

Interview with Calvin O. Schrag

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Dr. Schrag was interviewed by Laureano Ralón. January 24th, 2011.

Calvin O. Schrag is George Ade Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Purdue University. He was a graduate of Yale and Harvard, a Fulbright Scholar for research at Heidelberg and Oxford, and a Guggenheim Fellow at Freiburg University. His published works have been translated into eleven foreign languages, and among his most famous books are *Existence and Freedom*, *God as Otherwise than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift*, *Convergence amidst Difference*, *Experience and Being*, *Radical Reflection and the Origin of the Human Sciences*, *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity*, *The Resources of Rationality*, and *The Self after Postmodernity*. Professor Schrag has been invited to partake in seventy five lectures in the US and abroad. He is the only living member of the original group of five philosophers who designed the format for the current Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, which will celebrate its 50th birthday in October of this year.

How did you decide to become a university professor? Was it a conscious choice?

Plainly enough there was no single factor that occasioned my choice to become a university professor. And it is difficult, if indeed not impossible, to sort out the multiplicity of factors involved. One such factor in charting my path to academia can be found by recalling certain family influences. Growing up as son of a Protestant pastor may well have played a role in my decision to strive for a university career. Discussions at the dinner table often involved theological and

philosophical issues. Hence, there is a sense in which my very early upbringing already opened a path to academia. There were also additional factors that played a role in my decision to project an academic career. This had to do with three older brothers who were in process of achieving advanced degrees while I was growing up. The older one finished his doctoral studies at the University of Chicago and became a professor of sociology; the second entered academic life with a doctorate in philosophy, and the third completed his postgraduate studies in theology and biblical studies and became a pastor. You can well imagine some of the critical discussions that took place at family reunions! Plainly enough, these three older siblings were a formative influence in my deciding to aim for the professional life of academia.

These early formative factors in my decision to become a university professor became intensified during my college and graduate school studies, where two professors in particular became veritable models for the shaping of my future academic life. These two were Professors John Wild and Paul Tillich. Wild was one of the senior members of the Harvard philosophy department and became my principal advisor and director of my dissertation. Tillich had just been appointed University Professor at Harvard and taught graduate courses both in philosophy and theology. Although Wild was my main mentor, who suggested that I opt for the continental track in my research, which led to a Fulbright Fellowship for study and research at Heidelberg University in Germany, Professor Tillich was of considerable help in the framing of my dissertation on Heidegger and Kierkegaard as he was a colleague of Heidegger at Marburg University during the 1920s. I functioned as a Teaching Fellow for both Wild and Tillich during my stay at Harvard. The main point at issue in regard to your question is that it was John Wild and Paul Tillich who solidified and consolidated my desire to become a university professor.

In your experience, how did the role of university professor

evolve since you were an undergraduate student?

There can be no doubt that the media in its multiple modalities has had a significant effect on the role and function of the current professorship. It certainly has played a dominant role in the evolution of the self-understanding and task of the profession since I was an undergraduate student. Such has become particularly evident given that I will be eighty three years old in 2011! My undergraduate years extend to a quite distant past! Among the most noticeable changes I would cite those having to do as a result of the emergence of the computer age. During my university career, as well as the major portion of my academic publication career, the typewriter was the communication medium for the publication of articles in professional journals as well in my exchange of letters with colleagues in the profession. Since the typewriter has now become a virtual antique from years past, electronic communication has taken over and expanded the range and intensified the speed in getting messages to their designated termini. Hand in glove with general trends of globalization it has greatly facilitated the exchange of data by scholars across the globe in a way that was hardly imaginable during my undergraduate days.

Now there are both positive and negative components that accompany this global electronic communication. Being able to provide my colleagues both at home and abroad with instant messages is surely a good thing. The rapid exchange of information across the globe provides researchers in their various fields resources that contribute to the critical expansion of their current projects and provide a wider variety of interpretation on matters at issue. There are, however, also negative factors in the new arena of global communication. It has a tendency to tilt the role of the professor as researcher, appropriating a vast amount of information for his publication projects, away from her/his responsibility of teaching effectiveness in the class room.

The number of articles that she/he has swirling around the globe becomes more important for the tenuring process than does effective engagement with students in the teaching encounters. The student/professor relationship tends toward a depersonalization in which the voice and the face of the student becomes marginalized as the research telos of the profession takes on a primary focus.

What makes a good teacher today? How do you manage to command attention in an age of interruption characterized by fractured attention and information overload?

