



# **Life Inc.: How the World Became a Corporation and How to Take it Back**

*Douglas Rushkoff*

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## **Life Inc.: How the World Became a Corporation and How to Take it Back** Douglas Rushkoff

This didn't just happen.

In **Life Inc.**, award-winning writer, documentary filmmaker, and scholar Douglas Rushkoff traces how corporations went from being convenient legal fictions to being the dominant fact of contemporary life. Indeed, as Rushkoff shows, most Americans have so willingly adopted the values of corporations that they're no longer even aware of it.

This fascinating journey, from the late Middle Ages to today, reveals the roots of our debacle. From the founding of the first chartered monopoly to the branding of the self; from the invention of central currency to the privatization of banking; from the birth of the modern, self-interested individual to his exploitation through the false ideal of the single-family home; from the Victorian Great Exhibition to the solipsism of MySpace—the corporation has infiltrated all aspects of our daily lives. Life Inc. exposes why we see our homes as investments rather than places to live, our 401(k) plans as the ultimate measure of success, and the Internet as just another place to do business.

Most of all, **Life Inc.** shows how the current financial crisis is actually an opportunity to reverse this six-hundred-year-old trend and to begin to create, invest, and transact directly rather than outsource all this activity to institutions that exist solely for their own sakes.

Corporatism didn't evolve naturally. The landscape on which we are living—the operating system on which we are now running our social software—was invented by people, sold to us as a better way of life, supported by myths, and ultimately allowed to develop into a self-sustaining reality. It is a map that has replaced the territory.

Rushkoff illuminates both how we've become disconnected from our world and how we can reconnect to our towns, to the value we can create, and, mostly, to one another. As the speculative economy collapses under its own weight, Life Inc. shows us how to build a real and human-scaled society to take its place.

## **Life Inc.: How the World Became a Corporation and How to Take it Back Details**

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Author : Douglas Rushkoff

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# From Reader Review Life Inc.: How the World Became a Corporation and How to Take it Back for online ebook

## Tim says

I listened to the complete version of this, read by the author (whose high voice adds to the overall peevishness of the work) and found it very interesting and engaging throughout. Rushkoff takes the corporation and holds it up to scrutiny. He loosely traces its history, along with that of money (as we commonly use the term), and interweaves this with a free-flowing discussion of culture and community through the centuries. The corporation is evil, he seems to believe, and the source of much that is wrong with the world. Actually my feeling is that his real target is greed in all of its forms. Like most leftist intellectuals (and I'm not one of their opponents btw) he dislikes arrogant, greedy corporations and idealizes small, intertwined communities that are relatively free of big business.

I probably would have given this four stars except that my hunch is that Rushkoff plays a little fast and loose with the facts. I am not a historian and I didn't check any of his assertions, but he makes a lot of them, some of which seemed half-baked to me. There is much about this book that is attractive and engaging, however. There are a lot of good anecdotes, some of them springing from the author's own experiences, and a lot of asides (bravo for taking a swipe at Malcolm Gladwell who really makes some wild assertions). He covers a lot of ground and shifts between topics, but does so smoothly. The ideas are all grounded in history or contemporary reality, and things never get boring or pedantic.

Rushkoff is no theorist. No, in actuality he is a complainer - and that is not bad. Someone should complain about things that are not right, and there is much to legitimately bemoan about our current corporate culture. It concentrates wealth in the hands of a very few, and it stealthily sells people lots of ephemeral junk. But Rushkoff's view fails to take into account the sad facts that greed and abuse, as well as goodness, can take place on both large and small scales. In fact the victim of such behavior in a small community may have very little recourse and nowhere to turn, whereas in a big, modern society there are always other options. The author has something to offer along the lines of offering ways to resist corporate dominance, such as his idea of bringing back the pre-Renaissance practice of using local currencies for certain kinds of transactions (since the corporate octopus has the money system rigged to benefit itself), but for the most part his stock of suggestions (the take it back part) is pretty slim.

Rushkoff is also a good non-fiction storyteller, and a sincere one. I liked hearing about salespeople in jewelry stores, and average folks at get-rich-quick conventions headlined by Donald Trump, and how Starbucks refused the request of the leader of Ethiopia to use his country's name on their coffee because they wanted the branding benefits for themselves. Rushkoff utilizes these narratives (and many others) in support of an attractive and idealistic vision. I would certainly read/listen to more of his critiques of contemporary society.

