NO FUTURE: PRESENT SHOCK AND WHY OUR NOW-FIXATION HAS CHANGED EVERYTHING FROM ADVERTISING TO POLITICS

BY: TERESSA IEZZI

In his new book, Present Shock, Douglas Rushkoff argues that "presentism" has brought about the end of storytelling and completely changed culture, politics and our personal lives.

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"I'm working at a reasonable pace where I can focus intently for long periods of time on the important parts of my work, while planning for the future with a great sense of optimism, confident I can contribute to solving our society's biggest problems" says nobody, ever. Overworked, overstimulated, distracted, FOMO-plagued and device obsessed is our default state--a function of the rate of change enabled by digital technology. But to see our current state as merely "moving faster" may be

EDITOR'S PICKS

missing a larger shift.

Douglas Rushkoff offers a bold interpretation of that essential shift--and gives those in the brand, media and technology worlds reams of talking points and debate fodder--with his new book *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now.* We're not, Rushkoff argues, just overburdened with the infinite inputs of the digital age, but we've become unmoored from our traditional relationship with time. While, in the past, we looked toward the future, now we are all about the now; we are "defined by presentism."

Over the course of the book, writer, media theorist and lecturer Rushkoff (whose last book was *Program or Be Programmed*) outlines the manifestations of presentism in our personal and business lives and the disorientation--present shock--that has resulted. In doing so he draws lines between our obsession with a zombie apocalypse, the rise of reality TV and the reasons why Janie would rather send pictures of herself at a party to friends than talk to her friends at the party.

In the book, Rushkoff says: "Our society has reoriented itself to the present moment. Everything is live, real time, and always-on. It's not a mere speeding up, however much our lifestyles and technologies have accelerated the rate at which we attempt to do things. It's more of a diminishment of anything that isn't happening right now--and the onslaught of everything that supposedly is."

Note the "supposedly." We are more and more obsessed with the now, a present that can never really exist and that therefore provides a source of anxiety for all of us trying to live in it. And presentism doesn't just affect people trying to cope with staying on top of an impossible volume of information and responding to distractions rather than moving forward. The "real-time, always-on, pervasive, and constant" nature of reality impacts companies, brands, political movements, societies--humanity.

One major aspect of presentism, and one that content creators will find interesting is what Rushkoff calls Narrative Collapse. This idea concerns how that fundamental mode of human communication, story, and our whole societal narrative changed when we stopped leaning into the future and arrived at it and the book explores the impact on entertainment and brand communications.

Rushkoff breaks down other symptoms of our current condition. They include: Digiphrenia ("the tension between the faux present of digital bombardment and the true now of a coherently living human generates...digiphrenia--digi for 'digital,' and phrenia for 'disordered condition of mental activity."); Fractalnoia, dealing with how the volume and now-intensity of information causes us to create patterns that don't exist; and Apocalypto, "a belief in the imminent shift of humanity into an unrecognizably different form" (see: Doomsday preppers).
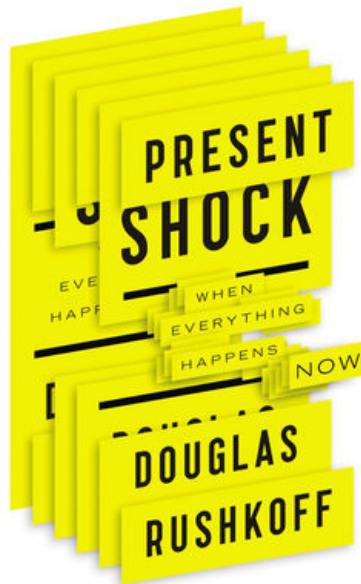
Here, Rushkoff talks about presentism, its effects on people and brands and how we can cope.

Co.Create: What is presentism--and what's it got to do with zombies and the singularity?
Douglas Rushkoff: It's very easy to be so distracted by the immediate pings and tweets around us that we fail to make time to engage with the bigger ideas underlying our society as it transitions out of the Industrial Age.

Most succinctly, presentism is what comes after futurism. Where we spent a century or more leaning forward toward the future, addicted to growth, and speculating on whatever might be next, we are now in an era that emphasizes the present. The here and now. And digital technology is a perfect complement to this new sensibility, in that it emphasizes the moment rather than the past or future.

