

EPISODE 1061

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:00] JM: We are all living in social isolation due to the quarantine from COVID-19. Isolation is changing our habits and our moods. It's ravaging the economy and it's changing how we work. One positive change is that more people have been reconnecting with their friends and family over frequent calls and video chats. Isolation is not a normal way for humans to live. We are social animals and we need social interaction. We've changed how we use internet products and there's been an evolution in trends in online shopping, social networking and video communication software.

Courtland Allen is the founder of Indie Hackers and Anurag Goel is the founder of Render, a new cloud provider. Both Courtland and Anurag are friends of mine and they join this episode to talk about how their lives are changing as a result of social isolation. It was a real treat to talk to these guys as this is such a time of gratitude. So I hope you enjoy it as well.

[SPONSOR MESSAGE]

[00:01:06] JM: The Uptake is a new show about all things tech and community. It's hosted by Anna Chu who travels the world of technology uncovering people's journeys, and each episode showcases communities around the world helping listeners understand the value in community activity and exploring the different ways that they can stay up-to-date and explore different ways of doing things with technology. Every episode has a focus topic, guest perspectives from Microsoft MVPs and community news. There're also updates on events and conferences, virtual conferences these days and more. You can find it by just searching for the Uptake in your podcasts.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:58] JM: Okay. Anurag and Courtland, welcome back to the show.

[00:02:02] CA: Thanks for having us. It's great to be back, Jeff.

[00:02:04] AG: Yeah, thank you, Jeff. It's always fun to be here.

[00:02:08] JM: I just want to start off by saying I'm happy to have friends in the tech world. It's been nice getting to know you guys even through the context that we've gotten to know each other is kind of through business and much of the interactions have been virtual, but it is nice to have friends, and I think this is a time of gratitude. I just want to mention that upfront. It's been a real pleasure getting to know both of you guys.

[00:02:32] CA: I feel the same way. A lot of us is obviously business. We all run different companies, but few people get into the startup world or the tech world who don't actually authentically enjoy it. It's a great place to make friends and really have lifelong relationships to come ahead of it.

[00:02:47] AG: Especially during this time when virtual friendships are all we have.

[00:02:52] CA: This is all we've got, the Zoom calls.

[00:02:54] JM: Silicon Valley or tech world-based friendships versus like college friendships or elementary school friendships, they are different because they start off in this kind of you're trying to find your footing. It's a little bit transactional. Everybody's trying to get to know each other and have coffees, and it has a little bit more of a synthetic feel at first, but everybody just gradually I guess you learn to trust other people and becomes more like those friendships of college or elementary school, but maybe not completely. I don't know. But hopefully we have moved past the synthetic friendship feeling to some degree.

[00:03:33] AG: Oh yeah, more than move past it, Jeff.

[00:03:36] JM: Okay. Wonderful. How have each of your lives changed in the midst of isolation?

[00:03:43] CA: I have to say that I was arguably living the social distancing lifestyle before this all started, so it hasn't changed all that much. I work from home on Indie Hackers. I sit right here at my desk most of the time. I cook a lot of meals. It's basically the same. I rarely went into the

office beforehand. Now I obviously never go into the office at Stripe. The biggest change though has been just the lack of actually seeing friends in-person.

I haven't actually seen somebody who I know well face-to-face in over a month. The only time I leave my house is to go to the grocery store. So I sort of replaced all those face-to-face interactions with Zoom calls and text messaging, in poker games and all the sort of digital relationships, which I don't think quite replace the real thing. But outside of that, I think I'm just doing most of the same things I've always done.

[00:04:31] AG: Yeah, I was thinking about specifically this in your context, Courtland, this morning, because we were both going to be on the show and I realized that life hasn't probably changed for you that much. On the other hand, for me, it's changed significantly because I was going into work every day. We have a nice little office close to Caltrain in SF and we have nine people now who are in that office. I miss being around them. I miss the bandwidth, of course, that you can get when you're just talking face-to-face. I also just miss just happy hours where we're just sitting together, chatting about nothing in particular and just bonding as a group, as a team. That's obviously much harder to do no matter how many virtual happy hours you have.