## Ahmed Salem says

[illegible]

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## Zoe's Human says

I'm DNFin 38 pages in. Philosophically, I agree with the premise, but the sourcing is just too spotty. While limited notes are in the back, there are statements of "facts" in the book with *no* source information listed. Statements, which upon researching, I either could not confirm or confirmed partially but not in keeping with the presentation. For example, the information on PASAR is not wrong insofar as the sentences about it contain no untruths; however, it is misleading by virtue of omitted information. Certainly this could be an error, or perhaps the author felt the particulars were unnecessary for some reason. Nonetheless, the picture painted by these omissions constitutes misinformation. I don't read non-fiction to fill my head with inaccuracies.

I'm going to find another book on the topic. When Corporations Rule the World looks hopeful, especially since the author appears to have some sort of expertise in the field. I was frankly a bit wary of this book because of the author's lack of related credentials. I suppose this serves as a reminder as to why I avoid non-fiction written by professional advocates with no background in their topic.

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## Rebecca McNutt says

*Life Inc.* felt slightly fear-mongering to me, but it's still an impressive book that looks extensively at the modern world's undying addiction to the corporate figures we look up to every day. As I type this on my Microsoft Asus laptop, looking at the screen through my new Converse reading glasses, drinking Bigelow earl gray tea and listening to a CTV News broadcast in the background, I feel like sort of a hypocrite. How many corporations do you rely on daily without even realizing it? :\

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## Raluca says

Kings created corporations, corporations created governments, replaced communities and isolated us under the guise of independence and self-sufficiency. We now express our identities through brands and media channels. Centralized money is biased towards accumulation rather than investment, bringing everything to a standstill. Hell, it even half-caused the plague in the Middle Ages! And if we try to solve world problems, that's 'cause corporations have taught us to think too highly of ourselves; a more reasonable goal would be small-scale change in our neighborhood.

That's the summary, more or less. I have mixed feelings about this book. On the one hand, it raises very interesting, mostly well-argued points about how capitalism and consumerism created or crept into every aspect of life. Also, the stories from get-rich-quick conferences are absolutely chilling. On the other hand, it almost completely ignores any positive aspect of the stories it tells; "coming from" Harari's balanced and nuanced *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, I really felt the difference. There's also an irksome current of "you fools, allow me to show you the truth while mocking you" in the text, and the one chapter of "we can still fix it, kind of" after 8 chapters of "we don't even realize how doomed we are" did ring a bit fake.

Or maybe it just ruffled my feathers because it blames businesspeople (and marketers in particular) for all that is wrong with the world. I somehow feel obliged to recommend it to my students.

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## **Aron says**

This book was a severe disappointment. I heard Rushkoff interviewed on radio and was intrigued by his talk. Like most people interested in the book and Rushkoff's views, I am strongly opposed to the US corporate culture and economy and I thought I would be reading a well-researched, historical/economic analysis of that system. The book however turned out to be a dilettante's screed.

Let's start with the style. As some have noted the book is poorly edited, does not have a coherent structure and tends to repeat itself. One gets the feeling there is quite a bit of padding to make what could have been a long article into a full length book. Worse yet nearly every chapter starts with a first-name anecdote, a common tactic of the self-help books Rushkoff viciously attacks. The purpose of these anecdotes is to humanize the ideas and make them more palatable. But it is quite obvious that while these anecdotes might be based on real events Rushkoff might have experienced or read about, they are made up stories not factual accounts of actual events. This type of writing, besides being patronizing, is essentially a form of propaganda and not intelligent analysis.

Which leads me to the main criticism - Rushkoff's thesis is based on inaccuracies and untruths. He has an argument he wants to make and he fits the facts to match his argument, not the other way around. There are multiple examples in nearly every chapter. Let's start with a minor inaccuracy early on, where he confuses debits and credits with assets and liabilities. All "debit" means is the left side of the ledger and "credit" means the right side. The whole point of double-entry accounting is that debits must always equal credits, and if they don't there was an error in entry. This is purely a technical aid in ensuring accurate accounts. Profitable businesses want income to exceed expenses and assets to exceed liabilities, not credit to exceed debit (which latter makes no sense). This criticism may sound pedantic. While accounting terms are complex, if you are going to make major arguments about how double-entry accounting moved us into the world of corporate dominance, at least make sure you are using terms properly!!

