

Book Review

Raiford Guins.

Edited Clean Version: Technology and the Culture of Control.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty, Book Reviews Editor

Overt censorship involves a battle for freedom of speech that most people think has been won. Subtle censorship may be more sinister. If Guins is correct, devices that we permit in our own homes may have a greater effect on ourselves and our neighbours, precisely because they involve technology that we falsely believe to be under our control.

Of all the extraordinary technical inventions of the turn of the millennium the innovations in communications and information technology are surely among the most profound. They have revolutionized commerce and entertainment, record-keeping and war. They present significant existential questions for the individual as they simultaneously transform the global economy. They represent advances in instantaneous personal and corporate communications across space. They negate the dominance of geography and time. They also pose problems. For many of us, the main concerns such technology poses have to do with data collection, storage and retrieval. We live in a surveillance society in which background information is assembled and filed on “virtually” everyone. Moreover, we seem to be at the point where machines can achieve organicity, and organisms can become cyborgs. We are on the threshold of disembodiment. We are becoming electric flesh.

Thanks partly to the visionary pronouncements of Marshall McLuhan half a century ago, we have some idea of the ways in which the alphabet, the printing press, the telephone and television altered our species’ ways of seeing, hearing and thinking. Today, however, the ready availability of functional MRI technology allows insight into the actual working of our brains. GPS permits our physical locations to be tracked. Our medical, dental, financial, academic, employment, psychiatric and criminal records can be shared among corporate institutions, national governments, employers, insurance companies, credit agencies and any marginally competent computer hacker.

Given the sophistication of the devices and the permeable security shields that protect their data, it is a short step to the question of how information technology both in process (how we think) and in substance (how data is collected, assembled, stored and retrieved) can affect and fundamentally alter our lives. For us as for none of our ancestors, our sensations are technologically mediated. We are connected to the world through experiential prostheses.

In addition, this concern about the individual—indeed about the question of how much individuality even exists—leads inexorably to broader social issues having to do with personal privacy and official secrecy. Relevant topics can be “ripped from the headlines.” They include daily instances of identity theft and the demonstrated capacity of Julian Assange and his WikiLeaks to disseminate confidential diplomatic documents at will, thus rousing the passions of men like the University of Calgary political scientist and former Prime Minister Stephen Harper

campaign manager Tom Flanagan, who rather imprudently blurted out on Canadian television that Mr. Assange should be targeted for assassination, and the reliably dyspeptic US Senator Joe Lieberman, who demanded that the WikiLeaks chief be brought before American courts and charged with espionage. Whatever we may think of Mr. Assange and his copious critics, no one can deny that the issue of electronic communications has now been identified as inherently controversial.

Whether the individual is the target of large organizations or large organizations are the targets of individuals, these highly contentious issues are but one set of dilemmas related to information technologies. Another arises from a much older kind of quarrel. Familiar in the days of quill pens and ink wells and the source of much litigation from the time of John Milton's *Areopagitica* to the burning of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* by a school board in Drake, North Dakota, the subject is censorship.

Edited Clean Version is principally interested in censorship, but its focus is rather different from that of people who disapprove of external bodies controlling what we are permitted to see and hear. After all, if the twentieth century did anything in the domain of popular culture, it loosened the restraints on expression. No major city in the Western world lacks outlets for what once would have been called pornography of the most depraved sort. No computer with Internet access need be restricted from displaying virtual debauchery of all sorts. No chronic exhibitionist or college student with an excess of alcohol can be prevented from posting potentially mortifying images on Facebook or uploading graphic film to YouTube. Yet, the issue of censorship remains.

Obvious intrusions into freedom of information are before us, around and even biologically "in" us. Parents implant chips to keep abreast of their toddlers' movements and trucking companies install devices in their vehicles' cabs to ensure their drivers don't stray from the shortest route. In the alternative, despotic governments seek to block electronic communications, and private corporations attempt to control the kinds of messages that their customers are allowed to send and receive. Whether in the form of governmental or corporate initiatives, these endeavours are loosely known as censorship and are widely rejected by citizens and consumers alike.

In *Edited Clean Version*, Raiford Guins, Principal Editor of the *Journal of Visual Culture* and editor of anthologies on other aspects of popular culture opens another discussion. He turns our attention away from both the astonishing openness of electronic communications and from the frenetic efforts of governments and corporations to limit access and content, to keep state secrets safe and to build almost infinite data banks on friends and foes alike. Instead, he explores the question of restricted information in which, as often as not, people are not only aware of, but complicit in, the limits placed upon them. He examines people who sometimes go out of their way to acquire the means for self-imposed restrictions.

The main subject matter of Guins's book involves a register of specific devices and practices, most of which fall under the general category of editing. The list includes blocking, filtering, sanitizing, cleaning and patching. They are employed in the modification of the content of film, music, art, videogames and the ubiquitous Internet in all its forms. Their purpose is not to ban particular kinds of audio and visual material, but to alter it in a way that reduces its content to a level acceptable to what pass for personal and community standards.

