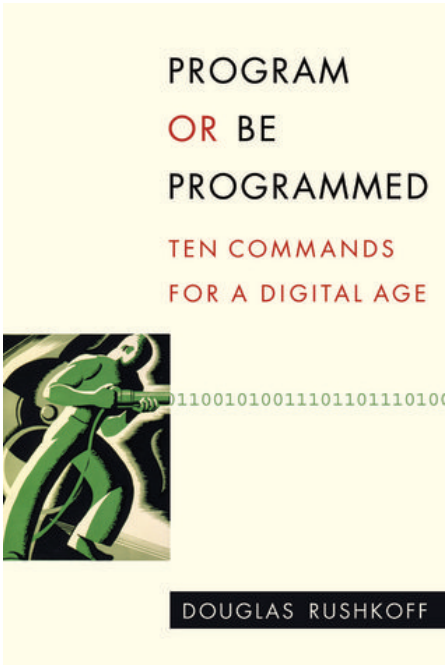

Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age

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The debate over whether the Net is good or bad for us fills the airwaves and the blogosphere. But for all the heat of claim and counter-claim, the argument is essentially beside the point: it's here; it's everywhere. The real question is, do we direct technology, or do we let ourselves be directed by it and those who have mastered it? "Choose the former," writes Rushkoff, "and you gain access to the control panel of civilization. Choose the latter, and it could be the last real choice you get to make." In ten chapters, composed of ten "commands" accompanied by original illustrations from comic artist Leland Purvis, Rushkoff provides cyberenthusiasts and technophobes alike with the guidelines to navigate this new universe.

In this spirited, accessible poetics of new media, Rushkoff picks up where Marshall McLuhan left off, helping readers come to recognize programming as the new literacy of the digital age—and as a template through which to see beyond social conventions and power structures that have vexed us for centuries. This is a friendly little book with a big and actionable message.

World-renowned media theorist and counterculture figure Douglas Rushkoff is the originator of ideas such as "viral media," "social currency" and "screenagers." He has been at the forefront of digital society from its beginning, correctly predicting the rise of the net, the dotcom boom and bust, as well as the current financial crisis. He is a familiar voice on NPR, face on PBS, and writer in publications from Discover Magazine to the New York Times.

"Douglas Rushkoff is one of the great thinkers—and writers—of our time." —Timothy Leary

"Rushkoff is damn smart. As someone who understood the digital revolution faster and better than almost anyone, he shows how the internet is a social transformer that should change the way your business culture operates." —Walter Isaacson

Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age Details

Date	:	Published November 1st 2010 by OR Books
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From Reader Review Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age for online ebook

Ashley says

In this book Douglas Rushkoff not only discusses what it means to be a participant in this new, fast-paced digital world, but he also outlines ten rules (or "commandments" as he calls them) for for us to use so we don't get swept off our feet in media streams. Rushkoff takes his time delving into the possible repercussions of Time, Place, Choice, Complexity, Scale, Identity, Social, Fact, Openness, and Purpose.

Rushkoff begins his chapter by defining what he calls the "computer biases" concerning each of the ten aspects of dealing with digital media. With Place, for example, "digital media are biased away from the local, and toward dislocation." He then discusses both the benefits and disadvantages of each of the computer biases.

I really like Rushkoff's style of discussing each of the ten commandments of digital media. I appreciate how he presents both the good and bad in each aspect. I think a lot of people become one sided in the debate over the how good/bad the Internet is for its users, but Rushkoff tries to steer clear of that. Rather, he invests his time in trying to help readers understand how to stay on top of digital media so they don't become overwhelmed. There are times when his reasoning becomes convoluted, but his tone stays very upbeat and engaging.

Cori says

I'm not sure what I expected of this book, but it was less technical then I thought it was going to be. It is a quick read with a number of thoughtful anecdotes. Some of the "commands" seemed like etiquette lessons for a digital age, but overall I thought the book was insightful.

I found the last two commands, Openness and Purpose, the most interesting. If his motivation for writing this book was to spark more of an interest in programming he has succeeded with me!

