

CHRIS'LL DEAL WITH IT episode notes



EP 22 - Book Notes: Program Or Be Programmed by Douglas Rushkoff

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Late in 2022 I read Douglas Rushkoff's 2010 book *Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age*. Despite its publication date, Rushkoff presents evidence and arguments targeted to the emerging trends of the time. As those trends have been realized, his arguments have become even more vital.

On today's episode I'll review my book notes, highlighting my key takeaways & actions that will help me implement his ten commands into living a better life.

This was the most impactful book I read in 2022 - and I haven't stopped thinking about it since. I can't recommend this book enough, and it's inspired the first of these Book Notes episodes. While I'm providing my personal highlights, this is one of those books where the summary isn't enough. It's a concise, accessible book. Rushkoff's writing style and depth of understanding are critical to crystallizing his arguments and commands.

It's my hope that listening to this episode inspires you to pick up this deeply influential work and explore it for yourself.

Like all episodes of Chris'll Deal With It, [I share free, downloadable PDFs of show notes on my website](#). This episode's PDF will contain all the notes discussed, with links to the book and recommendations for further reading. Go check out this gem of a book for yourself!

Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age

[Douglas Rushkoff](#)

LINKS

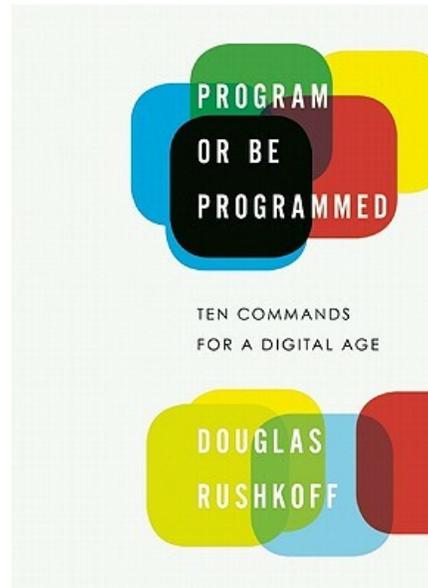
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Overview

- Rushkoff lays out the book as a series of essays around ten commandments.
- Each commandment is a conversation around a tendency or bias of digital media. How we balance that bias against the needs of real people living & working in physical & virtual spaces.
- His aim is not to turn us into luddites, but to help us live a better path alongside our digital technology.
- He argues that we've embraced these technologies and literacies too quickly, without learning how they actually work. Or work upon us.
- There is an existential risk for us: Our own obsolescence. We're mesmerized by the devices themselves, rather than the human stars operating within their biases.
- It's Rushkoff's aim to provide a kind of moral code, marking the changes and trends that were obvious only a few years after the first iPhone was released in 2007.
- This book is a wonderful guide to developing a new ethical, behavioral, and business template
- My Book Notes are structured in the same manner as the book:
 - The main theme & arguments
 - My initial thoughts & reactions
 - Concrete actions and takeaways after grappling with the arguments for nearly two months

Douglass Rushkoff's 10 Commands For A Digital Age

1. TIME: Do not be always on
2. PLACE: Live in person
3. CHOICE: You may always choose none of the above
4. COMPLEXITY: You are never completely right
5. SCALE: One size does not fit all

6. IDENTITY: Be yourself
7. SOCIAL: Do not sell your friends
8. FACT: Tell the truth
9. OPENNESS: Share, don't steal
10. PURPOSE: Program or be programmed

TIME: Do not be always on

- 32: Gaining control over programs has allowed us to deconstruct narratives of shows and even commercials. It's a desire to break time, and started before computers. Rushkoff uses the example of televisions and remote controls.
- 34: With internet connections becoming faster, fatter, and freer, he envisioned us adopting an "always on" approach to media. This totally proves out over the past decade plus.
 - Our connections allow us to keep our applications on, updating and ready at every moment. It's resulted in a constant barrage of dings & vibrations anytime anyone or anything wants to message, email, tweet, update, notify, or alert us.
 - Our devices have become an extension of our nervous systems, which are now attached to the entire online universe, all the time.
- 35-36: Instead of becoming empowered and aware, we become frazzled and exhausted.
 - Many of us feel obligated to impulsively reply immediately, with no time for careful consideration.
 - It's also forced us to decrease the length and complexity of those communications.
- Digital media doesn't care about our physical time or mental health. It's biased against time.
 - What works for companies programming the devices and digital technologies doesn't necessarily work for us as humans.
- 39: Outsourcing our memory to machines expands the amount of data we can access, at the cost of our brain's own ability to remember stuff and even calling upon certain skills.
 - Machines may do tasks like mapping or finding someone easier & better.
 - I often find myself instinctively using calculators for basic math even though I can do it in my head because I've lost both the confidence in that ability and a desire to calculate the result as fast as possible.

