

Communication is cohabitation:

a dual review by Dr. George Simons of www.diversophy.com

Informer n'est pas communiquer, by Wolton, Dominique
2009. CNRS Éditions, www.cnrseditions.fr 141 pps.

McLuhan ne répond plus - Communiquer c'est cohabiter, by Wolton Dominique
2009. Éditions de l'Aube. <http://www.aube.lu> 117 pps.

These are two very slim volumes with a plethora of insights useful to those of us whose work in in intercultural communication, or perhaps we should say, those of us aligned with the authors' understanding, that all communication is intercultural and cultural, a search for establishing operational communalities in the inevitable face of difference. Caveat—this is perhaps less a comprehensive and critical review than a collection of those gleanings from the texts of statements and perspectives that left their mark on this reader and an attempt to share them with my Anglophone colleagues.

Dominique Wolton has been the director of the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), a government-funded research organization, under the administrative authority of France's Ministry of Research. A rather extraordinary think tank because its mandate includes advancing knowledge and bringing social, cultural, and economic benefits for society, in short, socially responsible research.

The first work, *Informer n'est pas communiquer*, is a slight monograph focused on establishing a theory of communication and an attempt to answer the question, "How can we live together in peace in a universe where everyone sees everything and knows everything and where differences are ever more visible and less negotiable?" [This translation and those that follow are my own.] We live in a world where ever less is a given or imposed upon us and hence must be critiqued and negotiated.



The key proposition, should I say "insight," in Wolton's discourse is the insistence that "Communication is cohabitation"—it is how we go about living together peaceably if not always peacefully. The alternative to communication as cohabitation is violence and war. Globalization and its dangers raise the question of how do we frame information and knowledge. Is it enough to assume that a totally free market in information will in the end, given human fears and desires, be any more successful in creating fair distribution and empowerment than the free market economy has served to do?

How do populations now emerge from the paralysis brought on by our having become "giants in information and dwarves when it comes to taking action"? In the author's analysis, over a century of rapidly developing information technologies have brought both enormous emancipation but also have led us to a situation where the hierarchy of knowledge has broken down. It no longer serves to guide us through ideology and propaganda in an effective way. We are facing a new sort of frontier of "incommunication," where academicians (now marginalized) and journalists (now compromised) are compelled to be strange bedfellows in the effort to sort out the endless tsunami of information flooding down from the wifi tower of Babel. It falls to them in many respects to model managing otherness and

organize cohabitation—how they will live and work together. We live in an Internet that has but a scant dozen years of depth, yet infinite breadth.



The second volume takes the theme of cohabitation into its title: *McLuhan ne répond plus - Communiquer c'est cohabiter*. Stéphane Paoli, radio journalist for *France Inter* and Jean Viard, sociologist and research director, explore the model of academic/journalistic cohabitation, mentioned above, in dialogues with Wolton. The discussion is essentially about going forward in a world economically, socially and politically, where we see and know everything and wonder whether it is possible to make sense out of anything. It is about war and peace.

How is the internet changing things? It is used as a “pull” medium, where we are likely to seek only what we want, whereas the “push” media of television and radio give us what “they” want, an intrusion of otherness reflecting society, whether we are looking for it or not. Individualism makes sense only in the context of social cohesion, and this is what is being negotiated in contrasting the two kinds of media and living with both. Does the technical acceleration of information flow inevitably decelerate human communication in the comprehension of difference and the resolution of otherness and the creation of relationship? It is a strange world where the rich and their children are self-imprisoned in high security communities and spend their time in peering out of their ghettos through tiny windows of their LCD’s in search of a soul mate or at least someone to relate to. They live with the illusion of power and immortality, and yet time passes, perhaps all the more quickly for being unnoticed.

The discussion looks deeply at the questions of diversity. On one hand, “...linguistic diversity is essential because it is the uncontested condition for the maintenance of cultural diversity. Without it we live in a world of pseudo-standardization with the inevitable consequence of identities in revolt.” We don’t think alike just because we use the same tools. On the other hand we have long confused Western thinking with universalism, overlooking not only the exclusion of other lands but of the sixth continent of mobility, of immigrants and asylum seekers and expatriates.

In globalization and devaluing identity the effort is to annex others rather than connect with them. Yet, without difference, otherness, there is nothing to connect. Hence also, the violent resurgence of identities we see today, be they religious, ethnic or national, in resistance to commercial colonization and the culture it presumes. *Multiculturality* (perhaps a less loaded word than “miscegenation”) in individuals and families of mixed backgrounds, is becoming an identity of its own, does not lessen the need to negotiated identities. Embracing one’s identity, whatever it looks like, strong identity is the precondition for the possibility and the willingness to enter into communication.

How to avoid the linear, deterministic, fatal vision of Huntington? Realize that it was not democracy that triumphed in 1989 with the Fall of the Wall but the victory of the unbridled capitalism that is now gagging on its surfeits snatched from the mouths of children around the world. Realize that Google is our utopia today only by default of another. It is a moment for the resurgence of courageous politics and social policy based on the realization and management of the difference between self and others.