TRAPPED IN THE MINDSET
HOW BIG TECH ISOLATES US AND WHY WE SHOULD RESIST
Douglas Rushkoff

We always knew but now we know. The tech elite mean to leave us all behind.

I learned this when I traveled to a remote resort to deliver what was supposed to be a talk for a group of tech investors. It turned out to be something of a "consult" to five ultra-wealthy men on their apocalypse survival strategies.

They started out innocuously enough. Ethereum or bitcoin? Is quantum computing a real thing? Slowly but surely, however, they edged into their real topics of concern.

Which region will be less impacted by the coming climate crisis: New Zealand or Alaska? Is Google really building Ray Kurzweil a home for his brain, and will his consciousness live through the transition, or will it die and be reborn as a whole new one? Finally, the CEO of a brokerage house explained that he had nearly completed building his own underground bunker system and asked, "How do I maintain authority over my security force after the event?"

The Event. That was their euphemism for the environmental collapse, social unrest, nuclear explosion, unstoppable virus, or Mr. Robot hack that takes everything down.

This single question occupied us for the rest of the hour. They knew armed guards would be required to protect their compounds from the angry mobs. But how would they pay the guards once money was worthless? What would stop the guards from choosing their own leader? The billionaires considered using special combination locks on the food supply that only they knew. Or making guards wear disciplinary collars of some kind in return for their survival. Or maybe building robots to serve as guards and workers—if that technology could be developed in time.

That's when it hit me: At least as far as these gentlemen were concerned, this was a talk about the future of technology. Taking their cue from Elon Musk colonizing Mars, Peter Thiel reversing the aging process, or Sam Altman and Ray Kurzweil uploading their minds into supercomputers, they were preparing for a digital future that had a whole lot less to do with making the world a better place than it did with transcending the human condition altogether and insulating themselves from a very real and present danger of climate change, rising sea levels, mass migrations, global pandemics, nativist panic, and resource depletion. For them, the future of technology is really about just one thing: escape.

For all their wealth and power, they don't believe they can affect the future of humanity for the better, so all they really wanted to know how to insulate themselves from it.

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The experience led to a much-circulated [piece on Medium](#) and an option for a movie. But it also set me off on a multi-year journey to understand "The Mindset" leading the wealthy to believe that as long they have enough money and the right technology, they can break the laws of physics, economics, and morality to escape a disaster of their own making. They are preparing for a digital future that has less to do with making the world a better place than transcending the human condition altogether.

These billionaires once showered the world with optimistic business plans for how tech might benefit human society. Now they've reduced technological progress to a video game that one of them wins by finding the escape hatch. Will it be Bezos migrating to space, Thiel to his New Zealand compound, or Zuckerberg to his Metaverse?

But the pandemic has proved it's not just the super-rich who are susceptible to The Mindset. Many of us don't like who we have become in this pandemic but feel little freedom to choose otherwise. Officially, we may be wearing our masks to protect others, but it sure does feel appropriate to hide our faces when we're engaging in so many self-interested, survivalist activities in the light of day—leveraging whatever privilege we may enjoy to stock and equip our homes so they can serve as makeshift bunkers, workplaces, private schools, and hermetically sealed entertainment centers.

Sure, because I'm still being paid as a professor at CUNY (the City University of New York), I donated my government relief check to the local food pantry and am sending a significant portion of my income to friends who can no longer meet their basic expenses. But I also went and spent $500 on a big rubber pool for my daughter and our neighbors' kids to use as the basis for a makeshift private summer camp. And I've seen similar inflatable blue bubbles all over town.

No matter how many mutual aid networks, school committees, food pantries, racial justice protests, or fundraising efforts in which we participate, I feel as if many of those privileged enough to do so are still making a less public, internal calculation: How much are we allowed to use our wealth and our technologies to insulate ourselves and our families from the rest of the world? And, like a devil on our shoulder, our technology is telling us to go it alone. After all, it's an iPad, not an usPad.

