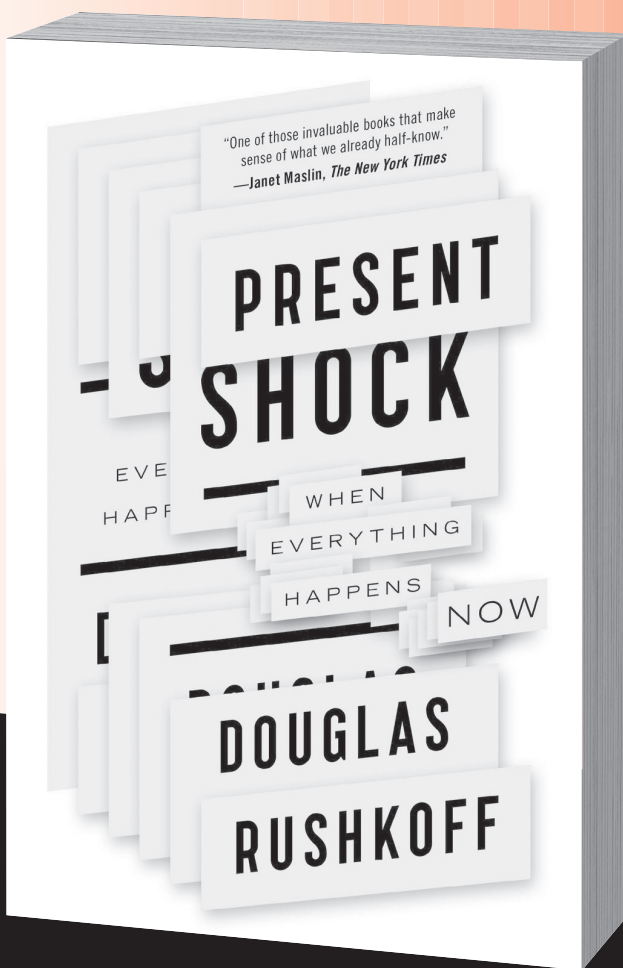


A STUDY GUIDE TO

PRESENT SHOCK

WHEN EVERYTHING HAPPENS NOW

BY DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF



COMPILED BY JASON RIZOS

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A study guide for further exploration of the concepts laid out in the 2013 text by Douglas Rushkoff. This guide has been compiled by author and Composition and Literature instructor Jason Rizo of Portland Community College for use in Higher Education and Post-Secondary educational classrooms, as well as for a general audience interested in pursuing these topics in greater depth.

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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

Critical reading of a text calls upon an active engagement with a text. This study guide outlines the subheadings of each chapter, provides a brief summary, integrates outside media, and offers opportunities and ideas for the creation of writing assignments. In addition, advanced rhetorical concepts and principles are offered when pertinent to the text.

EXAMINING YOUR OWN PRESENT

In the Preface, Rushkoff says “we tend to exist in a distracted present.” Regarding this, take a moment to examine your current present and compare it to a time the past as it relates to (1) News/Information, (2) Entertainment, (3) Being “connected” to social circles. How distracted, consumed, overwound, or otherwise diminished is our quality of life? Or, conversely, how has technology benefited us in these areas? Are we living in a “Golden Age?”

CRITICAL READING

This study guide will outline major topic areas for each chapter, in addition to providing a list of subchapter headings. Keep the following questions in mind as you read. They are designed to aid in better understanding the text as well as what ideas of your own will be generated in reading.

Stance—What values does Rushkoff assume his audience shares in common with? Rhetoricians call this the Shared Cultural Value statement, a starting place which the value of does not need to be argued for, but is self-evident. What kind of an ideal world is represented? What quality of life? Understanding what you personally strive for helps you arrive at a purpose and a call for action. Write any shared cultural value statements down and ask if they are truly self evident or represent a possible deviation from another's own set of values.

Purpose—What point of view does Rushkoff convey to his reader? How can you synthesize the claims and positions of Rushkoff with your own approximation of life to arrive at a unique theory? Keep in mind what is being advocated and argued for, especially when the thesis of a chapter is “delayed” or “indirect.” Create a list of possibilities for your own voice and approximation of the text's meaning.

