

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

A Conversation with Douglas Rushkoff, Digital Media Expert, Graphic Novelist and Documentarian

Ethics Matter, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

Douglas Rushkoff, James Traub

Transcript Introduction

JAMES TRAUB: Good evening. I'm James Traub. Welcome to Carnegie's Ethics Matter series.

Our guest tonight is Douglas Rushkoff, who is the author of *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*, a work that I would say cements Douglas's status as the Marshall McLuhan of this age, the age of Internet and social media.

Douglas is a ludicrously productive and protean figure, who, at least by my count, has written 17 books so far, including *Life Inc: How Corporatism Conquered the World, and How We Can Take It Back*; *Nothing Sacred: The Truth About Judaism*; *Ecstasy Club: A Novel*; three graphic novels; and my favorite Rushkoff title, *Stoned Free: How to Get High Without Drugs*, which I can't help assuming was the rueful book of an ex-stoner written when his daughter was born or something like that. You can tell us later whether or not that's right.

He's also the author of three PBS *Frontline* documentaries and innumerable articles and blog posts.

Douglas, thanks so much for being here today.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Thanks for having me.

Remarks

JAMES TRAUB: It's clear just, I think, from the litany of those titles that a very deep ethical strain runs through your work. That's really our kind of master theme at Ethics Matter; just that. Obviously, there's a deep sense, I think, of the kind of harms that are done to us by so much of modern life.

Maybe you could just start by telling us a little bit about your background. Did you grow up with a deep sense of the harms done to people by modern life? Where did that come from?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: When I was little, my older brother went to a Hebrew school. I was still in kindergarten, but I wanted to do the things my older brother did.

JAMES TRAUB: Where did you grow up?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Queens originally, then Larchmont.

He went to Sunday school. My dad got me, a kindergartner, into the first-grade Sunday school class. I was just a little kid. A new rabbi came in. He started coming to each class: "Ask me any question you want. Judaism is about questions."

So I asked him, "What is God?"

This is where you might as well get the answer, right? This is the place. I was five, and I figured this was what we were paying for.

He goes into this thing about, "You know, there's this sense in you between right and wrong, and you have this natural ability. That's God."

So I was, like, "What? You're saying God is your conscience?"

He was, like, "Yes, God is your conscience. God is your conscience."

And he started going to each of the classes and saying, "God is your conscience. God is your conscience."

So kids went home and said, "Oh, the rabbi said, 'God is your conscience.'" A month later, he was fired.

JAMES TRAUB: Apostasy is not a sin amongst the Jews, so he couldn't have been fired for that.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: You don't have to sin to get fired as a rabbi. You just have to aggravate the community.

JAMES TRAUB: Did you hold yourself responsible?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: I did, and I have to this day. I was a five-year-old. It was the whole thing.

But I decided that—it's almost like, if someone dies, you want to then live for them—I decided, really, at that point that I would live to help people see that sort of innate order of things, that there is a natural ethic that's beyond social construction.

JAMES TRAUB: There's justice out there.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: There is. Maybe that is an essentially Jewish take on things.

JAMES TRAUB: I think it is.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: I'm not a God-believer, but if I believe in justice, if I believe in that order of the universe, then I'm going to try to help people see those patterns, where they exist, to connect those things, so they can then live in a way that feels like they are in consonance with that and try to work against the structures and, really, the social constructs that hide that from people.

JAMES TRAUB: My sense is that, though we'll talk about media and media technology, because that's what your book is about, there's some broader theme here about the loss of personal agency. Despite all the liberatory promises of modern life, so that we think it's all going to be better, better, better, better, better, and in some semi-noticeable, understandable way, our personal agency is being sapped.

Is that kind of how you see a lot of this stuff?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Yes. I was a TV kid, so I was raised in a receive-only media universe. I was smart, so I would look at these shows and analyze them on a level that maybe other people weren't. I would think about, on sitcoms, whether the door was on the right or the left of the set and what that meant to the tone of the show

JAMES TRAUB: Really?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Yes, yes.

JAMES TRAUB: Wow. I watched a lot of sitcoms. That never crossed my mind.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: It's really interesting.

JAMES TRAUB: You were smart.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: It's interesting, though. You look at divorced couples, where their door is, versus not. Really, it goes deep. But things like that I would look at.

But I always felt—this was a receive-only world—the future that we imagined when I was a kid was one like on *Star Trek*, where they are looking at the universe on a TV. They're basically sitting on the bridge watching television. It was just bizarre.

Then I had my first exposure to digital technology. I had to save my very first file. In the old days everything was sort of mainframe, and you just had terminals. I had to save a file, and it asked me, "Do you want to save this as a read-only file or a read/write file?" I was, like, "What does this mean?" They explained. A read-only file means other people can look at it and a read/write file means they can look at it and change it. I was, like, "Oh, my God." And I realized that I had been living in a read-only media universe, and now we were stepping into a read/write media universe.

But then, when I looked out at the New York City streets for the first time with read/write consciousness, I realized, "Oh, the grid pattern, that's not city; that's a city." We chose to make it—there are other cities that they made other ways. Money is a read-only medium. Why is it a read-only medium instead of a read/write medium? Because they'll throw you in jail if you try to write your own money.