The more advanced the tech, the more cocooned insularity it affords. "I finally caved and got the Oculus," one of my best friends messaged me on Signal the other night. "Considering how little is available to do out in the real world, this is gonna be a game-changer." Indeed, his hermetically sealed, Covid-19-inspired techno-paradise was now complete. Between VR, Amazon, FreshDirect, Netflix, and a sustainable income doing crypto trading, he was going to ride out the pandemic in style. Yet while VRporn.com is certainly a safer sexual strategy in the age of Covid-19 than meeting up with partners through Tinder, every choice to isolate and insulate has its correspondingly negative impact on others.

This "out of sight, out of mind" externalization of poverty and poison trickles down through the Mindset to the rest of us; but the collateral damage doesn't go away just because we've covered our eyes with VR goggles.

The longer we ignore the social, economic, and environmental repercussions of our actions, the more of a problem they become. This, in turn, motivates even more withdrawal, isolationism, and apocalyptic fantasy.

The pool for my daughter wouldn't have gotten here were it not for legions of Amazon workers behind the scenes, getting infected in warehouses or risking their health driving delivery trucks all summer. As with FreshDirect or Instacart, the externalized harm to people and places is kept out of sight. These apps are designed to be addictively fast and self-contained—push-button access to stuff that can be left at the front door without any human contact. The delivery people don't even ring the bell; a photo of the package on the stoop automagically arrives in the inbox. Like with Thomas Jefferson's ingenious dumbwaiter, there are no signs of the human labor that brought it.

Many of us once swore off Amazon after learning of the way it evades taxes, engages in anti-competitive practices, or abuses labor. But here we are, reluctantly re-upping our Prime delivery memberships to get the cables, webcams, and Bluetooth headsets we need to attend the Zoom meetings that now constitute our own work. Others are reactivating their long-forgotten Facebook accounts to connect with friends, all sharing highly curated depictions of their newfound appreciation for nature, sunsets, and family. And as we do, many of us are lulled further into digital isolation—being rewarded the more we accept the logic of the fully wired home, cut off from the rest of the world.

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And so *The New York Times* is busy running photo spreads of wealthy families "retreating" to their summer homes—second residences worth well more than most of our primary ones—and stories about their successes working remotely from the beach or retrofitting extra bedrooms as offices. "It's been great here," one venture fund founder explained. "If I didn't know there was absolute chaos in the world … I could do this forever."

But what if we don't have to know about the chaos in the world? That's the real promise of digital technology. We can choose which cable news, Twitter feeds, and YouTube channels to stream—the ones that acknowledge the virus and its impacts or the ones that don't. We can choose to continue wrestling with the civic challenges of the moment, such as whether to send kids back to school full-time, hybrid, or remotely. Or—like some of the wealthiest people in my own town—we can form private "pods," hire tutors, and offer our kids the kind of customized, elite education we could never justify otherwise. "Yes, we are in a pandemic," one pod education provider explained to the *Times*. "But when it comes to education, we also feel some good may even come out of this."

I get it. And if I had younger children and could afford these things, I might even be tempted to avail myself of them. But all of these "solutions" favor those who have already accepted the promise of digital technology to provide what the real world has failed to do. Day traders, for instance, had already discovered the power of the internet to let them earn incomes safely from home using nothing but a laptop and some capital. Under the pandemic, more people are opening up online trading accounts than ever, hoping to participate in the video game version of the marketplace. Meanwhile, some of the world's most successful social media posses are moving into luxurious "hype houses" in Los Angeles and Hawaii, where they can livestream their lifestyles, exercise routines, and sex advice—as well the products of their sponsors—to their millions of followers.

And maybe it's these young social media enthusiasts, thriving more than ever under pandemic conditions, who most explicitly embody the original promise of digital technology to provide for our every need.

I remember back around 1990, when psychedelics philosopher Timothy Leary first read Stewart Brand's book *The Media Lab*, about the new digital technology center MIT had created in its architecture department. Leary devoured the book cover to cover over the course of one long day. Around sunset, just as he was finishing, he threw it across the living room in disgust. "Look at the index," he said, "of all the names, less than 3% are women. That'll tell you something."