Things move downhill from there. The book is riddled with propagandistic arguments. His discussion about Nash and game theory is a good example. Rushkoff can be paraphrased as follows: "Nash was crazy, so his rabid support of selfishness is an expression of some lunatic schizophrenia and since game theory selfishness is used to justify the free market, it just proves free market ideology is crazy. Isn't it ironic that Reagan shut down looney bins as part of his cost cutting of big government?" There are ten different logical fallacies in his arguments made in just a few paragraphs (including ad hominem) but it also doesn't match the facts in the real world. Yes it is true that the prisoner's dilemma was first raised at the Rand Corporation and Nash did contribute some math regarding this. But the prisoner's dilemma does not equal game theory (Rushkoff uses the two almost interchangeably). The prisoner's dilemma is not at all relevant to free markets since it is a

model where there is zero communication between the competitors and in Smith's classic free market all players have access to all information. In any case propagandists for the free market like Reagan didn't appeal to game theory to justify their arguments. Monetarism and its critique of Keynes is the main idea used in Reagonomics. Finally, most modern researchers agree that the optimal solution of the prisoner's dilemma involves some sort of co-operation strategy and in fact the benefits of altruism in biological and political systems is often modeled via the prisoners dilemma and other game theory models. Rushkoff's presentation of this topic is the kind of argument one expects to find in a Rush Limbaugh or Glenn Beck kind of book, i.e. a propaganda text, not a serious analysis of the topic.

Throughout the books it seems Rushkoff makes stuff up just to prove his point. For example when he talks about coins in the Roman empire he claims money was centralized and the empire fell because of debased coinage. Both points are factually wrong. The emperor controlled gold coinage but local currencies were used all over the empire. Debasement of currency was actually the way several emperors propped up the empire in times of economic crisis (and if Greece could do it today it would go a long way to helping them out). The fall of the Roman empire was a quite complex process and to blame it all on centralized currency and its debasement is ridiculous.

Which brings us to this: Rushkoff's arguments are based on gross over simplifications and his totally ignoring facts and events that don't fit or contradict his thesis. Sure the late Middle Ages prior to the plague was a time of prosperity. But it was also a time when trade opened up with the East and the Crusaders' plundered the Muslims in the Holy Land. These two most likely are far more relevant to this period's prosperity as opposed to local currencies. Oh and did I mention the Crusades? To talk of this period as some sort of pastoral utopia is utter nonsense.

I kept on reading the book because I was hoping to find some semi-intelligent discussion of alternatives to corporate culture. Instead, Rushkoff insults and demeans anyone who does things differently than he would like. For example, people who work at non-profits are losers according to Rushkoff because obviously anyone who is talented and "energetic" will go work for a higher paying corporation. The idea that someone might actually take less pay to achieve something important for society just doesn't compute in Rushkoff's mental "operating system." According to him, political action is worthless because government is obviously in the pocket of corporations. Well yes, our government was equally or even deeper in the pockets of corporate elites prior and during the depression of the thirties. Yet FDR somehow managed to make changes which in fact helped millions of people and saved our collective butts in this latest crisis, despite 70 years of concerted effort to roll back all his reforms.

Of course Rushkoff is correct in stating that it's important to be involved in your local community economically, socially and politically. However, that point is so obvious that it is ridiculous someone feels the need to write a book to make it. And it has nothing to do with your attitudes towards corporate control. No matter what your political perspective, you should be out there working to make your local community, school, whatever a better place for you and your family and neighbors.

Rushkoff spends 98% of his book whining about how bad things are (even though in the second to last chapter he says himself that whining is a waste of time). He blames his own failure to fight the "system" (including publishing his book with a big corporation and his bad parenting practices), in other words he blames his own moral and intellectual laziness, on the overwhelming power of corporations to rule our lives. He totally ignores or demeans his (and our) ability to choose alternatives to how we live and act. He also totally ignores how throughout history and geography, most people never had more control than we do over the big things in life. If after all his whining in this poorly argued, poorly thought out book, Rushkoff's best advice is his idea about "Comfort dollars," then one-star doesn't begin to describe how much this book

sucks.