Think of the difference between an analog clock, with a sweep second hand that moves through time, and a digital clock which just sits there, poised at 3:22 or 3:23. In the digital temporal landscape, a minute is not some portion of the day--an hour is not a pie slice of a day--but an absolute duration. It just is.

And so in a presentist society (note I'm not talking about present shock, here, which is a panic reaction to all this presentism), there are no beginnings and endings. Campaigns and goals and results make less sense to people. An easy example for "fast" company people to relate to would be the stock market: people bought Facebook shares expecting them to go up immediately. Then they sold them minutes later when they didn't. They were expecting to make money not by investing, but on the trade itself.

What this all has to do with zombies and the apocalypse is that all this presentism can get unnerving. We aren't used to stories that just keep on going. We are accustomed to defined endpoints. To winning, or even losing--which is better than the indeterminism of an infinite game. So for many of us, it's preferable to fantasize about a zombie apocalypse or even a "singularity" through which computers will overtake us. They just can't get used to what it's like to live beyond the stories that we used to imagine for ourselves, so they superimpose a movie narrative over human society.

I think of short termism as such a huge problem in everything-- from marketing to TV programming to politics/social policy. Is

FROM THE EDITOR

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this a function of presentism--and is it going to get worse?

Short-termism is definitely related. It's not a healthy form of presentism--it's not being in the now, at all--but it is a form present shock, in that it is a bad way of coping with everything happening in the present moment. People just speed up. That's not in the moment at all.

Think of it in terms of business, which is really the starkest example I can imagine. Shareholders are the most impatient beasts around, right? They don't care about anything the speed of returns. And as a result, they often force companies to cut back on quality, research and development, and all the sorts of things that are required of a genuinely sustainable business. It's more like when the mob takes over a restaurant.

Presentism--the good kind - actually puts a stop to this short termism. Because if you are in your business for the true now, you are more concerned with how good a job you are doing, how you are benefiting your culture in real time, than what you can pay to investors next week. And of course, investors would do much much better in the long run to engage with companies who think this way. In some ways--much as the "lean" people would argue--focusing on the present makes the best long-term sense. But I'm not talking about the distracted present of your Twitter feed, here. I mean the actually process and quality of what you are doing.

Stories, as you acknowledge, are such a fundamental way that people understand reality and communicate, yet you're arguing that this most basic language has changed--narrative has collapsed. And some of the examples you give pre-date what we'd consider the digital age of YouTube and smart phones and social media. So what spurred this narrative collapse and how does it manifest itself?

There's a terrific book chapter on this. What we're doing here is deciding not to tell that story, but instead to try to bullet-point its essential ideas into an interview answer. That's a form of narrative collapse in itself. So I won't try to do what the book does. Instead, I'll tell you in shorthand that stories since Aristotle's time have beginnings, middles and ends. We used those stories to get people to do all sorts of things, from fighting revolutions to buying pimple cream.

Over time, we have become largely immune to the effects of stories. We don't care if cookies were made by elves in a hollow tree. We don't even believe in wars we can go "win." Add to that the fact that we have digital technologies from remote controls to DVRs that let us interrupt or even

mashup narrative into anything we choose, and the storyteller loses his authority over us.

So we start looking to different kinds of entertainment--from the early stuff like The Simpsons and *Mystery Science Theater 3000* to newer stuff like *Game of Thrones* or *Community*. These kinds of TV shows are not about story in the traditional sense. They are either about drawing connections, going "meta", or simply keeping the story going infinitely, like a fantasy role-playing game.

While it's easy to see how reality TV reflects the changes you describe in the book, something like *Game of Thrones* or *The Sopranos*--things we consider the pinnacle of entertainment--how are they a reflection of presentism?

They are entertaining but they are never truly climactic. In a way they are a bit like the serialized stories of Dickens, for which he was paid by the word. He just kept the stories going in monthly magazine installments. To end the story might be to lose readers.

The Sopranos didn't have an ending, remember? The show just cut to black in the middle of a moment. As if someone (maybe even we) had been killed--but not with any purpose or meaning or insight. No reversal and recognition. Just bang. Or was it the story that they ended--as if to say, "enough"?

You note: "We are in danger of squandering this cognitive surplus on the trivial pursuit of the immediately relevant over any continuance of the innovation that got us to this point." Does this explain the seeming issues we have--businesses and society--making bigger innovation leaps right now?

