Review of Darin Barney's
Prometheus Wired: The Hope for Democracy in the Age of Network Technology [1]

Aimée Morrison [2]
University of Alberta
Alberta, Canada

Darin Barney's *Prometheus Wired: The Hope for Democracy in the Age of Network Technology* opens with an epigram by Canadian media theorist and professor of religious studies George Grant: "The kindest of all God's dispensations is that individuals cannot predict the future in detail."   The quotation is apt, because Barney's book, despite the filiation to utopian or prognosticatory texts that its title might suggest, is firmly rooted in the here and now. Rather than proclaim the grounds for hope that might be deemed immanent to network technologies, as many other writers on the topic have done (*cf* Barlow, 1996; Benedikt, 1993; Negroponte, 1995; Plant, 1997; Rheingold, 1994), Barney instead undertakes a material analysis of the effects of contemporary network technology on the individual, on communities, and on systems of government. He grounds this work in the philosophical contexts provided by the work of Grant, Karl Marx, Martin Heidegger, and others, while engaging with current cyberculture and postmodernist theorists as well. Along the way, Barney also deflates the rhetoric of the networked world such as this has been raised to fever pitch by popular writers like *Wired* polemicist and Electronic Frontier Foundation co-founder John Perry Barlow.

The opening chapter, "Prometheus Wired," retells the myth of the bringing of fire to mankind: what was most dangerous about this gift, argues Barney, is not the transmission of this technology of the gods to mankind, but the hope of transcendence that it offered. Extrapolating from this reading, Barney claims that "the story of modern technology is the story of Prometheus's people writ large: the story of humanity blindly wielding instruments to command and transcend that which is given, in the hope of creating its own future" (6). The rest of the book is devoted to demonstrating, first, the futility of this quest for command and transcendence, and second, how this futility is disguised in a falsely deployed rhetoric of 'democracy' and 'revolution.' Indeed, Barney describes the book "as a meditation upon the economic, ontological, and political conditions necessary for democratic self-government, the failure of the modern technological world to meet those conditions, and the likelihood that networks, as a technology, will perpetuate rather than alleviate that failure" (268).

Of the other six chapters, two trace the development—philosophical and technical—of the technologies in question. "On Technology" locates a definition of 'technology' in Plato's and Aristotle's distinction between useful arts and important purposes. Following their lead, Barney decides that "a theory that understands technology to be, simultaneously, always instrumental and never neutral provides a formidable resource to those who wish to think critically about

technology" (34). Reading Marx, Heidegger, and Grant for their assessment of the relationship of technology to humanity, Barney comes to the conclusion that technology and culture are so deeply imbricated that each asserts a causative influence on the other. "Networks" offers a more material history of the technologies that comprise what we have come to know as the Internet, beginning with a history of the modern computer post-ENIAC and moving through the development of networking. This chapter also traces the uses of networks as utilities of information, communication, and control.

Another chapter, "A Standing Reserve of Bits," addresses contemporary theories of postmodernism and of network culture. Barney here engages with academic media theorists Mark Poster and Sherry Turkle, and cybergurus Nicholas Negroponte and Kevin Kelly, in order to counter the widespread, but in his view erroneous, characterization of network technologies as inherently communitarian, liberating, and democratic. The weakness of this chapter is its cursory rejection of postmodern theories as necessarily relativistic and overly prey to cooptation by dominant capitalist culture as an attractive veneer to place over the more sinister aspects of network technologies. While this argument can certainly be convincingly made, it is not the whole contribution of postmodern thought to the question of the 'information age.' Regrettably, Barney is not as thoughtful or nuanced here as he is in his engagements with earlier thinkers.

The three remaining chapters are more explicitly concerned with defining and examining a 'democratic' political economy in the network age: two of these chapters, "The Political Economy of Network Technology I: The Mode of Production" and its second part "Work, Consumption, and Exchange," debunk the popular belief that the information age presents a radical new form of social organization, leisure, and work. Rather than offering a challenge to multi-national capital and the process of globalization, Barney argues, the rise of computer networking represents the next stage of capital's evolution. The final chapter, "Government, Politics, and Democracy: Network Technology as Stand-in," first addresses the 'governability' of network technology and then articulates the dangers of realigning political thought to fit the logic of such technologies—this is the way in which network technologies 'stand in' for real political debate and citizen engagement.

Prometheus Wired is distinguished by its breadth of subject, its political commitment to a richer form of democracy, and its well-reasoned distrust of network technology as the *deus ex machina* of contemporary culture. While the author shares with others dissatisfaction with the current state of political participation and with the form that 'democracy' has taken in the West over the past century, Barney finds the root of, rather than the solution to, this dissatisfaction in the adoption of network technologies as the *modus operandi* of culture and politics. Well-researched, compellingly argued, and clearly organized, the book lends itself as much to pointed research—on topics ranging from the technical developments that fueled networking to Marx's views on machination—as to a fuller reading. Over the course of the book as a whole, a coherent politics of democracy in the network age is articulated while its constituent technologies are materially apprehended. As such, *Prometheus Wired* is a valuable contribution to the study of the political, economic, and philosophical culture of the 'age of network technology.'

References

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[1] Barney, D., (2001)*. Prometheus Wired: The Hope for Democracy in the Age of Network Technology.* University of Chicago Press. (ISBN: 0226037460).

[2] Ms. Aimée Morrison is a doctoral candidate in English at the University of Alberta, Canada where she teaches a course in Electronic Texts. She can be reached at ahm@ualberta.ca.