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## **Matthew Boulton says**

I borrowed this book from the library, and towards the end I found no fewer than three abandoned book marks. This led me to believe that many people found this book hard to finish and in many ways I sympathise. The subtitle implies that this book will be a history lesson followed by advice on how to overthrow our inhuman corporate overlords. The former is definitely present; Rushkoff charts the history of the corporation back to the Renaissance. He explains how the corporation became a way for monarchies to rein in the new merchant class and maintain some semblance of centralised control over the new rich. However, the balance of the book is occupied with cataloguing the various evils corporations have done to us over the years (some fascinating, some well-known, some truly hideous) with very little advice offered (the promised 'how to take it back' part.) By way of homage, you will find that this long-winded review catalogues some of the interesting parts of Life Inc., but will not offer a recommendation or whether or not you should read it.

If you read Life Inc., it is likely you will be affected by a train of thought Rushkoff himself describes: concern becomes cynicism, becomes despair, becomes thoughts of self-preservation and insulation. The trick is to keep reading after the despair phase and I think that is where my three predecessors failed. Again, I can't really blame them because the payoff is modest. If you do move past despair, then eerily (or perhaps not-at-all-coincidentally), you will experience the self-preservation phase shortly before reading about it.

The history is fascinating, particularly when Rushkoff takes us back to the Age of Cathedrals. He conjures up images of an idyllic period of European history before the Renaissance, the plague and the rise of the corporation. A time where the working classes enjoyed four days of work, over a hundred public holidays and arguably enjoyed better standards of health and well-being than we do today. There was no reason or sense in hoarding local currency, so businesses invested heavily in their people and physical assets. It's a compelling view of the late Middle Ages, a period of history that I don't feel was covered very well in my education and throws some doubt on what we consider to be 'progress'. From there, Rushkoff takes us on to the spread of centralized currency, the abuses of Philip IV and finally the plague. He turns on its head the traditional assertion that the plague led to Europe's economic collapse, saying that in fact the switch to centralized currency decreased standards of living, started the economic collapse and the plague was the result. It's an interesting alternative view of history that merits further study, although Rushkoff does not provide much in the way of proof so more reading is required.

Having raised doubts about our interpretation of history, the author also questions traditional economic theory and GDP in particular, pointing out that while things like cancer and divorce increase GDP, home cooked meals and socialising with the neighbours decrease GDP. So what is so great about this GDP thing anyway? And in some less developed nations, it has become clear that an increase in GDP results in a lower standard of living for the majority.

In summary, it's an interesting book that will make you think and confirm some of your darkest suspicions but unfortunately it's a bit lacking in answers. I imagine that the sort of people drawn to a book entitled Life Inc. might not find much new in this book, but there's plenty of people out there that ought to read it. One more thing: don't forget your bookmark!

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## **Andrew says**

So I suppose Rushkoff is at heart a polemicist, and a very good one. This isn't really new material for me-- I read a lot of anti-capitalist screeds, so when Rushkoff references Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse, and Deleuze I say "but of course!" And his criticisms of the world of social media, the American cult of the individual pleasure principle, and the corporatization of daily life are my own complaints as well. So on this front, I enjoyed reading him, even if he was preaching to the choir.

It's when he fields solutions that he runs into problems. The solutions he suggests are community-building, specifically non-corporate enterprises. Which are beautiful and valuable, but ultimately, I'm rather skeptical that they will do anything to combat a totalizing corporate reality. Something tells me an injection of class analysis would provide a broader range of remedies to a stultifying corporatism.

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## **Stewart says**

There have been many good books written recently about the implosion on Wall Street, the massive debt held by Americans, corporations, and the federal government, and the current recession, but few have gone into such depth about the United States and its economic and political discontents as Douglas Rushkoff's 2008 book "Life Inc.: How the World Became a Corporation and How to Take It Back." This book explores the history of the corporation from the late Middle Ages through the chartered monopoly of European colonialist powers to corporations being granted the rights of "persons" by an inexplicable U.S. Supreme Court decision. During the past 40 years, corporations have insinuated themselves into every aspect of American life and bought undue influence in Congress and state legislatures. Everything we own was made by corporations, and most Americans are bombarded incessantly with commercials promoting consumption (provided by corporations). As Rushkoff points out, most Americans think like corporations and cannot imagine any other world than the corporate economic system we live under. "We live in a landscape tilted toward a set of behaviors and a way of making choices that go against our better judgment, as well as our collective self-interest. ... In short, instead of acting like people, we act like corporations."