These are very pertinent questions which need to be asked time and again as we continue our quest on the role of education in our fast moving academic environment. I can at best provide you with an abbreviated answer which would require considerable elaboration. What makes a good teacher today? Given that we are now living in an information age a good teacher will need to be abreast of the relevant information in his specialty. But good teaching is more than the retrieval and cataloging of bits of information. Good teaching also involves, and I would say primarily so, critical thinking, awareness of conflicts of interpretation, and skills of genuine communication. The latter is of crucial importance. Communication is the marrow of the educational experience and should never be confused with information retrieval. This places an extraordinary demand on the "good" teacher, for s/he must move out from the questions and concerns that are uppermost in the minds of the students. This involves the difficult task of understanding the context from which the students questions flow—and an understanding of context that involves a measure of empathic identification with the mind of the student. One does not fulfill the requirement of good teaching by constructing answers to questions that students are not asking.

Another requirement for good teaching that follows from the above has to do with the balance of teaching excellence with

scholarly production. Because the information age tends to confuse the collating of bits of information in sundry forms of media for genuine communication, review committees for advancement in the university are prone to highlight the number of journal articles and books produced by the candidate for promotion and pay little attention to students' evaluations of the effectiveness of teaching. Unfortunately the well worn criterion, "Publish or Perish", still is called upon in our varied citadels of higher learning. Now it must be understood however that what is at issue in good teaching is not a rejection of scholarly studies and publication in the relevant journals. The point is that the two aspects, communication skills and scholarly research, need to be properly balanced. Teaching and research reinforce each other. To be a good teacher is to be effective in imparting a knowledge that is won through the travails of disciplined research.

The second part of your question is more difficult to address. "Attention deficit" and "information overflow" are problems that travel with the emergence of the information age as it expands the space of the age of technology and inherits some of the problems that it had already created. This is especially the case with what you refer to as "information overflow". The technologization of information retrieval does indeed invite a variety of sensory overload in which the person caught up in the super abundance of information on this and that stands to lose a center from which to respond, and in the end stands in danger of losing her/his identity as an authentic self by becoming nothing more than a conduit in the flow of information. The other issue that you cite, namely "attention deficit", may well be one of the results of the loss of self as it is caught up in the continuing information overflow. And this can lead to what appears today to be an increase of the medical symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder among the youth in our land. It is at this juncture that medical and educational resources need to cooperate hand in

hand in working out resolutions to this troubling phenomenon.

What advice would you give to young graduate students and aspiring university professors?

My advice to young graduate students who wish to enter the world of academia would depend on their selected fields of study. Given the current market conditions my advice would depend on whether they are in a scientific or liberal arts field. We must be honest in counseling liberal arts students and point out the difficulty of securing a position at a university or college because of lack of openings. There are very few positions for new appointments in their chosen fields. The situation is somewhat better for graduates competing for openings in math and the physical sciences. In either case, however, young graduate students should be informed of procedures for promotion at the selected college or university and be aware of the usual requirements of achieving a good record of publication coupled with excellence in teaching.

You are one of the most influential figures in the multidisciplinary field of philosophy and communication. How did you realize that there were important yet unexplored connections between these two disciplines, and what are some of the most significant points of contact between them?

The connection between the two disciplines go all the way back to the ancients and the medievals. Aristotle wrote a book on rhetoric and provided rhetoric with a philosophical foundation. Later rhetoric, logic, and grammar became the tripod of medieval learning. It is thus that there is an interesting history of the connections of rhetoric, logic, and grammar, without which what is called "communication" today would be under some quite pronounced restrictions. Yet, new faces of communication have appeared in the developments of modern and especially *postmodern* thought, resulting from the developments of existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics,

critical theory, etc,

So in addition to my interests in the historical developments in the cross fertilization of rhetoric and logic, my attention turned to some of the new faces of communication within the corridors of the changing scene in modern and postmodern philosophical thought. My book, *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity*, was very much a continuing conversation with Jürgen Habermas, and especially with his two volume work, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. This conversation was both constructive and critical. My main reservations at the time had to do with his theory of rationality which continued to be linked to the transcendental epistemological foundations of modernity. I was of the view that there are modes of communication that extend beyond modern rationality with its criteriological epistemic conditions determined in advance of the event of communication. Plainly enough, there are examples of direct communication which use the resources of constative forms of expression, but there are also indirect forms of communication that display the uses of irony, satire, metaphor, and other tropes in which the speaker communicates with his hearer. Communication is not bound to the rationalist criteria as set up by the minds of modernity.

