

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF

Media Virus

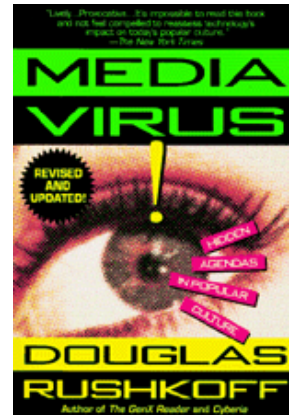
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An inspired look at how ideas are disseminated by the media and at how new concepts can be injected into the mainstream, altering views about critical social issues. The “datasphere,” says culture critic Rushkoff (Cyberia, not reviewed), is the new territory of human development, a region as “open as the globe was five hundred years ago.” Discounting fears that new media will remain the province of corporations and governments, Rushkoff maintains that they’re too complex and chaotic to be controlled by any one force. In fact, he asserts, the media replicates much like biological forms and can be manipulated to hasten our evolution. This book is a guide to empowerment through media activism; it shows how progressive notions are “injected” into the media—often with careful premeditation—via television programs like “The Simpsons” or through the recreation of events like the Rodney King beating on programs like “L.A. Law.” Rushkoff interviews young meta-media theorists who develop “designer viruses” such as the “Smart Drugs” public relations campaign (which works to legalize drugs the FDA forbids) in order to “infect” public thinking. And he shows how attempts to control the media can backfire, as happened in the 1992 Republican presidential campaign. The book has its problems: A helter-skelter style sometimes undermines the rigor of otherwise persuasive arguments, and Rushkoff is so enthusiastic about the positive power of everything from daytime talk shows to MTV that he barely acknowledges their negative effects. A more critical perspective—or an examination of the media activism of the Christian right or other cultural forces—would have given his study a critical edge it lacks. But this book will convince many that the counterculture is alive and well—and more widely dispersed than ever.

—*Kirkus Review*

Preface

The media has been getting a bad rap lately. Everything from CNN and The Power Rangers to Rikki Lake has been branded as threatening to the fabric



of civilization as the Soviet Empire, homosexuality, and jazz were in the not-so-distant past. I have endeavoured to prove here that, in spite of our fears, media is itself becoming the new fabric of our civilization, and stands a chance of restoring the long-forgotten privileges of participation, tolerance, and community.

Take the O.J. Simpson media trial. From the beginning — as far as the viewing public was concerned — this media blitz had nothing to do with whether O.J. actually killed anybody. That was a flesh and blood event between some people in Brentwood we've never met. What this book would call the O.J. Simpson media virus, on the other hand, is about us. It's about our inability to discuss spousal abuse, interracial marriage, or a court system that provides justice only for the wealthy. It's about a culture in such a delicately balanced equilibrium of co-dependency that it doesn't know what guilt really means anymore. It's about how presidents, policemen, and now, finally, sports heroes are exposed as false idols and inappropriate role models.

Media events as banal as those on *Hard Copy* and explicit as those on Court TV titillate us for a reason. We can condemn them as "sensationalist" and repress our natural curiosity, but this would be as worthwhile as spanking ourselves for having sexy or murderous dreams. The imagery has emerged from the psychic shadows — it is not controlling us any more than our dreams do, but neither can we attempt to control it without suffering the consequences. Dream deprivation leads to psychosis in an individual; I'd hate to find out what it would do to a culture. But if we embrace this seeming darkness (as Carl Jung would recommend) and attempt to reckon with its messengers, we stand a chance of learning a lot more about ourselves in the process.

That's what I've attempted to do with this book. It's about time we either forgive ourselves for our fascination with *A Current Affair* and *COPS*, or quit congratulating ourselves for not watching them. (Everybody else is.) These sorts of programs, bottom feeders though they may be, are also responsible for expressing the thoughts and opinions we've grown too bigotted or, worse, too politically correct to express ourselves. Even in the United Kingdom, mainstream respectable newspapers are finally questioning the legitimacy of the British Monarchy, but thanks only to the efforts of the much reviled tabloids that exposed scandals like *Camillagate* and late-night telephone tapes. No, Lady Di was probably not the first princess to suffer from an eating disorder, nor was Charles the first prince to talk dirty to someone other than his wife, but we have finally spawned — through sheer force of our commercial will — a set of media channels up to (or down to) the task of mining for these gems.

The instantaneous quality of today's media provides us with relatively uncensored, direct feed from the front, wherever that may be. More significantly, its speed and distribution allow for participatory, culture-wide events to unfold in the present tense. History becomes now.

This is why the truly magical, dreamlike moment of the O.J. debacle was not

the trial, nor the murder itself, nor any of the TV movies that are sure to follow, nor even the media covering the media about the media's intrusion on the courtroom. No, the transcendent scene that launched the O.J. virus into public consciousness was the epic Bronco drive to Mom's.

Were the image in a film, it would be criticized as too blatantly symbolic. Not only was O.J. Simpson, star running back, famous airport sprinter, now running for his freedom from scores of blitzing police; not only was a black man, accused during his past of being co-opted by white society, now fleeing from "the man" from within his white Ford; not only was this icon of disenfranchisement heading, for ultimate primal comfort, to his own dear mother; not only was this entire scene occurring in eerily post-modern slow motion as the entire motorcade crawled along the highway in the gesture of a police chase but without the motive of pursuit. But also, and most importantly, we, the viewing public, participated in the event as observers and subject matter all at the same time.

This was the first time in media history that people sitting in their homes, watching an event on their TV sets, quite literally walked into their own picture tubes. Thousands of Los Angeles residents, watching the chase on television, realized that O.J. was going to pass by their homes. They ran out onto the street to cheer O.J. on and, in the process, onto their own television screens. The impact of the original image was intensified by this new form of audience participation, drawing more television viewers and, in turn, more fodder for the fleet of cameras. It was as if the theories of quantum physics were demonstrating themselves on CNN, with the viewing audience playing the scientists who find themselves under their own looking glass.

The media of Marshall McLuhan's era was embodied by the Zapruder film, which showed a presidential assassination and history itself unfold, frame by frame, again and again, on prime time television. The O.J. Simpson chase brought us into a new era, characterized by the interdependencies and alternating roles of an audience and its media.

Even though this book was written back in the ancient history of Alan Dershowitz/Mike Tyson, Bill Clinton/Jennifer Flowers, and Menendez/Part One — as opposed to Alan Dershowitz/O.J. Simpson, Bill Clinton/Paula Jones and Menendez/Part Two — it aims to deconstruct and explain a datasphere that more explicitly manifests its true nature to us every day.

Hopefully, if I've done my job, this book can serve as a handbook to the media of this decade, and provide us with some of the tools necessary to navigate through an increasingly mediated world. Most of the examples I've used still resonate pretty strongly today, over a full year after they occurred. But if they don't for you, don't worry. There will be more opportunities for you to walk onto your television screen every day.

Douglas Rushkoff
New York City, 1995

