. Something that today seems to be fading in the current social environment, which more or less directly promotes fragmentation and individualisation. According to Dominique Wolton, television was, is and must continue to be: an opening to the world, a democratic function.

Abílio Almeida (AA): Why did you choose, several years ago, to think about the subject of television?

Dominique Wolton (DW): The first reason is that, after radio, the first mass media is television. In fact, television and radio are inseparable in a project of social emancipation. The written press was undoubtedly very important for the establishment and maturation of democracy, but whether we like it or not, until then, we always spoke of elite democracy, and even more so in the past, with the existence of so many illiterates. Television was and is, therefore, a means and phenomenon of communication that is more democratic than the written press.

When we talk about television, we know: (a) that the masses can be democratic, contrary to what was thought in the past; (b) that it manages to communicate to all social strata; and (c) that it is something that is accessible, open to virtually everyone. Therefore, it was this idea of a project, which today is practically forgotten, of democracy and mass communication that interested me and still does.

Furthermore, the idea of those who started television or those who started radio in the 1920s was fascinating: they talked about educating, educating and educating, but also entertaining, that is, leisure, politics and citizen awareness. Therefore, we were talking about an idea of a very strong social project. And today, we are increasingly aware of this because, somehow, we are all becoming overwhelmed by the individualism of the internet. On the other hand, television was aimed at everyone, wanting to raise the bar through culture and knowledge for everyone. It was enough to look at the programs to see that this ambition existed. There were games, entertainment, of course, but also relevant news and information.

So, the problem, the big problem with television, for years, was that of political independence from the government: that was the first battle. However, today, there is a second one. And, yes, we still talk about independence. It's an equally uphill battle. In my opinion, political independence has generally been achieved. But not financial independence. So, in a way, we've won that battle, but only in part. The war, as a whole, is not over, and it is not only on radio and television but also on the internet and in all cultural and communication industries. There's a lot of money at stake. Therefore, not infrequently, while our so-called freedom is apparently preserved, it is subtly mixed with

other interests. I can say that, nowadays, there is practically no collective vision conveyed by the media. The political norm on the internet today is individual liberty. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that individual freedom, as a concept, emerged in the 19th century. It is fundamental, it is true, but it is less ambitious to acquire than to acquire a mass democracy.

AA: In general, what, in your opinion, still makes television an interesting social phenomenon that is relevant to study?

DW: Two things: (a) the offer and the logic of the offer, which also happens in cinema or theatre; that is, the programmers and producers risk creating demand. But this is a much more complex phenomenon than it seems. While in the early days of radio and television, there was a risk of proposing and generating demand, today, in general, it is offered more in line with what people believe they want and expect, and (b) social ambition, or rather the lack thereof. With the internet today, we talk a lot about individual freedom and cataloguing but not about the notion of “social emancipation”. People used to say that television was the school of the 21st century, which was a bit of an exaggeration, but really, there was this ambition. There was a social ambition.

AA: You talk about changes that are emerging within the television phenomenon. Would you like to explore this subject a little more?

DW: The movement we are witnessing today with television, and even more so with the internet, is that of segmentation, of individualisation. The research’s great discovery is that the same message sent to everyone never had the same impact on everyone, as all receivers are different. The idea that consciences are manipulated is false because, in the end, the receiver takes and rejects what he wants. Therefore, what fascinated me about television was the construction of the logic of the offer and the cultural risk.

AA: Cultural risk? Can you explore it further?

DW: Cultural, political, sporting, whatever you want. The internet does not bring any progress in this regard because the internet is all about the logic of demand. We may be interested in fishing or sex or politics, but there is, in the logic of the internet, the logic of demand, no incentive to expand. In radio and television, as phenomena, there is this ambition.

AA: According to what you tell us, can we say that radio and television have a greater generalist value than the internet?

DW: Yes. And also democratic and egalitarian. Contrary to what people say, the internet is not killing television, just as television did not kill the radio, and cinema did not kill television. In reality, the media are helping each other. However, television’s ambition

remains much stronger than any other. If we compare the internet and television as phenomena, we can see that in one, we have supply, and in the other, we have demand.

Even so, there has been what is called a “fragmentation of supply” in both [internet and television] with the appearance of digital cable television. I believe there are now three phases of communication: mass communication with generalist channels, thematic channels, and the internet. And the most ambitious, intellectually, is the first because we have to have a grid that can please everyone. The false solution is fragmentation. We don’t really bother. We just watch what we want. Therefore, we are already in a demand logic. Moreover, the logic of demand is the internet. Therefore, in fact, depending on the proportion of supply and demand, the level of commitment to one or the other of these means is understandable.

