

A Review of Douglas Rushkoff's Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age

EME 11 (3-4); DOI: 10.1386/eme.11.3-4.351_5

Robert K. Logan

logan@physics.utoronto.ca

Doug Rushkoff's (2010) little book packs a big punch and reminds us that the freedom that digital media promise us may be an illusion. His title *Program or Be Programmed* captures the dilemma that these media create, media that were suddenly sprung upon us with the arrival of personal computers circa 1980 and the World Wide Web in 1994, the year that marked the beginning of the mass migration to the Internet with the release of Netscape.

Every new medium that has been introduced in the modern era beginning with the printing press promised a new era of personal expression and freedom. As it turned out the freedom of the press only applied to those that owned one. The printing press, the first technology of mass production, eventually led to industrialization and the factory system of manufacture as well as the economic system of capitalism. As the ownership of a printing press involved a significant outlay of capital, this medium for the shaping of public opinion belonged exclusively to the moneyed class. There were exceptions like the ones that developed in the American colonies where writers like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine were able to foment revolution against British rule through their writings. The American Revolution was more a changing of the elite that would rule the 13 colonies than a true revolution that affected the common man. Life for the ordinary people remained much the same. It was an important step towards democracy and liberty for those males that owned property and could vote. But life for the disenfranchised and the slaves of the revolutionaries remained more or less the same. The only difference was that they were programmed by their local elite instead of the one across the ocean in England.

The next breakthrough in communications, the telegraph, followed closely by the telephone opened up a new channel of individual expression for those able to afford these media of communication. The use of these two media was more or less controlled by the users. The only constraints on their use were their cost, which was controlled by the owners of the media, who quickly formed monopolies in North America; Western Union in the case of the telegraph and the Bell System in the case of the telephone. Independent operators were squeezed out of the market as has been described by Tim Wu (2010) in his book *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires*.

Radio was initially an operator-to-operator form of communication used by amateurs. Wu (ibid.) describes how radio was commercialized and was eventually monopolized by

big money interests such as NBC, CBS and ABC despite the Sherman anti-trust act. Only in Canada, other British Commonwealth Countries and Europe did public service radio flourish. A similar pattern of monopolization also developed with FM radio and television (ibid.).

And this brings us to the digital age and Rushkoff's book. During the age of the mainframe and mini computers these expensive machines remained in the hands of large companies and public institutions. Computer time was expensive and the feedback from these computers delayed for several hours or even a day while batch runs were processed and returned to their users. All that changed with the emergence of personal computers that any user could easily learn to program if they were so inclined.

I remember the arrival of the Apple II computer in our home. We were fascinated by the icon that came up each time the computer was booted up. A picture appeared on the screen of a table, a bouquet of flowers and a framed picture on the wall that read Home Sweet Home. My 11-year old son stayed up way past my bedtime playing with and working with our new toy. The next morning I could not resist booting up the computer just before heading out to work just to see the icon reappear on the screen. Up came the table, the bouquet of flowers and then the frame and then to my utter amazement instead of Home Sweet Home the sign read F*** You. My son had figured out how to reprogram our computer over night. It was then and there that I realized that this device that I had regarded as a toy compared to the IBM mainframe and the DEC Vax machines I had been using at the university was in fact the harbinger of a revolution.

Well it certainly was a revolution in terms of the way it changed the way business was conducted and the way it changed learning. It was a revolution that I quickly joined when I organized a computer training program for unemployed youth followed by a commercial corporate computer training business.

McLuhan had suggested that Xerox made everyman a publisher. This was certainly true to a certain extent but even more of the case if one had a personal computer equipped with a desktop publishing package and a postscript printer. But there was more in store. With the release of Netscape in 1994 and the universal access it brought to the World Wide Web and the Internet a publisher/writer with a PC and a printer now had a global distribution channel that allowed him or her to compete with the big time publishers. With the arrival of e-readers that possibility has become a reality within the last couple of years. The digital revolution now seems complete especially with the emergence of blogs, wikis, Wikipedia, Twitter and Facebook.

But do we really have a revolution on our hands. This is what Rushkoff's book is questioning with its provocative title: Program or Be Programmed. The first question Rushkoff addresses is whether or not the digital revolution has indeed

been a positive development after one peels back all of the hype. His book raises a number of interesting points that makes us question the assertion that the PC and the Net represent an absolutely positive breakthrough. As a student of media ecology and the ideas of Marshall McLuhan Rushkoff is well aware of McLuhan's insight that all media create both service and disservice. Although well aware of the service aspect of digital media Rushkoff turns his attention to the possible disservice of digital media.