So all of the things out there that were accepted as sacred truths or inviolably legally defended truths, to me, were all suspect.

JAMES TRAUB: In a way, this is when you became conscious of media as media, as opposed to just a kind of unthinking vessel through which you would see whatever it is you were eager to see.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Right, and whether or not media were open to human intervention or whether they were accepted at face value.

JAMES TRAUB: When did you read McLuhan?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: After. It's funny. I read McLuhan after I wrote a book called *Media Virus!*, which kind of launched that whole viral media thing. I was responsible, but not. They turned that into viral marketing, which isn't what I meant. I meant that there are these cultural agendas that end up getting expressed through viruses, because we have certain sort of collective immune deficiencies that can be exploited by information and ideas.

I wrote that, and this publication, *Nathan Gardels's* thing called *New Perspectives Quarterly*—they said, "Oh, the brilliant heir to Marshall McLuhan."

"My God, they keep talking about—I'd better read this guy."

JAMES TRAUB: It's a good thing nobody asked you then how has he influenced you.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Yes. I was a TV-head who wrote about my experiences in the changing media landscape, not a media theorist who was continuing a legacy.

JAMES TRAUB: So I shouldn't think of him as being an important shaping influence on your thinking.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Later he was, when I decided to apply some discipline. If you're going to write the next 10 books, you've got to have a little discipline. That definitely helped.

For me, it was understanding media as environments, the idea that even a light bulb creates a media environment that now you can write, and it's different. I tried to extend it beyond just media—what's the environment created by central currency; what's the environment created by the automobile?—how these new technologies create different environments around them. Once they are so well embedded in the environment, you accept them as given conditions rather than as inventions.

That's sort of where this sadness about the digital thing happened. For me, digital technology was like LSD. It was, "Oh my god, it's a read/write universe. We're constructing reality."

Then I see kids today. They'll use Facebook or Wordpress, a digital technology, and it's the equivalent of taking acid in the AC/DC parking lot. There's no insight associated with it. They accept it at face value. They'll look at Facebook and say, "Oh, this is the way I make friends. This is what it's for."

We know Facebook's not there to help kids make friends. It's there to monetize the kids' social graph. They surrender themselves over to it and accept it at face value, without what I thought would be—I thought anyone who used this stuff would get turned on. I didn't realize that a time would come when not only would people not apply the digital sensibility to money and Judaism and politics and all that, but they wouldn't even apply it to digital technology.

JAMES TRAUB: But in *Present Shock*, you're also saying that there is a diminishment in all this. You defined this expression, "present shock," as a diminishment of anything that's not happening at this moment, right now.

Explain what you mean.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Well, diminishment of everything that is happening now and surrendering to everything that's supposedly happening now. What's happening now is that we are in this room together. It's not that my Twitter feed is pinging at me. This is a *faux* now, this is the fake now on the device. It's distracting me from the moment I'm in, because the moment I'm in—and this is where I get kind of Marxist about it—the moment we're actually in can't be marketed.

It's not a market phenomenon, whereas every time we're creating data with our device, we're contributing to the churn.

JAMES TRAUB: But there's also some fundamental loss of attention. You point out that—I want to say this the correct way—being of the moment is not the same thing as being in the moment. Indeed, I think a large part of your point is that we have lost our capacity, to quote [Baba Ram Dass](#), the hallucinator in—

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Hallucinator-in-chief.

JAMES TRAUB:—and also kind of a far-out thinker, we've lost that ability to "be here now."

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Absolutely. We're chasing a now that doesn't really exist.

It goes back to—my second initiation with digital technology was in the late 1980s, when the Internet came around. I graduated college in 1983. It was the beginning of the slacker era. The idea of the slacker was not to be lazy, but to have time to do cool things rather than getting some yuppie job and punching the clock and giving your time to "The Man."

The computer came around and me and my friends thought this would be the great harbinger of slack. Now we could work at home, online, in our underwear, in our own time, produce the thing, and no one will know how long it took me to produce it. If I can write a 500-word article in half an hour and charge 500 bucks for it, the gig is it. This is all good.

But instead of using these technologies in that way, to create more time for us, *Wired* magazine and the other friends of the NASDAQ stock exchange looked at the Internet as a way to keep dying markets going, to

somehow recover from the biotech **bust** of 1987 and use the Internet as the new poster child for the ever-expanding marketplace. They wrote articles about the long boom, how we're going to keep growing and technology is going to let this thing happen.

They ended up looking at human attention as the new commodity, because they couldn't extract stuff from the Third World anymore. There was no more developing-world labor to enslave. So it's going to be our eyeball hours. That's what they called it.

So we developed what were called sticky websites that would keep people attracted to them longer, stuck glued to these websites, spending their eyeball hours. And we naturally moved towards, rather than having technologies that we could use in our own time, in asynchronous ways, when we wanted to work, and then make more time for real life, we strapped the devices to ourselves and have them ping us every time someone Facebooks us or tweets us or sends us an SMS.