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## **Andrew says**

(I listened to the Audible edition, read by the author.) Tremendously insightful, and enormously challenging to our most fundamental collective assumptions about the way the world works. I was not able to wrap my brain around everything Rushkoff had to say, so I'll probably need to listen to it again. Also, it's hard not to get demoralized while listening to Rushkoff tear down one institution after another and expose the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to correcting the flaws in the system. He offers some hope at the end, but it takes real resolve to listen and try to absorb everything he has to say. I recommend the book highly, but only if you're ready to have your whole worldview turned inside out and upside down.

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## **William Wren says**

I was excited when I first picked up Douglas Rushkoff's book, Life Inc.: How the World Became a Corporation and How to Take It Back. I confess I expected it to articulate ideas and feelings I had, hopefully

better than I could, and also flesh them out so they were more substantial. Yes, I was doing something I complain others do: looking for opinions that affirm my own rather than challenge them.

In many ways, the book does all that. I also think it's an important book, at least its thesis is important: that corporatism has so ingrained itself in our lives, in our very thinking and seeing, that we've become corporations ourselves. At least, we see the world through corporate defined eyes. Whether others agreed with this idea or not was irrelevant, in a sense. I thought it important to see the world from this perspective because we seldom stop and think about why we live and think as we do and what its meaning might be.

But the book's tone undermines all that. As Publishers Weekly puts it, "An engaging history of commerce and corporatism devolves into an extended philippic on how increasing personal wealth and the rise of nuclear families constituted a failure of community—whose services are now provided by products and professionals."

Each chapter starts well, but a strident, proselytizing tone soon creeps in and it is off-putting, to put it mildly. I also found myself questioning some of the interpretations and conclusions. If the book were a Wikipedia entry, I think there would be a number of places where the note, "citation needed" would appear. In some cases, there were supportive footnotes but in others, no – they were just conclusions Mr. Rushkoff drew having interpreted information a particular way.

Overall, the book is pretty humourless and annoyingly earnest. And that means the book's good points – its research, the information it provides, its fundamental argument – all get lost in its obvious politics.

There is Mr. Rushkoff's fundamental argument about the focus on the individual moving us away from the idea of community. It appears reasonable except when it's put almost exclusively in terms of a kind of a corporate conspiracy to separate us and transform us. Are there no other possible reasons for the individual focus? For the disappearance of community? Have we lost the notion of community or is the idea of community a much broader one? I know many people who would find the elimination of communities a dubious assertion. And I'd question the example of unions as community (some seem pretty corporate to me). I think Mr. Rushkoff's definition of community is a very limited one.

I suppose I'm saying there is an imbalance in the book. There is also the unstated belief in some kind of golden age when we had it right, whatever "it" is. It feels as if the argument was decided upon then material was gathered to confirm it, rather than explore whether or not it held water. The book becomes more polemic than anything else.

My biggest frustration, however, is in the feeling that what is of value in the book is lost by the tone and approach. When young people (or anyone) worry about personal brands, when corporations and everyday schmoe are involved in charities as ways to support their brand or when (to use Mr. Rushkoff's example) we're more concerned about our property value than our personal safety ... surely something ain't right?

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## **Enrique Santos says**

I was really drawn to this book after reading the excerpts of it on Boing Boing and Rushkoff's own web site. In short, the book is about two things: how people in society came to adopt the values of corporate interests as their own as opposed to vice versa, and just how this trend can be reversed. What I feel the book suffers from is the fact that there is too much explanation of the former, and far less of the latter.

Rushkoff analyzes the role of corporations from as far back as the Middle Ages. From there, he spends a great deal of the book talking about the rise of public relations and consolidation of corporate power that became intrinsically linked with the interests and policies of national governments.

To me, a great deal of this history was a rehash of the most excellent documentary series *The Century of the Self* (The full series can be found on Google Video). The real gem of this work really comes when Rushkoff begins to talk about the history of currency itself and goes in-depth into the historical use of complementary currencies among communities, and how it is a trend that is picking up once more. His calls for greater community involvement and support for local organizations is also a positive message that seems very practical in today's world.

I highly advise that anyone that reads through this book take Rushkoff's analysis with a grain of salt, at times he seems to brush his view in broad strokes over a situation. So long as you're able to critically analyze his arguments and have the willingness to research further on your own, I recommend this book highly. There are many great ideas and points to consider.

