New Technology, Censorship, and Control

For many users, technology may seem relatively benign. It serves a functional purpose in bringing us content and allowing us to connect with friends, family, coworkers, and strangers. People understand the capability of new technology to speed up lives and create imagined communities. Emancipatory narratives of technology abound, particularly in product advertising, with the user positioned in complete control of technology. Avoiding such attitudes to technology, Raiford Guins's *Edited Clean Version* examines an aspect of technology few may have considered: the creeping forms of control embedded in everyday technologies.

Censorship and control, as Guins discusses in the first chapter of the book, have long been shown as the work of institutions. The field of communication and culture has produced copious accounts of film board censors, government regulators, and undemocratic regimes that have screened, prevented, and destroyed content before it even reached audiences, often in the name of "family values" or "decency." Rarely have citizens had a direct say in these institutional practices. Of course, citizens have fought valiantly against laws and regulations, opening up spaces for communication. Since the 1980s, however, neoliberal politics has resulted in less regulation and smaller governments; as a result, governments have less and less authority–or even the practical ability in the peer-to-peer technological age–to control and censor their citizens. What makes *Edited Clean Version* so fascinating is that the book shows how the work of censorship and control has been embedded in new technology. Speaking to the main question of the study, Guins asks, "What does control look like in the early twenty-first century? " (p. 17).

The book is properly organized not by each new technology, but by the practices that generally enable to control and censor content. Those practices are blocking, filtering, sanitizing, cleaning, and patching. Within each chapter, Guins engages with critical cultural theory and also discusses how these practices are employed in different mediums, including film, music, art, the Internet, video games, and television.

The chapter on the practice of blocking deals mostly with V-Chip technology, a standard feature of American televisions. The V-Chip allows viewers to block out "offensive" content that may otherwise reach their children's eyes. Filtering is performed by software, which presents only "appropriate" content to users, or by Internet companies that filter content before it arrives in the home. These services are intended to assure parents that home computers are safe places for their children. Sanitizing finds its way into homes particularly in the form of DVDs and movie-viewing devices. These devices allow users to set viewing rules that cause DVD players to skip over parts of movies that break those rules (foul language, sexual content). Cleaning involves the filling in of content to cover up offensive parts, often done by making "clean versions" of controversial songs or bleep-

ing language in live broadcasts. Lastly, patching involves the use of software modifications to change video games, such as patches over the controversial *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* game. (Hackers unlocked a hidden R-rated part of the game causing the publisher, Rockstar Games, to issue a patch that would prevent access by children.) Each chapter also presents numerous practical recent examples in popular culture alongside deep engagement with cultural theories.Guins's running argument is that today censorship and control has been handed down to us from its original position in the state and other institutions. However, these control practices in technologies require a complicit user. Rather than the state censoring media, this censorship only happens, in most cases, if the user agrees to turn on the device or software that performs the censoring function or buy the content that has been cleaned. In a neoliberal political world, which emphasizes the power of the individual and downplays the role of government in people's lives, censorship and control does not cease to exist, as one might naturally assume. Instead, Guins writes, "Censorial practices ... are in our media technology as functions of choice to protect and serve users, not solely enacted on media as an imposing, external oppressive force" (p. xiii). Guins notes that "rather than 'big' government breathing down one's neck with its large bureaucratic institutions and legal processes for an imagined national citizenry and body politic, little practices located directly in our governing hands emanating at the point of purchase ... can achieve similar goals in managing and securitizing our everyday lives" (p. 16). This is not to say that the book sees a transition from institutional to personal control, but that people now can act as censors, too, extending control throughout society in a subtle way.

Guins engages with the work of such theorists as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Paul Virilio, and Marshall McLuhan, to outline, develop, and expand on theories of discipline, control, and governmentality in the digital age. As the book shows, new control mechanisms in our everyday technologies do not seem like old-style censorship; instead, they seem to allow more choices by the user, which Guins calls a form of "disciplined freedom."

Guins does deal with the question of why we should be concerned when people have choice to use these control mechanisms (it certainly cannot be as bad as institutional censorship, can it?). Guins puts forward a number of justifications. He suggests that there has been an increasing power of parents over their children's media consumption habits despite the reality that the chil-

dren may still encounter the censored content outside the home. Guins also questions the fear parents have about the outside world–using these technologies means media content in the home presents an unrealistic sense of the world.

But more important, the book shows how that creation of "clean" media content affects all of us, not simply those who choose to employ control technologies. Indeed, the notion of what clean media should look like suggests boundaries between good and bad culture that all of us must encounter. Is a realistic portrayal of a hard life in a ghetto, as depicted in a rap song with swear words, a problem and thus deserving of censorship to protect sensitive ears? Or is it a representation of social reality and a call for change that everyone, even children, needs to hear authentically? Should private corporations–not democratically elected governments–creating filtering technology have the power to decide what is and what is not offensive? One example in the book presents the Blockbuster video chain as an example of a company that censored its own rental offerings, which affects everyone's cultural experience in a neighborhood. The eventual media content of a society upheld, promoted, and protected by these new control technologies becomes the norm by which everything else is compared. As Guins writes, "Whether we use them or not, controls are designed in our media technology, and their presence reshapes the expectations we assign to them and how they mediate our world" (p. 174).

What is not examined in enough detail is the idea of the family that underpins the book and the question of media effects. Parental responsibility has certainly been a concern in recent years, and these kinds of technologies may serve a purpose even if they represent a greater cultural problem. Forgetting for a second the greater cultural influence of these control technologies, why should a parent be concerned about employing them within their home? The empowerment side of the equation is not entirely a problem, although the book does not deal with such questions. Further, some attention to the literature on media effects and children may have also added some weight to the arguments against employing these technologies, although admittedly that would involve wading into a large and difficult debate. Another approach that deserved attention is the idea that media have helped construct childhood (what it means to be a child), which leads to a sense among parents that children must be "protected," a precursor to the demand for V-Chips and the like. But these are small criticisms. *Edited Clean Version* presents a compelling argument about the

spread of control technologies into our homes and sug-
gests the importance of this issue to everyone, not just
the people who turn on their V-Chips.

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