We live in this state of perpetual emergency interruption, which is the state of consciousness that was endured by 911 operators and air traffic controllers only for a few hours a day. It does have this deleterious effect on our ability to contemplate and on our nervous systems. We think our phones are vibrating in our pockets, even though they are sitting in the other room. It's a syndrome called "phantom vibration syndrome," which is not an appropriate response to a technology. This is maladaptation.

JAMES TRAUB: Wait, let me stop you in all this. McLuhan famously said we shape our technologies and then our technologies shape us. But I think that's not what you're saying. You're saying that it is in the interests of some people to have our technology shape us in a way that turns out to be really pernicious. It could have been otherwise. The reason it's not that way is because this satisfies the material interests of big companies, basically.

Is that right? Or is it, rather, that it's in the nature of the technology, which in any case would drive us in that direction?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: No, the technology wouldn't—I mean, the technology does have biases. I wrote this book called *Program or Be Programmed*, where I looked at 10 major biases of these media. The bias of digital technology, I would argue, is not to speed things up, but digital technology lives outside time. Digital technology is sequential. The way to use it in a healthy fashion, or at least in a way that's consonant with the bias of the technology, would be asynchronously, the way we used to have conversations on BBSs [bulletin board systems] back in the day.

You would go on the **WELL** and you would have these asynchronous conversations, not real-time. You'd turn on your computer, you'd plug it into a modem—remember the modem?—and that would dial through a phone on to the Internet. You'd download a conversation from a server. You'd disconnect. You'd read the whole conversation in your own time, off-line—you used to have to spend telephone minutes when you went on the computer. You'd read it in your own time, and then you'd think, "How do I want to respond to this conversation?" You might spend an hour, two hours, or all night writing one or two brilliant paragraphs into this conversation with these people who you respected.

Then you'd plug back in and upload it to the thing, and you'd wait a day or so to see how people responded. It was like chess by mail.

The beauty of it was that you actually sounded smarter on the Internet than you did in real life. Imagine that. The 'net was a place where you were your smarter self, because you basically stacked time into it, rather than having time extracted by it.

JAMES TRAUB: Isn't that a little bit like saying life was so much better when you had to book an international phone call than nowadays, when you just go bip-bip-bip into your phone and you call your friend in Paris or something? That sounds like technological nostalgia.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: No. It's technological hopefulness. Now, with the power of the 'net to be able to download that in the background and come to it in the evening when you want to, it doesn't change the fact that digital technology is stacking, that email is not a phone call, that once somebody has relegated a message to email, they've put it in timelessness, where it can now stack in your in-box. It's not a phone call where they have interrupted your actual real-time flow.

But we misuse these technologies and we assume that email is somehow part of that freshness-stamped real-time flow, when it's not. Partly, that's because the other person has that expectation on us, and they have that expectation on us because we answer our email right away.

So the easiest way to unwind it, to intervene, is to say, "No, I'm not. I'm going to answer my email in my own time, because that's what this technology lets me do."

JAMES TRAUB: Let's talk a little bit about something you say a lot about and I think have lots of really interesting insights into, which is the loss of narrativity. You talk about the fact that the things that people might not have thought of as being technologically determined—for example, the rise of reality TV as opposed to those older forms you and I grew up watching—explain how it is that this technology winds up shaping all these forms of cultural content.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: I went to theater school for graduate school. I did theater until I became disgusted with Aristotelian narrative—the idea that you create a character the audience likes, the character makes a series of decisions that put him into some kind of danger, and then, finally, when the audience can't take it anymore, at the top of the Aristotelian plane of tension, the character finds a gun or a method or a change of heart or a recognition and reversal and then, "Ah"—the sort of crisis-climax-sleep model of narrative, the sort of male orgasm curve structure of narrative that we have had for 2,000 years and that has led to all of these false ideals—end justifies the means/journeys/eyes on the prize nonsense that keeps us out of what we're actually doing and allows to do unethical things now because we're getting to the top of the thing.

At least for that medium, I couldn't find another satisfactory narrative structure, other than weirdo, experimental, Richard Foreman-like stuff that nobody really wants to see.

I saw the way that this narrative structure was abused on television with the 30-second commercial. The girl gets the pimple, she wants to go to the prom—we've got to go up the inclined plane of tension—she pops it and the blood comes out, horrible thing, until, finally, 25 seconds into the commercial, she finds the Clearasil, she puts it on, colors go through her body, she goes to the prom, and everything's okay. I have to accept this imposed state of tension by the sponsor in order to make it to the end.

When I was a kid, before remote control, or in my father's day, you had to watch this commercial and experience this anxiety or you had to get up from your chair, walk up to the television set, turn the dial, adjust the rabbit ears—don't worry about what they were; television used to come through these things into it—you adjust the rabbit ears, sit back down, and watch something else.

Once you have a remote control, which for me was the first interactive device, now you can get out of that imposed state of tension with .001 calories of effort. Bam, you're there. Bam, you're gone. Bam, you're gone.

I would argue, if you watch yourself with the remote or a kid with the remote, they are not changing the channel because they're bored; they are changing it because they're mad, because somebody is making them anxious who is not their friend. They sense themselves being coerced or bullied.

