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Professional Resource:

Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age (2011)

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Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Life (2011)

By Douglas Rushkoff

Soft Skull Press, Berkeley, CA

Everything digital has arguably been the main game in town for those examining implications of media literacy in the contemporary landscape. Some have focused on discussing the characteristics of digital technology, others on the comparison of the old and the new, and still others have gone beyond descriptions to provide behavioral to-dos for a successfully media literate individual. Yet, a comprehensive look at all three aspects— though they are closely linked to each other – has been a rarity. In *Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age* (BookMobile, 2010) Douglas Rushkoff, does exactly that— he takes readers on an intellectual journey to think about what must be done as media literate individuals in light of the new digital technology. He does so through a proposal of ten simple yet thoughtful commands—prescriptions for individuals to maintain literacy in the digital environment one will inevitably be a part of for years to come, if not forever.

Rushkoff's reasoning is straightforward and sensible—digital media in itself should be looked at in terms of the implication of its technologies, but we do not “know to the full extent what capability is actually being offered to us” (13). Thus, it is important for us to understand digital technologies through their tendencies or biases. Indeed, his categorization of the ten commands derives firsthand from those biases. Rushkoff's proposed commands and associated biases of digital media are the following:

- Time: Do not be always on (digital media are biased away from continuous time)
- Place: Live in person (digital media are biased toward dislocation)
- Choice: You may always choose none of the above (digital media are biased toward choice because everything must be expressed in discrete language)
- Complexity: You are never completely right (digital media are biased toward a reduction of complexity)
- Scale: One size does not fit all (digital media are biased toward abstraction)
- Identity: Be yourself (digital media are biased toward depersonalization)
- Fact: Tell the truth (digital media are biased against fiction and toward facts)
- Social: Do not sell your friends (digital media are biased toward social connections – toward contact)
- Openness: Share, don't steal (digital media are biased toward openness)
- Purpose: Program or be programmed (digital media are biased toward those with the capacity to write the code)

At first glance, the ten commands as concepts do not seem groundbreaking. Most of them seem like relics of past discussions and everything the readers already know. However, Rushkoff differentiates his argument from existing discussions by 1) juxtaposing his conceptualizations with feasible explanations of biases from a technological perspective; 2) consistently maintaining a didactic approach; and 3) providing a narrative of biases to lead to his central argument, which is that one should become proficient with handling the technology. The focal point of his argument is not really on defending the commands, but rather on empowering the individual to “differentiate between what we intend, and what the machines we're using intend for us”

(21). That is, we must know how to control digital technology, lest it control us. This, in essence, can be achieved by acquiring the capability to program digital media.

Some of his examples are perfectly fitting (such as the lack of face-to-face interaction between students in the classroom example), while others seem rather coercively inserted to validate his point (internet commerce example used to explain the scale command). All in all, though the examples used in the book are effective in that they always thematically pose the question of how can real life be compared to digital media—or the digital imitator of “real life”?

As many authors providing a list of concepts would do, Rushkoff seems to pay attention primarily to explaining the ten commands. Naturally, his discussion as a whole seem scattered at times, as he does not really explain how the biases and commands can be related. One may wonder if presentation of digital media in real life is more complicated, where said biases of digital technology are closely weaved together to affect users in levels other than those mentioned by Rushkoff. So, are these biases associated with each other? Certainly, states Rushkoff, and becoming a proficient programmer of digital media is the key to alleviating all negative effects implied by the biases. However, it would have been more desirable to include a more profound explanation of how some commands could be more related, or even a discussion of how they are more similar or different from each other.

Another worthwhile thought about the commands is that of the ten, some seem more plausible and adequate in understanding the tendencies of digital media than others. For instance, Rushkoff’s perceived bias of digital media regarding complexity may be argued by many to be the opposite of what is actually going on. As digital media holds more information, it could be in the nature of digital media to be biased toward complex ideas and not polarization or simplification. Moreover, readers may feel that some commands are granted more elaboration.

In a similar light, it may also seem that some commands are more salient than others. It is likely that not all of the commands can be applied universally to all cases, but a few of the biases are arguably more prevalent in the new media landscape. Another potential weakness of the structure is that the process of leading up to the concluding and most significant command—to be programmers—might seem weakly

organized. It may have been beneficial for the discussion to rearrange the commands to provide a sense of significance and order.

Then there is the question of the intended audience. As mentioned above, the commands are highly didactic, but the audience does not seem to be limited to students. Instead, the intended audience seems to be older generations, who with regard to the concept of “digital divide” have had to deal with digital media as second nature. We can see this in Rushkoff’s constant referring back to real life and how important it is to maintain it to a certain degree. Learning to program and control digital media would make more sense to those who can distinguish what it is like to be immersed in digital media and to take a step away from it.

The book will be most relevant and useful for both educators and professionals because each command provides a lesson as well as a strategy. Also, many ideas presented by Rushkoff are extractions of significant and consistent phenomena that he has likely contemplated on over a long period of time. Arguments regarding digital media often become outdated in a matter of weeks. However, the commands set forth in this book seem perpetual in a sense as Rushkoff makes an attempt to emphasize the more fundamental characteristics of digital media. One thing though, from an educational perspective, is that not a lot of the ideas are grounded in theoretical frameworks. It could be due to the fact that not much has been academically concluded about this subject, but it may have been helpful for scholastic purposes if more ideas from scholars were mentioned, as in the example of Walter Benjamin in chapter five.

Rushkoff’s book provides a valuable discussion of what media literacy ought to be like in the age of digital media, and the book does so through an ample elaboration of relevant and significant points. Ten commands for the media literate are proposed, leading to the final claim that we must increase the capability as programmers in the digital realm. This is all for the sake of us being in the “sweet spot and gaining the high leverage point in a digital society” (133). When it comes to media, leverage really means being literate, and that’s what Rushkoff is trying to get us to become.