40: Our computers live in the ticks of the clock. We live in the big spaces between those ticks, when the time actually passes. By becoming "always on," we surrender time to a technology that knows and needs no such thing.

Thoughts:

- I've been rebelling against this for a while already:
 - eliminating most notifications on my phone
 - airplane mode - only allowing a few people into 'me time' / 'sleep time'
- I hate the phantom vibrate
- The concept of living between the ticks, in the immediate present moment resonated.
 - In part because of Buddhist philosophy

- In part by my own annoyance of people having phones out on table during conversations or not paying attention in meetings

Turning To Action:

1. More diligence in leaving phones totally out of bedroom & certain situations
2. Divorce myself of the notion that I must react to digital messages ASAP

PLACE: Live in person

- 43: Digital media is biased away from our locality and towards dislocation.
- 43-44: Rushkoff uses the example of TV being better at broadcasting a sport from the other side of the world than broadcasting a conversation with someone sharing your bed.
- 47: Technology in the 20th century mostly promoted one-way broadcasting. Now that it's become interactive, these digital pings become very compelling for those us already feeling disconnected by mass marketing and media.
- 50: Rushkoff makes a critical point: Digital slide shows can be easily delivered from the comforts of home through the internet. There's no need to fly a human body 2,000 miles for that. But the reason to spend those resources to bring a body is for the full-spectrum communication that occurs between human beings in real spaces.
 - The digital slideshow is a distraction - it distances people by mediating their interaction with electronic data.

50: After days or weeks connecting with people through video chats, the sensation of someone's eyes actually looking into our own in real life can be overwhelming and disorienting.

Thoughts:

- The last point becomes even more revelatory considering we're coming out of COVID lock-downs. I think this is part of the reason so many are having problems coming back into office and interpersonal settings. We're so overwhelmed by in person stuff.
- I've been shying away from static powerpoints, and more towards dynamic interpersonal conversation.

Turning To Action:

1. Keep a focus on not mediating live person-to-person conversations with digital abstractions
2. Create more opportunities to be face-to-face & have conversation with friends - I'll get a return on the extra effort to be IRL

CHOICE: You may always choose none of the above

- 54-55: Digital recording seems so convincingly real. Rushkoff brings in some research into analog versus digital recordings:
 - Early tests of analog vs digital recordings revealed that music played back on a CD had far less positive impact on depressed patients than played on a record.
 - Other tests show digitally recorded sound moves the air in a room significantly differently than analog recordings played through the same speakers.
 - Presumably, bodies in that room would experience that difference, even if we can't immediately name or put a metric to the exact difference.

- Digital audio engineers can increase sampling rates, measure more elements of a sound, tune their digital files to a finer point. If the sampling rate and frequency range are 'beyond the capability of a human ear' - it's presumed the problem is solved.
- But the problem is not with the quality of the digital recording: It's that it's a fundamentally different phenomenon from the analog one.
- Analog happens the same way the hands of a clock move slowly around the dial, passing over the digits in one smooth motion. The digital recording is more like a digital clock, making absolute and discrete choices about when those seconds are changing from one to the next.
- 55: The digital realm is biased toward choice. Everything must be expressed in terms of a discrete yes-or-no, symbolic languages. This, in turn, often forces choices on humans operating digitally.
- 57: Database architectures require programmers to pick the key categories, and the granularity for their employer's purpose.

Thoughts:

- This was a major mindset shifter for me: Highlighting the innate differences between digital vs analog
- There's a growing trend towards more analog consumption (vinyl being a huge example)
- I think it helps explain why as I get older I've fallen in love with bluegrass & jazz rather than electronic music. Not that I mind the latter, but the former resonates deeper with my soul

Turning To Action:

1. Internalize the knowledge that when I work on data analytics tools, my choices can have an outsized impact, and may be driven by unrealized biases. Remember these exist!
2. Keep a close eye on digital vs analog experiences - being more open to opportunities to compare/contrast them.

COMPLEXITY: You are never completely right

- 61-62: We forget that our digital tools are modeling reality, not substituting for it.
 - We must acknowledge digital tools are biased towards a reduction of complexity.
 - Therefore, we have to treat its simulations as models - not completely accurate depictions of our world.
- 65: Facts devoid of context are nearly impossible to apply sensibly.
 - Even worse, facts like this become the basis for falsely constructed arguments of social or political discourse.

67: Young people, in particular, are developing the ability to get the gist of an entire area of study with just a moment of interaction with it.