Then on the personal side, I think I have not been very good at meeting friends regularly even though I would like to. In that sense, perhaps things have changed a little less for me, but I am doing Zoom calls with friends and that is keeping same.

[00:05:44] JM: This one thing that I knew was doing even before the isolation, and I haven't been great at keeping up with friends or family myself. I think Courtland, maybe we've talked about this little bit as well, but like when you find something you really like to do, if you find a business you want to run and you're running it and it's really successful, it's just blissful in a lot of ways. A lot of the rest of the world melts away and it's not that you wouldn't want to be talking to other friends. You wouldn't want to be talking to other family members, but you kind of just wish there were 26 hours in the day and you could devote those two hours to actually socializing with people rather than working on your thing. But I started doing this thing, which is like in some ways it's not great, but I call it virtual runs, where basically I put on a Bluetooth headset and I like to go running, and I like schedule calls with friends while I'm going for a run. That's actually been a pretty good way to connect with people and I guess it was predictive of

the socially isolated world that we live in. But now we're doing like lots of calls with people. I know everybody has started doing this, which is funny. You guys are doing more phone calls with your friends and family members I imagine?

[00:06:55] CA: Yeah, a lot more. I've been talking to my mom every day for like an hour much to her delight. I've been Zooming and Facetiming with friends all over. To your point about the social runs that you used to do, I think have these sort of scheduled friendship interactions, it feels often away, but it also makes so much sense because you're kind of doing them at the same time you'd be doing other things. You're running while talking to friends.

When I was in college and high school, you just naturally make tons and tons of friends. It's because you have so many of these activities at overlap. You're in the same classes, you need to walk to school together, etc. etc. Of course you're going to talk to people. But when you have a startup or when you're coding and you get into the flow and it's blissful, like you said, it's not really a group activity. That's you doing this like really addictive thing by yourself and it doesn't naturally for the opportunity to like really interact with other people. I think scheduling it makes a lot of sense and I think also sort of aligning it so it coincides with something you're already doing, going for a run, walk into the office, also just makes it way easier and it greases the wheels.

[00:07:57] AG: Yeah. I was using my time during my commute to the office to sometimes call my mom, and every time I'd call her and she would know that I was driving, she's like, "Why are you calling me when you're driving?" Now I am like working and talking to her pretty much every day and she's obviously happier that I'm sitting on my couch as supposed to driving when talking to her.

[00:08:21] JM: The motivation for that, is it just because it feels like the world is ending and you want to talk to your mom more or is it because you don't feel like you have people to talk to or because everybody else is doing it? What's the motivation for that? Because I'm doing something similar.

[00:08:34] AG: I think it's also just to check in on her. I mean, she is in the age bracket where everyone over 60 is more susceptible to this, and my mom currently lives in India. I want to

make sure that things are going fine with her and that she had everything that she needs. Also because she's also stuck at home, I think it helps her and us to just connect more frequently.

[00:08:58] CA: Yeah, same here. My mom and 61. She had a case of acute bronchitis early in February. So I've been paranoid and had her lockdown at home in Atlanta for the last month and a half, and she is one of the most extroverted people I've ever met my entire life. She goes crazy if she's stuck at home, not able talk to anybody. I think just keeping her company, talking to her on the phone all the time, making sure she stayed at home. Staying healthy is really important to me.

[00:09:24] JM: Did you set her up with the protocol of grocery delivery and wiping down everything when it comes in?

[00:09:29] CA: Oh! She's got it all figured out. She's got like a spot in the garage for new packages. Leaves them there for a while, wipes them down. She has a fridge full of food that she stocked up a month and a half ago. She really hasn't left the house and hasn't needed to and won't need to for quite a while, but I'm also worried that the cases in Georgia – Different areas of the country have taken this more or less seriously.

The governor of Georgia was sort of trending on Twitter last week for only recently figuring out that you could transmit coronavirus without symptoms. He's like, "Oh! We just figured this out. This is a bigger deal than we thought." It's a, "Man! Everyone's known this for a month." I think that kind of reflects the attitude down there among a lot of people, including a lot of my mom's friends, a lot of my high school friends. I'm worried that the lockdowns isn't going to end anytime soon, and hopefully we don't get to a point where the hospitals or overcapacity and people aren't unable to get the treatment they need. This definitely discovery factors into why I'm check into my mom and some other friends as well a lot more often than I would be otherwise.