JAMES TRAUB: I thought it was, rather, because you wind up having this incredible "grass is greener on the other side" sense. It's a little bit like the point you make in the beginning about the girl sitting at a party who's scrolling through her email to see about a better party somewhere else. Whatever channel you're watching, something more exciting is happening—there's a better movie, there's a sports contest with more stuff happening.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: It might have come to that. But it felt to me, at least at the beginning, that the remote control helped you deconstruct the content of television. Now you were no longer watching a television program; you were kind of watching the television.

Certainly when it was just a dial of 13 or 20 channels, you could get around the whole thing, still know where the game is, know where you are in *Law & Order*, and watch this weird movie. You can kind of get to all three and make your way around it, and you can watch the TV.

It's sort of like when *William Burroughs* would cut up the front page of *The New York Times* and readjust it and say, "Now we'll see what the paper really says."

That's the way I felt about television. Now we're watching the TV or the Nintendo joystick. If you remember the first time you played a video game—probably *Pong*—you were moving the pixels around on the screen. It demystified the magic of the monitor. Finally, the computer keyboard and the mouse, which turned it into this do-it-yourself medium, where it was a portal—it felt to me like these digital technologies changed our relationship to this stuff, or potentially did, where the content wouldn't be as rhetorically manipulative, the medium wouldn't be as mysterious, and the broadcast directionality of it would be overturned by a peer-to-peer multidirectional network.

But it didn't, finally, come to pass. Using a remote like that was called ADD [attention deficit disorder], and we drugged our children to pay better attention. The demystification of the monitor was remystified with—how do you install a program in Microsoft? You summon the Wizard. Why would they pick "the Wizard"? It's not "the Helper," it's not "the Maid"; it's "the Wizard." Now this is, "Oh, stay back. You're going to damage this thing if you play with it."

The interactive revolution, the possibility for peer-to-peer connection became the information revolution. It was more about downloading, who can get more songs off *Napster*, than who's going to actually contribute.

JAMES TRAUB: And one of the other victims of this was this Aristotelian thing that you had such low regard for, which, in fact, is what made up television until recently.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Right. But I am not upset that we've lost Aristotle, or at least that Aristotle has lost his exclusive—

JAMES TRAUB: We've lost *I Love Lucy*.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: It has lost this exclusive claim on narrative. What television had to do was adapt. So you get *The Simpsons*, where you have a show that's less about "Will Homer get out of the nuclear power plant in time before it blows up" and much more about "What scene are they satirizing now? What commercial are they satirizing? What's this?" So you have this experience of making connections between what you're watching and other forms of media, or *Beavis and Butt-Head* or *Mystery Science Theater*, where now you're watching screens within screens, commenting on other things.

On the more modern end of the spectrum, you get *Game of Thrones*, which moves like a fantasy role-playing game. We don't really care so much how it ends than watching this thing keep going. It's what *James Carse* would call an infinite game. We're not playing it to win; we're playing it to see where it goes. They open focusing on this map, which looks just like a *Dungeons & Dragons* map. It's this open-ended kind of thing.

Or *The Sopranos*, which ended by just cutting to black, in that great existential moment, with no climax, as if to say we're done with that. That's not the way life works. It doesn't work with our experience anymore. They're positive ones.

JAMES TRAUB: These are actually kind of wonderful, charming, creative adaptations to a world where it no longer makes any sense to think in Aristotelian terms.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Yes, but the darker side would be reality TV, where it becomes really about creating—if you don't have a narrative, if you don't have a goal, the only thing that kind of energizes you is terror. That's what those shows are. It's a kind of violent humiliation of other people. Really, it's a horror show.

It's like [Stanley Milgram's](#) experiments. It's like, how far will we go under the authoritative nod of the sponsor to watch these models claw at each other to be the next top model? What are they willing to do?

That's the kind of cruelty, but it's the only kind of entertainment you have if you don't—

JAMES TRAUB: But that's also shaping us as well, you're saying. That is also making us barbarous.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Yes, it makes us meaner, our politics and everything about us.

JAMES TRAUB: I take it something like Fox News or talk radio, which is so violently emotive and impulsive, as opposed to the sort of gently droning, ponderous newscaster of yore, is another example of same.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Yes, because you're going to gravitate towards the sensationalist. If you're flipping the dial—flip, flip, flip, flip, "Ooh, there's someone getting killed"—if you're moving through it, it's going to be those moments. That's why we see the sort of race to the bottom in YouTube.

I just did that show, "[Generation Like](#)," for *Frontline*. What we see is a kid, seemingly empowered, getting a YouTube channel to do skateboard tricks, and he finds out he gets more hits when he's slapping naked butts of Latina girls than he is when he's doing skateboard things, or the girl who starts out singing [The Cup Song](#) and her mother finds out, "Oh, look how many more views you get when you show your full body versus just your head," and then she's not even singing anymore.

So there ends up being this—it's tricky without another context to sort of guide us. That's where what we didn't—where I thought we would naturally allow another context to emerge, a more human-centered one, we didn't.