One of his strongest points was, "...while Renaissance kings maintained their monopoly over the printing presses by force, today's elite is depending on little more than our own disinterest." He explains that learning the basics of programming is not as difficult as most people expect. Once you gain a better understanding you would have a different perspective when interacting with digital technologies.

The essential reading list at the end of the book also offers some good references to dig deeper into this topic. This book just scratches the surface, and I feel motivated to learn more.

Tamas Kalman says

A thought-provoking starting with a much more conservative approach as a resolution. I'd love to see more futuristic and modern approaches to resolve the challenges which are segmented in this book instead of

trying to eliminate these problems which in my eyes aren't really problems but challenges and options which we can adapt and use for our own development and purposes. Although this book can be useful for anyone who is new to these subjects and might be even inspirational.

Diana says

Such important ideas and insights in this little book. (Also many typos.) (Also the newer cover is much less hideous.)

Pam says

The ideas in this book are 5 star worthy though the execution a 3 but the ideas are very important, so worth the read. Each of us as well as humanity need to have a deliberate relationship with technology, Rushkoff argues. Let us be clear Rushkoff is no crackpot he is degreed, learned, and thoughtful (his bio - http://www.rushkoff.com/about/). He definitively makes the argument that the debate over the societal value of the internet and technology is irrelevant (he states the obvious, “it is here to stay so move on,” in such a way that should convince even the spiritual descendants of the Luddites), Rushkoff raises the more important question of do we direct technology or be controlled by those who master technology and the technology itself? “Choose the former, and you gain access to the control panel of civilization. Choose the latter, and it could be the last real choice you get to make.” A bit dire and seemingly over dramatic, Rushkoff proceeds to develop a well argued position that indeed we are not looking at the opportunity with enough self awareness. There are a number of substantial points that Rushkoff discusses and actually calls out in an article that I found to be just as benefical as the book for those that don’t have the desire or time to read the book (http://www.shareable.net/blog/program...
Every time humans acquired a new technology they had a dual nature both passive and active: “When human beings acquired language, we learned not just how to listen but how to speak. When we gained literacy, we learned not just how to read but how to write. And as we move into an increasingly digital reality, we must learn not just how to use programs but how to make them.”
Though the evolution of digital technology seems to be a natural progression built on previous innovations, it is significantly different: “Computers and networks are more than mere tools: They are like living things, themselves. Unlike a rake, a pen, or even a jackhammer, a digital technology is programmed. This means it comes with instructions not just for its use, but also for itself. And as such technologies come to characterize the future of the way we live and work, the people programming them take on an increasingly important role in shaping our world and how it works. After that, it’s the digital technologies themselves that will be shaping our world, both with and without our explicit cooperation.”
Our future has tremendous possibilities: “Just as words gave people the ability to pass on knowledge for what we now call civilization, networked activity could soon o?er us access to shared thinking—an extension of consciousness still inconceivable to most of us today. The operating principles of commerce and culture—from supply and demand to command and control—could conceivably give way to an entirely more engaged, connected, and collaborative mode of participation.”
Technology provides disruption and wields unexpected drawbacks: ”Educators who looked forward to accessing the world’s bounty of information for their lessons are faced with students who believe that ?nding an answer on Wikipedia is the satisfactory ful?llment of an inquiry. Parents who believed their kids would intuitively multitask their way to professional success are now concerned those same kids are losing the ability to focus on any one thing...Young people who saw in social networks a way to rede?ne themselves

