

INVITED COMMENTARY

## ***Prometheus—A Founder's View***

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ANN MOYAL

*Dr Ann Moyal, is an historian of Australian science and telecommunications. She is a Member of the Order of Australia and was recently awarded the degree of Doctor of Letters from the Australian National University for her published books in these fields. She was, from 1983 to 1989 Honorary Editor. She worked with Don Lamberton and Stuart Macdonald to initiate Prometheus.*

One arena of congratulatory reflection over 20 years is the Book Review section of *Prometheus*. This comprehensive section has played an outstanding role in bringing a telling array of international publications, both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, to scholars 'Down Under' and, in turn, exposing Australasian books, both historical and contemporary, to a growing stream of researchers around the world. This two-way flow has further been imaginatively served by an editorial policy laid down at the outset and carried on by successive Book Review Editors, of drawing the widest range of cross-national reviewers to the task.

As a historian of science and telecommunications with connections in science and technology policy, I note with interest the reviews across the years which draw attention to the enlightening relevance of history in contemporary affairs—in telecommunications, print media, and science communication—a state that has led one author to observe 'the burning issues of the day most frequently are replays of the past'.<sup>1</sup>

It is, hence, very encouraging to see that an invitation for contributions on historical aspects of *Prometheus'* fields of interest continues to form part of the journal's aims.

From its founding Australian emphasis from 1983 to its growth and international development since 1997 when Carfax took over its publication, *Prometheus* continues to offer its readers, through its book reviews, penetrating dips into a literature expanding dynamically on every front.

Across the board, and two decades, under its general editor, its associate and regional editors, and richly representative Editorial Board, *Prometheus* maintains 'the distinction of making and publicizing interconnections'.<sup>2</sup>

### **Notes and References**

1. K. T. Livingston, *The Wired Nation Continent*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 11.
2. Henry Mayer, *Media Information Australia*, May 1990, p. 112.

## ***Prometheus*—An Exemplary Contribution to Intellectual Discourse**

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BARRY JONES

*Barry Jones was the author of Sleepers, Wake! (Oxford University Press, 1982), Minister for Science 1983–90 in the Australian Government, member of the Executive Board of UNESCO 1991–95, National President of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) 1992–2000 and chair of Labor’s Knowledge Nation Taskforce 2000–01.*

*Prometheus* was one of the great figures of Greek mythology—a prophet and benefactor of mankind, who created humans from clay and water, stole fire from the gods for them, warned them of an impending flood (global warming?) and was punished by the gods by being chained to a mountain in the Caucasus.

For 20 years *Prometheus* has made an exemplary contribution to intellectual discourse, both here and internationally, by publishing papers on innovation, technological change, science policy and communications. If the level of Australia’s public and political debate generally has moved very little, rarely rising above the level of Kylie’s bottom, or Senator Alston’s meditations, *Prometheus* is not to blame.<sup>1</sup>

The founder of *Prometheus*, still its General Editor, Don Lamberton has been Australia’s greatest intellectual contributor to information issues. He published a collection of papers *Economics of Information and Knowledge* (Penguin) in 1971, but recognition of the Knowledge Revolution was very slow in coming. He was the first economist to grasp what was happening and I was the first politician, and I started talking about it in Parliament in 1972, largely influenced by Don, although we had not then met. It did us no good at all professionally. We were too far ahead of the pack. I soon learned that political wisdom is shown by those who proclaim the patently obvious about ten minutes before everybody else. I doubt if the academic world differs much.

The need for deep policy analysis, understanding how complex systems work, grasping the significance of a possibly dematerialised economy, making global linkages has never been more important than it is now. May *Prometheus* long flourish!

### **Notes and References**

1. Editor’s note: the reference in this sentence is to Kylie Minogue, an Australian pop-idol and Senator Richard Alston, formerly Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts in the Australian Government.