Well, genuinely embracing presentism would be a way out, I think. Truly choosing to burrow into our competence, support our innovators, and build the culture through and around them they need to attract the other most competent people in the world? That's presentism. That's choosing to make what we're doing really great, rather than always gaming the market responses to what we're doing.

The more panicked reaction, what I'm calling present shock, is to mistake the incessant demands of the "now" for the real moment you should be inhabiting. I break it down into five main types of confusion. The simplest one to get your head around is "digiphrenia," which is the stress of having more than one instance of yourself functioning at the same time. There is you, there's your Twitter ID, your Facebook profile--any of which (particularly if you look at Mark Zuckerberg's ever-changing user agreement) may be acting on your behalf when you're not there. So you have to be in all these different places at once, managing all these various streams of pings, and that makes it hard to make the kind of time you need to actually contemplate something. To sit down and ask the bigger questions.

Sure, you can go do an "offsite" and ban smart phones or whatever. But that only makes it more clear just how little freedom we have to do this at our real workplaces. We could have used digital technology to free up our time--we still can, as I try to show in the book--but we have to take charge of it in order to do so. Otherwise it really will take charge of us.

If "change is a steady state of existence, not an event that happens" what are some of the big shifts that have to happen in

business for companies to survive in this reality? It seems difficult to create a traditional business plan if change is constant..

For companies to survive in a presentist reality, they're going to have to come to grips with the changing time biases of money and banking. This may sound heady to some you--particularly when I'm saying it this fast-- but the money we use has a built-in clock. It was invented in the 12th century for a very particular purpose, and it is quite obsolete. We can't run our businesses at the pace of our debt structures anymore. It's really that simple. Anybody who is beholden to the rate of debt must eventually become a lender, himself. It's the only way to keep up. That's what befell GE, and they're still desperately trying now to shed banking and become a real company again.

As we move into a more presentist society, we begin to see steady-state economic systems come into play. Think Etsy, but writ large. Peer to peer trading, local reinvestment, and non-public companies who are not required to grow. Why do you think Michael Dell is trying to bring Dell private? It's to save his company from the short-termism of shareholders.

So in the book I share how companies can learn to live in a more harmonious relationship to the ebb and flow of their market cycles. It's a lot easier to do if they have smarter investors than the typical public shareholders, though.

What are the primary shifts that presentism is causing for brands and the way they communicate? Is brand storytelling irrelevant?

It's pretty irrelevant. Brand stories were developed to insulate consumers from the realities of factory labor, and to substitute for the human relationships they used to have with local merchants. They've come a long way since then, but their essential function is the same.

Now that social media and other cultural factors are reconnecting people to one another, this branding style no longer seems consonant with our culture. Instead, companies need to market by giving their customers and other constituents the facts they need to promote the brand to friends and others. All we're looking for is what I call "social currency" - good excuses to share information with other people. So give us the ammo we need to use your brand as a badge of green, local, or some other form of social responsibility. And then give us the data we need to communicate this. We will do the work for you. Just give us the ammo we need to tell *our* story.

You note a huge shift that is happening: brands de-ephasizing messages and focusing on "brand experience." This is certainly a huge change that some brands are trying to make--that instead of blasting messages, companies are being forced to DO things. Do you see this as one of the upsides of all these changes that are happening?

One of many upsides, sure. Digital spaces are more non-fiction than fiction oriented. People tweet facts, not stories. So the second best way to market a product is tell people where it's made, why it's good, and so on. The first best way is to convey those qualities through the experience of the product itself. In real time, in the moment. Get it? That's scary and hard, because it means you have to actually make something well, in a righteous fashion, and then have frontline people who are actually walking the walk, as well.

Now that we have things like Slaveryfootprint.org and a host of other ways for people to see what a company is really doing right now, it behooves all of them to begin acting in ways that reflect well on themselves. Act in ways that actually make the world a better place. Not as some compensation for the bad, but *instead* of the bad. Figure that out, and it's a lot more beneficial than figuring out some new story about the Doughboy. What the heck is in a Pillsbury muffin, anyway?

One of the things you note about brands and social media is the idea that you have a social media strategy whether you call it that or not. How should companies be looking at their role in social media's feedback loop?