The other formative influence on my work on the relation of philosophy to communication came from the ground breaking thought in contemporary phenomenology and hermeneutics – and principally that of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. What we have learned from these two thinkers, and their like-minded associates, is that there is a pre-conceptual understanding of what it means to be a human self and the world in which s/he exists. The epistemological subject-object dichotomy with its subsequent reduction of language to the play of sign and its referential signified is deconstructed. The language of everyday communication is freed from its modern epistemological requirement, and is able to disclose the concrete interdependence of self and world in its

practical quotidian uses as well as in its poetic aspirations. At this juncture, it needs be said, the relevance of the later works of Ludwig Wittgenstein and his return to ordinary language also opened new pathways to an alignment of philosophy and communication.

Toward the end of his life, Marshall McLuhan declared: "*Phenomenology [is] that which I have been presenting for many years in non-technical terms.*" How can phenomenology and communication studies reinforce each other in this age of information and digital interactive media?

This is the first time that I have learned of this particular quote from McLuhan, which of course indicates that my knowledge of McLuhan's writings is regrettably of a quite meager sort. I simply am not familiar enough with his works to speculate on how phenomenology impacted his own thinking. But I find it interesting that this question follows directly on the heels of the previous one, in which I was asked to list some of the formative influences in my own philosophical appropriation of phenomenology as one of the sources of my interest in communication.

Hence the most that I can do in responding to this question is to mark out some of the main themes in phenomenology that could well have been appropriated by current philosophers, social scientists, linguists, and communication theorists. This inevitably becomes quite a challenge given that there are numerous sorts and divisions of phenomenological approaches. These would include, for example the transcendental phenomenological idealism of the early Husserl, the phenomenological ontology of Martin Heidegger, the existential phenomenology of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz. But the list does not end here because there are distinctions within these approaches, for example the distinction between the early Husserl with its presentation of "phenomenology as a rigorous science" and the later works of Husserl that mark out "a

return to the life world (*Lebenswelt*)), making the point in his last published work, *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, that the idea of phenomenology as a rigorous science is a dream that is now over. Plainly enough, it is Husserl's later descriptions of the concrete existential subject making his/her way around the life world, articulating concerns in the everyday discourse of one's being in the world, that has elicited the most attention by communication theorists.

However instead of supplying you with a bibliography of names of individuals who had something to say about communication, let me attempt to consolidate what I would consider the main points or issues in the relation of phenomenology to communication. A) The emphasis on praxis rather than theory. The phenomenologist seeks to describe and interpret the phenomenon of communication as it shows itself in its lived concreteness rather than through a derivation from a theoretical construct. B) From this accentuation of the practical features of the communicative event phenomenological attention will be focused on the concretely embodied performances of the speaker and hearer. Phenomenology investigates the meaning in the locutions of the speaker as they are directed to the hearer, and seeks to decipher the responses by the respondent in the life of the conversation between speaker and hearer. C) The meaning of the exchanges in the communicative event requires the application of hermeneutics, the art of interpretation, to sort out the roles that the speaker and hearer play in the determination of the meanings in what is said. D) Insofar as the emergent meanings cannot be readily understood by somehow entering the minds of the speaker and hearer, the hermeneutical demand requires an examination of the background of meanings already extant, supplying the context for understanding. Phenomenological communication is always *contextualized* interpretation. E) Phenomenology gives attention to the variety of modes of communication, and not simply to the distinction between oral and written communication, but to the more subtle differences

that extend across the forms, such as the difference between locutionary and perlocutionary utterances, prosaic and poetical forms, metaphorical reference versus objective reference, the relevance of silence in the communicative endeavor, etc.

The above consists of very abbreviated issues and concerns in the linkage of phenomenology and communication. Now whether McLuhan had some of these in mind when he declared that Phenomenology is that which he has been presenting for many years, I am unable to tell.

What is communication anyway? Do you think communication studies should be a discipline in the first place – concerned as it is with a sort of *nothingness*, i.e., the effects stemming from technological environments?

This is a very important question, and it would take many pages to provide you with an adequate response. So I will need to make an abbreviated response in an effort to hit upon some of the central issues at stake in your question. First off, what is communication anyway and should it be a specific discipline in the contemporary university? The question has two parts that need to be sorted out. What is to be understood of communication as an event—or even better understood as a mode of human existence—and to what extent does it qualify as a specialization in a “Department of Communication” alongside the course offerings in other departments?