That's really what the book is calling for. If we return to the now, we can have human intervention in this. But, instead, I find that my peers, the greatest other kind of cybery-thinker people of my generation, are looking forward to the day when computers surpass humans. They're talking about the [singularity](#) and they're celebrating [Watson](#). I'm fine with Watson. God bless him, he's a smart computer. But it doesn't herald the day when computers become smarter than us.

I read a book like [James Gleick's](#) *The Information* and what I see is him telling the story of information's evolution towards greater states of complexity, as if information was here before us. Information evolves through atoms and biology. Now it's evolving through human culture. But the day that computers can evolve information better than humans, then we're only important insofar as we can keep the machines going. And that has the medium and the message reversed.

JAMES TRAUB: And you're also saying that your friends view this, not with horror, but with a kind of weird glee.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Yes, with a weird glee, because they think they're going to upload their consciousness to computers, and they're not.

JAMES TRAUB: We have a [movie](#) about that right now, where [Johnny Depp](#) plays a person whose consciousness is uploaded to a computer.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: I saw the [Scarlett Johansson movie](#).

JAMES TRAUB: Or the [Scarlett Johansson movie](#), where computers talk to each other over our heads.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Which they can't. They're not alive. They're really not. They're not thinking. They do

stuff.

I'm surprised that computer-literate people would come up with those scenarios. If you ever taught a computer, you know that computers are dumb. They're just fast. So you teach them really simple things, and then they buzz through them, and they go, "Whoa!" But you have to give them the algorithm to race through.

JAMES TRAUB: Douglas, when you're talking about books that you just read—you just wrote a book. Everybody here reads these big, long books. People still read 800-page books. I don't know. [Hilary Mantel](#) writes 600-page novels, the number one book in Amazon right now is [Thomas Piketty's book](#) basically on capital, the new updating of [Marx](#).

Is this fear of the collapse of depth attention and the loss of narrative maybe kind of premature because, it turns out, actually, there's still a tremendous yearning that people have for this stuff?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: I'm not afraid of it. I do think there's a tremendous yearning. I wouldn't be able to write a book if I didn't have hope. But I feel like it's—

JAMES TRAUB: But you're saying this stuff is in danger of becoming an archaic pursuit that only a few people bother with.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: I did feel in writing my book like I was—and I wrote this. I'm singing opera when people are buying singles. I reach a hell of a lot more people with one good sensationalist CNN piece on the web than I do with a book. More people read my [piece](#) about [Occupy](#) than read every book I've written combined. More people probably saw me when I was [on Colbert](#) than have read everything I've ever written combined. I had six minutes.

If that's what matters, then all of the writing is just to get me to the place where then I can have six minutes of the national ear. Now, on [Colbert](#) you're not getting the national ear either. You're getting the people who think like me.

JAMES TRAUB: You'll be getting the national ear when [he](#) moves to his [new job](#).

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: I don't know if I'm going to get on that show. I don't know if he's going to have authors of *Present Shock* on that particular program.

JAMES TRAUB: I hope for you he does.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: We'll see.

JAMES TRAUB: It's important to note that in Douglas's book, he talks a lot about the counterweights and possible solutions to all this, though one might feel in reading it that the critique is more persuasive than the solutions are likely.

You mentioned Occupy, for example, and in the book you talk about it as a post-narrative movement, a movement that in some ways adapted to this world. Talk about what you mean by that a little bit.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: I felt like there were two immediate political reactions to post-narrativity, to where we no longer can have a campaign. We had [Obama](#). He was the last great [campaign](#)—"Follow me on this journey. We're going to go. We're the change we've been waiting for," which is such a presentist sentiment. "We are the change we've been waiting for." It happens now. Then he got there and it felt like, "Oh. Where's the invitation? Where did it go? Where do we go? Where do we meet?"

I felt like there were these two reactions. One was the impulsive "present shock" reaction, which would be the [Tea Party](#), which was, like, "We want our change now! Just get rid of this. Get rid of government. Just give me stuff." There was that, which is the angry, impatient child.

Then there was Occupy, which was kind of infinitely patient. We're no longer going to be about reaching the conclusion. When they got interviewed by Fox or whoever would come down there and they'd say, "What is it going to take for this thing to end?" The Occupiers would say, "Why does this have to end? We're not looking to end this thing."

"Well, what do you want? What are you demanding?"

"We're discussing that."

It was a really difficult movement to embrace, certainly as an adult. But if you saw what they were doing, they were saying, "This sort of left-right, winner-take-all, debate-oriented politic doesn't work anymore. That's about getting an answer that half the people are going to like. Instead, what we're going to do is sit and develop new mechanisms through which consensus can emerge."

So it seemed to me sort of a post-movement politics that was presentist in that sense, in that they wanted to reach consensus, and it was an open-ended, iterative process. It was much more like the Internet than it was like a book.

I'm still very hopeful. I don't look at Occupy as over. Maybe it's over by that name. But I look at it as sort of the beginning of a new style of a much more incremental and even locally based change. The fact that these were live sit-ins, if you will, live gatherings of people, kind of reified the human dimension and human scale in a political process that has become as big as corporate brands.

