DIGITAL DISRUPTION AND THE DEATH OF STORYTELLING

MEDIA THEORIST DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF ON THE AGE OF REAL-TIME RESPONSE
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Rushkoff is an expert in analyzing missed connections. As a media theorist, professor, author and business consultant, he studies people's inability to connect with another person or an ideology—or a phone call—while they're immersed in this era of multitasking and digital chaos. He has bigger fish to fry than to pick on some marketers' misguided use of Big Data or their focus on real-time responses rather than on meaningful message development. He researches how digital disruption interferes with social interactions and society's value creation. He examines media and messaging disconnects from nations and governments, and assesses people's cognitive responses to communications on macro and micro levels, but marketing features prominently in his research because, he says, "marketers are the ones who have been the most interested in how media is changing because, in some ways, they're the ones with the most at stake."

After a Yale education in filmmaking and theater direction, Rushkoff started his career as a media strategist in 1991 when he wrote Cyberia, his first book on cyber culture, which was quickly cancelled by his publisher, Bantam, because the editors thought that cyber culture would be "over" by 1993. The book was published in 1994. Rushkoff's next book, Media Virus, discusses the viral nature of digital content, and soon after its publication, Rushkoff was invited to work as a media strategist for National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Station.

In his latest book, Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now, Rushkoff argues that we no longer have a sense of direction because our culture has become too focused on the present. Today's priorities take precedence, much to the detriment of long-term planning and cohesive communications strategies in marketing, advertising, politics and elsewhere.

Now a professor of media theory and digital economics at Queens College, part of City University of New York, Rushkoff recently helped start the school's Center for Media Studies. Here, he discusses how the complex state of digital media is changing human interactions, and impeding marketers' progress.
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Q Talk about the intersection of personal identities and our digital selves.

A The most sweeping way of explaining it is that digital technology emerged as a set of new possibilities for people to express and experience themselves, and relate to others in new, highly creative and self-determined ways. It emerged as an extension of our human abilities to think, connect, create, exchange value and do all sorts of stuff, really—to design our own reality as we live it. We've ended up using digital technology mostly to preserve the market as we know it rather than invest in a new one. That's led to some real problems. Rather than using technology to extend and expand on what it means to be human, we've used it to lock down a very 20th-century understanding of what it is to be a human being, and to prevent any kind of growth. In terms of identity, digital technology gives us a way to rethink who we want to be and how we want to express ourselves. There's an "anything's possible" quality to a digital world, where you can really write your own story of life. But instead, most of our understanding of self through digital is [obtained] through the different ways in which we track ourselves. We quantify ourselves. That's why they call it the quantified self: You wear all of the various bracelets that track all of your different body parts, and you use Facebook and Google that then do Big Data analysis on you. We end up creating digital files in order to lock ourselves down into certain consumer profiles rather than using the technology to break those open. The digital technology was originally so sexy and cool because it made people unpredictable. … People were presenting themselves in all of these different ways. Now we use digital technology to make people much more predictable.

Q What are the dangers of leading people into certain behaviors with digital technology?

A It's dangerous for people, for companies and for governments alike. It's dangerous for people in that they end up in an always-on, constantly pinged reality. They end up living to catch up with their Twitter feeds and their Facebook news, and all of the e-mails and phone calls, and they don't end up with any time to actually live, to actually be in the present. We live completely reactively, reacting to these technologies. That's really bad for your nervous system. It's a state of constant emergency interruption that only a 911 operator or an air traffic controller used to have to contend with. Now we all live with that all of the time, with the cell phone vibrating every time someone updates or pings or e-mails us, as if it's some emergency. There's this neurological breakdown that happens where we think our cell phone is vibrating in our pocket even though it's on a shelf somewhere far away because we're just always in that state of panic.

If you're a business, it ends up making you less confident in your creative, innovative potential. They have less belief in their ability to author a new reality, a new set of products, a new line, and are much more reactive to the data that's coming. They think of that data as real time: 'We know exactly what people are buying in the store right now, so we can now respond with this marketing campaign or with that product line.' But because you're looking at what's just happened in the store, you're necessarily looking back. Even though it's in the recent history, you're still looking backward. You're driving forward using the rearview mirror as your guide, and when you do that, you limit your creative and your profit potential to variations on history, to what's already happened. You end up incapable of bringing any new ideas to the surface because you're saying that past results are going to dictate our future actions, and that focus on the past is really dangerous.

