

Instead of People Using Technology, Technology Is Using People

Interview with Douglas Rushkoff, author and media theorist

The progress of AI and new technologies triggers hot debates about the future of human life. While fans of the singularity say that AI will become smarter than human beings and should take over the world, for others, such a vision is a sheer nightmare. Douglas Rushkoff is clearly part of the second group and takes a passionate pro-human stance. In our interview, he explains why giving too much way to technologies is a mistake and why humans deserve a place in the digital future. Already today, technologies have a much stronger impact on our lives than most of us would believe. For him, being human is a team sport, and he asks for a more conscious use of technologies while keeping a rapport with other people. To safeguard humanness in a tech world, he advises carefully selecting the values we embed in our algorithms. Rather than serving perpetual growth, technologies ought to help people reconnect with each other and their physical surroundings. Whether we use technology or whether it is the technology that uses us depends on the choices we make.



MIR × *In this issue, we take a closer look at the dark sides of digital marketing, a topic you have been researching almost since the Internet emerged. In your most recent book “Team Human”, you argue that digital technologies, social media, and AI-powered applications are actually anti-human. How can tools that are generally praised for empowering people and making our lives more convenient be anti-human?*

Douglas × Under the pretense of solving problems and making people’s lives easier, most of our technological innovations just get people out of sight or out of the way. We no longer have control of programming the technologies; instead, the technologies are programming us. We are strategized and optimized by the leading tech-companies towards purposes we don’t even know.

Why do you believe that the technologies are programming us?

Technology users are subjected to a constant assault of automated manipulation. America’s leading universities teach and develop “persuasive technology,” which is then implemented on platforms from e-commerce sites and social networks to smartphones and fitness wristbands. The goal is to generate “behavioral change” and “habit formation,” most often without the user’s knowledge or consent. According to design theory, people don’t change their behaviors because of shifts in their attitudes and opinions. It works the other way around: People change their attitudes to match their behaviors. In this model, we are more like machines than thinking, autonomous beings. Or at least we can be made to work that way.



Photo: "EDL Photography"

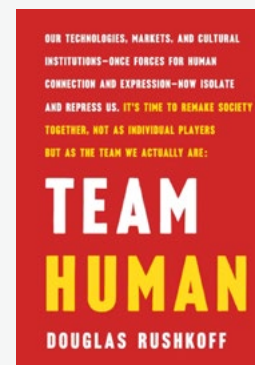
← DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF

ABOUT DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF

Douglas Rushkoff is the author of a dozen books on media, technology, and culture, including *Team Human*, *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus*, *Present Shock*, *Life Inc.*, and *Program or Be Programmed*. He made the documentaries *Generation Like*, *Merchants of Cool*, and *The Persuaders*, and wrote the novel *Ecstasy Club* and the graphic novels *Testament* and *ADD*. He is a columnist for the blog *Medium*.

Rushkoff studies human autonomy in a digital age, and his work explores how different technological environments change our relationship to narrative, money, power, and one another. He is a research fellow of the Institute for the Future and founder of the Laboratory for Digital Humanism at CUNY/Queens, where he is a Professor of Media Theory and Digital Economics, named one of the "world's ten most influential intellectuals" by MIT. His book *Coercion* won the Marshall McLuhan Award, and the Media Ecology Association honored him with the first Neil Postman Award for Career Achievement in Public Intellectual Activity.

<https://rushkoff.com/>

**THE INTERVIEWER**

The interview was conducted by Christine Kittinger in November 2020.

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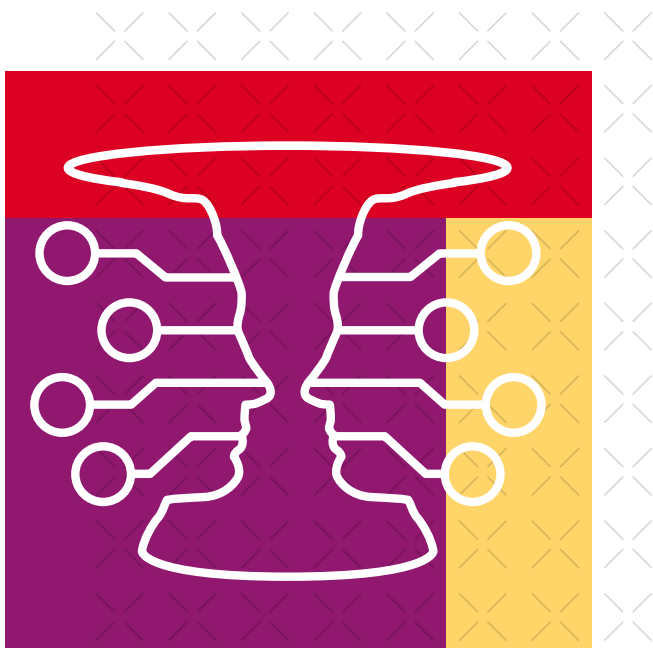
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So, the problem is that we no longer make active choices but go along with whatever the technology programs us to do?

Right, just as architects of physical environments use particular colors, soundtracks, or lighting cycles to stimulate desired behavior, the designers of web platforms and phone apps use carefully tested animations and sounds to provoke optimal emotional responses from users. Every component of a digital environment is tested for its ability to generate a particular reaction, be it more views, more purchases, or just more addiction. New mail is a happy sound; no mail is a sad one. The physical gesture of swiping to update a social media feed anchors and reinforces the compulsive urge to check in – just in case.