and their allegiances across formerly sacrosanct boundaries are now conforming to the logic of social networking pro?les and ?nding themselves the victims of marketers and character assassination. Bankers who believed that digital entrepreneurship would revive a sagging industrial age economy are instead ?nding it impossible to generate new value through capital investment. A news media that saw in information networks new opportunities for citizen journalism and responsive, twenty-four-hour news gathering has grown sensationalist, unprofitable, and devoid of useful facts.Educated laypeople who saw in the net a new opportunity for amateur participation in previously cordoned-o? sectors of media and society instead see the indiscriminate mashing and mixing up of pretty much everything, in an environment where the loud and lewd drown out anything that takes more than a few moments to understand. Social and community organizers who saw in social media a new, safe way for people to gather, voice their opinions, and e?ect bottom-up change are often recoiling at the way networked anonymity breeds mob behavior, merciless attack, and thoughtless responses. A society that looked at the Internet as a path toward highly articulated connections and new methods of creating meaning is instead ?nding itself disconnected, denied deep thinking, and drained of enduring values. Faced with a networked future that seems to favor the distracted over the focused, the automatic over the considered, and the contrary over the compassionate, it's time to press the pause button and ask what all this means to the future of our work, our lives, and even our species."

We know technology is here to stay and we don't want to keep perpetuating the negative aspects of digital living, so Rushkoff suggests to affect significant control over technology, we first have to understand that THINKING is different: "thinking itself is no longer—at least no longer exclusively—a personal activity. It's something happening in a new, networked fashion...while computers are free to network and think in more advanced ways than we ever will."

We must engage differently both individually and collectively: "Interior life, such as it is, began in the Axial Age and was then only truly recognized as late as the Renaissance. It is a construction that has served its role in getting us this far, but must be loosened to include entirely new forms of collective and extra-human activity." Rushkoff emphatically states he does not see humans as a hive species, but cautions resisting, ignoring, or opting out of this networked, digital future is to lose out.

Humans have experience with ground-shifting transformations (we are talking about change that allows humans a completely different perspective that results with a transformative way of relating to and interacting with the world) numerous times in the past. "Language led to shared learning, cumulative experience, and the possibility for progress. The alphabet led to accountability...and contractual law. The printing press and private reading led to a new experience of individuality, a personal relationship to God, the Protestant Reformation, human rights, and the Enlightenment. With the advent of a new medium, the status quo not only comes under scrutiny; it is revised and rewritten by those who have gained new access to the tools of its creation."

Each time our ability to capitalize on the situation has fallen short and limited benefits only to a small elite: "The Axial Age invention of the twenty-two-letter alphabet did not lead to a society of literate Israelite readers, but a society of hearers, who would gather in the town square to listen to the Torah scroll read to them by a rabbi. Yes, it was better than being ignorant slaves, but it was a result far short of the medium's real potential. Likewise, the invention of the printing press in the Renaissance led not to a society of writers but one of readers; except for a few cases, access to the presses was reserved, by force, for the use of those already in power. Broadcast radio and television were really just extensions of the printing press: expensive, one-to-many media that promote the mass distribution of the stories and ideas of a small elite at the center. We don't make TV; we watch it. Computers and networks ?nally o?er us the ability to write. And we do write with them on our websites, blogs, and social networks."

What we are missing and not capitalizing on currently with technology is just as limiting: "The underlying capability of the computer era is actually programming—which almost none of us knows how to do. We simply use the programs that have been made for us, and enter our text in the appropriate box on the screen. We teach kids how to use software to write, but not how to write software. This means they have access to the capabilities given to them by others, but not the power to determine the value-creating capabilities of

these technologies for themselves. Like the participants of media revolutions before our own, we have embraced the new technologies and literacies of our age without actually learning how they work and work on us."

Rushkoff concludes we are woefully lacking control of our own destiny: "And so we, too, remain one step behind the capability actually being o?ered us. Only an elite—sometimes a new elite, but an elite nonetheless—gains the ability to fully exploit the new medium on o?er. The rest learn to be satis?ed with gaining the ability o?ered by the last new medium. The people hear while the rabbis read; the people read while those with access to the printing press write; today we write, while our techno-elite programs. As a result, most of society remains one full dimensional leap of awareness and capability behind the few who manage to monopolize access to the real power of any media age."

We lack self awareness about what the opportunities are and instead focus on the wrong things: "We don't celebrate the human stars of this medium, the way we marveled at the stars of radio, ?lm, or television; we are mesmerized instead by the screens and touchpads themselves...Instead of pursuing new abilities, we fetishize new toys...Meanwhile, we tend to think less about how to integrate new tools into our lives than about how simply to keep up...Newspapers go online less because they want to than because they think they have to—and with largely disastrous results. Likewise, elementary school boards adopt "laptop" curriculums less because they believe that they'll teach better than because they fear their students will miss out on something if they don't. We feel proud that we're willing to do or spend whatever it takes to use this stu?—with little regard to how it actually impacts our lives."