By speaking of communication as a mode of human existence I mean that in our speaking and listening and in our writing and responding we to a great measure constitute the beings that we are. One could speak of this as the ontological dimension of communication. It is through communication that we become who we are. There is also an epistemological function of communication, which requires a deconstruction of the subject-centered approach to knowledge as defined by the modernists, and especially as promulgated by Descartes as “the father of

modern philosophy". Descartes sought the basis for knowledge by way of his famous procedure of hyperbolic doubt, whereby he was able to doubt everything except the fact that he was doubting. Here Descartes was of the mind that he had discovered the ego-centric foundation of knowledge. But is it not the case that the "other", either as individual or as a community, first enables one to think and reflect, and in this thinking and reflecting achieves knowledge by responding to the call of the "other". It is thus that communication plays a more decisive role in self-knowledge and self-constitution than the egocentric approach of modernity is able to recognize. Descartes celebrated one-liner, *cogito ergo sum*, needs to be reformulated into a *colloquy ergo sum*. Before the "I think, therefore am" comes the "I communicate, therefore I am", Communication is constitutive of who I am, as it is also constitutive of the knowledge about myself as a member of the human race.

Such is my very brief response to the first part of your question. Now as to the place of communication as a special "discipline" in the course offerings at a college or university, much will depend on how the specific courses are named and described.

Communication as constitutive of our being and knowledge of one's self should be understood as operating in a *predisciplinary* space. However residing in this predisciplinary and multifaceted space, there are numerous profiles that can be can be focused on for specific analysis, description, and interpretation, including rhetoric with its own range and depth of questioning, organizational communication with its own research into the structure and dynamics of social institutions, journalism which needs to attend to the multiplicity of media reporting the events of the day and the effects of the changing technologies on the several media, communication having to deal with issues of race, gender, and ethnic origins – among other specific course

titles! Communication is a complex phenomenon that shows itself in many profiles and modalities. The task is to keep the encompassing workings of communication from being reduced to any one of its perspectival profiles.

You have also written extensively about the Self. Your book [The Self After Post-modernity](#) is a comprehensive treatment of the question of selfhood. What do you make of the “death of the author/subject”? Is it possible to revive the body, perception, and the self after post-modernity?

Yes, some of my published works deal with the problem of the self, and the one in which I deal specifically with the problem is the one that you mentioned. In this book, *The Self After Postmodernity*, which was originally presented as a series of lectures under the auspices of the annual Gilbert Ryle Lectureship, I develop four entwined portraits of selfhood: the self in discourse, the self in action, the self in community, and the self in transcendence. The underlying motive in doing this work was to develop an analysis that splits the difference in the feud between the moderns and the postmoderns on what constitutes selfhood.

The moderns, who themselves come in a variety of packages, argued for the self understood as a thinking substance (Descartes), the self as simply a cluster of sense perceptions (Hume), the self as a transcendental ego (Kant), the self in the process of overcoming its finitude (Hegel), were all influenced by the modern mindset of the need for philosophical construction. The postmoderns, consisting of philosophers like Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, and Barthes, subjected the modern mindset to a radical critique, calling for a *deconstruction* of all traditional categories and overarching schemata in search for the human self. It is thus that the call for deconstruction became the pivotal notion for the postmodernists, and this then became, as you indicate in your question, the basis for the proclamation of “the death of the author/subject”. Now this proclamation was articulated in

different forms, such as the “death of Man” by Foucault, who read his proclamation as a natural consequence of Nietzsche’s announcement of the “Death of God”. And then there was another aspect of the dying that was taking place, promulgated by such as the literary critic, Roland Barthes, who made a case for “the death of the author” to which you refer in your question. This becomes a major concern for you in your concluding question, “Is it possible to revive the body, perception, and the self after postmodernity?”

This was precisely also my concern as I worked through the various writings by the postmodern philosophers and literary critics. Admittedly, I was never all that fond of the heavy metaphysical baggage that the modernists carried with them in their searches for the self, for example the employment of doctrines of substance, soul/body bifurcations, universal categories, transcendental entities, and the like. Hence I had some sympathies with the postmodern call for deconstruction. There is indeed much in the tradition that is ripe for deconstruction. On this I was in accord with the postmoderns, but I chided them for failing to realize that the basic truth of deconstruction resides in the fact that no complete deconstruction is possible. The self, I argued, is not an unchanging substance, or a transcendental ego, or a universal entity of some sort, or an abstract assimilation of attributes and properties. No, the self is a concrete, life affirming, sensing and perceiving lived body, dynamically changing and developing in its struggle for self-knowledge and self-constitution. The self is a wayfarer along life’s way who is able to understand and constitute itself in its discourse, its action, its community, and its encounters with transcendence.

The following question was drafted by Professor [Corey Anton](#): “*what are the challenges and opportunities of self within the changing communication landscape, e.g., the possibility and meaning of immortality technologies, and perhaps also the role of community in the future given the*

rise of distance communication technologies?"