Context—What interesting or thought provoking statistics or claims are mentioned? How do real-world experience provide a backdrop to these ideas? What additional context can you draw on? General statements that are factual claims create a scope for your own writing and can be used in your introductory paragraph.

IN-DEPTH RESEARCH

Possible avenues of research will be outlined for each chapter. While exploring these possibilities, it is helpful to keep the following questions in mind for possible writing assignments:

1. What does your audience need to understand about a topic before proceeding into a larger exploration of argument or analysis?
2. What is at stake for those involved?
3. Where did you find information on this topic outside of the text?
4. What is your recommendation now that you have investigated this topic?
5. What do you anticipate the future holds in store for this issue?

CHAPTER 1–NARRATIVE COLLAPSE

- a. Narrative Collapse
- b. Big Stories
- c. Now-ist Pop Culture is Born
- d. Reality Bytes
- e. Real-Time Feed: The CNN Effect
- f. Occupy Reality
- g. Infinite Games

KEY TERMS

- Cognitive Dissonance
- Egalitarianism
- Futurism
- Narrative Arc
- Postnarrative

CRITICAL READING

In this chapter, Rushkoff describes an American legacy of storytelling, specifically, a “narrative.” On page 13, he writes that stories “help us construct a narrative experience of our lives, our nation, and our faith.” As present-day society shifted its interest to Futurism, traditional, familiar linear arcs of storytelling have been replaced with those described as “postnarrative” or independent of linear structure and goal-oriented purpose. Examples of this include *The Simpsons*, *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, and *Community*. The ascendancy of Reality Television also figures into this cultural shift. Led by the advent of blogging, news and information that travels faster than traditional media outlets has befuddled gatekeepers and governments alike, in what has been termed the “CNN Effect.” The final portion of this chapter describes how video games have grown increasingly immersive and have come to replace traditional narrative storytelling of old.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

How have the stories of your own family, ancestors, or *Community* been shaped by its history? Look around the city or town in which you live. What cultural, industrial, or historical touchstones is your town known for? Examples you could explore:

- Agriculture and Natural Resource Management
- Food, Restaurants, and Hospitality
- Technology, Labor, and Industry
- Religion, Culture, and Lifestyle

How have these legacies affected the attitude and politics of your home town or city?

An examination of American history also reveals legacy institutions that have shaped our ideology and culture in the present day. Examples you could explore:

- The Civil War
- Western Expansion
- The Progressive Movement and The New Deal
- World War II

“It’s as if the linear narrative structure had been so misused and abused by television’s incompetent or manipulative storytellers that it simply stopped working” (22).



“This saturation with live, uncensored, and unconsidered images from around the world impacted public opinion profoundly and actually forced government leaders to make decisions more quickly. Officials at the Pentagon eventually dubbed this phenomenon ‘the CNN effect’ (46-7).

IN-DEPTH RESEARCH:

- Post-Narrative Television
- Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth
- Reality and Shock Television
- The Cult of the Amateur
- The CNN Effect
- The Century of the Self (<https://archive.org/details/TheCenturyOfTheSelf>)
- Advent of the Tea Party
- MMORPG Gaming

CHAPTER 2—DIGIPHRENIA: BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO

- a. Time is a Technology
- b. Chronobiology
- c. Pacing and Leading
- d. The Space Between the Ticks
- e. Do Drone Pilots Dream of Electric Kills?

KEY TERMS

- Chronobiology
- Iterate
- Omniscience
- Pinging
- Temporal
- Trending

CRITICAL READING

Rushkoff begins this chapter by telling a brief anecdote. In this, he describes his experience of checking into a Berlin hotel. He realizes that his digital self can “be in two places at once.” As you read through this chapter, think of opportunities where you see concepts of digital time and virtual personhood occurring in your own life and experiences. From here, Rushkoff provides an account of how time has been understood during various times in human history. Our current ability to manipulate time and disconnect ourselves from circadian and seasonal cycles relates to “Chronobiology,” and difficulties arises from which may affect sleep, concentration, and anxiety. This chapter then examines the ancient Greek distinctions between “chronos” (measurable time) and “kairos” (being active in the experience of the present moment) as they relate to time. Examples of technology providing opportunities for people to live “dual lives” follows, the result of which is described as “digiphrenia.”