We are headed to a world where we extend human agency through external tools that can think independent of us: "The strategies we have developed to cope with new mediating technologies in the past will no longer serve us—however similar in shape the computing revolution may appear to previous reckonings with future shock. For instance, the unease pondering what it might mean to have some of our thinking done out of body by an external device is arguably just a computer-era version of the challenges to self-image or "proprioception" posed by industrial machinery. The industrial age challenged us to rethink the limits of the human body: Where does my body end and the tool begin? The digital age challenges us to rethink the limits of the human mind: What are the boundaries of my cognition? And while machines once replaced and usurped the value of human labor, computers and networks do more than usurp the value of human thought. They not only copy our intellectual processes—our repeatable programs—but they also discourage our more complex processes—our higher order cognition, contemplation, innovation, and meaning making that should be the reward of "outsourcing" our arithmetic to silicon chips in the ?rst place."

How to get on top of situation is to have a solid understanding and say in how these devices are designed or programmed. Hence the need to program or be programmed: "Back in the earliest days of personal computing, we may not have understood how our calculators worked, but we understood exactly what they were doing for us: adding one number to another, ?nding a square root, and so on. With computers and networks, unlike our calculators, we don't even know what we are asking our machines to do, much less how they are going to go about doing it. Every Google search is—at least for most of us—a Hail Mary pass into the datasphere, requesting something from an opaque black box. How does it know what is relevant? How is it making its decisions? Why can't the corporation in charge tell us? And we have too little time to consider the consequences of not knowing everything we might like to about our machines. As our own obsolescence looms, we continue to accept new technologies into our lives with little or no understanding of how these devices work and work on us. We do not know how to program our computers, nor do we care. We spend much more time and energy trying to ?gure out how to use them to program one another instead. And this is potentially a grave mistake."

We are hurtled forward on this technological tsunami and in danger of losing meaning if we don't stop and develop a new template to guide us: "No matter the breadth of its capabilities, the net will not bestow upon humans the fuel or space we need to wrestle with its implications and their meaning. We are aware of the many problems engendered by the digital era. What is called for now is a human response to the evolution of these technologies all around us. We are living in a di?erent world than the one we grew up in—one even

more profoundly di?erent than the world of the alphabet was from the oral society that existed for millennia before it. That changing society codi?ed what was happening to it through the Torah and eventually the Talmud, preparing people to live in a textual age. Like they did, we need to codify the changes we are undergoing, and develop a new ethical, behavioral, and business template through which to guide us. Only this time it must actually work. We are living through a real shift—one that has already crashed our economy twice, changed the way we educate and entertain ourselves, and altered the very fabric of human relationships. Yet, so far, we have very little understanding of what is happening to us and how to cope. Most of the smart folks who could help us are too busy consulting to corporations—teaching them how to maintain their faltering monopolies in the face of the digital tsunami. Who has time to consider much else, and who is going to pay for it?"

There are many biases (tendencies to think or lean a certain way) and in the digital age those biases must be deliberately reviewed and consciously adopted, modified, or rejected: "It may be true that "guns don't kill people, people kill people"; but guns are a technology more biased to killing than, say, clock radios. Televisions are biased toward people sitting still in couches and watching. Automobiles are biased toward motion, individuality, and living in the suburbs. Oral culture is biased toward communicating in person, while written culture is biased toward communication that doesn't happen between people in the same time and place. Film photography and its expensive processes were biased toward scarcity, while digital photography is biased toward immediate and widespread distribution. Some cameras even upload photos to websites automatically, turning the click of the shutter into an act of global publishing. To most of us, though, that "click" still feels the same, even though the results are very di?erent. We can't quite feel the biases shifting as we move from technology to technology, or task to task. Writing an email is not the same as writing a letter, and sending a message through a social networking service is not the same as writing an email. Each of the acts not only yields di?erent results, but demands di?erent mind-sets and approaches from us. Just as we think and behave di?erently in di?erent settings, we think and behave di?erently when operating di?erent technology. Only by understanding the biases of the media through which we engage with the world can we differentiate between what we intend, and what the machines we're using intend for us—whether they or their programmers even know it."