I am particularly interested in Professor Anton's inquiry, as it deals with a quite urgent matter in present day communication, namely the encounter of communication with technology. This is a difficult matter to address as there are clearly both positive and negative features in the role of communication in the age of technology. That technology has made possible global exchange of information virtually in an instant of time is clearly a positive. The securing of medical information from a distant medical facility via electronic mail to save the life of a critically ill patient in a remote sector of the country is surely to be considered as a notable advance made possible by current technological developments. In the globalization of the current age, the resources provided by the developing technologies of rapid information retrieval open new possibilities for advances in international relations in economics and politics.

So there is much that can be said of the positive spin off from technological design and implementation. Yet, there are certain pesky problems that often make their presence felt in our age of technology. Permit me in the restricted space allotted in an interview of this sort to briefly discuss two closely related problems. The one has to do with the required distinction between "communication" and "information". Information may well stand in the service of communication. When we communicate we do at times make use of information, particularly when we are dealing with objective matters of fact. But communication itself is never simply the presentation of algorithms and scientific facts congealed as a data base. Thus it is necessary to avoid confusing communication with information retrieval processes.

The conflating of communication with information leads to another problem that comes to the fore in what Professor Anton refers to as "the rise of distance communication technologies": the phrase "distance learning", which may well

be an oxymoron, has contributed a fair amount of misunderstanding and particularly among those in the teaching professions. Distance information retrieval, yes, but no “distance learning”. Learning, as has been known since the time of Socrates, and no doubt earlier, is what occurs through embodied human interaction. The communication that takes place in the transaction of teacher and learner requires the dialectical process of proceeding from lower to higher stages of understanding that transcends the anonymity made possible by the developing technology of information retrieval. Genuine communication is not an anonymous and disembodied transfer of raw data. It involves the lived body of the teacher and the lived body of the learner, each with their face and voice and general bodily comportments that convey their own meanings in the communicative process of interaction of teacher and learner in the pursuit of an understanding that is won through the give and take of a genuine rhetorical encounter. Such is the nature and dynamics of communication as a form of life.

What are you currently working on?

I believe it was Joe DiMaggio who once said upon his retirement, “There are only so many hits in my bat”. My reply to your question is similar to his: “There are only so many books in my head!” As an aging senior citizen strains on my bodily and mental energy are beginning to take their toll. From time to time I still present colloquium papers at professional conferences and at other universities. I have developed a more focused interest in political and legal philosophy in my later years and am currently experimenting with a paper on “The Transvaluation of Human Rights”. But I have no desire to write yet another book.

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Questions? Contact Laureano Ralón at ralonlaureano@gmail.com

[Interview with Viktor Mayer-Schoenberger](#)

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Dr. Mayer-Schoenberger was interviewed by Laureano Ralón. January 7th, 2011.

Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, faculty affiliate with Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center, is the Oxford Internet Institute's Professor of Internet Governance and Regulation. His research at the University of Oxford focuses on the role of information in a networked economy. He was previously Associate Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and Director of the Information + Innovation Policy Research Centre. Before coming to the LKYSPP he spent ten years on the faculty of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Professor Mayer-Schönberger has published seven books, including most recently *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age* (Princeton University Press 2009) and *Governance and Information Technology* (MIT Press 2007), as well as over a hundred articles (including in *Science*) and book chapters. A native Austrian, Professor

Mayer-Schonberger founded Ikarus Software in 1986, a company focusing on data security, and developed Virus Utilities, which became the best-selling Austrian software product. He was voted Top-5 Software Entrepreneur in Austria in 1991 and Person-of-the-Year for the State of Salzburg in 2000. He chairs the Rueschlikon Conference on Information Policy, is the cofounder of the SubTech conference series, and served on the ABA/AALS National Conference of Lawyers and Scientists. He is on the academic advisory boards of corporations and academic institutions, including Microsoft. He holds a number of law degrees, including one from Harvard and an MS(Econ) from the London School of Economics. In his spare time, he likes to travel, go to the movies, and learn about architecture.

How did you decide to become a university professor? Was it a conscious choice?

Early in my childhood I wanted to become an inventor. Realizing one's ideas seemed an enticing proposition. But I really never intended to become a university professor until my father, who wanted me to take over his tax law practice, asked me what I wanted to be rather than a tax lawyer. I said university professor because it was all about ideas and yet sounded more respectable to my parents than "inventor" (although I had been a software entrepreneur before).

In your experience, how did the role of university professor evolve since you were an undergraduate student?

