

What Could Possibly Go Right? Hosted by Vicki Robin for Post Carbon Institute

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Episode 28 with Douglas Rushkoff

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Transcript

Douglas Rushkoff

My main mantra these days is find the others. You don't have to do this in isolation. Just look into people's eyes and you'll get that instant moment of recognition of, Oh, here's another one. Let's do this together.

Vicki Robin

Welcome to "What Could Possibly Go Right?" a project of the Post Carbon Institute. We interview cultural scouts, people who see far and serve others, to help us all see more clearly, so we can act more courageously in really messy times. I'm Vicki Robin, your host. Today, I get to introduce you to Douglas Rushkoff. He and I have both been longtime critics of consumerism in our society, and we both like to stand outside of society's assumptions to ask if where we're headed is where we want to go. In this interview, though, I found the most important alignment between myself and Douglas. He's a landsman, a member of the tribe, meaning we are both Jewish, which means we are sort of smart, funny, clever and a bit ironic, which you will notice here. We had a lot of fun. Named one of the world's 10 most influential intellectuals by MIT, Douglas is an author and documentarian who studies human autonomy in a digital age. His 20 books include Team Human, based on his podcast, as well as bestsellers, Present Shock, Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus, and Program or Be Programmed, and Life Inc. He also made the PBS Frontline documentaries Generation Like, The Persuaders, and Merchants of Cool. He coined the concepts like "viral media", "screenagers", and "social currency" and has been a leading voice for applying digital media towards social and economic justice. He is also a columnist on Medium. So enjoy Douglas Rushkoff.

Vicki Robin

Hey! Well, Douglas. Welcome to "What Could Possibly Go Right?" This is cultural scouts, people with long histories as visionaries and activists. We ask you to peer into the murk of the moment and put on your headlamp and help us see more clearly so we can act more courageously. I've been watching your videos and I've read Team Human and I feel like we've been barking up the same tree or sniffing the same trail for many years. You, like me, have followed many innovations with a great deal of optimism about what they could do for humanity,

and sort of a great sorrow for how our worse angels just grab them and take them over. But here we are. You and I are both still asking what is the core question for our series, which is, "What could possibly go right?" Go right, even now - 2020, bad collective trip of the highest order, the pandemic, the social justice uprising, the recession, polarisation. And yet, once again, we ask the question, "What could possibly go right?" Take it away.

Douglas Rushkoff

What I've been thinking a lot about during this whole pandemic moment, and the forced immersion in all of these networking technologies as a substitute for whatever it was we used to do, I got reminded of the time when I was in maybe 10th grade, and my father found a pack of Marlboro Lights in my jacket pocket. I thought, "Oh, he's gonna punish me. He's gonna punish me." And he'd say, "Meet me in the backyard after dinner." So we have dinner, and I think, What's he gonna do? Is he gonna hit me? What's gonna happen? He takes me to the backyard. He's got my cigarettes in his hand. He says, "So you want to smoke? Start." He made me smoke the whole friggin' pack of cigarettes. By the time I'm at the third, third or fourth cigarette, I start getting all green, and I get sick and I throw up my dinner. It's just a mess. I feel like that's where we're at with technology right now, that the gods have said, "Oh, you people. You really want to meet on Zoom? You really want to talk to everybody through FaceTime? You really want to text all the time? Okay, here you go." It's like they took us to the back porch, the way my dad did and said, "Alright, here. Now eat this 24/7 and see how you like that." People are so sick of this stuff. They're so nauseous. They're so overwhelmed. They're so fully sensorally aware of this assault of prana-free exchange, of soulless encounters, of people saying they agree with you, but you aren't in the same space with them. Your body can't feel it. You can't see if their pupils are getting larger, if their breathing is syncing up to yours. The mirror neurons don't fire, the oxytocin doesn't go through your bloodstream. You get off the call, and you know in your head the person says they agreed with me but your body doesn't feel it. All that does is engender more distrust. They say they agreed. But all the 600-800,000 years of painstakingly evolved social mechanisms for gauging trust and veracity with other people are just thwarted in these spaces. We feel increasingly untethered from everything, from reality itself. We don't even know. It's not just Facebook and algorithms and these guys. These kids at these companies are vastly overestimating their power over human cognition in the psyche. This is just what happens when you have nothing, when you're untethered, when you don't have organic kinship. So what could possibly go right is we emerge from this isolation, desperate to connect with other people in real ways, no longer content to walk down the street as we did a year ago, with everybody staring into their phones doing texting instead of looking at who else is in the street, more willing to make eye contact and establish rapport. And once you've established rapport, you've got the precursor to solidarity. And once you have solidarity, then you become open to things like mutual aid and mutuality, instead of capitalism and extraction. You realize that the world is not a dangerous place that you need to earn enough money to insulate yourself from it, but that you could spend all of this energy making the world a place that you don't feel the need to isolate yourself from. Meet your neighbors, take care of them. You take care and feel responsible, even if you don't like them. It doesn't even matter if you like people. I was raised in the Marlo Thomas, "Free To Be... You And Me", "Hands Across the World", Rodney King, "Can't we all just get along?" understanding of civics. You know, screw that. It's almost we should protect those we