JAMES TRAUB: Maybe one or two other examples might be good of other cases where you see a sign of a kind of positive post-narrative adaptation to what is otherwise this rather destructive world.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: For me, the biggest change has been becoming aware of some basic chronobiology, the basic rhythms of our biology—day and night, the recognition that shift workers get more cancer than other people, that there are these rhythms that we've evolved with biologically for however many hundreds of thousands of years than there have been people. If you become more aware of when it's day, when it's night, what season we're in, or get more advanced—it starts to sound New Agey and weird, but it's really basic—what phase of the moon we're in, it turns out that people's neurochemistry changes based on what week of lunar cycle you're in. If you're in the first week of the lunar cycle, you have more acetylcholine. In the second week, you have more serotonin. In the third week, you have more dopamine. In the last week, you have norepinephrine.

If you know that, then you're going, "Oh, gosh, it's acetylcholine week. It's going to be good to meet people, have new ideas. Dopamine week? Not going to get any work done. This is party week. No wonder we can't have trade negotiations in that week." Norepinephrine, really good for structural thinking, flight-or-fight responses. You're going to be cool and collected.

If you start realizing things like that—I wrote *Present Shock* with that schedule in mind, where I understood which weeks I could work and which I couldn't. I became way more coherent.

Then I start looking back at ancient Jewish lunar calendrical cycles and what was going on there, what aboriginal cultures understand about these things. Without even having to delve so deeply into the science and understand it, you find out, "Oh my gosh, there are so many really easy landmarks for how to reorient yourself temporally to really be on your game rather than at the mercy of this punch-the-clock existence."

JAMES TRAUB: You're saying these are all intrinsic limits even to this aspiration to turn ourselves into human forms of our machines, because the fact is, our body imposes organic limits on us.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Our body offers organic opportunities to us. I'm glad the bed stops me from hitting the floor. It's a boundary condition.

Yes, that's fine. We are finite beings. That is okay. There's going to be a death someday. The body has its edges. I think that's fine. The universe is not infinitely expanding, and neither are we and neither is our economy and neither is our time. It is finite, which is why we, as humans, have to intervene on our own behalf and choose what we want to do with the time that we have.

JAMES TRAUB: That was a beautiful closing monologue.

Questions

QUESTION: Jerry Spivak.

What you've been talking about is this [Ray Kurzweil](#) singularity and how these people who think that they can do something with the computer—eventually, the computer has its limits and starts moving downwards. I just want to know, from where you started, whether the same thing happened with that other creation—that God created the human. Then you said the human has reached the reality show and is going downward. Is there an exact parallel between those two different groups, the human and the computer?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: There's not an exact parallel, because humans are strange and unpredictable and ambiguous, and computers are not. They're just not. You have bizarrely emerging, surprising equations, but that's the yield of their output, not them.

QUESTIONER: People are talking about evolutionary algorithms that can be put inside of computers.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Yes, but they're not going to get what you're thinking. We can craft algorithms that will extract money from the stock market faster and better than humans, until we figure out a way to stop them. Yes, they can. But I would argue, without getting into religion, humans are special. We really are.

We can't understand ourselves. We can't even figure out with any certainty what's in a single square centimeter of soil. That's more complex than we have the ability to understand right now—all the interrelations between all the—if we don't know that, how are we going to know what's in a human society, much less a human brain? We are so far away from that.

Ten years ago, I talked to [Philip Rosedale](#), who created *Second Life*, one of these online simulations, and he said, "Within 10 years, I promise you, *Second Life* will be indistinguishable from reality."

That's where they are. That's where they're at.

I find it more interesting to think, "Why do they want that?"

JAMES TRAUB: I was going to ask you exactly that question. You are describing a thing that is science-horror, and yet you're describing people who yearn for the science-horror—

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: And are nice people.

JAMES TRAUB: And are nice people. So what is the reason for the wish for the eclipse of the human, do you think?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Self-loathing. It really is.

JAMES TRAUB: Species self-loathing?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: In some ways, yes. This is why I'm really interested in the zombie movies and zombie TV. On the one hand, it's wish fulfillment. We want that to happen, because the world's so complex. Zombie world—no phones, no Twitter, no Internet, no email. You just have a shotgun, slow-moving zombies, you live with your family on a hill, and shoot them.

But what the shows are really about is characters trying to figure out a way to distinguish between themselves and the zombies. What makes me better than a zombie? They kill to eat. I kill to eat.

As long as we really can't answer that question, as long as we think that's even a valid question, we don't understand what makes human beings special, and we may as well be overtaken by our computers.

JAMES TRAUB: Maybe it's a loss of the sense of the sacred.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Yes, and the fact that the sacred is human. It's hard to see ourselves as sacred when we have destroyed the planet, when we're doing all this horrible stuff to each other. In the wake of the 20th century, it's really hard to be pro-human, because you see what humans are capable of.

But I would argue that these are human beings stuck in systems, that the reason why this anti-human, let's-accelerate-everything-to-our-business-plan, singularity-focused, cyber philosophy is so popular, is because when you talk that way, you get more money.

What is Google going to want? Does Google want a speaker and an advisor who's going to say, "Well, you know, there are actually limits to what technology can do. Maybe we want to think about reifying the human"? Or are they going to say, "No. We're going to go cyborg full-on, drone power. Let's go!" Of course.

