

# 'Present Shock' tells of technology's continuous intrusion in our lives

*"Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now" by Douglas Rushkoff. New York, N.Y.: The Penguin Group, 2013. 296 pages, \$26.95 (hardcover).*

"Our society has reoriented itself to the present moment," Douglas Rushkoff argues near the beginning of "Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now," his latest attempt to enlighten us about technology's ongoing intrusion into our lives.

"Everything is live, real time, and always on," he adds. "It's not a mere speeding up, however much of our lifestyles and tech-

nologies have accelerated the rate at which we attempt to do things. It's more of a diminishment of anything that isn't happening right now – and the onslaught of everything that supposedly is."

"Present Shock" is comprised of six relatively short chapters that can be easily digested in a couple of sittings. The book is well researched, with nine pages of source notes at the conclusion of the main text. As I was reading the book, I found myself mentally agreeing with Rushkoff on almost every page. The transformation he is describing is real and profound;

our culture is evolving in a number of questionable yet undeniable ways, and the unintended consequences of this revolution are only beginning to become apparent.

The author has had an interesting life. After completing his undergraduate degree at Princeton in 1983, Rushkoff earned a master's degree from the California Institute of the Arts and eventually completed his doctorate in New Media and Digital Culture from Utrecht University. He currently teaches at New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program. A frequent contributor to CBS, CNN and NPR, his work appears regularly in *The New York Times*, *TIME* magazine and *The Guardian* of London. His previous books include "Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age," "Get Back in the Box: Innovation from the Inside Out," "Life, Inc.: How the World Became A Corporation and How to Take It Back" and "Playing the Future: What We Can Learn from Digital Kids." During his career, Rushkoff has been a choreographer, SAT tutor and keyboardist for a punk band.

"Digital technology is all about choices," Rushkoff explains. "Closer to a computer game than a continuous narrative, the digital path is no longer inevitable but a branching hierarchy of decision

points. The digital timeline moves not from moment to moment, but from choice to choice, hanging absolutely still on each command line – like the number on a digital clock – until the next choice is made and a new reality flips into place."

Rushkoff's primary thesis revolves around five major themes, each representing the different ways human beings are struggling to make sense of the rapidly changing world that characterizes the modern era. These coping strategies include "narrative collapse," which refers to our increasing tendency to see the events constantly unfolding around us more as an open game than a story; "digiphrenia," which signifies our growing need to be fully present in both the real as well as the virtual world; and "overwinding," which describes our ongoing attempt to pack time in order to achieve our goals – i.e., the desire to reap the benefits associated with an experience without actually taking the time needed to fully engage in the experience.

The other two emerging themes include "fractalnoia," which is our penchant for trying to connect unrelated ideas to each other in a way we hope will help us to better understand them and "apocalyppto," which characterizes those who are obsessed with their own

impending obsolescence. Think "Doomsday Preppers." One of the more endearing features of Rushkoff's literary style is his liberal use of newly created terms in an effort to more accurately and precisely define the somewhat complicated concepts he is struggling to convey.

"Digiphrenia: Breaking Up is Hard to Do," the second chapter in "Present Shock," contains one of Rushkoff's more thought-provoking and persuasive arguments. How many of us have a hard time enjoying the present moment because we are too busy sharing that moment with our friends through various forms of social media? In describing this condition, we can all relate to the real-world examples the author provides to convincingly illustrate his point. "Instead of taking our cues from the central clock tower or the manager with the stopwatch, we carry our personal digital devices with us," Rushkoff asserts. "Our daily schedule, dividing work time from time off, is discarded. Rather we are always-on. Our boss isn't the guy in the corner office, but a PDA in our pocket. Our taskmaster is depersonalized and internalized – and even more rigorous than the union busters of yesterday. There is no safe time."

The other chapter I found particularly intriguing was "Fractalnoia: Finding Patterns in the Feedback." Here Rushkoff explores our fascination with looking for connections between ideas and other phenomena that may or may not have any actual significance. The use of "Big Data" to reveal population trends or predict future events falls into this category, as does the seemingly ever-expanding list of conspiracy theories that have dominated the Internet since its introduction slightly more than two decades ago. "While we may blame the Internet for the ease with which conspiracy theories proliferate, the net is really much more culpable for the way it connects everything to almost everything else," Rushkoff writes. "The hypertext link, as we used to call it, allows any fact or idea to become intimately connected with any other. New content online no longer requires new stories or information, just new ways of linking things to other things."

Living in the present obviously has its benefits, but so does reflecting on the past and contemplating the future. You have to engage in all three activities in order to have a truly fulfilling life. So if things seem out of balance in your world, pick up a copy of "Present Shock." You might find it helpful in figuring out why you feel that way and what you can do about it.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.

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