



Edited Clean Version: Technology and the Culture of Control

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BOOK REVIEWS

R. Guins, *Edited Clean Version: Technology and the Culture of Control* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 242 pp., ISBN 978-0-8166-4815-3 (pbk), US\$22.50.

The defining, recurring metaphor of Raiford Guins's, *Edited Clean Version*, is that of the information highway – not Al Gore's version of a data-driven utopia, but a Deleuze-inspired vision of a technologically facilitated control society. Throughout his discussion of techniques and technologies for 'cleaning', filtering, and otherwise (self-)regulating a growing array of media content, Guins repeatedly returns to Deleuze's metaphor of the highway: 'people can drive infinitely and "freely" without being at all confined yet while still being perfectly controlled' (p. 6). Choice – at least the way it is formulated in the range of alternatives for protecting viewers and their children from the myriad threats posed by objectionable media content – is revealed in Guins's account as a participatory form of control, self-regulation, and submission to the logic of the censor.

To make his case, Guins draws on the examples of the V-chip television blocking system, internet filters, and the creation of 'clean' versions of music, movies, and video games. In each case, he argues, the logic of choice functions as an injunction to take responsibility for a range of threats, mostly to family, children, or 'family values'. Alongside the increasing range of available media products emerges a new set of choices for managing their consumption, rating their contents, and screening, filtering, or otherwise muting objectionable content. Social concerns related to violence, sexuality, crime, and a host of other perceived potential threats to home, children, and mental hygiene are reconfigured as risks that viewers are provided with both the responsibility and the technology to manage through individual acts of consumption. The result, Guins argues, is an invitation to participate in forms of self-regulation that reinforce a 'generalized mentality of rule that offers control technology as a viable solution to social problems as a new modality of authority and expertise through self-governance' (p. 18).

Drawing on Deleuze's description of societies of control and Foucault-inspired accounts of neo-liberal 'governmentality', Guins presents us with the grand inversion of the market promise: what looks like freedom is actually control. In an era of seemingly endless choice, we are not so much empowered

subjects of choice, free to roam where we will, as subjected to the power of choices that channel our media consumption according to imperatives set by others. The danger of a single-minded focus upon the newfound freedom of choice for self-regulating content provided by proliferating media outlets ranging from programmable DVD players to the internet is that it backgrounds the priorities these choices instantiate. As Guins puts it, paraphrasing Marjorie Hein's criticism of the V-chip legislation, it is 'absolutely useless against racism, classism, and homophobia' (p. 169). Guins demonstrates the emphasis of filtering and rating systems on sex, violence, and a particular understanding of religious values associated with the Christian right. For example, one DVD filtering technology he examines blocks out the Lord's name when taken in vain, but not, 'Hate speech aimed at sexual orientation' (p. 119).

The apparent goal of such technologies, Guins suggests, is to recapture a safe and sheltered imagined past – a virtual Mayberry, R.F.D. (as invoked by the internet filtering company Mayberry USA) – by creating online gated communities. In such online preserves, he claims, 'We are left with only quiet porch swings and fishing holes to surf'. But this seems to understate the case: at the very least we should factor in the barrage of billboards, targeted ads, and spam that have come to colonize the online fishing (phishing?) hole and the monitoring that tracks our use of the porch swing.

Although the book might have benefited from some more concrete examples to make the case that the logic of choice impacts even those who choose *not* to choose by dispensing with V-chips and internet filtering, it makes a credible start on the development of a theory of control for an era of information glut and media saturation. If, once upon a time, we may have construed control as a function of a lack of options, programming, or customized forms of content, we should not be fooled by the proliferation of choices – of 'clean' versions, customizable software, and DVD players with thousands of filtering settings – into imagining that such new freedoms somehow escape the logic of control. Perhaps the biggest illusion of all is that the freedom to choose is a choice.

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Chayko, M., *Portable Communities: The Social Dynamics of Online and Mobile Connectedness* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008).

'Portable communities' in the author's own words are 'groupings that use small, wireless, easily transportable technologies of communication ... to facilitate interpersonal connectedness and to make and share a collective identity and culture' (p. 8). Focusing on this central idea, the book considers mobile communication from a number of different academic perspectives, those being broadly psychological (covering issues of cognition, emotion and intimacy, play and pleasure) and sociological (for example, issues of identity, privacy, social interaction and activism).