don't like. Civics is about feeling responsible for people. It's easy to feel responsible for my daughter. It's much harder to feel responsible for the asshole down the block with the Trump sign. But we're responsible for him too. That's the kind of thing that could be engendered if we start looking at people in real life rather than through these ridiculous filters, through these platforms that are designed to make us hate each other. So what could possibly go right is, as we step outside and breathe the air and walk the ground and see the others, we realize that that's what we have to protect; that the object of the game is not to create a digital womb around us with algorithms that can predict our every want and need the way our mothers couldn't when we were babies, but rather, to engage in the living messy, chaotic reality that is life and start to see everything as teeming with fertility and messiness and soft, squishy things. What could possibly go right is that we finally break free of that kind of late medieval Renaissance understanding of science and technology as ways, like Francis Bacon said, a way to grab nature by the forelock, hold her down and submit her to our will. We can actually break free of our rape fantasy for how to deal with nature and women and life and others and dark forests and the soil and the moon, and realize, Oh my gosh, this stuff is all friendly. This is our nourishment. This is, boy, it's like eating a juicy piece of fruit. It's alive and so filled with possibility, that will stop trying to reduce the unpredictability of everything and everyone around us and learn to see that unpredictability as the novelty and weirdness and joy of being a living entity in the now.

Vicki Robin

Yeah, so if you were making book on that happening... I don't mean to, I'm the one who's supposed to be saying, What could possibly go right?

Douglas Rushkoff

Yeah, you asked the question!

Vicki Robin

Yeah, I asked the question. But where do you see evidence? I'm asking you to be sort of scientific, but where do you see evidence in the now of that possibility of us emerging into that light and not emerging into a greater ineptitude. Do you see bubbling up someplace this possibility? Because I couldn't agree with you more. That is what I have been working my whole life for, that juicy thing and I'm a stand for it and you're a stand for it. But where do you see evidence now?

Douglas Rushkoff

Who else do we need?! It takes two. No, I see it everywhere. I mean, the way right now, the way I get to see it is, I write an article on Medium espousing these ideas, and a million people read it and clap on it and comment on it. That my inbox of 1000 emails a day is a sign that people are looking for ways to do that. The listenership of my podcast which is up to like 50,000 people for something that's got no ads and promotion. It's like, there is a groundswell. The projects I see out of, not Silicon Valley, but out of Detroit, out of New Zealand, out of Africa, in India, the people who are doing... I mean, there are mutual favor banks and local currencies and people creating commons-based beehive networks. And everywhere, if you're open to seeing it. I kind