He went on to explain his core problem with the Media Lab and the digital universe these technology pioneers were envisioning: "They want to recreate the womb." As Leary the psychologist saw it, the boys building our digital future were developing technology to simulate the ideal woman—the one their mothers could never be. Unlike their human mothers, a predictive algorithm could anticipate their every need in advance and deliver it directly, removing every trace of friction and longing. These guys would be able to float in their virtual bubbles—what *The Media Lab* called "artificial ecology"—and never have to face the messy, harsh reality demanded of people living in a real world with women and people of color and even those with differing views.

For there's the real rub with digital isolation—the problem those billionaires identified when we were gaming out their bunker strategies. The people and things we'd be leaving behind are still out there. And the more we ask them to service our bubbles, the more oppressed and angry they're going to get.

No, no matter how far Ray Kurzweil gets with [his artificial intelligence project](#) at Google, we cannot simply rise from the chrysalis of matter as pure consciousness. There's no Dropbox plan that will let us upload body and soul to the cloud. We are still here on the ground, with the same people and on the same planet we are being encouraged to leave behind. There's no escape from the others.

Not that people aren't trying. The ultimate digital escape fantasy would require some seriously perverse enforcement of privilege. Anything to prevent the unwashed masses— the folks working in the meat processing plants, Amazon warehouses, UPS trucks, or not at all—from violating the sacred bounds of our virtual amnionic sacs. Sure, we can replace the factory workers with robots and the delivery people with drones, but then they'll even have less at stake in maintaining our digital retreats.

I can't help but see [the dismantling of the Post Office](#) as a last-ditch attempt to keep the majority from piercing the bubbles of digital privilege through something as simple as voting. Climb to safety and then pull the ladder up after ourselves. No more voting, no more subsidized delivery of alternative journalism (that was the original constitutional purpose for a fully funded post office). So much the better for the algorithms streaming us the picture of the world we want to see, uncorrupted by imagery of what's really happening out there. (And if it does come through, just swipe left, and the algorithms will know never to interrupt your dream state with such real news again.)

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No, of course we'll never get there. Climate, poverty, disease, and famine don't respect the "guardian boundary" play space defined by the Oculus VR's user preferences. Just as the billionaires can never, ever truly leave humanity behind, none of us can climb back into the womb. When times are hard, sure, take what peace and comfort you can afford. Use whatever tech you can get your hands on to make your kid's online education work a bit better. Enjoy the glut of streaming media left over from the heyday of the Netflix-Amazon-HBO wars.

But don't let these passing—yes, passing—crises fool you into buying technology's false promise of escaping from humanity to play video games alone in perpetuity. Our Covid-19 isolation measures gave us a rare opportunity to see where this road takes us and to choose to use our technologies to take a very different one.

We do not have to buy-in to the apocalypse for which these billionaires are actively preparing and, in some cases, they are intentionally accelerating. **There's no way out, except together.** 🔒

Info

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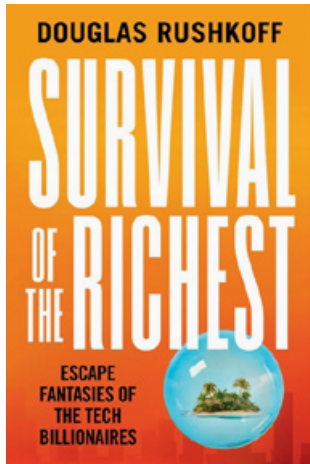
Douglas Rushkoff is an author and documentarian who studies human autonomy in a digital age. His twenty books include *Survival of the Richest: Escape Fantasies of the Tech Billionaires*, as well as *Team Human*, based on his podcast, and the bestsellers *Present Shock*, *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus*, *Program or Be Programmed*, *Life Inc*, and *Media Virus*. He also made the PBS *Frontline* documentaries *Generation Like*, *The Persuaders*, and *Merchants of Cool*. His book *Coercion* won the Marshall McLuhan Award, and the Media Ecology Association honored him with the first Neil Postman Award for Career Achievement in Public Intellectual Activity.

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