I'm really glad a book like this is giving exposure to a whole lot of these ideas, even if it is flawed.

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## **Ben Babcock says**

*Neuromancer* remains one of the most influential science-fiction books I've read. It's the kind of book that influenced me even before I had read it by influencing books and TV shows and movies that I then read or watched. However, it's not William Gibson's imagination of cyberspace that sticks with me. Rather, it's his vision of a future dominated by corporations, one where governments are atrophied entities and one's life and prosperity are dependent upon feudal loyalties to these transnational mega-corporations. Whereas the initial cyberpunk renderings of cyberspace and virtual reality seem very quaint thirty years on, corporate statehood remains a viable and fearsome proposition.

*Life Inc* is a non-fiction exploration of the power that corporations have and the means by which they hold onto power and gain more. Douglas Rushkoff looks at the historical antecedents of the modern corporation, exploring how corporatist philosophies developed out of old-style mercantilism. From there, he factors in the rise of individualism in the twentieth-century. Ultimately, he aims to show how corporations are alternatively self-reinforcing and, occasionally, self-defeating, but how our short-sightedness has allowed them to gain more power than they should have.

If I had read this back when I first heard about it in 2009, then I probably would have been more impressed. Since then my feelings about capitalism have changed. Whereas before I was more optimistic about the ability for regulation to rein in the excesses of capitalism, I've since become more radical. Now I view capitalism as an inherently unethical system that reinforces inequity, so let's burn it all down. Rushkoff doesn't go quite so far—he acknowledges that regulation is unlikely to be effective, at least by itself; but he isn't in a rush to reimagine our entire system. About as far as he'll go towards that radical end of the spectrum is to point out that we shouldn't suffer from tunnel vision. Just because we currently have a centralized currency doesn't mean we must always have one, for example.

As far as economic arguments go, *Life Inc* is a little bit all over the place. Rushkoff seems split over a chronological or thematic organization to his argument ... so he kind of goes for both. Each chapter is loosely based around a theme, and then from there he delivers a historical perspective on that theme. In some

cases this works fine—the first chapter, for example, is very informative. In other cases it can be confusing or repetitive. The book is also extremely American in its perspective and tone. I mean, that's to be expected—but it's always amusing, as a Canadian, reading an American's writing and seeing very plainly the biases that inform it. Even as Rushkoff talks about how people too easily assume that this is the way it has to be, he's making assumptions based on an American society that has laboured under the myth of the American Dream for over two hundred years.

The book is front-loaded, generally proceeding downhill towards its resolution with ever-diminishing returns. The last two chapters, in particular, I skimmed. After dedicating a great deal of time to discussing how corporations, and in particular the self-help industry, target people by singling them out as individuals, Rushkoff ironically does the same: "I believe it can. And more important, *you* can." And then there's this gem:

Likewise, each tiny choice we make to take back our world leads to a long chain of *positive* effects.

Oh, I get it. Power of positive thinking ... wait a minute. That sounds awfully similar to the Secret or those other self-help scams you were talking about earlier, Douglas.

Critiquing capitalism is easy. Coming up with solutions is hard. And to be fair, some of these community-minded solutions that Rushkoff includes are probably worthwhile ventures. But again, so much here assumes a kind of homogeneous, middle-class, white privilege in the reader: "You are an upper-middle class white guy with a university degree and a steady but not amazing income. You might be married or about to get married, and you want to make your community a slightly less corporatized place."

I guess what I'm trying to say is that there is very little fire to this book, because like it or not, Rushkoff has benefitted a great deal from the way our society is currently set up. That's one of the largest differences between a book written by a member of the dominant group and a book written by someone who has experienced more oppression—both books can be accurate critiques, but one is going to be more dry and academic and the other will necessarily have more passion. Rushkoff delivers a lot of fact and a lot of opinion, but it's the same kind of opinion I largely have on these things: opinion formed from careful and reasoned judgement and study rather than lived experience. While that doesn't make our opinions less valuable, I think sometimes it makes them less interesting.

So like I said, if I had read this in 2009, I'd be all over *Life Inc.* If you are just getting started in questioning capitalism or corporatism, Rushkoff is going to walk you through it. And this is such an important issue. So you could do much worse here.