- 71: Digital simulations are numerical models
 - Many choices about them must be made in advance.
 - Models are necessarily reductive & limited by design.
 - They're definitely useful - but it's important to qualify them
 - *Digital reduction yields maps. These maps are great for charting a course, but they are not capable of providing the journey. No matter how detailed or interactive the map gets, it cannot replace the territory.*

Thoughts:

- It's hard to believe this book was written in 2010 - It's like Rushkoff predicted fake news and the disturbing trends of social media algorithms
- I've heard "The map is not the territory" before - but putting it in the context of digital models was poignant.

Turning To Action:

1. When working with digital models, maintain awareness of their limitations and don't substitute them for a full reality
2. Note the limitations of my models when discussing them with others, to spread awareness of their inability to fully capture reality or predict what's going to happen

SCALE: One size does not fit all

- 74: Everything occurring on the internet is at the same abstracted and universal level.
 - Survival in a purely digital realm (businesses in particular) means being able to scale.
 - Winning means being able to move up one level of abstraction beyond everyone else.
- 76: Businesses are already biased towards abstraction
 - Combining this with the internet's emphasis on success through scale yielded a digital economy with almost no basis in actual commerce, the laws of supply and demand, or the creation of value.
 - It's not capitalism in the traditional sense, but an abstracted hyper-capitalism utterly divorced from getting anything done.
 - The closer to the creation of value you get under this scheme, the farther you are from the money.
- 80: Our mediating technologies do connect us, but on increasingly abstracted levels.

Thoughts:

- We're starting to see a push-back on these massively-scaled global digital economy companies like Meta/Facebook, Twitter, Apple, Google, etc...
- We hear so much about big data, algorithms, and digital footprints, that we've lost sight of the importance of creating value
- Few people have a full understanding of how hard it is to get your signal through the noise - lots of gatekeepers still exist, but many now are algorithms or abstractions, not actual people

Turning To Action:

1. Continue to push for solutions more grounded in reality than the digital realm. For example: Local indie bookstores instead of Amazon.
2. Put more energy into 'boots on the ground' marketing instead of digital - making true connections may be slower and harder to scale, but it's more human.

IDENTITY: Be yourself

- 88: The anonymous status of people in an online group engenders crowd behavior
 - It goes further than protecting themselves from retribution.
 - Anonymous people have nothing to fear as individuals. They get used to taking actions from a distance and in secret.

- The result is that they exacerbate digital technology's most dehumanizing tendencies. They behave angrily, destructively, and automatically.
- **They go from being people to being a mob.**
- 89: Of course we should all keep our bank accounts and personal information private
 - But our posts, our participation, and socializing should be coming from ourselves.

The less we take responsibility for what we say and do online, the more likely we are to behave in ways that reflect our worst natures or even the worst natures of others.

- Because digital technology is biased toward depersonalization, we have to make an effort not to operate anonymously, unless absolutely necessary.
- We must be ourselves.
- 91: The more time it takes to acquire a reputation in an online environment, the more it matters even when it is entirely out of body.

Thoughts:

- I couldn't agree more with the mob-tendencies online anonymity causes. Rushkoff identified a trendline that we've seen result in cancel culture, fake news, the January 6th insurrection, and countless digital takedown attacks
- I believe in the rule that you shouldn't say online what you're not willing to say to the person's face. It's possible to disagree with someone & have a discourse online with civility & grace.

Turning To Action:

1. Continue to own what I say & do online, just as I would in the real world
2. Don't pay any attention to anonymous comments/reviews/etc... from online interactions with the media I create

SOCIAL: Do not sell your friends

- 99-100: Our digital networks are biased toward social contact.
 - Any effort to redefine or hijack those connections for profit end up compromising the integrity of the network itself.
 - It compromises the real promise of contact.
- 102: Referring to networks devised to exploit kids' social lives:
 - Kids aren't nearly as scandalized by all this as those of us who still hold on to the ideal of genuine, agenda-free connections between people.
 - If online social contact becomes something necessarily comingled with commercial exploitation, then this will become the new normative human behavior as well.

Thoughts:

- I appreciate Rushkoff identifying that there are some necessities to living part of our lives online, and it's not all necessarily negative
- But we do need to have an awareness of how we can be manipulated by these social systems - since it's far easier to do this at scale online than it would be in a tightly-knit community

Turning To Action:

1. Focus the growth of my writing, the podcast, etc... on honest & real relationships. Cater to individuals and their needs. It's slower & difficult to scale, but it's more genuine and can have a stronger impact on the communities I serve.
2. Keep an eye on my kids' usage of technology, especially those with social & data gathering components - and teach them enough about systems design & programming behind them so they understand what's going on 'under the hood'.