He begins with the way our ability to focus on anything at all deeply is compromised by the multitasking that digital media encourages. "No matter how proficient we think we are at multitasking, studies show our ability to accomplish tasks accurately and completely only diminish the more we try to do at the same time... Instead of becoming empowered and aware, we become frazzled and exhausted (Rushkoff 2010, 35)."

Rushkoff then points out that digital technology takes away our focus on our local community so that "we lose our sense of place, as well as our home field advantage (ibid., 41)." Not only do we lose the local context of neighborhood but we also lose the context of the information and knowledge that we so easily access with the Net (ibid., 63)." Wikipedia easily provides the facts but we still need books to provide the insights that make us truly knowledgeable.

Rushkoff alerts us to the dangers associated with digital media like Second Life whose founder, Philip Rosedale, claims that "his online world will be indistinguishable from real life (ibid., 69)." Another problem area arises when brick and mortar businesses go digital. Rushkoff relates how Tom's local record store enjoyed a surge in sales when he migrated his business on to the Web and closed his retail store. It was not long afterwards that his prices were undercut by larger online operations that could afford to sell records at a lower price point because of the volumes they created with the money they put into their marketing. Because Tom lost contact with his local customers who were now buying their records from his competitors he was forced out of business. This painful lesson for Tom is something we should keep in mind. While it is true that digital media tend to decentralize in the short run it is also true as Tom discovered that "the digital realm enforces central control on an entirely new level (ibid., 77)."

Rushkoff is able to identify the great strength of the Net and what it does best namely create contact, which leads to social media for as he says just as atoms, molecules, cells and organisms all cluster, "we organisms are networking into greater levels of organization (ibid., 104)."

A fascinating insight of Rushkoff's is that "books, radio and television are read-only media [but] digital media, on the other hand, are 'read-write' (ibid., 110)." Read-only media, as has already been pointed out, are controlled by monopolies. Digital media with their global reach are open to anyone with a computer and Internet access and hence concludes Rushkoff, "we're back in the bazaar (ibid., 111)."

Rushkoff points out an inherent problem with the culture of digital media and the capitalist society in which it developed. It is the conflict that arises because “our digital mediaspace is biased towards a shared cost structure, [while] our currency system is not....Peer-to-peer currencies are based in the abundance of production, rather than the scarcity of lending. This makes them biased, as is the net, toward transaction and exchange rather than hoarding for interest (ibid., p. 129-30)”.

In the final chapter with the same title as the book Rushkoff alerts us to the fact that “we do not teach programming in most public schools. Instead...most schools with computer literacy curricula teach [popular] programs... from the perspective of users” His concern is that “programming is the sweet spot, the high leverage point in a digital society. If we don’t learn to program, we risk being programmed ourselves.(139).” His fear is that “we remain unaware of the biases of the programs in which we are participating, as well as the ways they circumscribe our newfound authorship within their predetermined agendas... and leads us not towards greater agency but less (146).” Like McLuhan, Rushkoff understands that “technologies created for one reason end up having a very different use and effect.”

Rushkoff sees digital media as having a kind of agency unlike the media before. “Digital technologies are different. They are not just objects but systems embedded with purpose.” This is similar to McLuhan’s (1964, 64) notion that “All media are active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new form.” But Rushkoff goes a bit further than McLuhan, in my opinion, precisely because digital media are programmed by programmers with an agenda and a purpose in mind.

Rushkoff provides us with a sobering look at digital media with the hope that we can learn to control these media rather than being controlled by them and those that take the trouble to program them. Their effects are more insidious than non-digital media in that those that program digital media are not just influencing their content as has been the case with all other preceding media but they are influencing the way that content will be created for these media which is far more insidious.

The best way to sum up Rushkoff’s considerable contribution to our understanding of digital media and their effects on us is to restate the ten commands (not commandments as Doug insists but why did he come up with 10 like Moses) of the use of digital media by this would be prophet of digital media. And as Tom Wolfe might say, what if he is right? Here are Rushkoff’s ten commands to control digital media rather than have them control us:

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. Size: 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.

Amen – thank you Doug!

References

Rushkoff, Douglas. 2010. *Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age*. Berkeley CA: Soft Skull Press.

Wu, Tim. 2010. *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires*. New York: Knopf