One of the book's strengths is its breadth of coverage which, along with its clarity of expression and logical organization, makes it an accessible and relevant read for undergraduates from a range of disciplines. After an initial section on the concepts of portability and community, the book progresses very systematically through consideration of the internal dynamics of portable communities – how users feel connected to others and gain a sense of community – followed by a discussion of the ramifications of our portable connectedness for the larger culture. The fact that the book interweaves research findings from a number of fields with extracts from the questionnaire responses of 87 informants who are regular mobile communicators is also one of its positive aspects.

The author uses a 'snowball' method to acquire her informants, which is to ask an initially small group of individuals to involve others known to them. While this ensures a level of commitment and richness from the informant community, there are clearly problems of homogeneity in the sample collected. In this case, the interviewees are disproportionately white, female, middle class and from educational contexts (students or lecturers). To be fair, the author recognizes this and is entirely upfront about it in the 'Methodology' section; and there are clear statements in other parts of the book about issues of inequality and differential access to technological resources. However, there are very many references to what 'we' do and what 'we' think, requiring readers to do some rather complex acrobatics around scope and apparent universality. Also, because the informants are frequent users of mobile communication, the centrality and value of such connectedness is represented in a positive way.

As part of this positivity, there are at times some rather large generalizations drawn on shaky evidence about the technologies themselves: for example, the idea that half of all emails are accessed within one hour of their being sent (p. 142); the idea that we become more emotionally expressive in our communication as we become more familiar with portable systems (p. 51). The new term coined in the book, 'sociomental', to describe a level of engagement that cuts across the false divisions of 'real' and 'virtual' is certainly useful; however, the idea that portable communication is not 'physical' is problematic (see Goddard (forthcoming) on the textualized physicality of real-time writing).

However, it is notoriously difficult to achieve depth as well as breadth, and the real usefulness of this text lives in its breadth, which means that students in subject areas from English Language/Linguistics through IT to Psychology, Sociology, Business Studies and beyond will find something to connect with here.

Angela Goddard

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Reference

Goddard, A. (forthcoming) 'Is there anybody out there? Creativity, materiality and representation in new communication technologies', in *Creativity in Language*, eds R. Carter, R. Pope & J. Swann, Palgrave.

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Felicia Wu Song, *Virtual Communities: Bowling Alone, Online Together* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), xx + 179 pp., ISBN 978-1-4331-0395-7 (pbk), £21.20.

In an early episode of *The Simpsons* ('A Streetcar Named Marge' 1992), Marge Simpson recounts her worries about learning lines for a play as Homer lies in bed, inattentive while playing a bowling game on a handheld console. *Virtual Communities*, Felicia Wu Song's engagement with Putnam's (1995, 2000) 'bowling alone' thesis, seeks to examine the impact of the Internet on American civic inattentiveness and disengagement through 30 case studies of Webby Award winning online communities.

This sample is made up of winners from 1998 to 2004, and many are unfamiliar by virtue of this. Communities such as bianca.com, Idealist.org and Beliefnet.com no longer receive much media attention or are even no longer active. While this may suggest that the study is somewhat dated – inevitable given the environment of incessant speed-up – what emerges is in fact a sketch of the dominance and decline of web 1.0; Wu Song's study, by chance, as she admits, charts the nature of online community before the epochal shift

to web 2.0. As such, the lack of familiar names – Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. – does not detract from the relevance of the study.

Through these case studies, Wu Song examines the efficacy of online communities for greater democracy. She explores the culture of online community membership; the influence of the market on online community formation; the way online communities develop democratic practices by their design; and finishes by evaluating the success of online communities in cultivating democratic participation. She approaches these issues in a rigorously analytic manner, avoiding the polar dangers of optimistic global villagism and pessimistic doom-mongering that mire so much work on life online, concluding that, although there is the real possibility of ‘a robust democratic life’ (p. 123) online, it remains only a possibility; the Internet, in general, and online communities, in particular, are not structured to encourage this: we must look first to ourselves and not to our technologies.

Although I find the book as a whole to be tightly argued and thorough-going, there are a couple of instances where I felt Wu Song ought to have delved a bit deeper. First, she claims that online communities are porous – that is, have a low barrier to entry – without relating this to the rules of conduct that all the groups she studied possessed. Of course, it is easy to join an online community but this takes no account of how an individual must conform their identity or behaviours to join. In a sense, it is very difficult for me to join an online community – Facebook, say – without translating my self into a set of information for the profile; if my self does not fit into the fields provided then I – as a singular ‘I’ – cannot join. (Obviously, I can still set up the account but it would not fully represent me.) If I do join and yet have to comport myself according to the rules of conduct and generic norms, then, again, it might be argued that this is another barrier to my participation.