of see it everywhere. There's some trailheads, you know; the women who do Zebras Unite, it's like, Oh, wow! Here's a whole new range of businesses. Trevor Schultz with the Platform Cooperative movement, creating or helping to facilitate the creation of worker-owned businesses. The Inspiral Network in New Zealand, who have all these different apps and organizational modalities that they're sharing with the world for how to start Community Supported Agriculture and delivery services and local currencies and gift economies. So I am seeing it, and I'm seeing it amongst the young who so, at least in America, so traumatized by shooter alerts. God knows what they have to go through. And now with COVID and masks and shields at the same time, they still have to do their shooter drills while they're in surgical masks. I mean, what are they thinking? I'll tell you what they're thinking is, "This is bull. This does not work. This is not the future that we want to live." They've got, not a seriousness, but a practicality I feel. It's not, we like to say, or so many adults like to say, they're lost in Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and all that. I don't see that. I see very hands-on, a very hands-on generation of kids who are willing to do what's necessary to dig themselves out of the mess that we in prior generations have put them in. So I see it pretty much everywhere. I see it in the radically fearful reaction of the alt-right, to women's empowerment, to the climate movement, to the increase in intimacy that is taking place all around them. I see that as the last fundamentalist gasp of this mythology of nation state and boundary. And I see some positivity in this right wing insanity. You know, what's clever about a man like Trump saying, "Do not fear this virus, do not fear this virus." Then you see the whole left saying, "Oh, no. We have to fear it. We have to fear it." We don't have to fear it. You don't have to fear it. Even if you have cancer, you don't have to fear it. Right? You fight it! You get it! I'm not afraid of the virus. I'm smart about the virus. There's a difference. So even they who are realizing, "Wait a minute." Some of the ways that we're looking at at social justice, some of the ways we're looking at universal rights, seem to be based in in some sort of self-defeating, even counter-intuitively repressive strategies, and they're looking to try to, "Wait a minute. Can't we do this all through enhancement rather than pushing something down?" And yeah, that is the way you do it. It's not always by yelling at people that they're doing the wrong thing, but helping them figure out how to transform what they're doing into something positive. Any therapist will tell you that you can't take away a behavior without replacing it with something even juicier, and that's not through fear or scolding; that's through seduction.

Vicki Robin

We're both being counter-tribal, so I'll just say that I love what you just said, because I've been hanging out with some people who are into QAnon and libertarians. I'm just very curious because we look at each other like alien species. But I've decided to actually do my research, and I am finding that one of the appeals of the Trump narrative is this optimism. You know, you listen to him and to us he sounds like insane. This thing is not going away by the summer. We know that, but he says that because he thinks that optimism is a way you get through things.

Douglas Rushkoff

Well, that's his upbringing. He was raised in the church, he went to the church of Norman Vincent Peale, who wrote about positive thinking and came right out of the Theosophy movement, of Mary Baker Eddy and Christian Science and Madame Blavatsky. This is like The

Secret; think it, be it, get it, whatever. And there is a certain something refreshing about that, and it doesn't have to be against the science. It's like Bernie Siegel, the cancer doctor. He would do the surgery, but also have the person envision the cancer dying. It's like, again, you can have both, not just one.

Vicki Robin

It's in a way the polarization is actually driving us into greater positionality, because you just can't give the other side not even a centimeter, not even an inch, because...

Douglas Rushkoff

Without getting attacked by your own side! I say something like that, to say, "Look, Trump was really smart about this", or "We have to embrace aspects of..." "Oh, how could you do that? You're a collaborator with the fascists and the Nazis!" And it's like, No, I'm not saying Hitler was good. That's not what I'm saying.

Vicki Robin

Right. Right. Right. Yeah, both sides have a point. It's that there is just a minorly transcendent state in which you observe what's possible. And this is the whole interview, you know. What's possible in the moment? And what are the ideas laying around that we can cobble together into something fresh? So, I don't want to go on...

Douglas Rushkoff

But I like what you're asking, though. It's sort of, what are the sleeper cells of positive action?

Vicki Robin

Totally, exactly. What are the sleeper cells? And you brought up a lot of things that are about cooperatives, and collaboratives, and sharing networks, etc. I have also looked into that a great deal in the past, tried to create an alternative currency where I am, and it's just very clear that as long as the dollar is strong, people are not going to trade massages. But it's places where the dominant way to meet your needs has failed you, people are spontaneously - this is like in Argentina - it's spontaneously block by block, there were currencies, there's trading systems. In a way, what could possibly go right? - I know I'm answering my question, but you asked though for a dialogue - is that the failure of the system that we live inside of, that we look to provide us with baseline survival and meaning; the failure is getting up more and more obvious. It starts with toilet paper, and it just goes down from there. So that, in a way, the failure itself could be part of what goes right, because then the innovation from below, faced with the necessity of living your life - and I am no way extolling poverty, but everything you mentioned comes from someplace outside of the people who have enough money to cover the territory.