The culprit here—this is what my next book is going to be about—the culprit here, really, the ultimate clock, the thing that we set in motion around 1300, is debt-based currency.

JAMES TRAUB: Let me stop you before you go off on what could be a truly exotic tangent.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: That should be the title of my next book, *Exotic Tangent*.

JAMES TRAUB: I want to pluck something from the flux of what Douglas just said, to call attention to something that he deserves a lot of credit for. I'm sure you're all familiar with the fact that [Michael Lewis](#) wrote this book called *Flash Boys*, or whatever it's called.

PARTICIPANT: [Flash trading](#).

JAMES TRAUB: That's what it's about. That's the subject of it.

Douglas had already written about this in his book. If you read his book, you will see that it begins with three examples of this phenomenon of presentism, one of which is high-frequency trading. Then later on in the book you describe precisely the phenomenon that Michael Lewis describes, and you give the explanation that has been welcomed as a kind of revelation in his book that there are these high-speed traders who engage in tease trading. They appear to be trading. They're actually not. They're teasing out your bid, and then, because they can trade faster than you can, they wind up executing your trade at a price that's no longer available to you.

I was very struck by the fact that this is in Douglas's book. Has anybody called attention to the fact that you said it before Michael Lewis did?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: No.

JAMES TRAUB: You all heard it here first. He said it first.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: The first-mover advantage is not all it's cracked up to be.

QUESTION: Your discussion of the loss of the narrative and the desire right now for the moment—there are still organizations, like *The New York Times*, that care about the narrative and not the moment. The way they're surviving at the moment, from what I can see, is that they are going wide. They're going global to find that niche readership around the world, because New York—we're still reading, but not everyone.

Anyway, do you see a way that those kinds of organizations will be able to survive until this changes or is this just a buggy whip?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: The *Times* is banking on a last-man-standing possibility here. I think they'll make it.

It's not narrative itself that's over. It's narrative with conclusive endings that's over. I think the *Times* is fine telling stories, as long as they're not pretending to have answers they don't have.

JAMES TRAUB: But are you also saying that the authority of the narrator is over, and therefore *The New York Times* is in danger because it depends totally on this thing called authority?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: The assumed authority of the narrator is over, but the earned authority is still available. It's interesting. Those who have earned the authority, the narrative authority, are leaving the institutions. They're starting their own blogs, their own things. They're becoming independents. They're, like, "Oh, I have authority. Why should I spend my authority on their franchise?"

I think they'll come running back, because, in the end, you want a home. It's nice to have colleagues. You want to be somewhere. The long tail is not kind. If you want to remain a superstar, you end up, I think, having to sacrifice more than you would if you have the protection of an institution of likeminded people who have values. They're going to realize that. You want to be a franchise player at some point, like any good basketball player wants to find a team. You don't want to be a free agent all the time, however tempting it is.

QUESTION: Going back a bit to why someone would want to live in a *Second Life*, my broad question to you is, what is the—if the fascination right now has taken over—we see reality television. We see people tuned out and watching the cruelty, and it becomes a muscle memory. What is the healing that needs to take place? What is the incentive to reach a critical mass of people who are moving through, yes, media, but life deliberately? Why is it that once you're aware that you're being manipulated, people are still willing to trade, for convenience, their power? What do we need to do to incentivize that?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: People are probably going to trade their power for convenience as long as they are able to do so. Luckily, we're not going to be able to do so for that much longer. The [economic wobble](#) that we felt in 2007 was like a tremor to what's actually going on. Joblessness brings families together and brings communities together in ways that people didn't realize.

What you get in a renaissance—and I believe that's what we're in now, thanks in part to digital technology—is you get a retrieval—this is McLuhan—of the values that were repressed in the last renaissance. In the last renaissance, we repressed peer-to-peer trading, we repressed local currencies, we repressed women, we repressed community, and we promoted abstractness, central authority, centralized currency, time is money, punch the clock, indentured servitude, all those things.

But these other ones come back. We see just a little blink of them in [Etsy](#), [Burning Man](#), [Occupy](#)—little bits of people practicing with those models. You go to Lansing or Detroit and you say, "Oh, my God, people are actually doing these things to survive, because they realize they have skills and they have needs." They have the basis of an economy. They don't need to borrow money from a bank to get them to build a factory in a place so we can all have jobs.

You stop looking at joblessness as a problem and start looking at joblessness as a goal. Back to the slacker mentality, who wants a job? No, I don't want a job. I want stuff. I want to create meaning. I want to create value. I want to exchange value. I want to participate.

So I think it's that. Unfortunately, it's that. There's weird, fun, fringy, New Agey, [Ithaca HOURS](#) communities out there who are willing to experiment with this stuff because it's fun and interesting, and they know it's coming. But there are other people who are going to rediscover these things because they have to.