[00:10:25] JM: Anurag, what's been the on the ground response in India thus far? What does your mom say about what she's hearing from other people?

[00:10:33] AG: Oh! They're in full-on lockdown. They've actually, especially in New Delhi where she lives, there are now 20 locations in the city, neighborhoods in the city, where the police are

enforcing a complete lockdown and people aren't allowed to leave those locations. They seem to be sort of hotbeds of where the infection is right now for the most part. Everyone, they seem to be following it. I think is much more stringent. India doesn't have as much of a personal liberty, I will do what I want. Governments cannot take my guns away from me, that kind of attitude in general. I think people are generally just staying indoors and we're all hoping that in a country of 1.3 billion people, the numbers continue to stay low.

[00:11:26] JM: And you have your mom set up with something similar where she like gets the food delivered and is wiping it down or something? Because like that's one of the logistical things that I've kind of had to train up some of the other people in my family on and really emphasize. What's been that process like for you coordinating it through India?

[00:11:46] AG: Oh! She's actually fairly independent. She is a doctor and she stopped working recently because – Well, she retired, and then she's still seeing patients until a full lockdown, but she wasn't actually in sort of emergency services. She has been on it when it comes to groceries and stocking up and she likes to cook. This isn't very different for her. At least so far, things have gone fine and she's just ready to be locked in for some more time or much more time.

[SPONSOR MESSAGE]

[00:12:30] JM: Over the last few months, I've started hearing about Retool. Every business needs internal tools, but if we're being honest, I don't know of many engineers who really enjoy building internal tools. It can be hard to get engineering resources to build back-office applications and it's definitely hard to get engineers excited about maintaining those back-office applications. Companies like a Doordash, and Brex, and Amazon use Retool to build custom internal tools faster.

The idea is that internal tools mostly look the same. They're made out of tables, and dropdowns, and buttons, and text inputs. Retool gives you a drag-and-drop interface so engineers can build these internal UIs in hours, not days, and they can spend more time building features that customers will see. Retool connects to any database and API. For example, if you are pulling data from Postgres, you just write a SQL query. You drag a table on to the canvas.

If you want to try out Retool, you can go to retool.com/sedaily. That's R-E-T-O-O-L.com/sedaily, and you can even host Retool on-premise if you want to keep it ultra-secure. I've heard a lot of good things about Retool from engineers who I respect. So check it out at retool.com/sedaily.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:14:06] JM: Courtland, you and I had talked online a few weeks ago about the fact that you had gotten more into poker and you just described even online poker as a social activity, and I found that funny, because back when I was a poker player, it was like totally nonsocial. It was like – I think it was basically how you used to play Starcraft where it's just like –

[00:14:27] CA: Put on your headset. You're not going to talk to anybody. You're just in the zone.

[00:14:30] JM: You're not talking to anybody. Yeah, you're just totally in the zone. Before that, you were – I guess that was your experience with chess, at least. When you were more on the chess side, it sounds like you've shifted from the chess side to the poker side, which I'm proud of. In doing so, you become more social though.

[00:14:46] CA: I mean, it's less of a shift. It's more of all of the above. I play a lot of chess. I have chess lessons every Wednesday with this guy I hired, who's a chess pro. He's super good, and we just talk for an hour. But I've been playing a lot of poker too and I actually started last year for the reasons that we were talking about earlier, just for social reasons. I love being able to schedule a time to hang out with people. Poker is like four or five hours of sitting across from a bunch of buddies at a table talking about life and business and relationships and family stuff and jokes while you're playing this like super heavy, thoughtful game.

We would play once or twice a month last year and then SF entered the shelter in place sort of phase a couple weeks ago and we decided to move our game online. We've been using this app and we've been having Zoom calls the same time that we play and we have fully transitioned into a life of poker degeneracy. We're playing pretty much every single night. I was up till 2 or 3 AM last night and I lost a huge hand. I'll have to show it to you after, because I know

you're a fan of poker. It was the worst cooler I've ever had in my life, man. But it's fun because we are all just keeping up with each other and staying in contact. It's just a great way to be social.