AA: Allow me a little tease. In your work, you talk a lot about “saving communication” (Wolton, 2005), but how can television, particularly the generalist television you just mentioned, contribute to this?

DW: The evolution of the “communication” concept has increasingly been based on an unequal logic of power or silence. Radio and television perfectly illustrate this. Therefore, the first big challenge is to save the logic of the offer and the general interest. This, for the most part, is no longer preserved. With the proliferation of techniques and programs we can access, many might even say: “this is, after all, equality for all”. However, that’s not true because we don’t have programs designed for the population. The offer is much more gigantic, but the democratic spirit no longer drives it. Consequently, there is more and more confusion between the citizen and the consumer. Political will is needed to maintain diversity in supply.

AA: We are, therefore, entering the theme of public service, right?

DW: Yes, and that’s another battle. Only Europe still has an audiovisual public service, which is a pity. Through public service radio and television, we can make programs that may not have a large audience but are interesting. The audience cannot be the only criterion, but unfortunately, it is increasingly the case. Something that can lead to the tyranny of demand.

AA: What is the biggest lesson you learned from your work on the television phenomenon?

DW: The danger of fragmentation, of segmentation. Hence, and continuing the previous topic, the public service’s interest in maintaining a diversified offer for all. Because it is the guarantee of the general interest, which no one seems to care about anymore, as a lesson to learn, we must stress the importance of cultural diversity because the Italian

media is not Spanish, Chinese, or American. The general interest is to be able to make a program aimed at everyone. In reality, the concept of “equality” has not aged. And the same goes for “school” or “health”. These are concepts that transcend eras. Just because there are more advanced technologies does not exclude the fact that they are fundamental.

For example, when the media or the internet say they don’t want to do politics and that it’s a service for everyone, it’s a lie! Because this is obviously a political view. We can easily see it when people say: “this is the goal for young people, for the adult world, etc.”. It is important to emphasise and not forget the following: at the origin of radio, television, and the written press was, first of all, the human being. At the origin of the internet were networks. So, what about the human being?

AA: So, how do you see, or would you like to see, the future of television?

DW: A reversal of the current trend. That is, the focus is on people. The current trend is the internet, segmentation, individualisation, interaction, and diversity of communities and spaces. I think we need to revalue the general interest, the State, and the public service. So, it’s completely the opposite. We’ve always been wary of the audience, saying, “there are too many viewers; will they be influenced?”. Now, with the internet, it’s been great to have many followers. We are, therefore, talking about a political, ideological question.

AA: Can you please be more specific?

DW: In fact, it is mainly a question of ideology, which is more serious. I think the values that motivated the foundations of radio and television in the 40s and 60s have not aged, which isn’t extraordinary because, in a society, great values don’t change every 30 years. What changes every 30 years is the technique. This is where distortion arises since the pace of technological change is perceived as the speed of transformation in the very essence of communication.

AA: In your opinion, will this lead to the extinction of television?

DW: Not at all. Because even if people generally don’t watch television, when there is an important event, everyone wants to watch television after all. Moreover, there is also the memory of time because there are grandparents, uncles, fathers, and so on. Furthermore, following a period of exhaustion in the interactivity of the internet, many turn to television to find a slower pace.

AA: Finally, in a sentence, what is television for you?

DW: Openness to the world. Because most people are the same, and that is a democratic function.

AA: Thank you very much. Is there anything else you would like to add?

DW: Yes, it's up to the people who deal with the media to break the current balance of power, which is this dominant ideology that is all for the internet and against television. It does not make sense. There is room for both media. Television does things that the internet cannot do, and the internet does things, particularly for networks, that television will not do, but one cannot have one over the other and one without the other. Moreover, in any case, television is no less important as a political challenge because it raises the issue of equality and democracy.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Abílio Almeida, PhD in Communication Sciences, is a researcher at the Center for Communication and Society Studies (University of Minho).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0936-3898>

Email: abiliogomesalmeida@gmail.com

Address: Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade, Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade do Minho, 4710-057 Gualtar, Braga, Portugal

Dominique Wolton is director of the Center National de la Recherche Scientifique, founder and director of *Hermès* journal (CNRS Éditions) and president of the Conseil de l'Éthique Publicitaire.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4132-3493>

Email: dominique.wolton@cnrs.fr

Address: 3 Rue Michel Ange, 75016 Paris, France

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