Second, Wu Song holds that managing discourse disagreement is key to the democratic potential of online communities, be this via the imposition of rules of conduct or the presence of moderators or both. But do we really want our dissent managed? Is this a healthy state, to sacrifice dissensus for group stability? I want to disagree!

While I cannot accept Wu Song’s conception of democracy – a sort of Habermasian dialogue towards consensus – her analysis of the design and functioning of online communities in light of this conception of democracy is nonetheless excellent. This book will have a broad appeal, recommending itself to anyone who wishes to begin to understand the nature of online communities, their political/ethical make-up, and the changing nature of civic participation.

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Kevin Gillan, Jenny Pickerill & Frank Webster, *Anti-War Activism: New Media and Protest in the Information Age* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 230 pp., ISBN 978-0-230-57449-6 (hbk), £47.50.

As it follows from the title, this book is devoted to the analysis of the anti-war activism (mostly – the UK-based anti-Iraq-and-Afghanistan-wars movement including many Muslim groups) and the roles played by the modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the related cyberprotest activities. The main attention is devoted to the employment in these processes of various World Wide Web-based services, email, and connected cell-phone applications. The authors consider political conflict related to the anti-war activism through the Information War symbolic lens; namely they devote much attention to the soft side of power – persuasion, propaganda, and the steady information flow about actual events of the war in Iraq. The authors stress that under current conditions of the ubiquitous use of mobile ICTs capable of gathering, storing, and transmitting large amounts of information almost instantly, the government is no longer able to control the information environment surrounding the war. At the same time, the anti-war activists skillfully used the modern ICTs to create an alternative information environment in which they framed the war in the ways advantageous to them, and thus won in these key struggles of interpretation and representation. As a result, the changes – from positive to negative – in attitudes of many British people toward the Iraq war mostly 'have been influenced by the ready availability of persistently negative information about the reasons for and progress of the war' (p. 185). In addition to fulfilling this important information function, the modern ICTs also help the activists to easily coordinate their efforts globally, e.g. while arranging synchronous mass demonstrations in various parts of the world.

The authors substantiate their concepts through numerous in-depth interviews with the activists, hyperlink analysis of the activists' online networks, and observations of the current state and evolution over time of the anti-war activism

in the UK – all of which taken together help them to describe more comprehensive picture of the ICTs use in the anti-war movement. In particular, the authors come to the conclusion that with the help of the modern ICTs the activists now can both generate and process information, as well as communicate with their peers, much faster and cost-effectively than in the previous decades. At the same time, there is a problem of information overload accompanying the current easiness of online access to information. The activists try to cope with this problem using various information-filtering processes. The authors point to the potential drawbacks in some of these approaches, including the possibility to limit selection of information materials to only those which conform to the activists' own beliefs (the so-called problem of the 'information cocoon' (Sunstein 2006, p. 9)).

The authors also consider various innovative ways by which the activists use the modern ICTs in their daily cyberprotest activities. In particular, they introduce the concepts of 'manifest functionality' of the ICTs (i.e. the more obvious, straightforward possibilities of the ICTs use) vs. 'latent functionality' of the ICTs. The latter can be effectively employed by merging several different ICTs (often also in combination with various off-line technologies) into totally novel multimodal information and communication structures possessing new features and thus providing competitive advantages over the often rigid structures opposing the anti-war activists. The authors believe that in the near future, the anti-war activists' movement will be able to considerably enhance its power through the skillful use of the latent functionality of the modern ICTs. Another huge potential gain for the anti-war movement can be in more active involvement of new generations of activists – young 'digital natives' (Palfrey & Gasser 2008) who are sophisticated and very creative users of the modern ICTs.

Patterns similar to the ones surfacing in the anti-war cyberactivism we can also observe while studying some other cyberprotest activities (e.g. those manifested by the democratic dissidents during the Ukrainian Orange Revolution). Therefore this book can be a good information resource for everyone interested in modern political cyberprotest, in general. It can also be of use during elaboration of the security measures in order to better understand and counteract, e.g. terrorists who are actively using global ICTs-based networks to coordinate their activities and to recruit new members. The authors represent different fields of scholarship – political science, human geography, and sociology – and skillfully combine different methods in their research – therefore this book should be of interest for the wider circles of information and political scientists examining socio-political applications of the modern ICTs. At the same time, the book is written using easily understood language and is supplied with attention-grabbing factual material. Therefore it can be appealing for a lay reader as well.

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