It's interesting how much isolation has resulted in people being almost more social than they would be. No one has anything else to do. No one has other plans. Everyone's sitting at home. They answer the phone, you call. They're down to hop on to a poker game and play for four or five hours a night almost every night and this just wasn't really true a few weeks ago.

[00:16:13] JM: Well, and strangely I think that norms have changed. I think for some reason or another we have all had some desire to reconnect with our loved ones and to spend more time socializing, and that desire has been reinforced by a change of norms. Now it's like it is and encouraged norm to have more of these socializations.

[00:16:36] CA: Totally. I mean, it makes sense like I was just saying. You know nobody's doing anything else. You know everybody is staying at home.

[00:16:41] JM: Yes.

[00:16:42] CA: I think also just like the fact that there's this pandemic and it's just killing so many people. It's a reminder that life is precious and life is temporary, and I think it's easy to just sort of live life kind of always in the present, always focusing on what's happening now. Not really look up and take time to account for the fact that like we're all getting older. It's not slowing down. We're getting older faster it seems like, but I think when there's a global pandemic and you have loved ones and you have people who aren't necessarily the healthiest, you sort of remember that like it can all end and there's probably – I'm not sure how bad this will get, but probably all of us will know someone who doesn't make it through the whole coronavirus pandemic. That's been at the back of my mind since January actually. I've been thinking about it a lot, and I don't think it's surprising that we all care a little bit more about our friendships and relationships.

[00:17:29] JM: In what ways do you think the world will be permanently changed other than obviously there is the potential for losing a loved one or people getting sick? But what do you guys think are going to be the lasting implications?

[00:17:40] AG: I mean, the most obvious one is people are going to be more open to doing more things remotely instead of in-person because a lot of people have now realized that they can do it and it isn't as difficult or in some cases just it is now technically possible to do it. I think that we will definitely see a lot of local jobs converting to remote jobs. I would say obviously that all the local jobs or most of them will convert, but I think a good chunk will [inaudible 00:18:15]. That's the biggest one. But in other terms, I mean honestly for startups, the funding situation is changing and continues to change. Coming out of this, my sense is that we will see a period of low valuations of less founder friendly terms. Then it's just all the people who've been laid off. I just don't think that some of those jobs are coming back honestly. I suspect that the unemployment rate is going to continue to be high for several months and especially in tech also. That's pretty worrying.

[00:18:51] CA: I agree with pretty much all those things, especially the remote stuff. A lot of people do this remote stuff and it won't work for them and they'll go back as soon as they can, but for a lot of people it will work and they'll realize that they don't necessarily need the overhead of an office or they don't necessarily want to go into a place to work, be collocated and so they'll sort of stick with it.

I'm hoping that our relationship as a society with experts changes. I think there's never been an event in recent history where we've had to rely so much and so urgently on what experts are telling us is unfolding. Quite frankly as a layperson, we're completely oblivious. We wouldn't even know what a coronavirus was if there wasn't for biologists and epidemiologists telling us what to expect for the past few months. I think it's unfolding so quickly that we kind of have to just sit back and trust what's going on, but hopefully it's as lasting implications for other topics that matter to me like climate change, etc., and sort of teaching us as a society that even though we can't see something or reason about it ourselves, that we kind of have to trust to some degree that the scientists and the people researching this stuff know what they're talking about. That's a potential change.

I also think that to the point about being more social and not having all these Zoom calls and poker games, that society is – We're kind of on this inevitable march towards more isolation for like hundreds of years probably. We just become more and more isolated, less and less tribal. The reason that it works is because we have all this technology that makes it possible to be isolated while still being social. I can move 3,000 miles away from my family and my friends who I grew up because I know we have airplanes and I can just fly back and I can spend all my time in my apartment because I know I've got Zoom, etc.

I think in a lot of ways this technology that connects us also as a justification for living more disconnected lives. I wouldn't be shocked if we see just a lot more isolation and a lot better tools that come out of this for dealing with isolation. A part of me is excited. I like to see good tools. I like to see easier methods of communicating and being in touch with their friends and family, but also a part of me is sad because I think there's something to be said for the kind of tribal human lifestyle of seeing people in person and being part of a big group and the advantages that that confers. We'll see what happens in another two or three years.