The instruments of content modification range from the familiar V-Chip, a blocking feature that permits parents to remove what they believe to be odious content from the range of options available to their children as they are parked with the family television set and, in the process, inspire resourceful children to discover ways to circumvent the family censor. Filters are a little more disturbing. They perform the same function, but do so outside the home as companies provide the service of excising content that their experts deem to be inappropriate for children and other impressionable creatures. Sanitizers do the same job for DVDs as they mimic television broadcasters which erase particular words and images that run afoul of someone's concept of propriety. Cleaning moves one step closer to the old print medium practice of "bowdlerization," in that it insinuates itself into a DVD or other product and substitutes inoffensive language for that which is deemed unacceptable. And, finally, patching performs a similar task for videogames which have raised concerns most often because of the violence they simulate.

Guins writes from the perspective of a cultural critic who worries about the implications of technological mechanisms which allow people the comfort of knowing that they will not have to see and hear what they do not want to see and hear or to have others under their care and supervision see and hear. At first glance, this might seem like the very model of personal choice—the freedom not to be exposed to material thought to be degrading, decadent and even demonic. It might seem a bit of a postmodern stretch to equate a sensitive audience choosing to close its eyes or cover its ears [with a tyrannical government forcing the use of blindfolds or ear plugs](#). To object to this apparent exercise of individual discrimination might, in fact, seem to be a sort of reverse censorship. Whereas past authorities tried, ultimately unsuccessfully, to safeguard us from "smut," contemporary libertarians seem to [willing](#) to endanger our sensibilities by forcing smut upon us. Few earlier opponents of the censor's knife imagined, we may be forgiven from believing, that the right to engage in imaginary debauchery by attending to the works of the Marquis de Sade would imply that future generations would be forced to endure such artistry in all its discomfiting integrity. Nonetheless, Guins argues that the censorial practices mentioned above amount to a subtle method of achieving, through personal choice, a form of voluntary social control that may turn out to be more effective than direct repression by the state.

In terms reminiscent of Herbert Marcuse's fusion of Marx and Freud in *Eros and Civilization*, Guins sees self-control in the digital age as a kind of "repressive tolerance." Since at least the 1950s, we have permitted popular magazines such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse* as well as their progeny to display erotic images, but to do so in a way that so objectifies sensuality that it actually contributes to sexual repression rather than encouraging it. Guins [relies on](#) more recent theorists such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze to make a similar point, and calls the contemporary consequences "disciplined freedom."

In *Edited Clean Version*, we see an argument built around the notion that self-censorship devices do much more than ensure that people are empowered to set the boundaries for listening and viewing and to establish standards of propriety within their own homes. Permissible cultural representations have consequences. By editing out rap lyrics or excising depictions of violence, Guins argues, a portion of our society banishes reality from their home entertainment, public affairs and even news broadcasting. Moreover, the individuals who submit to self-censorship are

not really in personal control; instead, they literally buy in to corporate decisions about what is and what is not objectionable. Guins asks if corporate censors are to be preferred to government censors especially when they take it upon themselves to expurgate scenes from rental videos, even in response to perceived market demands. As Guins puts it: “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.”

Readers may not be convinced that we need worry excessively about the pervasiveness of control technologies. Still, there are important arguments to be made.

One arises from a serious question about “values” and technology. Many people continue to labour under the illusion that technology is value-neutral and that judgements about it depend on the use to which it is put. This idea was given expression in the slogan of the National Rifle Association: “Guns don’t kill people,” they say, “people kill people.”

There is, of course, an arguable moral point here. Human beings who intentionally or negligently use guns to kill other human beings are responsible agents carrying out a horrific act using the technology of firearms and may properly be held to account. As well, there is no doubt that a person who uses a rifle to kill game to feed a family may be doing something that is morally commendable, while another who uses the same weapon to kill a neighbour in a jealous rage is not. Thanks, however, to the serious analysis of technology, we now better understand that technology is not neutral. We appreciate that it carries with it inherent purposes and interests, and that it alters our understanding of ourselves and the world. In the context of the NRA, “guns turn everything into a target.”

Over fifteen years ago, journalist Carole Corbeil addressed the then-new V-chip technology. She worried about some of the same things that upset Raiford Guins. “Who,” she asked, “will get to classify programs and how”? V-chips and any other editing process require a system that decides what to leave in and what to leave out. No doubt both manufacturers and distributors will have a hand in the system design and the effect would be to “spook advertisers from attaching themselves to controversial [products].”

Finally, while explicit nudity, sex, coarse language, violence and other “adult” content makes contemporary entertainment subject to editing, the next issue might well be political or religious content. Corbeil added: “we all know that it is not the violent American action movies that would suffer from such a classification system, but the serious documentaries and movies dealing with unpalatable issues.”

Overt censorship involves a battle for freedom of speech that most people think has been won. Subtle censorship may be more sinister. If Guins is correct, devices that we permit in our own homes may have a greater effect on ourselves and our neighbours, precisely because they involve technology that we falsely believe to be under our control.

About the author:

Howard A. Doughty teaches in the Faculty of Applied Arts and Health Sciences at Seneca College, Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at howardadoughty@yahoo.ca.