

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Are You Suffering from “Present Shock?”

I just finished reading a book by media theorist Douglas Rushkoff entitled *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*. It is a penetrating and thought-provoking book. [The title is an obvious play on the Alvin Toffler’s 1970 classic book, *Future Shock*.] To me, it captures quite brilliantly the unsettledness and disorientation that many feel as we begin the 21st century. It offers an analysis of our culture unlike any other I have read recently. Yet, with his analysis, Rushkoff offers few solutions and little comfort. So, in this *Perspective*, I seek to summarize the principal arguments of the book and add a biblical response to each major point, for I believe that God offers a cure to the “disease” called “Present Shock.”

A summary of the book:

1. **First symptom of Present Shock:** “Narrative collapse,” by which Rushkoff means no metanarrative that explains or helps us make sense of things. Because of technology and our access to instantaneous information as it happens, we no longer can make meaning of things and there are no value-anchoring stories that aid in our search for meaning. He cites TV sitcoms such as *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *South Park*, *The Office*, among many others, that tell a linear story with a beginning, a middle and an end. *Seinfeld*, after all, is about “nothing.” We live in an era of “storyless TV.” Reality TV is another example of storyless TV. The same observation can be made about news reporting. The focus now is on “immediate response,” for with CNN, MSNBC, FOX NEWS, etc. the news is always on! “Opinionated newsreaders keep our collective cortisol (stress hormone) levels high enough to maintain a constant fight-or-flight urgency” (p. 49). Poignantly, Rushkoff cites the Occupy Wall Street movement, “[which] constitute[s] the first truly postnarrative political movement” (p. 56); it lacks a specific goal and its “leaders” cannot really define what they want and when their “movement” will end. Finally, video games have surpassed all other forms of entertainment in market share and cultural importance “because they engage with players in an open-ended fashion, they communicate through experience instead of telling, and they invite players in the creative process” (p. 59); they are “infinite games.” Point: Present shock deconstructs the narratives that give life meaning and purpose.
2. **Second symptom of Present Shock:** “Digiphrenia,” which refers to the relentless assault of information from emails, Twitter, Facebook, etc., and our seeming inability to “keep up.” This often leads to a near panic, even rage, a “schizophrenic cacophony of divided attention and temporal disconnection” (p. 75). Rushkoff writes that “Time in the digital era is no longer linear but disembodied and associative. The past is not something behind us on the timeline but dispersed through the sea of information. Like a digital unconscious, the raw data sits forgotten unless accessed by a program in the future. . . In the digital universe, our personal history and its sense of narrative is succeeded by our social networking profile—a

snapshot of the current moment” (p. 85). In this new age of technology, time is no longer neutral, for hours and minutes are very specific to us now. Technology gives us more choice over how and when we do things. But our “bodies are not quite as programmable as our schedules” (p. 92). Thus, by letting technology set the pace of our lives, we really are not increasing choice at all. Rather, we are disconnecting ourselves from whatever it is we may actually be doing. “With digital technology, the environment created is one of choice. We hop from choice to choice with no present at all” (p. 115). By resurrecting two Greek terms *chronos* and *kairos*, Rushkoff summarizes the unintended result of being inundated with choice: we sacrifice *kairos* (the richness, meaning and purpose of time) for the mastery of *chronos* (the mathematical calculation of time—hours, minutes, seconds). Point: Present shock is profoundly destabilizing.