PLOTTING YOUR OWN NARRATIVE

In subchapter, Time is a Technology, Rushkoff elaborates the many ways in which time has become increasingly subdivided and carefully measured over the course of human history, citing as examples:

- Written language
- Calendar
- Prayer
- Clocks
- Church bells
- Clock towers
- Digital timepieces

How does your relationship with time, schedules, and the recording of life's events in social media affect your own productivity and quality of life? With regard to chronically experience and digital revisiting of experience, Rushkoff explains how “time in the digital era is no longer linear but disembodied and associative” (85). What topics from this chapter particularly resonate with your own personal experience?

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

Here is a brief list of some topics that emerge from Chapter 2 on which you may choose to write:

- How has public etiquette regarding technology use changed over time?
- Does technology obligate us to be “always on”? How can we mitigate this to find balance between “chronos” and “kairos”?
- What appeal does social networking and text message have for instant gratification?
- What is it about the nature of the email and the internet that makes commentary not fully thought out, ephemeral, and unaccountable?
- How do we feel when disconnected? Are we dependent on connectivity being always on, always connected?
- What does technology do to provide creative outlets and how does it shape creative productivity? Does technology produce innumerable dilettantes or eliminate barrier to entry for artists?
- Does the depth of research and exploration benefit us or merely create a labyrinthine and superficial time sink?

SYNTHESIZING IDEAS:

Regarding the subchapter titled The Space Between the Ticks, view the following video from the RSA Animate Series:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bqMY82xzWo>

Professor Reneta Salecl describes how choice induces anxiety in three ways:

1. How do the choices we make relate to the choices other make? Are conforming or rebelling? By rebelling are we conforming to a rebellion? Are we losing our individuality by having made a choice?
2. Is this an ideal choice? In other words, are we making the best choice we can?
3. What is lost in making this choice? Other options? A previous state?

Rushkoff outlines ways in which “digital technology is all about choices” (110).

Salecl argues that Capitalism and the array of choices that comes along with it discourages social change in that people are afraid of losing what little they have, and that in being forced to make choices they naturally blame themselves for hardships.

“The Result is a mess in which we race to make our world conform to force yes-or-no choices of the digiphrenic” (119).

DEMONSTRATING CONCEPTS

Plot the course of your commute to campus using Google Maps. Provide information on driving, walking, biking, or public transit. Next, measure precisely the real time it takes for you to make this trip. Take note of how accurate the prediction was. Repeat this comparison three more times. How does knowing the precise amount of time affect your preparation and expectation?

SATIRE IN CULTURE:



The animated television satire *South Park* pokes fun at people's obsession with Facebook and how it has come to redefine the meaning of friendship. In addition, the temporal immediacy of digital information is satirized by Eric Cartman's podcast, Mad Friends, which echoes Rushkoff's notion that “internet writers whose lives must conform to the dictates of online publishing and economics end up espousing values consistent with the always-on hyperactivity of the web” and that like Eric Cartman, the website Gawker “assigned stories based on trending Internet terms (97). Kyle finds himself overwhelmed by guilt and obligation, to which Rushkoff might respond that our online social interactions “live outside of time and can sit in the inbox until we are ready... This should not be guilt provoking” (117) Watch the episode here:

<http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s14e04-you-have-0-friends>

IN-DEPTH RESEARCH:

- *The Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, a film by Werner Herzog
- Chronobiology
- The Paradox of Choice
- The Precision of Simulacra
- Multitasking
- Life, Inc.

PRINCIPLES OF RHETORIC: CAUSE VS. CORRELATION

Cum hoc ergo propter hoc (Latin, “with this, therefore because of this.”)