Douglas Rushkoff

I read a book recently, the title I forgot, but it's about Black cooperative economics, the history of Black cooperative economics in America since the 1700s. Basically, because they were disenfranchised, because they were slaves, because they couldn't participate in the real economy, or in our real economy, Black people created circular economics and cooperatives

and mutual aid societies before we white folk even knew what they were. And their communities would become so wealthy, that the neighboring white communities would then go in and tear them apart. That's why they rioted and killed all those people, saying, "Wait a minute, we cut you off. You're not allowed to be richer than us. If we cut you off, how did this happen?" It's because they were employing the kinds of mechanisms that we're talking about here, because they had to. So then you look at our society and I, like you, sometimes think, Boy, if the 2007 crash wasn't enough to do it, how bad a crash are we gonna need to get people to start turning toward these much more cooperative, healthy commons-based economic solutions? You almost get into what I think they call accelerationism, where you want capitalism to burn itself out, so that these other things can happen. But it's such a violent way for it to happen, you know? Do we need another Great Depression for people in the wasteland to start? You know, that's the last time we had thriving alternative currencies in this country, was in the early 1930s. It's like, Do we have to go there? And I'm hoping we don't, I'm hoping we don't have to hit bottom to get off our addiction to exponential growth and extraction and repression of others, but we may. We may. It feels like that's the only way people learn unless we can somehow make the commons look and feel so much more appealing, so much more fun. Rather than using the stick of devastation, if we can use the carrot of sexy, weird, wet, fun to seduce people into enjoying each other, rather than competing against each other, we may stand a chance. I think the path toward that is to make people more aware of the spiritual deficit that we're under, which really precedes the economic deficit. It's this sense of loss and isolation and despair that so many people have. It's the canaries in the coal mine of teen suicide and cutting and all this. If you can't see that and realize, Wow, maybe we need to take a different approach? And COVID could do that. When I hear a lot of parents saying, I don't care about what college my kid gets into anymore. I want them just to get to go. You just want them to get to be there. And that's good, you know? Good, because it really doesn't matter. I mean, I've taught at a bunch; it really doesn't matter where you go. There's good teachers and assholes in every one of these places.

Vicki Robin

Yeah, one of the things that I see is just even where we are; the formality of being in a TV studio, forget that! You know? We're in our homes and behind this screen, you would not believe what's been there, so there is an informality and a leveling of prestige, at least. One other thing I'll say, and we should probably wind up, is that I think a piece of what you're pointing to also in all these cooperative ventures, is proximity. We've lost a sense of that proximity. We live somewhere and we live around some people. So there's an abstraction of community that comes from being online or doing this, but there's a concrete reality of living somewhere and then you do form the cooperative systems. The sort of underground volunteer economy of giving and receiving is immense when you're in a community where you trust each other because you shop at the same market and your kids go to playdates and whatever.

Douglas Rushkoff

Right. And you see the fact that, Oh, if I'm spending my money in town, then the tax base goes up, the schools get better, my main street's happier. You know, if you don't, then you see the empty stores on your main street and your real estate values go down. It's like, it's a selfish spiral. But you're like me. You're really arguing for localism, you know. It's funny because

whenever I talk about localism and proximity and all that, at the sort of conferences that I get to speak at, someone always gets up and says, Well, yeah, but how does that scale?

Vicki Robin

It scales sideways. Yes. It doesn't scale up; it scales sideways. We can have a whole other conversation. I just feel like I'm having to cut this off because I'm committed to our listeners that they get a soupçon. You know, they get a taste, but they're not going to have to be on an hour and a half YouTube something. We could go off on a whole other thing and maybe we should do this another time. Maybe you're the one person I'm going to revisit because localism, the being able to travel electronically but live locally, I think there's a great potential there. Maybe this moment is sort of squeezing down some of the abstraction of self, so that we're becoming more ourselves in our natural habitat in our homes and being able to do some of our business without getting on aeroplanes. So I can see, what I feel from our conversation, our riffing, is that there are so many ways to see this. This is not... It's a very hard time, but it's not a dour time, of end times. I mean, it can be end times, we could go there. But it has so many sparkling possibilities around the edges, that if we just look there, and feel a little bit excited about it even, that'd be cool.

Douglas Rushkoff

Yeah, wouldn't it?

Vicki Robin

Yeah. Do you have one final great thing you want to say to us before we close out?

Douglas Rushkoff

My main mantra these days is: Find the others. Just find the others. You don't have to do this in isolation. They're out there. They're all over the place. Just look into people's eyes and you'll get that instant moment of recognition of, Oh, there's another one. Let's do this. Let's do this together.

Vicki Robin

Right. Well, thank you so much for a really fun conversation.

Douglas Rushkoff

Oh, thank you. And I know how we should continue this is I should have you on Team Human, so then we can have an hour long conversation. Okay!

Vicki Robin

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