

REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Finding good and hope in the new democracy?

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Darin Barney. Prometheus Wired: The Hope for Democracy in the Age of Network Technology, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000. ix, 340 p.; 22 cm.

“Hope enlightens, but it also blinds.” (Barney, 2000, p. 5)

Over the years much has been touted about the fit between digital networks and postmodernism, especially in regards to the ways in which understandings of virtual textual spaces enhance post-modern understandings of identity as similarly dispersed and fragmented. However, Canadian political scientist Darin Barney consciously resists this postmodern perspective in his exploration of the politics of digital networks. Instead, and in the name of maintaining both critical distance (which, he argues, postmodernism does not) and a closer assessment of the particularities of digital networks, he “opt[s] for a few modern tortoises over the postmodern hare” (p. 15). These tortoises are primarily Heidegger, Marx, and Canadian philosopher George Grant, although the book draws from and responds to many others, most notably Langdon Winner, Mark Poster, Sherry Turkle, Max Weber and Michel Foucault. What can be appreciated about Barney’s approach is his up-to date engagement with how digital networks affect North Americans — as citizens, as workers, and in their personal lives — in an array of contexts, from call centres to virtual communities. For technical communicators and their teachers, *Prometheus Wired* provides a theoretical perspective on work in Canada and the US as it is affected by network technology (NT). It does not look at technical writing *per se*, but just as histories and analyses of attitudes towards language and writing instruction interest us as researchers and teachers of writing, this book — with its history and analysis of attitudes towards technology — is of interest for the light it throws on real and potential fields of employment for us and our students.

Chapter One explains the title of the book, suggesting as it does that the mythic Prometheus is now more than just “unbound” (as enlightenment science would have him), he is also “wired.” Given Prometheus’ potential for doing damage, Barney ar-

gues that it is “imperative that we subject our hopes for [network] technology to the sort of thoughtful consideration that [...] befits our nature as rational beings” (p. 6). The first step in this process is to confront our understanding of the term “democracy.” Barney develops a definition of democracy that is in itself an exemplar of academic definition as we might teach it. This aside, he insists that democracy must be founded upon individuals’ *meaningful participation* in the decisions that affect them — a prerequisite that, by Barney’s estimation, most contemporary governments would fail to meet (p. 24). This definition is crucial to the main claim of the book: that we are misguided to uncritically promote (as many do) network technology as by its very nature a democratic, equalising, and egalitarian force in our world. Rather, we should, to put it in Barney’s terms, “[interrogate] the hope for democracy vested in network technology” (p. 54).

If technology is not naturally democratic, Chapter Two establishes that neither is it neutral. From as far back as Aristotle and Plato, *techne*, along with all matters of science and the useful arts, came under the jurisdiction of *politike* (p. 34). And in Marx and Heidegger Barney finds not only the most commonly noted dire pronouncements of technology’s negative influence on us as workers and as intimate and essential beings but also room for hope (this is far from a *hope-less* book). In answer to the irony we note at being much busier in our supposedly time-saving high-tech world, Barney reminds us of Marx’s stipulation that technology only lengthens the hours of labour when “in the service of capital” (Marx, in Barney p. 39). Similarly, Barney notes that even though Heidegger sees technology as contributing massively to rootlessness, and leading to a compulsion to “enframe” nature as a “standing reserve” for the purposes of fuelling technology itself, we can and should develop both a “pious detachment” (p. 46) that will subject “technical considerations to considerations of being” (p. 47), and an “openness to mystery” (p. 47) which avoids seeing technology’s impact on us as empirically determined: “Being cannot be discovered via the calculation of outcomes” (p. 47). Lastly Barney draws from George Grant, perhaps the strongest influence on his thinking, whose critique of liberal politics is essential to Barney’s thesis:

Liberalism [for Grant] is a politics of getting-out-of-the-way of technological mastery and the material progress it always promises and sometimes delivers. As such, it is a politics that privileges one concept of what is good — a certain type of liberty, material progress, and unfettered development of technology — at the expense of a host of potential others. To the extent that technological liberalism purports to be free of a specification of the good, it is a politics of denial. (p. 51)

But Barney is quick to point out that Grant's analysis is not devoid of hope, as long as standards for what is "good" stand "outside simple technological rationality" (p. 54).

The chapter closes by noting three overall premises for the book: that "technology and politics are intimately linked" (p. 54); that together they operate in a field of power and capital; and "technology conditions political outcomes and possibilities" (p. 56).

Chapter Three, "Networks," puts technology in global and historical perspective, usefully explaining fundamental aspects of computer technology and network types, and emphasising a key tenet: "network technology encourages the collapse of the distinction between information and communication" (p. 92), subsequently "eras[ing] the distinction between information production, information consumption and communication" (p. 97). All of this, by virtue of a common medium of exchange ("bits"), turns "interaction" into a commodified "transaction." I found the discussion of this distinction useful for the critique it can potentially provide for those of us who are seen as being in the business of teaching "communication" in American and Canadian universities.

