

Interview with Darin Barney

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Dr. Barney was interviewed by Laureano Ralón. April 12th, 2011.

Darin Barney is the Canada Research Chair in Technology and Citizenship and an Associate Professor in the Department of Art History and Communications at McGill University. In 2003, Professor Barney received in 2003 the inaugural SSHRC Aurora Prize, awarded for outstanding contribution to Canadian intellectual life by a new researcher. In 2004, he was selected as one of fifteen “Leaders of Tomorrow” by the Partnership Group for Science and Engineering. In 2002, he was the Hixon-Riggs Visiting Professor of Science, Technology and Society at Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, California. He has also taught at the University of Ottawa, the University of New Brunswick at Saint John, the University of Toronto at Scarborough, McMaster University, and Simon Fraser University. From 2000-2005, he served on the Advisory Council of the Law Commission of Canada and is currently on the Board of Directors of CKUT Radio McGill. Professor Barney is the author of *Communication Technology: The Canadian Democratic Audit* (UBC Press: 2005); *The Network Society* (Polity Press: 2004; second printing 2006); and *Prometheus Wired: The Hope for Democracy in the Age of Network Technology* (UBC Press/University of Chicago Press/University of New South Wales Press: 2000) which received the 2001 Award for Social and Ethical Relevance in Communication Research by the McGannon Center for Communication Research at Fordham University, was selected as an Outstanding Title in political theory for 2001 by the American Library Association, and was a finalist for the 2002 Harold Adams Innis Prize. He is co-editor with Andrew Feenberg of *Community in the Digital Age: Philosophy and Practice* (Rowman and Littlefield: 2004). Professor Barney earned a B.A (1989) and a M.A. in

Political Science (1991) from Simon Fraser University and a Ph.D in Political Science (1999) from University of Toronto.

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

I am tempted here to quote Henry Bugbee, a little-known American philosopher I have been reading lately (thanks to a tip from my friend Andrew Feenberg), who wrote that “decision and commitment go deeper than choice.” He meant that commitment is something that takes hold of us, something that *happens* to us, not an expression of our will. For Bugbee, a person does not decide or commit – rather, “the person is decided or committed.” I cannot remember a moment in which I “decided” to become a professor, but I do recall *being decided*. It had something to do with being impressed by the possibility of attention to thought as a vocation. I say “attention to thought” because I would not presume to call myself “a thinker,” or what I do “thought.” Rather, in my job as a professor, in my teaching and writing, thought is what I attend to, with others. This possibility first impressed me when I took a class as an undergraduate on a series of texts in which anarchists were arguing with Marxists over questions of politics, the state, violence, the party, etc. In those texts, I encountered the possibility of political thought as something other than mere ideology. After that, I was a goner.

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

I think “university professor” is a category that is too broad to be meaningful today. It includes such a wide diversity of jobs and situations, many of which resemble each other only in that they take place at the university. The job (and experience) of a precarious, part-time lecturer, or even a professor in the sciences and medicine, is not the same as mine as a tenured professor in the arts and humanities. I am not sure what it was like to be a professor when I was an

undergraduate 20 years ago. People like to say that academics have lost their authority as exclusive custodians of knowledge, and have become more like facilitators and guides than professors, but I am not sure this alleged pedagogical shift, conventionally attributed to emerging media, is actually as radical a departure as either its proponents or its opponents make it out to be. Contemporary professors do what they have always done: they make use of the means at their disposal to learn, and to convey what they think and think they know, as faithfully as possible. Good professors do this discriminately and thoughtfully, and approach their practice as ever-flawed, always unfinished. That much has not changed.

Still, I do know that the job is different from what I expected it would be. Across the spectrum of teaching, research and collegial governance that defines the work of a university professor, I find that I and others spend more time and energy on the business-like activities of management, promotion and correspondence than I ever imagined I would.

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?