3. **Third symptom of Present Shock:** “Overwinding,” which means we are increasingly compressing time and its consequences, resulting in “the short forever—the effort to squish really big timescales into much smaller or nonexistent ones. It’s the effort to make the ‘now’ responsible for the sorts of effects that actually take real time to occur—just like overwinding a watch in the hope that it will gather up more potential energy and run longer than it can” (p. 136). The result of this is quite serious: When everything is rendered instantly accessible via Google and iTunes, “the entirety of culture becomes a single layer deep. The journey disappears, and all knowledge is brought into the present tense. In the short forever, there is no time to prepare and anticipate” (p. 153). Thus the end of all this is a “psychic mashup,” a short forever where there is contradiction and a paralysis by both the weight of an enduring history and the anticipation of a preordained future. This phenomenon spills over into how we consume things: “The economics of consumption have always been dependent on illusions of increasing immediacy and newness, and an actuality of getting people to produce and consume more stuff, more rapidly, with evermore of their time. The expectations for instant reward and satisfaction have been built up . . . [such that] the amount of time between purchase . . . and gratification has shrunk to nothing” (p. 167). Point: Present shock leads us to overwind, magnifying the stakes for any given moment of our time.
4. **Fourth symptom of Present Shock:** “Fractalnoia,” which refers to our seeming inability to make sense out of the barrage of disconnected data in “a world without time.” Rushkoff writes: “The sheer volume, constancy, and complexity of communications are too hard to consciously manage anymore. They must be regarded as the expressions of a living culture whose growth and fertility are inextricably linked to one’s own” (p. 215). We end up having an urge to connect everything to everything, which is quite frankly impossible, and we thereby “ignore the special peculiarities, idiosyncrasies and paradoxes of activity occurring on the human and cultural level . . .” (p. 230). The promise of our era is that, through computers, we gain a perfect memory and perfect recall of that memory. In addition, social networking, such as Facebook, heightens the sense that we are what we perceive and experience as individuals and that “the recordable bits of information about ourselves reflects who we are” (p. 240). The Fractalnoid sees the connections between things but only as having something to do with himself; for this is the only way present shock victims can make sense out of the enormously disparate amount of data that bombard us every day. Point: In Present Shock, we draw paranoid connections when there are none, which actually can foster deeper paranoia—fractalnoia.

5. **Fifth symptom of Present Shock:** “Apocalypto,” which refers to the desperate desire to find an end, a way out of the disease of present shock. But, since we live in a postnarrative culture with no beginning, and no middle, there will, therefore, be no end, only “a chronic plateau of interminable stresses that seem to have always been there” (p. 247). Rushkoff uses the TV show, *The Walking Dead*, as a metaphor for this element of Present Shock. We are all Zombies: “The zombie apocalypse not only relieves us of our highly stressed, overcivilized and technologically determined lives, it reveals the savagery and selfishness innate to our species. We have no morality separating us from brute nature or even lifeless matter, so we humans may as well be walking dead” (p. 250). Rushkoff suggests that we are thereby relieved of the responsibility for morality—that uniquely human trait—“as well as the way it hampers our decision making and limits our choices. Technology will just go ahead and do it for us or, better, to us. Get it over with already. Like parents consoling themselves about their own imminent demise, we look to technology not merely as our replacement but as our heir” (p. 260). Point: Present shock causes us in some way to seek order out of chaos, when there really is no order to be found.

As Christians, how should we think about this rather provocative and disturbing book? I believe that Rushkoff has captured the technological component of the worldview called Postmodernism. With the remarkable personal autonomy, radical relativism and radical pragmatism Postmodernism produces, technology feeds and enhances each one of these characteristics such that present shock, and all its life-robbing aspects, are upon us with a force and a power that understandably produces despair. Let me sketch five characteristics of biblically-centered Christianity that offer a cure to the symptoms of present shock:

1. There is a metanarrative that gives meaning, structure and purpose to life. That metanarrative is centered on Jesus Christ and His death, burial, resurrection and ascension. His life and work are the key to the biblical metanarrative of creation—fall—redemption—restoration.
2. Biblical Christianity centers our lives on God and His purpose—the most profoundly stabilizing force there is. Faith and trust in Him produce stability, and give purpose and meaning to life.
3. Biblical Christianity says much about “rest,” not only the physical rest that accompanies the teaching about the Sabbath, but also the New Covenant “rest” that accompanies salvation from sin. More than anything else, this “rest” is the antidote to “overwinding.”
4. The paranoia that accompanies present shock is overcome by the biblical worldview, where we learn to see things the way God sees them. Since He is sovereign, His purposes become our purposes and eternity becomes the grid through which we live our lives. There is no longer a futility or despair to life.
5. Present shock’s “apocalypto” is overcome by the biblical eschaton, the *telos*, to which history is moving. The return of Christ, the establishment of His kingdom, the vanquishing of His enemies, the defeat of evil and the triumph of righteousness and peace are indeed the “order”

we seek in this present shock world. There is an “end” that focuses on Christ and the conviction that He will keep His promises, which brings hope to life. Where present shock can produce despair, Christ produces hope.

Present shock is a real “disease.” The antidote to that disease is Jesus Christ.

See Douglas Rushkoff, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*. (New York: Current, 2013).