

Book Review

Guins, Raiford. 2009. *Edited Clean Version: Technology and the Culture of Control*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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In *Edited Clean Version*, Guins argues that media censorship is not restricted to the actions of external institutional forces that impose their censorial regulations from above. Rather, censorship can also be found when individuals use ‘technologies of control’ in the privacy of their homes. Discussing a variety of technologies that allow individuals to filter the media exposure of family members - such as the television V-Chip, filtering DVD players, “clean” version CDs, video game patches, and Internet filtering software - Guins points to a larger cultural shift in our censorship practices. In our era of digital technology, censorship has become an increasingly self-initiated process, and individuals purchase filtering technologies for personal and familial use so that they may self-censor the information to which they are exposed. Within this framework the very act of censorship becomes reframed as a question of user choice and individual freedom, as a feature that we intentionally choose in order to filter and block ‘harmful’ media content. Thus the notion of censorship is being remade, and rather than being presented as an oppressive force imposed from above it is now marketed as a technological solution that is empowering, liberating, and enabling. Guins questions this uncritical celebratory stance, arguing that because these technologies control an individual’s access to information (however willingly they may be used), they should still be understood within a framework of governance.

In developing these arguments Guins draws on Foucault’s notion of governmentality and Deleuze’s concept of control. He indicates that governance does not operate only through direct state intervention, but also operates through the small day-to-day actions of individuals, such as their personal use of filtering technologies. Drawing on Deleuze’s metaphor of the highway as an iconic controlling structure, Guins suggests that filtering technologies reflect an ethos of neoliberal governance where censorship is placed squarely in the hands of the user. Users are provided a measure of individual ‘freedom’ in filtering the media to which they are exposed, but this freedom is only ever delimited to the extent that the filtering categories have been pre-selected (or are pre-programmed into the technology). As Guins points out, these filtering categories are not neutral, for their development is influenced by political, religious, and ideological factors. Thus the pre-selected categories that allow an individual to filter also provide a default morality that can help to shape the worldview of individuals who are exposed to control technologies in their homes. It can also have implications for those individuals who do not use the technologies to the extent that their use by others can shift public opinion and change the political landscape. This process allows for the ‘governance at a distance’ that Guins associates with a control society.

One of the main strengths of *Edited Clean Version* is its analysis of self-regulating censorship across a variety of technologies, including television, film, music, Internet, video games, and (briefly) mobile phones. This approach is useful to the extent that it allows Guins to avoid making simplistic arguments about the nature and causes of censorship, for as he notes the censorship practices of each technology do not occur in isolation from one another. By drawing connections between these technologies, then, Guins

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is able to point to a larger cultural shift that is at work in regards to censorship, governance and power. However in seeking to draw connections across media, Guins divides the text thematically according to censorship *activities* (the analytic chapters are organized under the headings of Blocking, Filtering, Sanitizing, Cleaning, and Patching). While Guins makes the methodological point that analyzing censorship activities rather than technologies allows us to move away from the more simplistic explanations of censorship, organizing the book in this manner actually undoes much of its coherence. The reader is left to wonder about a thematic division that often appears arbitrary at best, with as much overlap between the headings as there is distinction. Various technological developments are scattered throughout the chapters, with the end result that many of the connections are only loosely drawn. The coherence of his argument would be strengthened considerably if the text were organized according to technological development, while a well crafted conclusion would still allow for the analysis across media that is so central to the text. This would also help to avoid the repetitiveness that characterizes several of the chapters. Finally, a more extensive conclusion would go a long way in connecting the analytic chapters back to his original arguments regarding self-governance.

It is also worth noting that while Guins briefly references the importance of the categorization process at several points throughout the text, and specifically in relation to the development of filtering categories at the level of production, he does not situate this argument within the wider literature on classification. Doing so would have strengthened his argument that the development of filtering categories is inherently political; a point that underpins the central premise in his text but that receives far too little analytic attention.

Overall, Guins makes several important points and draws some excellent theoretical connections, so it is unfortunate that the reader is left to dig for the bits of gold that are scattered throughout each section. The introduction and the theoretical framework are solid, but disorder begins to appear in chapter three. At the end of the day the text is still well worth reading for the sake of his central arguments, which are both interesting and insightful, but the reader may find the organizational framework of the book trying at best.