Jen Jen says

Some really excellent considerations here, as we continue to move into the digital age.

Dani says

First of all, I had to read this book for a communications course and I wasn't expecting to enjoy it, so perhaps I was already biased. (I did love the course, though, so maybe that evens it out? Oh well, irrelevant.)

Overall, I thought that Rushkoff made his point in each chapter within just a few sentences, and the rest was all just fluff. He seemed to write the same things over and over again, just using different words. The book wasn't long by any means, but it definitely could have been much shorter and nothing important would've been lost. Additionally, I felt that his ideas were nothing new, and I remember thinking that only a few of his "Ten Commands" were actually applicable or at all useful.

The book provided for interesting class discussions, however, so that's why I gave it the second star. If not for the book, the great discussions wouldn't have occurred, so there's my reasoning. Otherwise, *Program or*

Be Programmed would only have received one star from me. I didn't hate it. I'm **indifferent** about it, and that's why *Program or Be Programmed* deserves one star: it couldn't stir up ANY reaction in me whatsoever.

Nick says

As someone who is primarily interested in social media's influence on us, the chapters 'Time' (Do not always be on), 'Place' (Live in person) and 'Complexity' (You are never completely right) really struck a chord. However, I found the other chapters thought provoking for aspects of the digital age that I haven't much explored or thought about.

However I take issue with Rushkoff's main point: Learn coding to throw off the shackles of the oppressor and shape the narrative of the digital age to best suit your needs. Progress from user/consumer of technology to hacker/coder.

However, I'm not convinced that we know what our 'needs' are or how to achieve them using this technology. And so for me this distinction is not so radical. I will simply transition from having a technology done 'on' me of indeterminate impact on my wellbeing, to 'doing' a technology myself of indeterminate impact on my wellbeing. But I suppose that is a step forward.

Jan says

Insightful and deep reflection on the way we could/should evolve our behaviour to maintain control of the digital evolution. The principles are here, but read the book:
TIME — Do Not Be "Always On"
PLACE — Live in Person
CHOICE — You May Always Choose "None of the Above"
COMPLEXITY — You Are Never Completely Right
SCALE — One Size Does Not Fit All
IDENTITY — Be Yourself
SOCIAL — Do Not Sell Your Friends
FACT — Tell the Truth
OPENNESS — Share, Don't Steal
PURPOSE — Program or Be Programmed

Rob says

Right from the first page, Douglas Rushkoff's book *Program or Be Programmed* reminded me of Nicholas Carr's, *The Shallows* [1] -- only with a broader scope and more buzzwords and a less gloomy appraisal of the subject. I read *The Shallows* last year, and though it was interesting, it was also overly dramatic, and was too timid in its speculations -- and thus it failed to draw fully-baked conclusions or make substantive predictions. We walk away with Carr's Neural Doomsday:

The price we pay to assume technology's power is alienation.

Rushkoff dives into a lot of the same territory as Carr. They both discuss (and not wholly favorably) the optimistic futurists that long for the infinite memory of their "outboard brain[s]", those same futurists that assume that our cybernetic evolution will (through technology) give us powers that are indistinguishable from telepathy. On the flip of super-human memory and super-human emotion/intelligence-sharing, both Carr and Rushkoff talk about the flavor of hyper-facile "breadth-only/depth-never" searches that are encouraged by the very design of systems like Google and Wikipedia. This is where we start to see differences in their approaches to the subject though: Carr sees us as being "reprogrammed" by those systems to think in a specific and narrow way; meanwhile, Rushkoff points to those systems and says that what's happening is us bending to the *bias* of the machine, instead of taking advantage of those machine biases to do for us what is otherwise difficult or repetitive or time-consuming. Rushkoff's argument is similar to Carr's but subtly and importantly different -- he is not quick to cast off these powerful and seductive tools, but instead urges us to remember that they are simply a means through which to achieve our ultimate goals, which are really about meaningful contact with other human beings. If going head-to-head, I'm sure that Carr would cite McLuhan and accuse Rushkoff of making David Sarnoff's argument, placing all of the blame on the consumer. On the surface, this would seem true; after all, isn't Rushkoff imploring us in the title to take control by learning the fundamental means of production for digital content?