Nevertheless, there's just so much that this book isn't that it *could have been*. While there are plenty of gems, accurate criticisms, and interesting historical tidbits, you have to wade through a lot that isn't so interesting to get to them. *Life Inc* reminded me of all the many reasons I'm not fond of corporatism, and it gave me some fresh perspective on some of the reasons corporations are as powerful as they are today. But it's a long way from becoming any kind of bible on the subject.

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## **Socraticgadfly says**

I may rank books, on average, a bit on the higher side than some others, but trust me — if you're politically progressive like I am, this book deserves it indeed.

Rushkoff has a great paean for truly being ourselves without buying into corporate-driven cults of "individuality." With the rise of social media, this message is more true and more necessary than ever. Rushkoff notes that most "branding" into which we are sucked is driven by corporations.

Corporatism goes beyond that, though. It goes to government-corporation interlocks, which shouldn't be surprising to true progressives.

When we not only have holding companies controlling holding companies, as in the run-up to the Depression, but we have outsourcing companies outsourcing some of their own outsourcing, we should look carefully at the corporate "patriotism" of buying from American-owned companies, too, Rushkoff says. (And, yes, in the wake of Mitt Romney, you read that exactly right — companies that specialize in outsourcing jobs to places like China outsource some of their own outsourcing!)

That said, Rushkoff did have some new information for me on the way money systems are controlled in our modern world, vs. parallel local and long-distance money supplies that existed centuries ago. Related to that, he invites us to rethink just how good the High Middle Ages, i.e., the trecento and quattrocento, were, and to think about what we might learn from them.

The "solution" isn't unplugging. The solution is, whether in cyberspace or meatspace, to examine the messages we're being given and why, and act accordingly.

And, part of is carefully examining just how deep those corporate messages run. To illustrate that, Rushkoff starts the book with scenes from a wealth seminar he attended, where people were supposedly being given "the secret" of how to get rich on repossessed houses, etc. The tragedy of tragedies was that many of the attendees had recently lost their own homes, often on subprime mortgages, but were still suckers for the same marketing that had hooked them before.

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## **Justin says**

Those who control history control the future and in *Life Inc.* Douglas Rushkoff makes his mark on our future by detailing the history of Corporate Capitalism as the political and economic reality of the modern world. After evolving over hundreds of years into its current form, Corporate Capitalism is now taken so thoroughly for granted that few even question the basic mythology behind it. Rushkoff was jarred into this revelation after being mugged outside his home and being told by neighbors to keep quiet because it might hurt property values. His fellow homo sapiens were becoming dispassionate economic actors instead of human beings. The unquestioning behavior towards the value system of Corporate Capitalism is compared to waking up with Microsoft Windows on every computer, and every computer you've ever known. While nations and economies thrived using alternate models of economic transaction, the course of history has resulted in our particular economic arrangement. Rushkoff succeeds in tracing a clear and coherent history

uncovering how arbitrary the rules of the modern economic game truly are.

As corporations gained power in the Colonial era they changed places into 'territories' and people into 'labor', solidifying the power of the state to grant monopoly power to the corporations. Ultimately, everything and everyone could be colonized for profit, fueling European colonialism and establishing corporatism as the basis for a new continent. This new classification of human interaction created a value system that extended to every aspect of human life. Rushkoff draws a distinction between the division of labor and specialization of labor, in doing so he reveals a major flaw in our valuation of specialization. We would think a society of trained merchants, managers and laborers are more specialized than one of self-taught artisans and inherently entrepreneurial shop-owners but managers didn't want to hire highly skilled labor which could demand higher wages. The managerial classes standardized processes as to hire the least qualified and most replaceable laborers around. This activity favored generalization instead of specialization: the basis for the modern education system. A modern education system designed by people like Stanford professor Ellwood P. Cubberly created a curriculum to produce "mediocre intellects" for a docile citizenry. The model for this education was one of the factory where, "the raw product (of children) are to be shaped and fashioned according to the specifications laid down." My own thought is that by creating a population of generalists, we create individuals that have no specific knowledge, no actual ability to create a tangible good or to experience the inherent pleasure of such creation. This is an insecure individual and one with an inherent fear of survival imposed on them by the scarcity in a compounding interest based monetary system.