## ***Prometheus*—Looking Ahead**

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MICHEL J. MENOU

*Michel Menou in an independent consultant in information policies and visiting professor at City University London (UK). He has been active mostly in Africa and Latin American since 1966.*

As we celebrate the 20th anniversary of *Prometheus*, it would be all too tempting to seek in its past evidence of its unique nature and accomplishments. No doubt this will be done by more-qualified contributors. I would like to follow paths of traditional birthday songs, not with wishes, even though they are granted, but rather with prospects.

What we can observe among scholarly journals, in the various domains usually covered by *Prometheus*, is a steady growth in the number of increasingly specialized journals, publishing a rising quantity of papers. Boosted by education policies that confuse gross statistics of enrollment and higher degrees granted with growth of knowledge, an ever-rising number of scholars are fighting to 'publish or perish'. Misled by quantitative techniques for research 'quality' appraisal, they are going to develop increasingly smarter intellectual reflexes for aligning contents, references and submissions with what they feel more likely to ease their career. Abused by the newness fetish that makes it so easy and exciting to look profound with trivia, and to establish oneself as the guru of an emerging field, especially when the common frame of reference cannot go beyond a few years, more and more authors will contribute to the information pollution they are nevertheless condemning. And, as can be expected, this flood of literature will see its influence over the thinking of decision makers and actors at large, and over the course of real life, becoming ever more insignificant, except when proper academic guaranty is a badly needed smokescreen.

This disappointing scenario, as excessive, or the opposite, as it might be, serves as a counterpoint for what *Prometheus* has been and might hopefully continue to be even more aggressively: a forum where a vast variety of topics and perspectives are confronted; a crossroad where people from all parts of the world can exchange their views and experience, even though one might hope for wider participation from the continents that language and poverty keeps away from these encounters; a place where the rigorous examination of facts goes together with the unconstrained invention of alternative visions: an agora where critical thinking is not inhibited by dominant fashions, conformity to politically correct stances of the day, desire to please at the risk of being untrue; a tribune where policy issues can be raised and discussed in an open-minded and constructive fashion and from a holistic and articulate perspective; a place where the opinion of a panel of CEOs of major multinational firms about the 'effectiveness' of national policy is not taken as whole and sole evidence; and, a place where intellectual honesty, alacrity and rigor is the only article of faith.

Is it not refreshing to find among the papers of the first volume of *Prometheus* (1983), one that reminds us of the importance of the real world as a home base for

the electronic economy,<sup>1</sup> another one that warns against the illusions of the 'Silicon Valley model',<sup>2</sup> and a third one on the failure of hasty computerization in hospitals.<sup>3</sup> They might have been as useful yesterday as they can be tomorrow, if the 'new masters of the world' would dare to look at them. If life reading of *Prometheus* cannot be made a standard part of sentences for corporate fraud or causing environmental disasters, not to mention other aberrations and crimes, one can at least hope it will continue to be the enjoyment of independent minds and perpetuation of the Promethean dream that human intelligence enlightens our destinies. But yes, there is still a long way to go.

#### **Notes and References**

1. Richard Dunford, 'Technology: the contingent nature of its impact', *Prometheus*, 1, 2, 1983, pp. 290–302.
2. Stuart Macdonald, 'High technology policy and the Silicon Valley model: an Australian perspective', *Prometheus*, 1, 2, 1983, pp. 330–49.
3. Ann M. Brewer, 'The failure of a new communications technology in a large hospital organisation', *Prometheus*, 1, 2, 1983, pp. 350–65.

## Prometheus—Paradigms and Paradoxes

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HANSPETER GASSMANN

*Hanspeter Gassmann is currently a senior adviser and member of the Executive Committee of Pro Natura International, a Franco–Brazilian non-governmental organisation specialising in issues relating to climate change and sustainable development. He is a retired international organisation official. From 1980 to 1998, he was Head of the Information, Computers and Communications Policy Division and then of the Industry Division of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris, and previously held various other positions with this organisation.*

We are living in a world of continuing paradigm shifts. This has become a fashionable word, to mean ‘fast change’. The history of mankind was always characterised by such paradigm shifts, but in the past 20 years two have become especially important: around 1980, the main paradigm shift was informatisation, the fast development of information, computer and telecommunications technologies (ICT). About 1990, globalisation became the new major paradigm shift, and continues today.