FACT: Tell the truth

108: We spread the ideas that we think are true, because this will increase our value to others.

- 110: When media remained a top-down proposition, there was little fact-based, peer-to-peer communication to challenge any of it.
 - People worked hard on assembly lines or in cubicles, no longer experiencing themselves in their multiple social roles simultaneously.
 - They were workers on the job trying to earn a paycheck & consumers at home relaxing to the mythological drone of mass media.
- **110: KEY CONCEPT: Media has evolved from being read-only into read-write!**
- 114: On the net, mythologies fall apart and facts rise to the surface.
- 115: If a company wants to promote conversation about itself, all it really needs to do is something, anything, significant.
 - There are companies who get on the front page of the newspaper simply for releasing an upgrade to a phone.
 - This is less about their ability to communicate than the power and importance of their actions on so many people.
- 115: Marketers need to learn that the easiest way to sell stuff in the digital age is to make good stuff.
- 116-117: In the online marketplace, successful communicators are the ones who can quickly evaluate what they're hearing, and learn to pass on only the stuff that matters.
 - Create more signal and less noise
 - Become the most valued authorities in a digital media.
 - Those who actually discover and innovate.
 - The people who do and find things worthy of everyone else's attention.
 - They're the ones who provide excuses to send messages to each another, but also ways for us to create more value for one another.
 - When the media space is biased toward nonfiction: You win by telling the truth.
 - **This means having a truth to tell.**

Thoughts:

- The read-only to read-write is paradigm-shifting mindset for me. Rushkoff's review of how we got to this stage, and how it was impacted by digital technology was revelatory as well.

- As we engage more with content (read-write), we're also exposed to far more choice than in previous generations. It's possible to drown in all the noise & all those options.
- I feel that I check a lot of the boxes for being a successful communicator in online marketplaces - I pass on stuff that matters. Perhaps my problem is casting too wide a net in terms of interests / domains?

Turning To Action:

1. Put more focus into discerning better signals in the noise - be choosier with the content I interact with & promote
2. Give myself more time to synthesize - so that I can better realize the truths I want to tell.

OPENNESS: Share, don't steal

- 124: We live in an age where thinking itself is collective, no longer a personal activity.
 - **We are immersed in media and swimming in the ideas of other people all the time.**
- 127-128: Value is still being extracted from our work
 - But it's being taken from a different place in the production cycle
 - Not being passed down to the creators themselves.
 - Those who create for a living are told the free labor will garner us more exposure
 - That exposure is necessary to get paid for something else we do like talks or television.
 - Of course, the people hiring us to do those appearances believe they should get us for free as well, because our live performances will help publicize our books and movies.
 - We characterize this as an open digital society, but we've become less open to one another than we are to exploitation
 - **Exploitation coming from the usual suspects at the top of the traditional food chain.**
- 129: Our digital media space is biased toward a shared cost structure
 - But our currency system is not.

We are attempting to operate a 21st century digital economy on a 13th century, printing-press-based operating system.

- 132: The people creating behind the screen spent time and energy on the things we read, watch, and listen to.
 - When we insist on consuming it for free, we are pushing them toward something much closer to the broadcast television model, where ads fund everything.

Thoughts:

- The value extraction cycle has only gotten more damaging to the creative - especially with monthly subscription services, which funnel less to all of the creators who (in many cases) have no choice about being on the platform in the first place.
- I was very curious about Rushkoff's take on crypto - which came of age after this book was written. *See my link in the Further Reading section below for where I'm getting this answer!*

Turning To Action:

1. Continue my mission to educate people on the damage massive corporations do with media content creators (Print & audiobooks, music, podcasts, etc...) - we must support our creators!
2. Keep an eye on how I offer up my content - finding a balance from what's free to enable more connections with people, and what content is worthy of compensation.

PURPOSE: Program or be programmed

- 134: Digital technology is programmed.
 - This makes it biased toward those with the capacity to write the code.
 - In a digital age, we must learn how to make the software, or risk becoming the software.
 - Learning the code behind what we use isn't that hard, and it's never too late to learn.
 - At the very least, people need to understand that there is code behind their interfaces.
 - **Otherwise, we're at the mercy of those who do the programming, the people paying them, or even the technology itself**
- 137: We've come to see actual coding as a working-class skill
 - Often it's outsourced to some poor nation while our kids play and even design video games.
 - We look at developing the plots and characters for a game as the interesting part, and the programming as the rote task better offloaded to people somewhere else.
 - **But programming the code itself is the place from which the most significant innovations emerge.**
- 140: Understand what programming is, how programmers make decisions, and how those decisions influence the ways the software and its users function.
 - As the mystery of computers became the science of programming, many other mysteries seemed to vanish as well.
 - **For the person who understands code, the whole world reveals itself as a series of decisions made by planners and designers for how the rest of us should live.**
- 146-147: We've surrendered our technological age to a small elite who have seized the capability it offers.
 - Renaissance kings maintained their monopoly over the printing presses by force
 - Today's elite depends on little more than our own disinterest.
 - We're too busy wading through overflowing inboxes or social media feeds to consider how they got that way in the first place.
 - Is there a better or less frantic way to stay informed and in touch?