I am not sure it did. When I began teaching at Harvard I had very nice PowerPoint slides and provided them online to my students. I also offered them online discussion forums etc. I did okay in the classroom, but I found the media tools restricted discussion. I then changed everything. I did away with PowerPoint slides for the most part, reverting back to the blackboard and flipcharts. I focused each teaching session around a particular challenge or issue, rather than a chapter

in a chronology or all-too-obvious pedagogical sequence. I required my students to write short reflection papers (responding to questions I posted) on the readings for most classes and submit them online two days before the class, and then had other students write response papers for each reflection paper the day before class. Most importantly, I would read all reflection and response papers the night before class, and based on these restructure how I would teach the session, also referring to the arguments in the papers in the classroom, essentially using these as tools to advance the discussion. It was immensely time-consuming but worked extremely well. I got teaching awards for all the classes I taught using this system. Students really loved it. But at the end it wasn't that much "digital", it was simply timely, responsive and immersive – perhaps these are the factors the digital natives have come to expect.

What makes a good teacher today? How do you manage to command attention in the classroom in an "age of interruption" characterized by information overflow?

I ruthlessly try to reduce information overflow. I reduce reading materials to the essence, but require that they be read. I do not permit online access in the classroom, suggest students close laptops etc and engage in discussion rather than taking copious notes. My task (especially at the graduate level) is not to convey information, but to help structure it towards knowledge. I push my students to respond to arguments, I cold-call, I challenge. My courses are not easy, but they are (hopefully) engaging and fun, and I try to create an environment that is forgiving of crazy ideas (albeit not forgiving of laziness).

What advice would you give to young graduate students and aspiring university professors?

Read anything and everything. Then stop. Think. For weeks. Listen to yourself, to how your brain begins to structure the

information you consumed. Give it time. Let it gel. And then write – not on topics everyone else is writing on. A senior faculty member once gave me the good advice: don't tell me what I already know or suspect, tell me something new. Be original, look out for the counter-intuitive, and – despite everything everybody is telling you – take risks.

You just mentioned the importance of taking the time to digest the information you acquire through different means. However, it seems to me that we are governed by a “metaphysics of presence,” to paraphrase Derrida, where there is less free time and fewer empty spaces for silent thinking and critical reflection. Do you think that we live in a society that maximizes the conditions for careful thinking and reflection?

I do think we live in a society in which immediacy and the present hold elevated positions that do not reflect their actual importance. Upon reflection much of the immediacy vanishes, and much of the singularity of the present gives way to a more nuanced temporal perspective. But the relentless ticking of the clock seem to have hypnotised people to stop critical thinking. I interviewed a wonderful old man once, who was a professor of Latin and Greek and a very successful fund manager. He advised me to always take a piece of Tacitus when going to the stock market, and when things seem to get out of hand to take Tacitus out and read, and act only after an hour or so has passed. He said it served him well to avoid the torture of the present. I think he has a point.

You also spoke of how teachers should help students structure information toward knowledge. How, exactly, do you achieve this inside the classroom? Do you think that institutionalizing this interpersonal practice through some form of regulation of content can be helpful?

I don't think there is a simple formula that could be regulated. Planned systems have failed even more spectacularly at preparing its people for the future than ours. In my

individual teaching context, however, I was able to achieve this in the classroom mostly by letting students respond to questions (the old Socratic dialogue), and by pushing them to discuss among themselves. It's important though to ensure that not always the same talk in the classroom. And sometimes the chemistry simply isn't there and it fails to work.

It appears we live in a society that tends to confound information with knowledge, and knowledge with education. Why do you think this so?

First of all it is wonderful to see that people thirst for information and now have better tools than ever before to access information. But with such powerful tools comes the responsibility to use them well. I think we fail in our educational system, and we fail in our public discourse to do just that. I believe (and yes, it is a belief) that people are capable of thoughtful discourse, of listening to and weighing different arguments, and of being pushed to "do their homework" and find out the information they desire – rather than having to "dumb down" the message. But we need to provide them with the tools, the institutional support, the educational support. We need to treat them as adults. And we need to relentlessly defend rationality and civility, especially in our times of information overload, so that people develop and fine-tune their good sense of extracting knowledge from information.

Your most recent book is *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age*. What can you tell us about it?

Delete is about the importance of forgetting. For millennia humans have tried (and often succeeded) to remember important things, as they biologically forgot most of what they saw, experienced, and thought. Remembering was time-consuming and expensive, and was thus used sparingly, while forgetting was natural and ubiquitous. Today, thanks to digital technology, cheap storage and retrieval and the global Internet the

situation has become reversed – “remembering” is now the default. This has advantages, but also comes with a bag of challenges: it may deliver more informational power to the already powerful, make it difficult for us to forgive, prompt us to self-censor, clutter our mind with too much irrelevant information, and make it difficult for us to see the forest for the trees. It may also prompt us to take a digitally remembered past as accurate and authentic although there is no guarantee it is either, and let us neglect societal institutions of remembering and societal processes of forgetting. *Delete* also looks at ways to mitigate these challenges – including the idea to reintroduce forgetting, e.g. through an expiration date for information.