As I disagreed with Carr on this before, I disagree with him now. Rushkoff is not naïve in invoking neuroplasticity [2] here. He wisely points out that the reason we assume the shape of "the machine's" biases is because it is convenient to do so, and in large part it is convenient because the masters of those machines have made it that way. Rushkoff cites how American pedagogy looks at computer literacy through the lens of usage and consumption -- "how do you enter data into last year's version of Excel?" instead of "how would you go about designing a data aggregation and analytics engine on your own?" Rushkoff goes beyond that to point out that even the language around the simple act of installing software ("the Wizard" in Windows) is constructed to mystify and obfuscate it behind abstractions -- and that is to say nothing of the mechanism itself. He does not damn all creators of software [3], but he does point the finger in that direction. So what Rushkoff is saying is not that those machine biases are bad [4] -- but that our approach to learning and interacting with those systems is flawed, and in part that is an incidental conspiracy on the part of those creators to feed what *they* want into those systems. But... re-enter neuroplasticity -- the brain mechanism that causes us to take the shape of those machine biases is also the same one responsible for the kind of technological re-appropriation that William Gibson often talks about [5] -- and that's enough of an argument to say that we can and often do "snap out of it" and shape the tools to our desires and needs.

That technological re-appropriation is in the spirit of the type of New Media Literacy that Rushkoff would have us learn, and which Carr seems to mention only obliquely and incompletely and perhaps a bit timorously. To Rushkoff, "the new literacy" -- as mentioned above -- is woefully insufficient. Learning "spreadsheet skills" [6] like data-entry and copy/paste and sorting/filtering is ultimately just cranking out more consumers (albeit spreadsheet consumers) and is not encouraging creativity or even thoughtfulness. As a consequence, the lessons learned for our un-fun software become the same lessons for our fun/social [7] software -- we graze from them, we engage shallowly with those systems, and since we use those systems to mediate our social connections, then those interactions become increasingly shallow as well.

Once again, we have Rushkoff's theses dovetailing with Carr's. They both assert that taking the shape of the machine's bias puts you at a disadvantage, that you wind up fetishizing the gadgets themselves instead of putting them to work for you. But Carr offers us his ditch-digger analogy [8] and stops coyly and obliquely

short -- abstaining from any speculation on how we might save ourselves. Meanwhile, Rushkoff comes right out and delivers a proposed salvation in the form of an ultimatum: "Program or be programmed." [9] But that ultimatum is just a stand-in or metaphor for something else: "Think, synthesize, and create -- don't just consume."

There is a great deal more than just the above going on Rushkoff's book. I've focused on these items because it makes a great (and significantly more positive) companion piece to Nicholas Carr's book. [10] But Rushkoff discusses more than just "machine biases" and "spreadsheet skills"; he talks about identity and anonymity, about factuality and openness, about nuance... He talks coherently and passionately about a great many things in the span of 150 pages. [11] And he delivers these points in such a way that anyone can read them, that anyone can process them and act on them. He wants you to act on these "commands". And for all of my minor criticisms [12], I would want you to read and act on these "commands" as well.

1: My review is here on Goodreads.

2: Carr also invokes neuroplasticity in his text, but he sees it as dooming us to forever mutate into impulse-driven click-hungry meat-terminals for machine masters. (Okay, that is maybe going a little too far into what I perceive to be the spirit of his text...)

