

# communication +1: dialogues

## Dialogue with Darin Barney

Under the heading of “dialogues,” *communication +1* begins here a series of conversations between a variety of thinkers engaging the various topics we hope to explore. We invite engagement here in the comments section as well as suggestions for the future at [communicationplusone@gmail.com](mailto:communicationplusone@gmail.com).

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Q: *Some of your earlier work, in [One Nation Under Google](#), and [Prometheus Wired: The Hope for Democracy in the Age of Network Technology](#) focuses on network technologies and politics in an era of connectivity. More recently, with your study of the farmers of the Battle River Railway cooperative in rural Alberta, Canada political subjectivity takes on a more conventional form with laborers asserting their rights, and reclaiming access to production resources. What is to be gained in revisiting infrastructures, such as agricultural industry, through the lens of technology? Has your work taken a ‘material turn’?*

DB: My early work on network technologies was always materialist in the Marxist sense, a response to the overwhelmingly idealist early promotion of digital technologies as essentially egalitarian and democratic. This discourse took it at face-value that equality meant access to information, and that democracy meant the expression and circulation of opinion. All of my work on digital technology has tried to trouble this by placing digital technologies in the material context of advanced capitalism – the political economy of information industries; the role of digital technology in production practices and work arrangements; the deployment of these technologies by the capitalist state. A second, more Heideggerian, strain in my work has focused on digital mediation and the quality of our encounters with human and non-human things, and the worlds they compose. I see this as “material” as well, albeit in a different, perhaps more phenomenological sense.

That said, my recent work on infrastructures such grain elevators, grain marketing agencies, short-line railroads and pipelines is certainly materialist in the more current fashion, insofar as it engages with the specific and situated materiality of these infrastructures, as sites and media of politics.

Q: *In your work, you make use of Jacques Rancière’s ideas of disruption and dissensus. Is there something within the particularities of the technologies in question that is better poised to attend to a politics of refusal, or of reclaiming agency? Does the role in transportation of such agricultural technologies sustain something different than do digital network technologies? Do their cargo, or their primarily material status (as opposed to digital) carry different affective potential?*

DB: The infrastructures in which I have become interested are all explicitly media for the movement or transportation of valuable commodities. This is what makes them potential sites of material disruption and reorganization, which I take to be the core operation of politics, especially in a context in which publicity – the circulation of information and the making of persuasive arguments – has largely lost its critical function. Digital network technologies enable all sorts of wonderful things, but (to paraphrase Jodi Dean) they also mediate a public sphere in which aesthetic and discursive disruption are almost immediately absorbed as circulating content. The disruptive character of a group of farmers who establish a short-line railroad and producer-car co-operative to resist the consolidated private grain trade (which amounts to the technological obliteration of their communities) is, while small-scale, of a different magnitude than a Facebook group. To raise another example: pipelines carry commodities that need to move to deliver value to those who have acquired the rights to them. The ability to disrupt those flows can be a powerful way to extract concessions from powerful actors and institutions that otherwise appear to be impossible. My interest is in how particular commodity infrastructures make themselves available or unavailable as media for these sorts of non-violent, disruptive political action, once all the reasoned arguments have been tried and failed.

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Q: *What do you think of the distinction that is often made between the US and Canadian traditions in communication theory, where (among myriad other differences) McLuhan and Innis are seen as freighting Canadian theory with an inherited tendency toward spatial-temporal models, while early sociological institutes and public opinion research are seen as having shaped the US scene? Is there something about Canada—perhaps its comparatively abundant geographical space—that has fostered a fixation with reflecting on material networks of circulating culture and goods? Would it be a stretch to say that the ‘Canadian tradition,’ perhaps as John Durham Peters (2003) imagines it, has enjoyed the benefit of materialist thinking?*

DB: In his preface to that lecture, Peters described Canada as “a place communication studies has always been critical, philosophical, and historical at once.” I think we still aspire to that, at least on our best days. The Canadian question has always been more about how stuff – including cultural stuff – moves (or does not move) around than it has been about how to manage large numbers of people with no common tradition to which to defer. Democracy has never been as real or as dangerous here as it is the United States, so Canadian elites never really needed to develop a science of public opinion, or even a sociology of communication. The polity has been managed more through mechanisms like patronage, equalization payments, freight rates, and hydro-electric power deals than by communication of that other sort. And we have always been constituted in and by circulatory relationships with imperial powers in relation to which we have stood as a site of branch-plants, a

plentiful standing-reserve (of fish, of fur, of timber, of oil), and a residual pool of consumers. Innis saw, via his own non-Marxist brand of materialism, that the circulatory logic of the economy infused political and cultural life as well. This, combined with the properly Marxist political economy approach that was so important to the second birth of communication studies in Canada (I am thinking here of Dallas Smythe), stamped the discipline here very distinctively.