There is of course a link between the two: a powerful stimulus to globalisation was the rapid spread of computer technology and its distribution via data communications, resulting in the Internet. The other powerful stimulus to globalisation was, and is, the rapid increase of the speed of physical transportation, especially air transport, both for persons and goods, which itself would not be possible without modern information and communication technologies (ICT).

These developments have also created some paradoxes. The first paradox is that 20 years ago there was a widespread fear that computers, and more broadly, information technology, would destroy jobs. Today this issue is much less debated. Now it is patently clear that it is in the present period that automation and rationalisation in industry, but also in services such as banks and insurance companies, are eliminating many blue-collar and now white-collar jobs. Interestingly enough this elimination of jobs—at least in developed countries—now is attributed more to globalisation than to ICT.

The second paradox is that while one would assume that ICT and the spread of globalisation would diffuse more similar attitudes and behaviour to the entire world, it seems that the contrary is the case. The value systems driving globalisation and the spread of ICT, instead of getting more similar among countries, are drifting apart. Witness the anti-globalisation movement, and the new forms of terrorism based on radical religious beliefs, including the banalisation of kamikaze killings.

It is here that *Prometheus* will have a pivotal role to play. The journal has demonstrated in the years of its existence a remarkable openness to new ideas, new technologies and their applications, and their management. No doubt it will continue to be the messenger of innovation. But there will be a new challenge: there is a need for *Prometheus* to also become a messenger of values. It is critically important that in the future these messages of values flow not only from

developed countries to developing countries, as was mostly the case in the past, but that these flows be much more balanced between all countries of this world.

The difference between internationalisation and globalisation is that in the former, each country, while trading internationally, continued to act according to its own value systems. With globalisation, each country should absorb not only new technologies and innovations, and trade them, but also be more influenced, in a give-and take mode, by other countries' value systems. To achieve this, we need a well-functioning, multi-dimensional information exchange. *Prometheus* is ideally placed to become such an information catalyst.

## Congratulations on the 20th Anniversary of *Prometheus*

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G. RUSSELL PIPE

*Russell Pipe has specialized in telecommunications and information technology policy, regulation and trade for more than 35 years. He began his career working for the US Congress on legislation restricting intrusive (to personal privacy) questions in the 1970 decennial census, then was appointed Senior Consultant at the Information Computer Communication Policy (ICCP) at OECD from 1971 to 1978, preparing documents on national computer policy, transborder data flow and privacy and other issues. He publishes I-Ways Digest of E-Commerce Policy and Regulation, is a member of the Editorial Board of Telecommunications Policy journal and is Vice President and Governor of the International Conference on Computer Communications (ICCC).*

For two decades *Prometheus* has effectively addressed the diverse and complex issues involved in the 'information revolution'. Don Lamberton, together with a distinguished Editorial Board, have provided readers with a diverse quarterly menu of significant papers and book reviews. Many journals choose a narrow focus in approaching the politics, economics, technologies and other dimensions of the evolution of information-communications, but for my part, the broad, multi-disciplinary approach to this field taken by *Prometheus*, is the far better course.

Over the lifetime of *Prometheus*, we have witnessed advances in computer communication to tremendous heights; new technologies like wireless already offer one billion customers around the world access to voice and data services; and the Internet has opened stores of knowledge and new forms of commerce heretofore unknown. It is to the great credit of the editorial team and contributors of articles that these important developments have not only been focused on for their achievements, but more than that analysed for their impacts both positive and negative.

Don Lamberton in an article 'An information infrastructure for development' published in *Prometheus* in 2001 raises the challenge of bringing an information perspective to bear on development issues, in particular the role of telecommunications. He rightly questions whether the excessive focus on technical delivery systems is obscuring the underlying objectives of these delivery systems—information. As well, information economics has lagged in the priorities given to infrastructure development. Reports from preparatory meetings of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), in my mind, very much validate Don's thesis.

As editor of a digest called *I-Ways* focusing on policy and regulatory issues of E-Commerce for many years, I can heartily congratulate *Prometheus* on its 20th anniversary.