When reading statistics, it is important to keep in mind the phenomenon of Cause vs. Correlation. On page 92, Rushkoff notes the World

Health Organization statistic that women who work night shifts may have a 60% greater risk of breast cancer. What other lifestyle and environmental influences on contracting breast cancer might be shared in common by people working night shifts? Note the difference between potential direct causes (lack of vitamin D from sunlight, disrupted circadian

cycles) and causes associated with the lifestyle of those working a nightshift (smoking, caffeine intake, low income). What other common examples of causes and their related effects can you think of where correlation interferes with a practical effort to determine causation? Begin by examining common arguments in media and conventional wisdom.

CHAPTER 3—OVERWINDING: THE SHORT FOREVER

- a. Time Binding
- b. Seeds and Feeds
- c. Mashup and Makeup
- d. Act Now
- e. Time is Money
- f. Living in RAM
- g. Winding Up

KEY TERMS

- Abstraction
- Behavioral Finance
- Currency
- Derivatives
- Hipster
- Mashup
- Monopoly
- RAM (Random Access Memory)
- Spectacle

CRITICAL READING

Chapter Three further examines the relationship we have with time in a modern context. Having lost perspective in digital and numerical clocks, time is further compressed into symbols, brand icons, and other abstractions that represent vast amounts of information, bound up and accessible at any time. Efforts to grapple with always flowing information lead to a desire for such concepts as “inbox zero” and new ways of subdividing invests of capital that betray the nature of how capital creation has naturally and historically occurred. Immediate access has also undermined the creation and assimilation of subcultures, leading to disconnection with the true meanings of those cultures, such as Hipsters, mashups, and unwinding Facebook timelines. Pathological consumerism, spectacle, and kleptomania are cited as examples of Presentist thinking in

finance, this being the primary focus of the second half of the chapter.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

The very chapter title introduces a paradox. How can something that is forever be described as short? What is the author implying by describing an infinite length of time as “short” in relation to how we live today? As you go through this chapter, look for the following evidence as provided by Rushkoff:

- Brand icons, brands, symbols, tropes (Korzybski's *abstractions*) that compress information (137-9).
- The Sisyphean goal of “inbox zero” (142-4).
- Trying to remain static in one stage of your life (149-51).
- Mashup art and culture (153-5).
- Facebook identities that never delete and live in perpetuity (155).
- Consumer culture and the temporal compression of creating and consuming products (161-5).
- Currency, value and wealth creation in derivative investing (170-87).

DEMONSTRATING CONCEPTS:

Because content is rendered instantly, choices can be made and their consequences felt instantly. Exploration of a culture or phenomenon no long a “journey” (153). Write a descriptive essay of your own journey into a cultural identity, fashion, or musical style. How has internet technology helped you gain access to these ideas? How do you see the rise and fall of trends and the popularity of a culture affecting authenticity and originality? What related examples can you think of?

"The consumer must never feel completely at home in his present, or he will stop striving toward a more satisfied future" (167).



The "Buy Nothing Day" campaign emerged in 1992 as a result of what *Adbusters* magazine perceived as compulsive, pathological over consumption (see page 161).

IN-DEPTH RESEARCH:

- Behavioral Finance
- Performance Enhancing Drugs in the Workplace (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2012/06/should-your-boss-encourage-you/>)
- Chronobiology
- Dr. Mark Filippi's SomaSpace
- Filter Failure
- The Prisoner's Dilemma
- Clay Shirky (<http://blip.tv/web2expo/web-2-0-expo-ny-clay-shirky-shirky-com-it-s-not-information-overload-it-s-filter-failure-1283699>)
- Program or Be Programmed (<http://www.rushkoff.com/program-or-be-programmed/>)

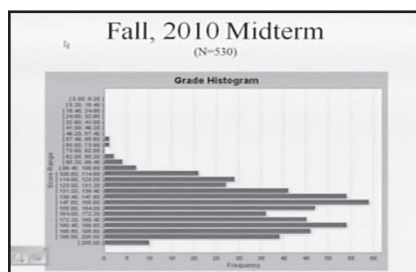
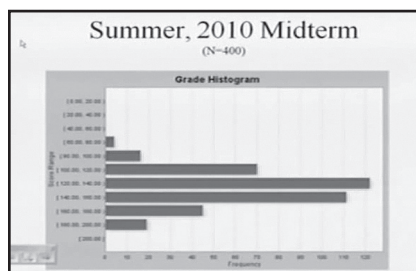
ARGUMENTATION SCENARIO: THE PRISONER'S DILEMMA

Technology has changed the fundamental way in which we learn.