Good teachers do not command attention, they earn it. They earn it by working harder than their students and by being decent. Good teachers are convinced of the gravity of what they think about, and what they teach, so much so that the oddity of this conviction compels students to pay attention to it for a little while. Good teachers are irresistible in the way that car wrecks are irresistible: when you drive by one, nothing can possibly compete for your attention in that brief moment you are witness to it. And you never forget it.

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

Be a worker, not a player. Devote yourself to doing the best work you possibly can, every time you commit words to paper or to speech, every time you step into a classroom. The culture of the player – the networker, the entrepreneur, the publicist, the smooth-operator, the pro – now presses upon graduate students from the moment they set foot on campus. However, the only variable that matters when it comes to the various sorts of peer-evaluation over which scholars still have control in the academy – who gets admitted, who wins the scholarship, who gets the position, who gets published—is the strength of the work. Obviously, things do not always turn out this way. But my advice to students is that, in the long-run, you are far better off doing the work than playing the odds.

This is not to deny that students need to attend to the strategic demands of the profession—specialization, competition for awards, publication and presentation in reputable venues, cultivating a scholarly identity – far earlier than people of my generation did. It is just that even this can be approached in a manner that serves and reflects, rather than substitutes for, the work and its quality.

I also think the aspiration to be a professor, when expressed as an end itself, is not sufficient to sustain the work necessary for its own realization. You have to love the work more than you want the job. Sadly, the organization of academic labour is changing such that full-time, tenured positions represent a diminishing proportion of the professorial jobs that are available to graduates, and so graduate students need to ground their commitment to study in rewards that exceed that particular job description. It is hard to specify the nature of those rewards without sounding hopelessly romantic. I think this is one of the major challenges facing those of us involved in graduate education in the arts and humanities right now: we cannot look our graduate students in the eye and tell them honestly that when they complete their degrees there will be jobs like ours waiting for them. And, from our privileged positions in jobs

they dearly want and deserve, we are not sure what else we can tell them to do besides prepare to settle for something less than what we have.

Who were some of your mentors in graduate school and what were some of the most important lessons you learned from them?

I was blessed with two excellent mentors. At Simon Fraser University, David Laycock was the first to impress me with what it means to take teaching and research seriously, and to approach students, the classroom, and hard questions—not to mention politics itself—as things worth caring about. At the University of Toronto, my teacher Edward Andrew affected me in more ways than I can enumerate or adequately express. From the strength of his example I learned that what defines a good professor also defines a decent person: generosity, fidelity, integrity, courage, and fierce devotion to justice. From his practice and books I learned that the defining virtue of the scholar is respect for thought. He also taught me to read, to think, to pay attention to words, and to play snooker (cheating if necessary). He is the best person I know.

You are *Canada's Research Chair in Technology & Citizenship*. What would you say are the most significant points of contact between Technology studies and Citizenship studies?

If citizenship is about politics (rather than about identity), then I would say would say that both it and technology are about the organization of power, the materialization of judgment, and the possibility of action. So, if you are interested in politics you must pay attention to technology, because technology is a means, object and setting of power, judgment and action. And if you are interested in technology you have to pay attention to politics because politics is both where technology comes from and where it ends up. I would also say—and this is reflective of some of my own current interests—that despite the irreducibly political character of technological artefacts, devices and systems, technological

cultures tend in a depoliticized and depoliticizing direction, especially when it comes to questions about technology itself. In technological cultures, politics tends to get eclipsed by technology, even though technology remains positively saturated by politics. And so technological cultures are deeply contradictory when it comes to politics. Most of my work inhabits and explores that contradiction.

What attracted you to the field of technology studies in the first place? Do you think the contributions made by Canadian Communication theorists such as Innis and McLuhan are still relevant today?