[00:21:02] JM: On the part of trusting experts or our changing relationship to experts, Bill Gates has really been giving a master class in how to display expertise and how to express that expertise. This is a guy who has been studying this subject, the subject of pandemics for a very long time, but he still finds a way to explain it in layman's terms in almost the most convincing and simple language that could potentially be used. It's inspiring to me and it's instructive to me about how to talk about things that you feel you are somewhat authoritative on.

[00:21:51] CA: I haven't been paying much attention to what Bill Gates has been saying. Has he been tweeting?

[00:21:53] JM: He's been giving some TED talks, or he gave a TED interview. He's been going on some news programs and just talking about what we know, what we don't know. Basically what we have to do in terms of the social isolation and why that's so important and why there's not really a middle ground despite the fact that it slams the economy and kind of being a voice of extremely measured reassurance in the sense that he's just telling you what needs to be done in the sense of being a condensed funnel of information through which a lot of expertise is being funneled. Because he just talks to all the smartest scientists and people who have been

writing about this, and it feels like a very well-condensed stream of information coming from Bill Gates. I think it's a great show of expertise and leadership.

[00:22:48] AG: I just hope enough people listen to him, because on the one hand we have all these experts; Bill Gates, Dr. Fauci, being really great at helping the general public understand what's going on. On the other hand, we had things like the 5G coronavirus rumors that are taking hold, and I just don't know how or why in a time like this people would choose to believe stuff like this. But I just think that we're again seeing polarization and division in the same ways as what led to Donald Trump being elected in 2016, but I'm hoping that at some point these things will reduce and that the government even might have to intervene to cut down some of these false information. But right now, it seems to be worrying that people are jumping to conclusions based on rumors and ignoring the experts at least in some parts of the country.

Now, the three of us live in an extremely privileged, fortunate part of America and we have access to people like Bill Gates talking on TV or Dr. Bob Wachter on twitter. He's been amazing at explaining what's going on in San Francisco hospitals, and every day he posts a chart, he posts the situation at UCSF hospitals. He compares it with the rest of the country. Again, as someone who has access to Twitter who is very proficient and active on Twitter, it's a great source of information for me coming from a doctor who is also digitally really proficient. But a lot of people don't and a lot of people will never see what Dr. Wachter or even Dr. Fauci or Bill Gates have to say, and that's the worrying part. I don't know how we can change it, because Fox News continues to be Fox News, and NBC continues to be NBC.

[00:24:36] CA: I think that's such a great point, and whenever we have any of these big societal shifts or conversations, I think it exposes a lot of the divides and the cracks in between how people get their information and really just like the different I think skillsets involved and filtering out information. When I talk to people like you guys, when I talk to my friends in tech, I'm sure most people listening to this podcast spent a lot of time online, a lot of time on Twitter, a lot of time on their computers. We're just relatively practiced at seeing website and seeing information and to filter out what's true, what's not.

When I talk to family members living in Georgia, they're not – They're forwarding me rumors that they found on Facebook. To them, there's no – They haven't lived a life where they have

necessarily needed to be able to filter out that information and figure out what's good versus what's not, whereas if you're – I don't know, a software engineer, they're constantly Googling and looking on Stack Overflow and trying to find the answer and just like a skill you've just had. You've had to flex muscle thousands and thousands of times.

It is worrying. It is worrying to see just how easily misinformation can spread and just how confused a lot of people who are honestly trying to find the truth and who sincerely are searching for it, but just don't necessarily know who to trust, who to listen to. They're not really plugged in the same way that a lot of other people are.

To be honest, I can talk about this for an hour because I also think the media, especially the tech media and the sort of blog sphere has not necessarily done a great job at this from the beginning. They sort of downplayed the seriousness of the virus. They themselves as the people who are supposed to be the best at finding information. I mean, they're journalists. They're supposed to be literally professionals and telling you fact from fiction and telling the right stories have themselves gotten wrong. There isn't necessarily a lot of hope for like sort of the average person on the ground who's not an expert journalist, who's not professional at tech to go online and really differentiate between Dr. Fauci saying something and a rumor about 5G causing the coronavirus spread.