Imagine you are in college and taking a Business Economics class called Strategic Management. At one point, a member of your study group emails all the other members. The email is completely plain, it just says, "check this out" in the subject and then includes a link. Upon clicking the link, you find it takes you to a bank of 200 multiple-choice test questions and answers that the textbook manufacturer has assembled. You

browse through the questions and answers and find it to be a suitable study guide. Then, during your first exam, you discover, to your surprise, the instructor himself assembled the 50-question multiple-choice exam from this list. Now watch the following video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbzJTDO9f4>



Professor Quinn cites "bimodal distribution" as evidence of tampering and cheating on the midterm exam.

As the video indicates, students were accused to cheating by the professor, with grave consequences. However, students argue that they had no way of knowing that he would have built the test from existing test banks found freely on the web.

What do you do? Will you confess to having received the study guide? How has this professor created a "prisoner's dilemma" for his students? Is he bluffing about knowing who has and has not utilized the test bank in advance? How has technology and the availability of information caused this issue? What argument would you provide in favor of students who had received the email and used the test bank as a study aide?

CHAPTER 4—FRACTALNOIA: FINDING PATTERNS IN THE FEEDBACK

- The Feedback Loop: Parsing Screech
- Managing Chaos:
Birds, Bees, and Economies
- To Be or To Be

KEY TERMS

- Astroturfing
- Crowdsourcing
- Fractal
- Feedback
- Game Theory
- Iteration
- Pattern Recognition
- Social Currency

CRITICAL READING

The chapter begins by revealing a connection between the rampant conspiracy theories found on the internet and an impulse shared by today's society to make sense of the world in the present tense. From this impulse, comes a tendency to seek out patterns, what can result in productive connectivity, or can degrade into indecipherable feedback. Masters of pattern recognition and game theory include John Nash, Norbert Weiner, Friedrich Hayek, and Stewart Brand fit prominently in this chapter that explores the fractal-like way we can derive repeating patterns economics, government, and culture.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

One of the concepts mentioned in this chapter is the notion of ownership in a hyper-connected media landscape. This affords new creations, mashups (see p. 154) as well as de-emphasis on original content creators (General Motors online commercial creator for their Chevy Tahoe, see p. 213). Rushkoff writes, "Since ideas are built on the logic of others, there is no way to trace their independent origins. It's all just access to the shared consciousness" (204). Explore mashups and reinventions of Music, Video, and Fashion. Here are some examples:

- *Downfall* (film) subtitle spoof (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hB0LqxNyR2I>)
- G.I. PSA Voice Over (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogEtfIdgjpY>)
- X-Men animated series Voice Over (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSuvOVH0aSQ>)
- Autotune the News (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBb4cjjj1gI>)

How has remixing and reinvention made original content richer and/or more immersive? When does a piece of art stop belonging to a creator, but to the culture at large? What makes these spoofs emerge as popular viral videos?

SYNTHESIZING IDEAS:

Websites offer opportunities for guests to create content, what had been originally heralded as "Web 2.0" is now simply taken for granted. New relationships between service providers and customers have emerged as a result. Here are some examples:

- Twitter
- Yelp
- Rotten Tomatoes
- Youtube
- Angie's List
- Epinions
- Tripadvisor

How have these services helped and/or harmed our world of consumer choice? How does the role of anonymity factor into this feedback loop?

PLOTTING YOUR OWN NARRATIVE

One of the many PBS Frontline documentaries Douglas Rushkoff has helped produce is called *The Persuaders*, referenced on page 211 of *Present Shock*. Recently, Frontline aired *Generation Like* (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/generation-like/>).