3: Mostly Rushkoff is just damning the commercial creators. He seems to have kind words for free/open source software (FOSS) developers, and the FOSS movement on the whole. And/but that said, I was a little surprised that he didn't jump in and link this "abstractions" business up with how developers are (by and large) lazy -- inasmuch as "lazy" developers are "lazy" because they are not interested in re-solving solved problems unless those problems are worth re-solving. (Did that make sense?)

4: In a way, he argues that these biases are essential -- that the machines are designed to compensate for things that we (as human beings) do not do well, and/or do not *like* to do.

5: Check out William Gibson's remarks about pagers in this interview in *The Paris Review*.

6: My term, not his -- though I wish it was his.

7: Though I almost didn't stick "social" in there, since Rushkoff believes that all software is social, since "the point" of all software is to connect users to other users, people to other people, to enable sharing between them and strengthen social bonds. Like the digital equivalent of primates grooming each other?

8: In case you didn't read it yourself, I'll summarize the ditch-digger analogy as follows: "Is it better to dig a longer and wider ditch in half the time with your steam shovel if it means that your muscles atrophy as a consequence?"

9: Although, let's be honest here -- there isn't much real/actual discussion of *programming* until the very end of the text. And even then, it's only really few pages in the last chapter and then a page or two of references in the bibliography.

10: ...which I recommend despite despising it.

11: Screw it, here are the ten "commands" from the table of contents:

(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) **Scale** - 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

And as a brief side note there: after reading the chapter on "Choice", I felt surprised that Rushkoff's "Essential Reading" section did *not* include Sheena Iyengar's *The Art of Choosing* . But I suppose that they *did* come out at about the same time...

12: And there were a few... I could have done without some of the lurid buzz-wordy passages; and they could have done another editorial pass (some of the sentences seemed to be missing... an important verb or two); and he sometimes flubbed certain scientific elements... but it's all water under the bridge in light of his central thesis and commitment to the subject matter.

Kim Pallister says

I headed into Douglas Rushkoff's book expecting it to like it. I've read some of his writing and find I agree with some of his major ideas. As the title of the book implies, it centers around the idea that the more of our lives we place in the hands of technology, the more important it is that we understand how the underlying tech works, and if necessary, be capable of changing it.

However, I was quite disappointed with the book. While some of his ideas are along the right lines, he sort of circles around them without directly nailing most of them. Worse still, many of his analogies are broken

For example, he makes an analogy to automobiles, comparing ignorant users of tech to being passengers rather than drivers. I'd say a better analogy would be to say that it's more like drivers who know how an automobile works are more likely to make better use of the car, better able to converse with their mechanic, etc.

Other analogies are just plain wrong. For example, he compares digital audio to analog audio recording, making the point that digital is a quantized, and thus poor, copy of the original, while analog is an exact copy. However, analog recording is full of it's own errors and approximations. Ultimately BOTH are a copy of the original, each with their own flaws, thus 'going digital' doesn't necessarily cause a problem, and ultimately it's important to understand both.

More annoying still, is that he stretches many of his analogies too far, as many books tend to do.

Finally, he doesn't really offer a prescription of any kind. Unlike better works like Jonathan Zittrain's book, which at least attempt to offer some suggested tactics and possible solutions, Rushkoff's book just rants about the problems and doesn't offer any paths out for most of them.

I gave it 2 stars as it at least gets the problem statement right, but I'd recommend skipping it, or at the very least complementing with something like Zittrain's "The Future of the Internet"

Marc Weidenbaum says

This book definitely makes more sense when read alongside the recent ones by Kevin Kelly and by Jaron Lanier. Like them, it's something of a correction on the tech-evangelism that has marked much of its author's earlier works. If Lanier's is a rangy diatribe, and Kelly's a concertedly developed argument, Rushkoff's is a list: it's 10 ideas, laid out plainly for a common reader. The last of these 10 ideas ("commands," a joke on the 10 commandments), the one from which the book takes its title, is the important one. The title pretty much says it all: in a world that is mediated increasingly by software, our lives are in many ways affected by the decision-making of the people who program the software. People who don't program are, in effect, to some degree or another, at the mercy of those who do. The answer? Learn to program. It sounds simplistic, and to some extent it is, but demystifying programming (it's not rocket science; it's the math equivalent of writing intelligently) is a valuable lesson.