We're intimidated by the whole notion of programming, seeing it as a chore for mathematically inclined menials than a language through which we can re-create the world on our own terms.

- 147: Until geopolitics force us to program or perish, we'll likely content ourselves with the phone apps and social networks on offer.
 - We'll be driven toward the activities that will help distract us from the coming challenges

148: We are looking at nothing less than the conscious, collective intervention of human beings in their own evolution. It's the opportunity of a civilization's lifetime. Shouldn't more of us want to participate actively in this project?

Thoughts:

- These historical trendlines are very important - They helped me to understand how what we're currently experiencing does have direct ties to historical trends that go back much further than the dawn of the internet.
- There's a trap here given my last formal programming training was nearly 20 years ago. I must remain vigilant that I don't get too enamored with that knowledge by keeping up with advances/trends in coding & programming.

Turning To Action:

1. Ensure my kids have at minimum a working knowledge of coding principles
2. Take advantage of opportunities to learn & educate others of systems design issues (good or bad) that go into many of the tools we utilize in our day-to-day lives.
3. Continue to seek ways of eliminating the frantic from my life.

FURTHER READING

If this book, notes, or topics interest you, I recommend the following related works:

For a more current analysis from Douglas Rushkoff (including his takes on crypto) - I'm currently listening to the audiobook of this title, read by Rushkoff himself. It's excellent!!

Survival of the Richest: The Tech Elite's Ultimate Exit Strategy by Douglas Rushkoff
The tech elite have a plan to survive the apocalypse: they want to leave us all behindFive myster...

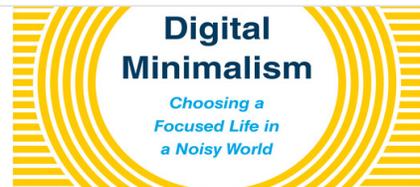
📖 <https://app.thestorygraph.com/books/34f69697-9363-4976-8617-2e7b1563ad82>



Cal Newport's Digital Minimalism is another critical book that touches on similar themes, with some great methods you can use to live a more focused life

Digital Minimalism by Cal Newport
Minimalism is the art of knowing how much is just enough. Digital minimalism applies this idea to...

📖 <https://app.thestorygraph.com/books/955da706-fcd2-4b30-a584-9a138c25a929>



For some excellent arguments on the dangers of social media, check out Jaron Lanier's work: His book & an excellent interview he gave on the Jordan Harbinger show (link includes further links to Jaron's Ted talk)

Ten Arguments For Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now by Jaron Lanier

Jaron Lanier, the world-famous Silicon Valley scientist-pioneer who first alerted us to the danger...

 <https://app.thestorygraph.com/books/271838ad-58f6-4308-b189-ac97a16c0f60>



Jaron Lanier | Why You Should Unplug from Social Media for Good | The Jordan Harbinger Show 156

Jordan Harbinger: [00:00:00] Welcome to the show. I'm Jordan Harbinger. As always, I'm here with my producer, Jason DeFillippo. Using social media is like living in a behaviorist cage. You are constantly being watched, analyzed, and manipulated. Rather than any particular technology, the business model of the social media

 <https://www.jordanharbinger.com/jaron-lanier-why-you-should-unplug-from-social-media-for-good/>



Matt Haig's book is a wonderful memoir of living within the current technological age & how to reduce our anxiety in dealing with it

Notes on a Nervous Planet by Matt Haig

A follow-up to Matt Haig's internationally bestselling memoir, *Reasons to Stay Alive*, a broader I...

 <https://app.thestorygraph.com/books/6835a71f-cafa-4a79-8469-22f8e2e2baaa>



Summary of Actions

1. More diligence in leaving phones totally out of bedroom & certain situations.
2. Divorce myself of the notion that I must react to digital messages ASAP.
3. Keep a focus on not mediating live person-to-person conversations with digital abstractions.
4. Create more opportunities to be face-to-face & have conversation with friends - I'll get a return on the extra effort to be IRL.
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