I was attracted to technology studies by a claim that I did not believe could possibly be true: that the advent of the internet constituted a revolutionary change in the direction of a fundamentally more democratic political and economic order. Interrogating this claim led me to work through the treatment of the question of technology in the tradition of western political thought, which in turn brought me to appreciate that thinking through this question would take the rest of my life, and would require serious engagement with work and things beyond that tradition. Since then, my experience has been that the more I think about technology and politics, the less I know about it, which confirms to me that it is a worthwhile question.

Innis and McLuhan are arguably more relevant than ever, partly because of their recuperation in recent German media theory, and partly because recent technological developments have produced a broad range of questions about (inter)mediality and the contingency of print culture, questions that recommend a return to Innis's and McLuhan's thoughts on these matters. My own most recent work on resource infrastructure as communication media owes a tremendous debt to Innis. The Canadian thinker on technology who has become somewhat lost to us is George Grant. For while contemporary technological society arguably "needs" to hear Grant's critique more than

ever, in what is a particularly Grantian irony we have lost the language with which to summon his thought to our public conversations.

Your most recent book is *Communication Technology: the Canadian Democratic Audit*. In a nutshell, what questions did you address in your book and what were some of your findings?

That book was commissioned as part of the Canadian Democratic Audit, which applied the standards of inclusiveness, participation and responsiveness to several Canadian political institutions. I was asked to consider whether emerging information and communication technologies were improving the performance of Canadian democracy across these contexts. My answer, generally, was that they are not, particularly if we expand our critical consideration of these technologies beyond their deployment as means of conventional political activity to consider their status as things against which democratic political judgment is, or is not, brought to bear, and as part of the broader material and cultural setting in which power is distributed and politics unfolds. My findings, on balance, were that these technologies do more to bolster depoliticization and existing inegalitarian distributions of power than they do to reverse them.

The following question was drafted by Professor [Andrew Feenberg](#): “Have the recent events in the Arab world changed his rather negative evaluation of the Internet?”

No, they have not. My critical appraisal of the political implications of the internet has always been situated in the context of well-established capitalist liberal-democracies. Under these conditions, I continue to think the internet is primarily a technology of depoliticization and inequality – I say “primarily” rather than exclusively because it would be ridiculous to ignore the important political uses to which these technologies are being put in the service of various forms of opposition and resistance to the present order of

things. However, these alternative and resistant practices still represent a tear in a salty sea of hegemonic encounters with the broad scope of digital technology and its culture. To take the measure of the present conjuncture we need careful work that documents and even promotes tactical political uses of these technologies, but we also need to place these uses in the broader context of what remains a very powerful set of technologies configured to advance and secure what Jacques Rancière has described as the “unlimited power of wealth.”

The question of the political potential and significance of these technologies in the context of illiberal or authoritarian regimes and cultures where access to information, free communication, and political participation are radically limited, is entirely different. In these contexts, publicity—both its normativity and its technologies—might retain a critical force that is less attenuated than it is in liberal democratic settings, where compulsory interactivity via a range of digital media provides the greatest security against the possibility that politics might break out and shift, rather than confirm, the horizon of the possible and the impossible.

What are you currently working on?

I am currently working on a book that attempts to theorize the problem of depoliticization, and to consider the substance of political judgment and action under technological conditions. I am working with some classical ideas about judgment and action (mostly via Arendt) and some more contemporary radical political philosophy (Badiou, Ranciere, Žižek), trying to articulate these with a variety of accounts of contemporary technology and technological culture. Its working title is *The Conceit of Technology*, and I expect to have it completed by the end of 2011.

I am also working on two more empirical projects on non-digital technology in rural or remote settings. Most

fashionable treatments of technology assume that digital technology is where all the action is, and that politics is specific to cities – that rural circumstances are somehow idyllically devoid of both technology and politics. I am working on two technologies that contest this prejudice: grain-handling technology in the Canadian prairies, and petrochemical pipelines in the Canadian north. I treat these as “unconventional media” that, along with serving as systems that transport commodities, also act as communication technologies that structure experiences of time and space, and around which attention, concern, sociability and power are gathered.

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