Eric Phetteplace says

Rushkoff gives a concise & accessible introduction to so many issues of our digital era, from filter bubbles to social media to copyright. The book offers several commandments for living a healthier life & taking advantage of computers. In sum, ways to make computers useful to you rather than bending to their will. It would make us a better society if everyone was forced to read it in junior high.
All of that said, I found some of Rushkoff's contentions a bit strained (the fact that binary data can be represented as series of 1s & 0s doesn't mean that computers, as opposed to the analog world, are somehow innately inclined to making choices). The first citations appear about halfway through the book, long after some of the most questionable statements. I'd be OK with just no citations–the book isn't academic & wouldn't be as effective if it was–but don't go halfway & cite some things while leaving so much unsupported. I also wished the last section, on actually learning programming, was better emphasized. The book is more oriented towards software use than software design; at least presenting a few fundamental concepts, like variables or control flow, might have helped explain the power & appeal of programming to the uninitiated, who are left only with vague adumbrations of what it means to code at the end of the book.

Eiki says

Dear God this is an awful book: obvious, tedious, puffed up with empty words and self-importance. If "Ten Commands for a Digital Age" sounds like the title of a blog post to you, that's because it should have been one: there's just about enough ideas and specific examples here to sustain a longish blog post, no more.

Reading this short-but-not-short-enough book in its entirety has been like chewing through a loaf of damp white-bread trying to get to one tasty chocolate chip buried in the middle. I think I only did it for the somewhat novel experience of plowing through and finishing such a relentlessly windy book when all my instincts were telling me to put it down forever.

If you want a short read that addresses similar topics in a far livelier fashion, try In the Beginning...was the

Command Line. Although out-of-date compared with Rushkoff, Stephenson doesn't waste words and he doesn't dumb down his material; you might actually learn something from him.

Stephany Wilkes says

First, the good. Rushkoff makes important points, and I thought the best were made in the final chapter that bears the title of the book. Rushkoff breathes new life into the importance of controlling the means of production. Unlike other tools (the woodworking hand tools and knitting needles of which I am so very fond, for instance) software is programmed. Well, obviously. But this matters because programming is a process; the code we use in the form of software is the end result of a particular sequence of logic, a pattern of thinking that we follow without even realizing it and, unlike other tools, patterns that most of us cannot modify. There's a lot of conformity in an environment that gives us the illusion of choice and independence.

I appreciate the fact that Rushkoff is one of the few voices pointing out that knowing how to use Facebook or send text messages is NOT digital literacy. If you don't know how to write code, you're not digitally literate. Rushkoff makes this point through strong stories. Here's an excerpt of one of them:

"One of the US Air Force generals charged with building and protecting the Global Information Grid has a problem: recruitment. As the man in charge of many of the Air Force’s coolest computer toys, he has no problem attracting kids who want to ?y drones, shoot lasers from satellites, or steer missiles into Persian Gulf terrorist camps from the safety of Shreveport. They’re lining up for those assignments. No, the general’s challenge is ?nding kids capable of programming these weapons systems—or even having the education, inclination, and mental discipline required to begin learning programming from scratch."

The chapter titled "You Are Never Completely Right" is another strong one. I think never being completely right is a wonderful thing, but Rushkoff points out how it can result in a reduction of complexity. The desire for a reduction of complexity is in evidence in U.S. culture, the "I'll believe what I want to believe, evidence be damned, because there's so much evidence on all sides I'll just pick the one I like."

The book also contains more common things we hear a lot of. Rushkoff says to not be always on, to be more present rather than always reporting on what we're doing rather than experiencing it more fully. We've heard this before and Rushkoff doesn't bring a fresh perspective to it.

I don't agree with everything he's written (wouldn't life be boring if I did?!), but I'm glad he's written it. Rushkoff's provocative style does what I imagine it's intended to do: provoke critical thinking. They style is, however, sometimes needlessly alarmist.
