

00:04

I used to love waking up at exactly 7:00am. When I lived in San Francisco, I would wake up right at 7:00am and immediately go to my favorite coffee shop. It was my favorite coffee shop, because it was the best coffee shop. I had done the research, it was five stars, it was great. And I would drink my coffee and get onto my bicycle and ride into work. And I had optimized my schedule to be perfect. I was constantly, like, shaving off one or two seconds making it slightly faster so I could get into work faster.

00:39

I was working as a software engineer at Google, and in a lot of ways, this was my dream job. It felt like this was the thing that the rest of my life was leading up towards. I'd always wanted to work in software and I was finally doing it. And I was living in San Francisco, which is a city that I love, surrounded by people who were like me. And every part of my life was perfectly tailored to my interests, the things that I wanted to do. And I loved it.

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So one day I was at work and I started to read this paper, a computer science research paper about predictive analytics. And the gist of the paper was that if you take someone's GPS trace, like the listing of all the places that they've been in the past month or so, and you feed it into a machine-learning algorithm, you can predict with fairly high accuracy where they're going to be on the following day. And I thought this was kind of cool. And I was thinking, like, what would happen if you put my GPS trace into the algorithm? What would come out the other end?

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So I was talking with my friend Kelly, and we were planning something to do after work that day. And I got onto Yelp and found this really great bar that had just opened up. And I was about to suggest that we go to this bar when I stopped. And I started thinking about that algorithm again. And I started thinking, wait a second, isn't this bar exactly where that algorithm would guess that I was going to go this evening? And that was kind of weird. Because I thought that I ... where was I in that? I know that I was the one making the choice, right? But how did the computer know about that? So that was a little disturbing.

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And since I'm an engineer, whenever I have a problem like this, my instinct is to fix it, to make something that solves the problem. And so I decided to make an app that would help me choose where to go on this evening. And so the way that it works is that the app looks at all the places

that are on Google maps in the city of San Francisco, and then chooses one at random. And then it calls an Uber. And that car shows up at your location and takes you to that random place. It tells the Uber driver where the random place is, but tells you nothing. And so it's a big surprise when you arrive.

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(Laughter)

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And so I texted Kelly and I said, "We should do this." We met up and pressed the button. And suddenly, miraculously, there was an Uber driver at my apartment door. So we got in and very quickly started heading to a part of San Francisco that neither of us really knew. It was a part of town that we just had never been in before. And when the driver told us we had reached our destination, we thought it must have been a joke. We showed up in front of this austere brick building with a wrought iron fence in front of it, and a sign that said the words San Francisco General Hospital, Psychiatric Emergency Center.

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(Laughter)

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Which, maybe that's pretty appropriate, I don't know.

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(Laughter)

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But we thought it was funny. But it was also exhilarating because here we were, in this place that we never would have gone to otherwise, doing something really different on a Friday night.

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(Laughter)

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And I was hooked, I started using this app to go to all different places in San Francisco. I went to museums randomly, random grocery stores, random bars, random bowling alleys, random florists. And I started discovering that there was an entire side to San Francisco that I had been ignoring because of my preference.

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And then I started thinking, how else can I apply this concept to my life? And so I started building other experiments that involved randomness. I made a random YouTube video generator, a random schedule generator, a random diet club that would randomly eliminate a food from my diet each week.

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(Laughter)

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And it's cumulative, so eventually you just can't eat.

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(Laughter)

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Random tattoo generator, a random Spotify playlist, random podcast, a printer that prints out random suggestions of things to do.

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(Laughter)

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A random Facebook event generator. And the way that this one works is that in a city like Vienna on a given day, there are hundreds of Facebook events -- public Facebook events -- that

are going on. So it would choose one at random and say, this is your plan for tonight. And so I ended up showing --

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(Laughter)

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And so I'd show up at events like Joe's birthday, the eighth grade band recital, chess club, truck drivers school. And it was really interesting because these were communities that I knew nothing about but were having amazing events to talk about things that they cared about. And there I was.

06:04

After a while, I had the opportunity to transition my work into freelance, which gave me a lot more flexibility about where I lived. And so I decided, you know, what if I could let the computer decide what part of the world I lived in? And so I wrote a program that figured out every city that it was possible for me to live in, given my budget, and then chose one at random. And I started living this way and it sent me all over the world. Taipei, Taiwan, Mumbai, India, Dubai. Even places that for an American are really off the beaten path, like Essen, Germany and Gortina, Slovenia. And every time I would go to a new city, I would do the same sort of stuff I was doing in San Francisco, go to random events, meet random people. And I'd live there for two to three months and then ask the computer again for the next location. I did this for two years.

07:01

Paradoxically, giving up control to this machine actually made me feel more free than when I was making choices, because I discovered that ... My preference had blinded me from the complexity and the richness of the world. And following the computer gave me the courage to live outside of my comfort zone, to discover parts of the human experience that I ignored because they were too different or not for me.

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I ended up in Mumbai, India for a while, and I was going to a lot of Facebook events when I was there. And one day, the computer sent me to this yoga class and I'm really bad at yoga, but I went anyway. I found myself descending into a downward dog when I had a revelation. Because I was thinking about, you know, this random stuff is really freeing, it's sort of putting me outside of my

bubble, my comfort zone. But really how random is it? Because this was not my first yoga event in Mumbai. In fact, it was my third that week.

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(Laughter)

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And if you think about it, it's not surprising that you see patterns like this. Because I was choosing randomly from a list of things that was decidedly not random. The list of Facebook events that are happening in a city is very influenced by the things that are going on in a city like that. And if you think about it, every time you make a choice, you're not just making it on your own. You're selecting from a list, a menu of choices that was designed by someone or something else. And whatever freedom that you have in that choice is necessarily constrained by social structures, customs and history that provide the context for that selection.

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So initially, I thought of this as a way of getting outside of my bubble. As, you know, transcending myself, my preference. But eventually I started to think about it differently. I started to think about it as a way of taking a photograph. When I was in a place like Mumbai, it was more likely that I would show up at a yoga event. But if I was in Vienna, maybe a music event would be more likely. Every time that I was choosing randomly in a city, what I was doing was making an inquiry, asking, "Mumbai, tell me what you're about." And then the answer would tell me something about the structure of that city and my relationship to it and its relationship with the rest of the world.

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And so I ... I had, like, a really tidy ending for this previously. And as I was coming up here, I decided to scrap it, because ... You know, I think that, like, a problem with TED Talks often is that they wrap up in a tidy bow and then you can go away without really thinking about it. You can sort of just -- It feels like everything is OK at the end. And I think ... In the world that we're living in, there are a lot of real problems. And I think that these questions of algorithmic control play a lot into them. We're talking right now about the role that Facebook had in the American election. There are a lot of questions about the ways that these algorithms are controlling our lives. And so, I don't know, I don't know what I'm saying and I don't have, like, a very clear conclusion. But I would just encourage you to try to be experimental when it comes to interacting with these algorithms. Because if you just do the defaults, follow your preference, go

in the direction that everything else is going, it's really easy to get caught in a place where you can be controlled. And I think that's it.

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Thank you.

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(Applause)