[00:26:29] JM: One thing I've always liked about the podcast format is it's unfiltered conversations with experts in many cases, and that way the listener gets to hear for themselves what is the expert saying rather than the format of that being condensed down into an article. Now obviously the tradeoff there is that you just get a high-volume of information that's not presented in a nicer fashion, and in this process, the journalistic process of talking to experts and condensing that information, you can have the lens of the journalist be directing that information in a political direction. But the function of interviewing people and then condensing that down into a shorter article, that function does still exist and I'm sure there are plenty of people who perform that function correctly and we're calling for whatever social distancing or we're calling for more paranoia about the virus before this kind of paranoia made it to the mainstream. These people happen to not be as surfaced in the Twitter sphere. I feel like the outcry about Vox journalists or other left-leaning outlets that "didn't pay enough attention". I mean, it's kind of unsurprising and it's just like it's some people that didn't respond well enough.

But I think the world of journalism has become so big and become so granular. We're basically journalists ourselves, Courland, interviewing people. There's just such a higher volume of information. Not that I guess excuses journalists from coming to an incorrect conclusion and then shouting that incorrect conclusion from the rooftops. I do wonder just more like what is actionable, and I worry more about, yes, my relatives who are spreading rumors, because I don't really know what to do to have them become more cognizant. Certainly, I'm not going to be able to police the standards of information on the internet. I just wonder how I can inspire some behavioral change among my relatives.

[00:28:39] CA: I'm not that forgiving of journalists. I think as a journalist, you have a responsibility, and if you have this conflict of interest and it's telling you, "Hey, we get the most clicks when we publish gossip that batches the tech industry," and you filter all of your articles through that even to the point where you will publish misinformation and downplay significant and important events just because that's what's going to give you the more clicks. I just don't have a lot of sympathy for you. I think that media organizations need to really question their incentives and question what drives them and make sure that doesn't sort of send them over the edge in times like this and situations like this.

Obviously, you're right, the world of journalism is huge. It's not just – Not like it's monolithic and everybody's getting this wrong. There's been a lot of great journalism done that's helped a lot of people. But I also know agree with your point about certain formats just being excellent. The podcast format is excellent because you're really getting a message filter through the lens of a journalist. The host is right here in the podcast talking to the expert and you get to hear it from the experts mouths with all their caveats and all their insights. I think in a time like this where you're dealing with such a quite frankly like scientific phenomenon, a biological phenomenon, one where like you really experts, because journalists don't necessarily know what they're talking about. I don't necessarily know what I'm talking about if I bring an expert on. I think it's more important to have a format where the experts can speak for themselves. I think that sort of lowers the risk of the journalists sort of pushing their own agenda and misinterpreting what's being said, which we've seen a lot of as well.

[00:30:04] AG: I also think that specially during a time like this, I'm hoping that the clickbaiting stuff is going to die down, because people feel more of a sense of social responsibility because they see everything bad that's going on. As journalists, hopefully with that sense of increased responsibility to help people in general and with a sense of charity, I hope that people are able to move beyond just the clicks and the money and truly help the readers. I'm just optimistic in that sense and I'm hoping that that is happening across the board. I do think some people got it wrong earlier. But again, we're all humans. We make mistakes.

[00:30:44] JM: Shifting back to purely online subjects that were more well-versed in, have you guys seen any new online products that have gotten started as a result of the virus, the opportunistic product starting? Have you seen anything interesting?

[00:31:05] AG: I haven't seen any opportunistic sort of predatory products yet. I do think that people are trying to pass off what they already have as perhaps a little more helpful for the virus, because somehow they make up how it's more helpful when everyone is social distancing. But what I have seen is lot of people, especially on Render, we just were seeing an explosion of websites and resources related to the virus and people are building a lot of things to help people not just deal with the virus, but also in specific situations where someone build a website for his wife who was doing a lot of telemedicine calls and she just wanted a good system for tracking those calls and timing them. He just built a really simple Vue web app because he wanted to get into Vue. I think he showed up on Hacker News too, and that's just an example of just ingenuity and people taking this time to do something useful and learned in the process. We're seeing a lot of that on Render when we see websites being creative these days.