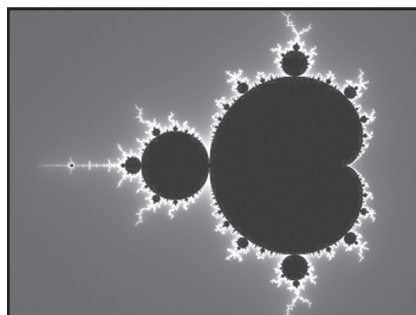


Generation Like aired January 20, 2014, produced and written by Douglas Rushkoff and Frank Koughan.

What experience do you have with brands and the means in which they reach you? Do you have affinity or loyalty for a particular brand? How do you respond to advertizing?

Like the featured Pepsi's "selfie" campaign, find and examine your own case study of a major brand with a unique or diverse marketing approach. Evaluate the effectiveness of an advertizing or marketing campaign that uses unorthodox or unconventional means to reach an audience. Do you find these techniques manipulative? Deceitful? Invasive?

"When feedback comes instantaneously and from all sides at once, it's hard to know how people are reacting to what we are doing—or what we're doing that they're even reacting to" (209).



The Mandelbrot Set, a mathematical fractal pattern of a function iterated with itself infinitely, here rendered visually.

IN-DEPTH RESEARCH:

- Steam's Employee Manual
- Walter Kirn's *Lost in the Meritocracy*
- Astroturfing (fake consumer reviews)
- General Motor's make-your-own commercial debacle
- *Generation Like* (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/generation-like/>)

CHAPTER 5—APOCALYPTO

- I, Zombie
- Transcending Humanity
- It's the Information, Stupid
- Everything Old is New Again

KEY TERMS

- Doomsday Prepper
- Kabbalah
- Millenarianism
- Singularity
- Transhumanism

THINKING ABOUT THE TEXT

A strong argument made in this chapter is the idea that some "in lieu of doing the actual hard work of fixing these problems in the

present, we fantasize instead about life after-ward" (246). From Terrence McKenna, to Daniel Pinchbeck, to Ray Kurzweil, a modern, pseudo-science driven culture of Apocalypso has emerged and gained momentum in the social consciousness. Participant to this is the notion that technology may outpace and supplant humanity, and in the process deliver humanity to some superior state of being, but Rushkoff offers a cautionary warning, and a call for balance and appreciation of historical relativity. In thinking of his conclusion, what examples can you find of appealing and provisional abatement and short-term mitigation to problems instead of solutions to the problem itself?

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

Appealing to a media landscape of crisis and panic, a Zombie Mythos has become popular in literature, television, and film. Explore one or more of these and look for examples of how the surviving humans enjoy life “outside of time” (251). In addition, this chapter discusses the persuasive nature of escaping our own responsibilities by embracing a quasi-religious “end of history” mindset. Are zombies movies a form of escapist fantasy? How so? Noam Chomsky suggests that zombies have supplanted Indians and Slave uprisings in America’s collective social unconscious. What other types of disaster media fulfill a similar intention?



An iconic screen capture from the popular AMC Series *The Walking Dead*.

“Without a compelling story to justify a sustainable steady state for our circumstances, we jump to conclusions—quite literally—and begin scenario planning for the endgame” (259).

IN-DEPTH RESEARCH:

- Terence McKenna’s *Time Wave Zero*
- Daniel Pinchbeck
- Ray Kurzweil’s *Law of Accelerating Returns and Singularity Theory*
- *The Walking Dead*

ABOUT DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF

Douglas Rushkoff is a world-renowned media theorist whose twelve books, including *Life Inc.* and *Program or Be Programmed*, have won prestigious awards and have been translated into thirty languages. He is a commentator on CNN and a contributor to the *Guardian*, *Discover*, and NPR. He also made the PBS

documentaries *The Merchants of Cool*, *The Persuaders*, and *Digital Nation*. He advocates for digital literacy at Codecademy.com, and teaches at NYU and The New School. He lives in New York with his wife, Barbara, and daughter, Mamie.

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