Even the original American Revolution was one against corporatism, as the Tea Party slogan of "No Taxation without Representation" was primarily about Britain's tax laws which removed barriers to trade and allowed the East India Company to destroy the colonial economy. The irony is that our modern Tea Party movement shares the same angst as the original one but without the clarity of understanding the connection between Corporatism and their frustration. In the United States, corporatism was held mostly in check until the landmark 1886 decision of *Santa Clara County v Southern Pacific Railroad Company*. This case established the ability for corporations to claim all the rights of personhood granted under the 14th Amendment to the US Constitution, a law ratified to ensure the rights for former slaves. Over the next 25 years 307 14th Amendment cases went before the US Supreme Court and 288 of them were brought by corporations. With this as a precedent, money became equivalent to speech, so corporations could obtain their 1st Amendment right to free speech by spending money. Since 1944 when the US set the rules of the global economic game with the Bretton-Woods agreement which established the US Dollar as the global reserve currency, the policy of Corporatism has been international. We've dragged the rest of the world along, yielding a race to the bottom as municipalities and then nations competed to offer corporate handouts for attracting major companies. We've demolished local economies and land with the scorched earth policy of Wal-Marts and other big boxes.

The corporation has built a mythology so transcendent it has disconnected us from the world of true science, technology, ecology and thought. As Rushkoff notes, "Corporatism depends first on our disconnection. The less local, immediate, and interpersonal our experience of the world and each other, the more likely we are to adopt self-interested behaviors that erode community and relationships." We become the rational dispassionate economic man the corporations need us to be for their survival, and in doing so we become ever more dependent on their services, confirming in our own minds a subconscious subscription to the ideals of the system. We were told the perfect society is one we could own a stake in, through owning a home and a car and our own piece of suburban perfection. As Walt Whitman wrote, "A man is not a whole or complete man unless he owns a house and the ground it stands on." This was a directed goal because it was the burden of home ownership which, "chained a man to the factory where he worked." A focus on home ownership drove a separation of classes and produced much of the wealth disparity in the US today.

Ultimately, the myth that we are all free to compete for the great prizes the free market has to offer prevents us from conferring about the value of the system itself. Divided and conquer, as a people but mostly as a mental environment. And so we are stuck with branding instead of the relationships we used to have with real people and their craftsmanship. We are piled in droves towards others with similar brand loyalties and the public discourse is standardized by using the media to speak to "individuals". We've removed everything of value from its context and in doing so we've removed the sense of awe that is a product of its uniqueness. Even the quest to find our place in the world while recognizing the power of being human has been co-opted by a spirituality that is derived from corporate values. From L. Frank Baum's Wizard of Oz where Dorothy could have whatever she wanted as long as she believed, to the modern obsession with The Secret, we've developed the purist spiritual expression of consumerist culture: a disembodied other delivering whatever we want when we want it.

A questioning and curious mind is culled with the depravity of modern intelligensia as dominated by the de-facto standards of a corporate value system. Surely there must be more to this world? Fear not, economists have explored it and found, as in Freakonomics, that maximized utility is surely the primary drive behind human actions. Malcom Gladwell offers spiritual and intellectual comfort for modern persuasion professionals with advice to classify our fellow humans for finding Tipping Points and harnessing snap judgements with Blinks. When we think Wal-Mart succeeds because it is efficient, it only does so because it has access to speculative markets beyond the reach of local shopkeepers. In reality, the Fortune 500 are just names on huge piles of debt. Adam Smith and his invisible hand were regulated by the pressures of neighbors and social values, not abstract speculation on derivatives and demolished trade barriers.

In the modern era corporations became giant externality generating machines, displacing liabilities as fast as possible to increase profits and our natural world suffers. Yet, the primary discourse regarding economies treat them as a natural system, ignoring that it is itself but a man-made system imposed on an ecosystem. Fiat currency has become the operating system which runs this game but has faded to the background so that we no longer think about. We can only think of one system of money despite the existence of many others throughout history. The most valuable piece of Life Inc. are the historical accounts of jealous monarchs which outlawed local currencies based on tangible grain stores in medieval towns to regain power through their coin of the realm.

As the Corporate Capitalist systems which have driven economic reality and moderated human life continue to break down, Life Inc. provides a guide to understanding that our species has survived and thrived in many alternative economic arrangements. This is a powerful book which dispels an unconscious acceptance of the corporate value structure and outlines a path towards returning to authentic human interactions once again.

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