What are you currently working on and when is your next book coming out?

I remain fascinated (and troubled) by the information deluge we are exposed to.

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Interview with Robert Babe

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Dr. Babe was interviewed by Laureano Ralón. January 2nd, 2011.

Robert Babe is a Professor in the Faculty of Media and Information Studies at the University of Western Ontario, where he teaches courses in Research Methods, Public Opinion, and Canadian Communication Thought. He earned his Ph.D. in Economics from Michigan State University in 1972, and has taught both Economics and Communication studies at a number of prestigious Canadian Universities, such as Carleton, McGill, Simon Fraser, and the University of Ottawa, where he was a faculty member for 18 years. Between 1972 and 2001, he also worked as a consultant for the Government of Canada, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, and the National Film Board of Canada, to name a few. He received numerous awards and honours, and has written several books and dozens of articles on various topics related to economics, information, and communication studies.

How did you decide to become a university professor? Was it a conscious choice?

I did not plan ahead. Initially I was in pre-meds, with ambitions to be a medical doctor. Illness forced me to drop out of med school before attending a single lecture and, deciding to take it easy for the year, I concentrated on economics – my best subject. One of my economics profs suggested I enrol for a M.A., which I did, and later another suggested I should apply to a PhD program. Everything took place incrementally. I was working on my PhD thesis on the economics of the Canadian television industry when my major professor, Walter Adams,

recommended me to the head of the Television and Radio Department at Michigan State University, and so I attained my first teaching position without even applying. It was on the basis of that year and a half in MSU's TV and Radio Department that I became convinced to become a professor, although I was also strongly committed to return to Canada. I spent several years as a consultant in Ottawa, and one year as a public servant, often teaching part time, but always believed I should re-establish myself as a full time teacher and scholar. Without that time as a teacher at Michigan State, it is doubtful I would have had the resolve to pursue that role.

In your experience, how did the role of university professor evolve since you were an undergraduate student?

When I was an undergrad, there were no course evaluations. Professors lectured and students assimilated. Professors were seen as the fount of all knowledge and students were deemed to have little that was useful to say. Of course there were no overheads, let alone PowerPoint; lectures were delivered orally and some of us scrambled to write down as much of what the professor said as was possible. One consequence of the student protests of the late 1960s was the enlisting of student participation in academic decision-making, and an aspect of that was the routine evaluation of courses and instructors by students. Symbolically this meant that professors were no longer necessarily regarded as the fount of all wisdom and hence should be held accountable both for what they said and for how they said it. I think this new outlook combined with technological developments, both encouraging professors to make their classes more user-friendly, meaning that the oral recitation of lectures became increasingly supported by audio-visual aids. (A contributing factor to this change, of course, was the ridiculous expansion in class sizes, making some sort of visual support almost necessary). A second consequence of student power was a new willingness of professors to entertain questions, comments and opinions in

class from students. Classes became more interactive, as opposed to one-way, predating analogous media developments. On the other hand, electronic devices are now also increasingly displacing the classroom experience – distance education and course-related blogs, for example. But on the whole, at least when you get past the large-enrollment classes, there has been a nod in the direction of democratization of university learning.

What makes a good teacher today? How do you manage to command attention in the classroom in an age of interruption characterized by fractured attention and information overload?

I think what qualifies as a “good teacher” is somewhat related to the discipline, although in all cases a good teacher will encourage students to think for themselves. If you are teaching mathematics, the goal of encouraging students to think would presumably mean applying or extending the logic inhering to the field. For media and communication studies, I encourage *critical* thinking, which includes questioning the positions and arguments of textbook authors and other authorities. I often select as texts, books I want students to question and challenge. I would be most uncomfortable in the “old-style” lecture format described earlier where the person at the front of the class is presumed to be the fount of all wisdom. Since my classes are interactive, always encouraging students to think critically about what others have said or positions advanced, students seem to be interested, even excited sometimes. I also stress the power implications of knowledge, that often some groups benefit if we think *this* way rather than *that*. Interestingly though, since I’ve been teaching at Western, and given the abundance of poststructuralists in the Faculty, I came to perceive poststructuralism as the established thinking and so I encourage my students to be critical of *that*. None of this is to suggest that I reject the idea of truth (as the poststructuralists uniformly seem to do), and indeed

Popper's *Conjectures and Refutations* finds its way into several of my classes.

What advice would you give to young graduate students and aspiring university professors?