Most people don't seem worried too much, though. They enjoy and use the services without feeling manipulated. What's the problem, if users are happy?

The problem is that helping people is no longer the main agenda of the tech companies. Technologies are seen as mere investments that require growth and growing share prices. Users and their behaviors are optimized to reach these goals. The addiction algorithms of slot machines are built into newsfeeds, in order to make engagement more addictive and make us act against our own better judgment. Technology is optimizing us instead of us using the technologies to our advantage. What is happening is that figure and ground get reversed as with Rubin's vase. What should be the figure has become the ground.



In your book, you call the outcome of this optimization the attention economy.

Yes, instead of helping us leverage time to our intellectual advantage, the Internet was converted to an “always-on” medium, configured to the advantage of those who wanted to market to us or track our activities. Going online is no longer an active choice but rather a constant state of being. And every time I swipe my smartphone, it gets smarter about me, and I get dumber about it.

Are people aware enough that everything they do online is tracked and how this affects their choices?

I don't think so. Facebook will market your future to you before you've even gotten there. They'll use predictive algorithms to figure out what's your likely future and then try to make that even more likely. They'll get better at programming you and reducing your spontaneity. And they can use your face and name to advertise through you, that's what you've agreed to. I didn't want Facebook to advertise something through me as an influencer where my every act becomes grist to marketing. Therefore, I left Facebook in 2013, but most people have fallen for this “fear of missing out” that platforms like Facebook are cultivating.

So, you argue that humans lose some deeply human traits like being spontaneous, creative, or unpredictable. Do you also see collective damage?

Yes, the big tech-companies are extracting all the value from the system. They take the data and make us do what is best for them. Take Uber, for instance. Uber helping people get rides in towns is only a means to a much larger goal in its business plan. They are investing heavily in establishing a platform monopoly and getting ready to leverage that monopoly into other domains like delivery, drones, or logistics. The prosperity of all the people who used to be in the cabbie industry ends up sacrificed for the growth of this company. And just like Uber, other heavily funded tech companies suck money out of our economy and store it in the fat of share price. That's not business; that's value extraction.

What about artificial intelligence? Don't you think algorithms and AI can solve many problems better than humans can?

When we assume that our problems are fixable by technology, we end up emphasizing very particular strategies. We improve the metrics a given technology can improve but often ignore the problems the technology is unable to address. We move out of balance, because our money and effort go toward the things we can solve and to the people who can pay for those solutions. We've got a greater part of

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humanity working on making our social media feeds more persuasive than we have on making clean water more accessible. We build our world around what technologies can do.

Do you think we should abandon social media and back off from augmented and automatized decisions altogether to remain human?

No, technology may have created a lot of problems, but it is not our enemy. Neither are the markets, the scientists, the robots, the algorithms, or the human appetite for progress. But what we have to do is balance these elements with our more organic, emotional, and social needs. It's not a paradox. Both sides can be united, if we wish.

In your book, you suggest that people need to become more human to resist the toxic effect of digital technology. What should we do?

We should stop thinking about our utility value, because machines will always have more utility value than a human being. It starts with our approach to public education. We should educate our kids more about the essential dignity of human beings and less that they have to be useful to have a place in society. Once we learn to maintain a basic rapport with one another, that's when the human conspiracy can begin. When we breathe together with other people in a room, have eye contact, and have conversations, we start to experience power and the dignity of ourselves and of other people. Once you touch that core of dignity in yourself, it is much harder to be controlled by anyone or anything.

We are in the middle of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, not the best times for building rapport. Do you think the traumas of lockdowns, job-losses, illnesses, and deaths will spark a countermovement?

Douglas: COVID-19 has forced us into a harsh, anti-social world. We have to sort of dehumanize in order not to transmit the disease. But after that, we have the chance to rehumanize more than ever – we've got to reconnect with each other in ways that re-establish local resilience, local business, local manufacturing, cottage industries, circular economics: all the stuff we can't do right now because we're stuck in this cycle of disinfecting ourselves.

This rehumanization would be part of what you see as a renaissance period. Which changes do you expect or hope for?

A renaissance is really the retrieval of old values and their rebirth in a new context. I think that a new form of collectivism will replace the individualism that emerged in the last Renaissance in the middle ages. The established value system ultimately allowed investors to pursue short-term profits and venture capitalists to establish incontestable and extractive platform monopolies. Now, we are discovering a spirit of collective sensibility that is multidimensional and participatory. It is reflected in the Occupy Wall Street and Fridays for Future movements, and it's the distributed economy aspired to by the open-source and blockchain movements, to name just a few.

So, you're positive that technologies and humans can coexist while humans remain the subjects in control and not the objects for optimization?

The future is open and up for invention. It is not something we arrive at but something we create through our actions in the present. Even the weather, at this point, is subject to the choices we make today about energy, consumption, and waste. I encourage people to stop hiding in plain sight. We must take a stand and insist that human values are folded into each and every new technology. We have to stand up and be seen. However imperfect and quirky and incomplete we may feel, it's time we declare ourselves members of Team Human.

Thanks for your very clear words, Douglas, and for making us aware of the threats we are facing and of ways out. We're in!

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