Well, we used to be able to measure feedback from consumers, because it came in the form of sales, or maybe letters and focus groups. You'd put a product out there, wait a quarter, and then get reports from the sales floor on how it did. Then you'd adjust and go out again. Now, feedback comes instantaneously. There are people responding on Twitter to your marketing campaigns in real time. Or before the campaign has even rolled out. Then you change the campaign based on that feedback. So it's hard ~~_____~~ nymore. It's a bit like a feedback loop.
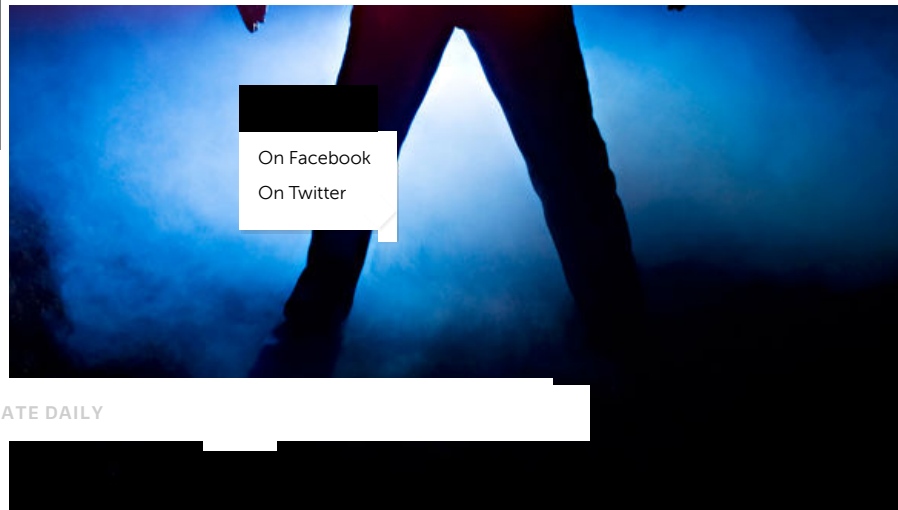
t to the speaker, and all you get is

alk about in the book, as well as how to ally get much data from screech. You and learn to do pattern recognition

On Facebook
On Twitter

You seem positive about games as an antidote or response to the collapse of narrative. Why?

I think that video games offer an alternative to watching some hero go through a journey. Games offer a real-time, first-person experience of making decisions. We make the choices.

And the best games are presentist in the sense that they don't have to end. We don't play *World of Warcraft* to "win"--we play to keep the game going. We want to live on, fight more battles. And we enjoy being the character, making choices live, rather than sitting there watching some piece of film that was made years ago.

There is something of a concerned tone in the book. What's your overall feeling--is this unalterably changing human interaction for the worse, or is it an awkward phase in our evolution?

I'm hoping it's an awkward phase in our evolution. And that by calling attention to it, I can help people and companies make the transition successfully. They don't need to fall into present shock. I think I've done a good job, particularly in the second half of the book, offering strategies and approaches for contending with presentist markets, consumers, communication, employees, and society in ways that don't have to involve massive change. Just some adjustments.

When I was reading, I kept thinking of the Arcade Fire song "We Used To Wait." Obviously presentism is manifest in the art we consume but are you seeing artists offering a counterpoint or, I guess, "fighting" this? I mean, you've chosen to write a book even though at the end you acknowledge that most people won't read up to that point and will get a summary online.

Yeah. The most radical thing about the book Present Shock is that it's a book at all. I'm here writing opera when the people are listening to singles. But there's a place for both. Particularly in a genuinely presentist society where we take authority over the moment we're in, rather than surrendering it to the next ping.

[*Image: Flickr users Jared Tarbell, Venndiagram, Stephen Poff, and Buckshotfrank*]

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CLARA RICE JRA

28 minutes ago

As designers of brand experiences, we at JRA are noticing that more and more companies are creating brand lands to foster deeper connections between visitors and their products. Coca-Cola reinvested in their "World" in 2007, Jim Beam recently unveiled their new American Stillhouse and Distillery Tour, and Crayola will open their renovated experience this May. Instead of simply telling their stories, these companies are letting their guests participate in the story through authentic, only-here experiences, whether it's creating their own crayon color or actually running their hands through the mash of a

small-batch bourbon line. By taking their guests on this kind of journey, they hope to deepen the consumer's emotional connection (and loyalty to) the brand.