Do your very best work at whatever you may be doing, irrespective of the perceived "payoff." Don't have too many preconceptions regarding your career trajectory. Assume what you are doing now is very important in and of itself. Appreciate the journey, rather than being fixated on the destination. Engage yourself in activities that help promote truth and justice rather than their opposite. And finally, quoting Polonius, "above all to thine own self be true," no matter what the "norm," others' expectations, or the pecuniary rewards.

In my opinion, *Canadian Communication Thought: Ten Foundational Writers* is one of your most important books. How did you come up with the idea, and in a nutshell, what is the most fundamental underlining thread connecting all these thinkers?

I would definitely date that book back to 1968-69 when, as a PhD candidate, I took Warren Samuels' three graduate courses at MSU on The History of Economic Thought. I found those so inspiring, challenging, enlightening and transforming; they definitely triggered my interest in intellectual history. Another root was James Carey's seminal article, "Harold Adams Innis and Marshall McLuhan" (*Antioch Review*, 1967), and also Arthur Kroker's extension of Carey to include George Grant in his book *Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis, McLuhan Grant* (1984). Furthermore, having taught in the TV and Radio Department at MSU, and becoming somewhat acquainted with mainstream US media writings, I understood that there were significant differences in the mainstream scholarship in the two countries. By the late 1990s I felt I was ready to write this up.

Briefly, I would say the major factors distinguishing the Canadian theorists from their American counterparts are dialectics as opposed to functionalism, methodological collectivism rather than methodological individualism, a concern for political economy and disparities in power instead of an often implicit presumption of pluralism, and the foregrounding of mediation/ bias, which was one of Harold Innis's remarkable insights, and one pursued in various ways by all of the scholars treated in my book. One could say that the book sets out Innis's media/ communication thought, and then explores the themes and variations articulated by nine other Canadian theorists.

What attracted you to Canadian communication studies generally, and how did your background in economics influence your appreciation of the field?

Again, I attribute this to time spent in the US. First, the economics I learned there was multifaceted, often quite different from the standard neoclassicism that was dispensed at the University of Western Ontario when I was an undergrad and MA student. I learned about power in economics, for instance, and of distinctly different economic approaches arising through time. This eventually all led to a strong appreciation of the work of Harold Innis. Second, my first academic job, in a media department teaching the economics of radio and television, meant I was required by my job description to integrate communication and economics – again, a foreshadowing of my later enthusiasm for the work of Innis. Third, being in the US, I grew much more appreciative of Canada, and at the same time apprehensive with regard to the survival of Canadian culture and its political/ economic independence.

I viewed at that time media industries through the lens of economics, albeit institutional as opposed to neoclassical. Later, as I grew increasingly familiar with communication studies research and approaches, I began critiquing mainline

economics, being particularly critical of its understanding of information, communication, persuasion, mediation, prices, and power.

One of your more recent books is *Cultural Studies and Political Economy: Towards a New Integration* (2009). What can you tell us about it?

Interestingly, I would say that my background in social science positioned me to critique the branch of cultural studies that has become aligned with poststructuralism. In 2002 Jody Berland, editor of *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, invited me not only to join the journal's Board of Directors, but also to contribute annual "political economy" columns. I did not really know much about cultural studies or poststructuralism at the time, but I learned some things over the next few years, much of which I found to be quite inane, yet this stuff was being taught, evidently in all seriousness, by members of my own faculty. After completing five columns for *Topia*, I was ready to gather revised versions of the columns together for a book, adding as context the histories of political economy and cultural studies, including their bifurcation with the rise of poststructuralism. In some ways I think this is my most important book. I teach from it at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, in what has essentially been a hotbed of poststructuralism – less so as time goes on, I trust.

What are you currently working on?

In the spring of 2011, *Media, Structures and Power: The Robert E. Babe Collection* is scheduled to appear from the University of Toronto Press. It is edited by my esteemed colleague, Edward Comor, and contains contributions from Sandra Braman, Robin Mansell, Paul Heyer, Hanno Hardt, Warren J. Samuels, and James Winter, as well as twenty or so of my pieces (all revised) covering the span of my career.

I'm also working on a book for Lexington Books entitled *Meet Harold Innis*, which is in essence an expansion of the final *Topia* column, "Poster Meets Innis: Poststructuralism and the Possibility of Political Economy." In the new work I look at how Innis could have informed writers such as Wilbur Schramm, Kenneth Boulding, Theodor Adorno, David Harvey, and poststructuralists like Poster, as well as what he might have learned from them. I do not have a completion date in mind for this, but I am very excited.

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Questions? Contact Laureano Ralón at ralonlaureano@gmail.com