JAMES TRAUB: Is there also a kind of emerging counter-narrative of which you feel your work is a part,

whether it's that novel by [Dave Eggers](#), *The Circle* or, I don't know, [Evgeny Morozov](#), people like that? [Editor's note: Check out Morozov's latest Carnegie talk, "To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism."] Is there a kind of, in a way, counter-dystopian, an attempt to expose the dystopia beneath what appears to be a utopia?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: Yes, but it has to take a step beyond that. It has to go beyond the sort of *Adbusters*-like critique of everything the way it is and, instead, start looking at what is the fertile soil for people to do stuff, and to get people to be happy with incremental, extremely localized, perhaps non-repeatable solutions to things.

Everyone I talk to who kind of agrees with what I'm doing, says, "Oh, I'm going to create the website where people who have solutions can now put them all on there and share them with each other, or the place that is going to aggregate all of the currencies, all the solutions, all the CSAs [community-supported agriculture]."

No. Just do the thing. It's okay. We're at the time and place where actually doing the thing is probably the best that we can do. It's certainly the best thing that we can contribute. Then if you want to write about it so others can model that thing you did in ways that are specific to where they are—we are so trained to look for one-size-fits-all solutions to things, because we're children of the Industrial Age, where one size fits all. But when you realize that everybody is so different all over the place, the solution for Finland is not the solution for Italy, which is why the euro is *not working*, and Germany can't keep bailing everybody out. Likewise, the solution for one community is not the same as the solution for another. There are some guiding principles we can share with each other, but the solutions, I think, are very local.

JAMES TRAUB: In terms of in your own life, your own work life, now that I have followed you on [Twitter](#), I know that you have sent out 2,000 tweets and you follow 300 people and you have zillions of followers. That is all that intense racket of distraction that you talk about.

How do you find a way of balancing your own intense immersion in the social media with the stuff that keeps you sane and connected to deep narratives?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: I have a daughter. She's nine years old. That speaks louder than all the social media combined.

JAMES TRAUB: And he's going to make sure he gets home to tuck her in bed, too.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: I'm going to get home. I'm leaving at 7:15 with a little car to get home so I can tuck her in, because you know what matters, right?

But it's by making conscious choices about what media I use and what I don't. I don't use Facebook, because Facebook sucks. It does. It's just such an imposition. It's just so big. So I left Facebook.

I use Twitter because it's not asking a lot of me. It's 140 words. That's easy. I can do that, and it doesn't feel like it's like this whole big system with the pages representing me. I don't feel like Twitter's advertising me to other people about things I don't know. It's not using big data on my past to advertise a future I haven't lived yet to me before I've gotten there.

So I use that. I'm on LinkedIn, but I don't really know—all I do with LinkedIn is just say "yes" when I get an email saying, "Will you be my friend?"

JAMES TRAUB: I do, too. I don't know what LinkedIn is, but I accidentally joined it. So now I just say "yes."

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: I say "yes, yes." So I've got all these friends there, God bless 'em.

But it's by that, and I'm slowing down my email response time. The slower you respond to your email, the less email you get. It's true. People solve the problems before you get there. It's fine. They're not usually kind

enough to say they did, but just don't answer for a while and they'll be fine.

So it's that. It's being really asynchronous with it.

I answer the telephone and the texts from my wife. Anybody else really is going to have to wait until I'm at the machine. It's work. It's not love. This is work. If you love me, call me on the phone and say hi. Otherwise, they're asking for something.

So I'll sit at my desk, where I'm psychologically prepared, where I have my professional armor on. Otherwise, I'm going to be exposed to the venom of god knows what it is. They're not all nice. It's not all good stuff coming out there. When they're—I'm in a cab, okay, I've got a minute. I'll look. Aah! They are going to infect you with the bad willies, and you don't need that.

QUESTION: So many people these days appear to be abandoning their privacy veil by veil. Do you see that continuing and the trend strengthening or will there be a rebound of some sort?

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: When I first used the Internet, I was part of the [cyberpunk](#) movement, and we thought that the Internet was going to become the domain of the counterculture. Corporations have moved on there to the point where I've realized that the real world is the domain of the counterculture and the Internet is the zone of the corporation.

The only privacy I am attempting to protect anymore is the privacy of me in real spaces conspiring—"breathing with," "conspires," great word—conspiring with other people. That's the privacy I want to protect. I think that's part of why people are bucking against Google Glass and little buttons and wearable technologies, because then you don't know if you're really alone or if you're still broadcasting.

But no, I have believed from the very beginning that if you are typing words onto an international computer network, then you should assume they are out there somewhere, that you are creating a file that is more redundant and more permanent than chiseling your name on the side of the Parthenon.

The privacy that gets crazy is the privacy that can then be—future actions of yours that can be construed from that data is where it gets really interesting, that they know things about me before I know them myself. But they only know the most probable outcome. Ninety percent of the time they are right, but if you can prevent them from advertising that future to you before you get there, there's still that 10 percent chance that you're going to do the weird stuff that makes you who you are, rather than just part of the 90 percent who are in your psychographic profile group.

JAMES TRAUB: All right. Douglas, thank you so much.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: I do have to run, but you can email me at rushkoff.com and we can talk more.

Audio

With the advent of new means of interaction from the TV remote to Twitter, the media became a two-way conversation, says Douglas Rushkoff. But who controls, shapes, and benefits most from these interactions--we the users, or big business?

Video Clip

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TV Show

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