Q: *In our most recent volume of Communication + 1, John W. Kim explores the status of the material in new media theory, arguing that the centrality of the virtual to media research has fluctuated, but that is it rather a conception of the material that holds potential for continued investigations into media.*

*“In contrast to the virtual, the material has not been given sufficient consideration as a constitutive element in our interactions with media technologies. To move beyond accounts of the disappearance of the material, its total mediation, or association with the body, we must recognize ways in which our perception of it both conditions and is influenced by our interaction with media technologies.” (9)*

*Could the configuration of ‘infrastructures as media’ stand to contribute further to this mode of thinking?*

DB: It is not just that paying attention to infrastructure can exert some much-needed materialist correction on our study of media, but also that approaches developed in media studies can help us understand what is at stake in infrastructure. Old fashioned Innisian communication studies alerts us to questions of storage, conveyance, distribution, directionality, temporality and orientation, and the way in which these dynamics bear on the possibilities of subjectivity, culture and politics. What is exciting about so-called new materialism is that it draws renewed attention to the agency of things, and the manner in which action arises from confederacies of human and non-human things gathered in contingent assemblages. This suggests that what is contemplated as infrastructure is more much dynamic, relational and complex than we sometimes think. It forces us to rethink what infrastructures are for, the extent of their implications, and who or what has a stake in these. I think here about the contentious politics of oil sands pipeline approvals, which summon a diverse confederacy of non-human and human things from across the vast spatial and temporal territories that pipelines traverse. People are on the line and at the table, but so are whole ecologies, habitats, climates, creatures and materials. As hard as the energy industry tries to exclude it, the future itself is at the table, because this infrastructure is implicated deeply in the future and its possibilities.

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Q: *One of the goals of the current volume was to “challenge the text-centered approaches in media and communication studies.” What elements of non-discursive communication and politics are at work in your research? And what do you think is to be gained in such reconfigurations?*

DB: In a recent piece I have written on pipelines as media, I steal a couple of phrases from Hans Gumbrecht to say that transportation infrastructures are media because they “produce presence” and, in so doing, communicate “what meaning cannot convey.” I think what is to be gained in a return to the materiality of communication is a way to think the relationship between communication and politics that exceeds the liberal democratic narrative of publicity. Marx said, “As individuals express their life, so they are.” This does not mean we are what we say we are; it means we are what we do. When the farmers of Alberta’s Battle River region decided to organize a major part of their productive lives co-operatively rather than competitively, they did not simply express the opinion that doing so might be a good idea: they expressed a short-line railroad. Sure, they had to persuade people to buy shares in the co-op. But their work was primarily material, not discursive, and I would say it was more robustly communicative and more political as a result.

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Sarah Ahmed’s work on the phenomenology of orientation has also been extremely helpful to me in this respect. She calls attention to the ways in which subjectivity is a matter of orientation, whereby we are oriented towards and by the objects that are placed in front of or behind us. These orientations and objects form lines of direction and horizon that establish subjective and collective possibility, and place certain things and experiences within or beyond reach. I think infrastructure is another name for the sort of objects Ahmed has in mind. And her account of the queering of orientation – the unsettling but life-affirming work of disorientation and reorientation – is very suggestive of what becoming political might mean beyond the expression of one’s opinion. I see infrastructure as the potential site and medium for this sort of politics of orientation, disorientation and reorientation.

Q: *In “Human Material in the Communication of Capital” Atle Mikkola Kjøsén considers “...how economic forms can be considered elements of the communication system that is capital” (11). In particular, Kjøsén likens capital to “value-in-transmission” (13) through an analogy to Shannon and Weaver’s model. What do you think is to be gained in thinking across communication and economics?*

DB: I think we gain an appreciation for forms of action and modes of becoming subjects that are consequential precisely because they are not confined to symbolic and semantic registers. Words, sounds and images

matter, but so do bodies, work, food, wealth and movement. There are good reasons to think the internet is the definitive technology of our present, but the technology that will define the possibility of our future will be an energy infrastructure. The question will be how we, as scholars of communication and as political subjects, orient ourselves to the questions such a technology will demand of us.

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*Darin Barney is Associate Professor in the Art History and Communication Studies department at McGill University and Canada Research Chair in Technology and Citizenship. He has presented the prestigious Hart House Lecture at the University of Toronto, published in 2007 under the title *One Nation Under Google: Citizenship in the Technological Republic*. In 2003, he was awarded the inaugural Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Aurora Prize for outstanding contribution to Canadian intellectual life by a new researcher and was selected in 2004 as one of fifteen "Leaders of Tomorrow." His current work investigates the politics of petrochemical pipelines in Canada. He also looks at grain-handling technology on the Canadian prairies as a form of 'unconventional media,' exploring the affective, political and communicative stakes in the case of the Battle River Railway cooperative.*

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**Dialogue conducted by Wendy Pringle on February 14, 2013**

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