For governments and nations—and this is the big problem with the Obama administration right now,
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from both sides of the aisle—you end up with an administration that reacts to crises rather than charting a course. There’s no sense of national narrative or goals. What are we about if we don’t know what it is we really want? If we’re just saying, ‘Oh, there’s ISIS, there’s this, there’s that,’ these are all the little bumps. We’re looking at the bumps in the road rather than where the road is taking us.

It would be inappropriate to say, ‘Digital did this, computers did that, iPhones did this and iPads did that.’ It’s not that ‘cause and effect.’ We are living in a digital media environment now, and the environment that we’re living in is as different from the industrial age as the industrial age was from hand craftsmanship in the late Middle Ages. It’s like having been given electricity. When the whole world is maintained or administrated by computers, and when we’re all walking around with computers to take care of our smallest tasks, we end up being shaped and flavored by the underlying biases of the technology, itself. If you choose your restaurant using Yelp rather than using your own understanding of the neighborhood, or the friends that you spoke to or the smells on the street as you’re walking down the block, you’re living in a different world and you’re going to make choices that are determined very differently for you.

Q A lot of your philosophies center around this idea that the traditional story arc is gone, and that storytelling—whether it’s from governments or advertisers—has changed. We used to have long-form commercials with stories and a protagonist, for example. It’s the same for politics, too: There was more of a national identity before computers became prevalent.

A Since the invention of text and theater, we’ve had what we call the Aristotelian story arc, where you create a character that the audience likes and that character makes serious decisions that put him into danger. You reach a climax, a real crisis, and then there’s a turning point—he has a great realization—and then we get to rest. It’s a very goal-oriented story arc. … It’s the way that society has organized itself for the past couple thousand years. It’s the way that our religious narratives work, that you’ll suffer and then be saved. It’s the way that our political narratives work: We’re going to go to war to fight those bad guys, but the ends justify the means and we will win the day.
It’s the shape of all great struggles, even that of Martin Luther King Jr. We keep our eyes on the prize: March with me and we will get there.

It was a great thing and an abused thing, this kind of story arc. It’s the way that so many television commercials once worked: The girl gets the pimple, but by the end of the commercial, just when you think all is lost, she finds the Clearasil and the pimple magically is healed and she can go to the prom. We always had that cathartic release at the end of each one of these journeys. In our digital age … when we watch things at different times than other people, and years later, we binge-watch an entire series in a weekend, we don’t end up as tolerant of that arc. If a storyteller is putting us in too much anxiety, we change the channel. …

When we do watch TV, much of it is this ongoing odyssey format, like Game of Thrones, or a fantasy role-playing video game. You’re no longer watching the protagonist: Now you are the protagonist, making a series of choices in a story that gets more open rather than more closed as it goes along. There is no ending. What does that do when we’re living in a world where that’s our culture? We start looking at other things less narratively, too. It’s impossible for a leader, unless you’re running a cult or a really closed nation, to talk about our great national goals. Obama, or any president, can’t get up there and say, ‘By the end of this year, we will have done this or that.’

In a digital environment, everything becomes much more of a steady, constant problem. Terrorism is not a war that you can win. It’s a chronic problem like hunger or psoriasis. You can’t beat discontent or ongoing problems.

In some ways, it’s a very existential crisis because we have to ask ourselves what it’s all about. What is it all for? What does it all mean? That’s why shows that are popular now are those about a zombie apocalypse. They’re shows that are almost wish fulfillment. You look at The Walking Dead and you think of it as a nightmare, but for a lot of people, that’s now the goal, or at least a novel idea. At least the zombies are slow-moving, and you don’t have to answer the phone anymore. In some ways, it’s a less complicated, less troublesome world. But the questions that they’re asking on those kinds of shows and these bizarre post-apocalyptic movies are the questions of our time: What is this about? What is it for? Why am I here? When you no longer have these great, overarching narratives, like the one where you’ll go to college and get a job and then retire, it’s almost like we’re in that plateau of middle age, where we say, ‘Now what?’

Q Is there room for the traditional narratives anymore? Will we be stuck forever with stories that are either seven seconds long, or never-ending?

A There’s still room for traditional stories. It’s just that we have to almost consciously reintegrate those stories and understand that they’re just one way of seeing the world.