Chapters four and five engage with the impact of network technology on capitalism, debunking first the idea that Karl Marx would have been pleased because of the way NT redistributes powers of production and consumption. Other somewhat valid claims — such as how NT fosters academic research, or gives space to alternative cultures — are similarly assessed as still not challenging enough the decidedly predominant "logic of power and capital" (p. 106) that motivates NT overall. Here Barney also traces the privatisation of NT in the US and Canada to the present degree in which governments, he argues, are now just customers like everybody else (p. 112), focussing for example on how the "bundling" of operating systems leads to limited competition within the NT industry, and a rise in corporate mergers and takeovers. Bill Gates and Microsoft provide much grist for the mill here, further illustrating how NT intersects with global capitalist production, and showing the dark side of the "pithy labels" that describe production practices (namely *Flexibility*: "just in time" manufacture and supply, and the ability — or at least the threat of it — to move to suitable taxation and regulatory climates; and *Agility*: fast and specialised responses in a marketplace that has reached saturation, but is "nevertheless capable of perpetual and rapid reinvention" [p. 127]). He points to the development of international protocols that eliminate any "friction" resulting from working in a multicultural world (for example those that deal with "the Japanese bow, the French kiss, [or] the Canadian handshake" [p. 129]), all in the name of an "increasingly perfect, global capitalist economy" (p. 135).

In response to those much cited statistics that show unemployment levels may fluctuate as workers are retrained for higher-tech jobs but level out overall, Barney looks instead at the social impact of what he calls “the disappearance of work into networks” (p. 136). And he undercuts ideas about how universal access to computer networks is “an indispensable social requirement of a civilised and just society” (p. 171) by distinguishing between *interactivity* and *transactivity* (pp. 97, 174); the former implies a communicative exchange that happens between community members in a democracy; the latter signifies more an informational exchange between participants in a capitalist economy. In short, the goals of such arguments for universal access to NT “are commercial rather than democratic” (p. 174).

Chapter six returns to the idea that postmodernism is being used to uphold NT as a “fit” for our current understandings of the fragmented, de-centred self. Barney moves from Ronald Deibert’s “malleable” identities (p. 198), to Neil Poster’s “decentred” ones (p. 199), and to Sherry Turkle’s “bricolage” (p. 200); while agreeing with Turkle’s point that technology can “help us think through postmodernism” (in Barney p. 203), he adds that “it’s not so clear that postmodernism helps us think through network technology” (p. 203). He uses Hiedegger to rescue an essential self from postmodernism, or more specifically, from postmodernism’s co-optation of NT to its project. For example NT may seem to be the solution to those selves who do not have a place in the world: those transient workers who are “the nomads of flexible capitalism” (p. 215). But although it gives these people some attachment, attachment is not the same as rootedness (p. 213).

In regards to technological surveillance, Barney focuses more on that which occurs in the consumer marketplace, because he believes “as the efficiency of coercive techniques of social control has receded, techniques of consumption management have emerged as their successor” (p. 225). What follows this is a fascinating account of “data mining” and how legislation in the U.S. and Canada is complicit in paving the way for “the ongoing accumulation and trade of digitised personal ... information” (p. 229).

Lastly Chapter seven investigates the relationship between government and cyberspace, including how they share the same derivation from the word *kubernetes*, meaning “steersman.” The difference, of course, is that it is government and not cyberspace that is enjoined to steer human affairs. Here the example of encryption software provides an interesting case in point: on the one hand its proliferation is thought by civil libertarians to herald the “on-line world’s immunity to law enforcement” and political control; on the other encryption codes are protected by the First Amendment as “speech,” which renders *technai* subject to *politique* after all. But on the issue of governance, Barney concludes it is not so much a question of whether NT can be subject

to laws — he gives a few examples of just how cyberspace is “anything but anarchic” (Johnston & Post, in Barney, 2000, p. 250) — and is rather concerned with the ways in which it is governed; he states: “contingent normative preferences for a particular relationship between sovereign political government and network media often masquerade as technical imperatives and, by virtue of this disguise, discourage rather than invite deliberation upon that relationship” (p. 250). This imperative brings to mind recent talk on the benefits of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), especially in regards to its buzzword “connectivity”; universal access to NT is being proposed not just for the resultant benefits of trade to South and Central American nations, but also to assist some countries in their paths toward modern democracy. Perhaps Barney would say this discourse is upholding myths of decentralisation, of non-hierarchical working relationships, and of democratization. FTAA proponents’ “connectivity,” would not be interactivity, but rather Barney’s “transactivity,” a system in which everything is ultimately considered in terms of institutional and economical gain.

Barney doesn’t ask the questions that our wider community’s members might traditionally ask about NT — for example those about the effects of computer mediation on writing instruction, on workplace writing and review, on copyright, or on literacy overall — but his work helps us situate these concerns in a wider context of NT in society, as it affects us and our students. As course designers we too are called upon to meet the needs of changing workplaces. Similarly, students are preparing themselves for an ever changing, skill-based job market. I know as I try to create a supportive community of practice in the classroom, one that connects with local issues and concerns, Barney’s quotation from Grant that “modern civilisation [...] makes all local cultures anachronistic” (in Barney, 2000, p. 252) will haunt my efforts.

Prometheus Wired is a practical book, full of uncommon common sense. Barney’s distinction between the more “robust” interactions of beings in real communities and some of the network-based transactions that are replacing them might resonate more fully if we count up those hours we spend hooked up to NT ourselves. Is it the ennui we feel in front of the computer screen that makes us vulnerable to the seductions of postmodernism?