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Douglas Rushkoff Questions Technology



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Douglas Rushkoff, a professor of media studies at CUNY's Queens College, says of technology: "There's an appropriate use of these really powerful tools."

By Sarah Brown | APRIL 10, 2016

Douglas Rushkoff doesn't mince words about how technology, in his view, has been wrongly manipulated over the past two decades to fit the needs of a voracious stock market. But while he's often labeled a cybercritic, he's careful to qualify that description.

Credited with coining the terms "viral media" and "digital native," Mr. Rushkoff, 55, is a professor of media studies at Queens College of the City University of New York and a public intellectual. He says he isn't a critic of technology itself, or its potential, and in fact is especially excited about the role that massive open online courses, or MOOCs, can play in higher education. "They can take the burden off of real colleges becoming trade schools," he says. "We can say, Oh, you just want to learn to do that? Do a MOOC!"

The core problem with technology is twofold, Mr. Rushkoff argues. First, the structure of the current digital economy is centered on infinite growth — a principle he doesn't believe to be sustainable. The prevailing mind-set among digital-technology pioneers now is to create and expand companies, no matter the cost, and then sell them quickly for 10-figure sums, not to make them sustainable or benefit their workers, he says.

Second, those companies exercise an outsize degree of control over society, he says. "When you strap a device to somebody that's going to ping and vibrate every time a company wants your attention, you're living in a state of perpetual emergency

interruption," he says. "We lose the ability to think critically of the world around us."

"The classroom," he adds, "is one of the few places where we get to sit and look in each other's eyes and actually speak with one another."

Mr. Rushkoff remembers exactly when his fears about technology companies were forever stoked. It was August 9, 1995, the day Netscape made its initial public offering and set off the first dot-com boom — or, in Mr. Rushkoff's words, "the original moment when the civic and human potential of the Internet was sacrificed to the financial hopes of a dying Wall Street."

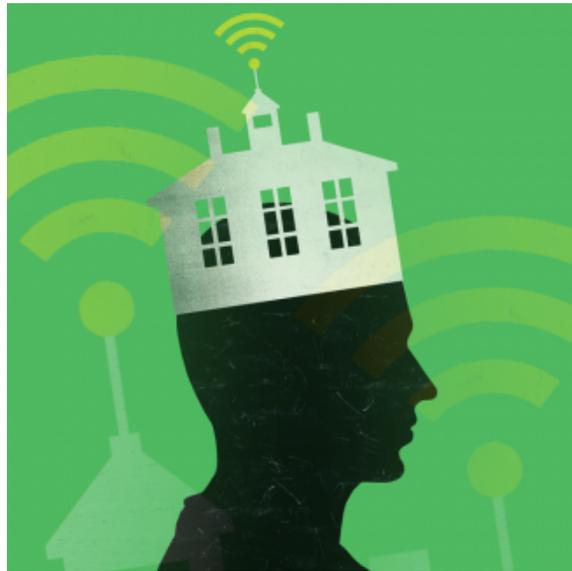
The original Internet was really developed by educators and not corporate interests, Mr. Rushkoff says. But after Netscape went public, the idea of infinite growth online gained increasing traction, he says.

Not even the dot-com crash of 1999 could quell the temptation of investors and profits.

"We've applied technology to the needs of the market," he says. He stresses, though, that "it's not the technology's fault. It's where and how we implement it." For instance, using technology to flip courses could help improve conventional teaching. "There's an appropriate use of these really powerful tools."

“The smartphone doesn't just sit

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economy for years, and has written 10 books on the subject. (His latest is *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus: How Growth Became the Enemy of Prosperity*.) Robert W. McChesney, a

professor of communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, often assigns them in his courses. Mr. Rushkoff "has never taken his cues" from outside groups or people within academe, says Mr. McChesney, who's also a media critic. Mr. Rushkoff's work reflects "a sense of independence and integrity and accessibility that much academic writing does not have," he says.

Mr. Rushkoff was called to academe only recently, earning a Ph.D. in 2012 from Utrecht University, in the Netherlands. He joined the faculty at Queens, where many students are first generation, low income, or immigrants, in 2014. He brought new-media expertise to a department that had been more traditional, says Richard Maxwell, chair of the media-studies department and a self-described political economist of media.

Both scholars believe academe has a critical role to play in debates over technology's influence. Scholars can show people the unseen parts of technology, Mr. Rushkoff says, such as controversial questions surrounding smartphones. "The smartphone doesn't just sit in your pocket," he says. "It creates a social, cognitive, economic, and political environment around itself." He asks: Where do its materials come from? Who's paying for it? What kind of energy is it using? Who are the company's real customers?

One of Mr. Rushkoff's tougher tasks involves emboldening his students to question the value of social media, particularly Facebook. He encourages them to examine how the company makes money. That process should help show them, he says, "that Facebook is not your friend."

Hoping to inspire students to explore such questions, Mr. Rushkoff helped start a master's program in media studies at Queens last year that he says differs from many other media-studies programs. "There are places you can go to be a media-reception scholar," he says, referring to academics who "read the media" and draw conclusions based on such observations, "or learn how to make apps and sell them to Google or

Yahoo and get your money. But who is thinking about Team Human?" he asks. "Who is thinking about how tools and technology are impacting who we are, and how we can use them to pursue social justice?"

He pauses when asked if he's optimistic about the future of technology. "I know what we can do," he says, describing an idealistic vision for a reformed digital economy that distributes value to workers and consumers instead of extracting it from them in the name of profits. "We'll get there one way or another."

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