Right now, there aren’t really any of them because we’ve woken up from 2,000 years of it. We were fools. We don’t want to be fooled again in that way, so when the narrative gets broken, whether it’s by 9/11, or the Internet, or the collapse of the economy, we look back and say, ‘Those great narratives of the 20th century, most of them were lies.’ Yeah, Martin Luther King Jr. was cool and I guess Gandhi was cool, but most of these things, like Nazism and communism and capitalism, and all of the ‘isms,’ were all really manipulative stories. Advertisers abused the stories so much that we don’t want to surrender our trust to anyone. We don’t trust the storytellers anymore, except in very few circumstances. Even our movies are all about time travel and moving backward because we don’t want to just go down that single path. But I do think that as we get a little bit more comfortable, or maybe as we get uncomfortable in a purely digital world, we will start to ache again for these more prescriptive narratives and, hopefully, turn to trustworthy storytellers to do it.

Q The Internet has broken down many communication barriers, and chief among them is that we no longer have a filter for our information. We can read anything, anywhere, at any time. Some media theorists use the term ‘filter failure.’ Is the problem that we can’t filter through all of the noise and find a narrative to hold onto?

A ‘Filter failure’ implies that you should just build a better screening mechanism so that you can effectively process all of this stuff coming at you. What I would say is, who cares about this stuff coming at you? The stuff coming at you is their problem, not
yours. If someone e-mails you instead of calling you or coming over and saying something to you, then they've put their message in the official non-urgent pile. They've taken something from real time and they've shoved it into something that's outside time. The whole beauty of e-mail is that it's sitting somewhere until you get to it. …

Digital technology is desperate and needy by nature. It's all of these packets and nuggets flying at you. If you're going to dip into it all, understand what it really is: It's people barking orders, and that's the nature of the technology. People won't tell you what you truly mean to them through digital media because that's not what it's for. The problem is not one of information overload. It's not too much stuff coming at you. It's us trying to be in too many places at once. You can't be present on text, Facebook, Twitter and e-mail, and present with the people in the room all at the same time. When you try to maintain these multiple instances of yourself, in parallel, that's what I'm calling 'digi-frenia.' It's what a parallel processor can do. That's what digital technology is really good at: doing more than one thing at a time. …

Digital technology, by its very nature, asks us to work on more than one thing, and be more than one thing at the same time, because that's what it does. The problem is that people can't do that. We can't multitask. Every experiment that's been done shows that we don't do it well, even if we think we're doing it well. We read less deeply, we have less memory, we have shorter memory and less understanding when we do things at the same time than when we do them individually. Even if we subjectively believe that we've been more productive during that time, we've been less productive. And that's OK because we're not computers. We're people. We've been imposing technology on humanity rather than imposing humanity on technology, so we end up limiting ourselves, our businesses and our ways of interacting to the ways that computers interact instead of extending the ways that we can interact through digital technology.

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Q What about digital media, advertisers and communicators, in general, trying to reach people online? Like you said, they have to be everywhere rather than have a larger, cohesive message. Is there a way to create a cohesive message anymore?

A There is, but the really scary part is that it requires the business or the brand to actually create value for consumers. Broadcast technology was really good for communicating myths about brands. The fictional reality of the Keebler elves in the hollow tree was really good TV. It doesn’t work as well in a digital media environment, where your storytelling has to at least be based somewhere in something more attributional about the cookie or the chocolate, or where it’s made, the manufacturing process or the culture around it. It’s got to have something to do with a foothold in reality. … You create a genuine culture around it. [In digital marketing,] you can’t just use branding as a way of camouflaging the reality of the product from the public.

A lot of branding was originally a way to hide the realities of industrial factory manufacturing from the public. You want to imagine your food coming from these nice farms when it’s actually coming from industrial agriculture, so you invent the Jolly Green Giant and his world to substitute for the real one. The Keebler elves substitute for the factory. The Quaker on the box of oats substitutes for the fact that you’re not buying your oats from the local mill anymore. That was the beauty of the way that radio and television could mass-market brands in a one-way medium to people, in a way that obfuscated the industrial reality.

Now we’re in a place where digital media technology has to communicate the truth of how things are made. This is why Pepsi works on zero-emissions factories, why Apple has to stop using slave labor in China, why GM developed Saturn, where people went to the factory and met the workers. In a social media universe, your employees are your communicators; the walls around your company go down. What you have to do, if you’re going to develop a media strategy that’s appropriate for a digital media environment, as a marketer, you’re going to have to work with the company to create a reality that’s worthy of the digital realm, that’s worthy of being looked at. The world is going to see your operations whether you like it or not, and they’re going to care about your operations, so you might as well turn what you do into your story. Then it’s so much easier to communicate. …

A marketer’s role is to go to CEOs and … help them determine what their competitive advantage is. Help them figure out what their actual story as a company is. What do they provide? Where are they going? How do they want to get better? How do they want to make the world a better place? Then help them tell that non-fiction story to the real world. It’s that hard and that easy.