## ***Prometheus—The Bringer of Hope***

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IAN LOWE

*Ian Lowe is emeritus professor of science, technology and society at Griffith University, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. He holds adjunct appointments at three other universities and has received various honours like the Eureka Prize for Promotion of Science, the Queensland Premier's Millenium Award for Excellence in Science, the Prime Minister's Environmental Award for Individual Achievement, Australian Humanist of the Year and has been made an Officer of the Order of Australia.*

The editorial in the first issue of *Prometheus* said that those who inflict new journals on the world should explain their conduct. The editors then observed that there was no single publication dealing exclusively with the increasingly important issues of technological change, innovation, communication, information and science policy.

*Prometheus* certainly filled that gap. I eagerly awaited each edition, such was the quality of the early contributions from such people as Ann Moyal, Clem Tisdell, Michael Kirby, Jean Moran, Stuart Macdonald, Richard Joseph, Don Lamberton, Barry Jones, Ian McLean, Ashley Goldsworthy, Paul Wildman, Chris Freeman, Athol Fitzgibbons, Brian Martin and Henry Mayer. Within the first four issues *Prometheus* published work on nineteenth century Australian telecommunications, strategic management in CSIRO, the Silicon Valley model, exogenous factors in economic theory, technological innovation in the Arctic petroleum industry, law reform in the information field and union perspectives on new technology. It then devoted a special issue to the Commission for the Future, with contributions from Robyn Williams and Ian Reinecke as well as an array of overseas pundits.

The freshness and breadth which characterised the new journal are still there today. The 2002 papers ranged from US corporate research to science in post-Soviet society, diffusion of R&D in the wine industry and management education for electronic commerce professionals—with a special issue reflecting on 11 September 2001. Don Lamberton is still editing the journal, while the other members of the original trio—Stuart Macdonald and Tom Mandeville—also remain involved. The ‘chaos of published presumption and superstition’ they set out to counter still holds sway in the mass media, but *Prometheus* has well and truly fulfilled the goal they set for it: to be ‘the bringer of hope, the means by which unjust and uncaring authority could be resisted’. Long may it continue!



## The World Without *Prometheus*—Not a Future One Would Want

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TERRY CUTLER

*Dr Terry Cutler is an Australian company director, and industry consultant and strategy advisor in the information and communications technology sector. He has authored numerous influential reports and papers on the new information economy and electronic commerce and is a regular columnist on innovation. Terry Cutler has served on numerous Australian Government Boards and advisory bodies, taking a special interest in Government's role in the new global information economy. In 2002 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Queensland University of Technology.*

I remember well the world without *Prometheus*. It is not a future one would want.

My youthful entry into the world of technology policy was participating in the multidisciplinary *Telecom 2000* exercise in the mid-1970s. This project ventured something rare today, a policy model of 'open planning'. Unfortunately it was a bit like a dinner where none of the guests turns up. There were virtually no forums nor vehicles for discourse. No wonder Barry Jones was driven to write a book titled *Sleepers Wake!*. It was people like Don Lamberton and the founding of *Prometheus* that helped fire up a discussion of important new topics like information economics and emerging technology policy issues.

Australia, as a small Southern Hemisphere community, continues to have a major problem in supporting a vibrant public discourse around vital policy issues. We lack the well-founded independent think tanks of the United States or Europe. We are remote from international meeting places. As a result, too often our debates are parochial or lacking the benefit of bracing critique (witness the standard of our newspapers). The flipside is that, in too many cases, potential Australian contributions and perspectives are missing from international discourse.

We often use our smallness as an alibi—but being smart is not a matter of scale. If it were we would lack the intellectual legacy from ancient Greece. It is about a culture.

In 2003 I regret that in many areas we appear to be going backwards. A number of university-based policy research centres have disappeared, or are a shadow of their former selves. Specialist research units within government are an endangered species. Public policy formation is increasingly outsourced to commercial consultants. All this leads to a narrowness and orthodoxy of thinking. Thank goodness *Prometheus* soldiers on.