[00:32:13] CA: I've seen a ton on Indie Hackers. There are so many people who are basically sitting at home with a lot of free time on their hands and who have the skills to build something or the desire to build something and they're building all sorts of coronavirus checkers and tracker and products to help disseminate information, little dashboards to follow along with the stats in your hometown or your area. Things to help people basically spread sort of these good-faith efforts like wearing masks, literally countless projects.

We launched the group a couple weeks ago on Indie Hackers called Coronavirus Group just because there's so much conversation happening around this topic and it's happening for

different reasons. Some people are just thinking very opportunistically like, “Okay. Well, this thing is happening. There’s lot of change. How can I as a founder build something that takes advantage of this? Perhaps build something successful.”

But a lot of people are operating what I see is being altruistically, just trying to help, and seeing themselves as part of some bigger global conversation movement where everybody's kind of on the same page and we all have a common enemy. I like seeing that stuff. It feels really good to see. It’s kind of heartening. When something bad happens that you can kind of count on people to at least come together and do good for each other, whereas in situations where the world is just kind of operating normally, you don't see as much of that coming together in mindset.

[00:33:25] AG: On that note, one thing that I have seen that feels a bit opportunistic is all the recruiting companies are trying to compile these layoff lists and using sort of [inaudible 00:33:39] marketing or what have you to try and be more visible, because they're compiling a list of people who've been laid off and then connecting them whoever. I think that obviously some of that is useful, but in a lot of cases, I see that just from the tone and from how it's being presented, it's come across as opportunistic.

[00:34:02] CA: Yes, it's a tough line to walk, because basically the entire conversation now is all about the coronavirus. I scrolled through my Twitter feed the other day and I think I had to count like 19 tweets before I saw one tweet that wasn't talking about the pandemic or the economy, and it's kind of like walking into a funeral. You can have the same conversations. You can't have the same marketing that had otherwise, because you're just not really being in line with the tone of the conversation.

But on the other hand, it's also complex. I mean, if you are a restaurant business. If you're in sort of like hotel industry, if you're in the recruiting industry, you're probably facing pretty dire straits right now where it's kind of like do or die, like your company's existence hangs in the balance. On one hand, I think people are being opportunistic and kind of off tone. That's easy to do that if you're not careful, but on the other I think people are also pretty desperate because in a period of a couple weeks, they've gone from probably having a solidly operating business to looking bankruptcy or the end of their company in the headlights and having to figure out what to do. It's pretty desperate times for a lot of founders I think.

[00:35:03] JM: Yeah, absolutely. It's almost hard not to appear tasteless in any kind of marketing that is not below just like things that are going to immediately help people in coronavirus time. But it's weird, because we are in this such a digital economy and we're, at least us three, our day-to-day lives are fairly minimally affected by the virus as far as I can tell with you guys and you have to maintain this degree of tact because there are a lot of people that are really, really impacted by this.

On that front, I really do wonder about the retail shops and the restaurants that are getting just slammed by this. I mean, there is like this 5 to 10X adaption of retail and food delivery and I don't think much of that business is going to these retail shops and restaurants. I just wonder what the secular impact of this is going to be as more and more people learn about delivery and you got virtual kitchens and you have all this retail space and this restaurant space that's basically like doesn't serve a purpose any more. We'll see what happens afterwards, but I really wonder what happens to all the excess real estate.

[00:36:18] AG: It gets turned into Amazon stores.

[00:36:24] CA: Amazon is going to buy up all the shattered restaurants.

[00:36:27] JM: I heard that's what they did with the shopping malls. I heard Amazon went on a shopping mall buying spree.

[00:36:33] AG: Yeah. They're just either going to convert them to these amazon go stores, some of these restaurants that where you can just walk in – I don't want to be an ad for Amazon right now, but it's a pretty cool experience, or otherwise I mean with larger buildings, I can imagine them being turned into warehouses for deliveries.

[00:36:53] CA: I wonder how many companies that are shattering now just won't ever be replaced. How many – Because whenever you have any sort of technological shift, you have just kind of a long transition period. There's probably a long period of time where people were riding on horses and buggies, at the same time, people have cars on road. When those horses died, they probably didn't get replaced.

I think this is going to kill a lot of businesses that some of them will come back, like we probably still want restaurants. There're probably a lot of physical locations. It just don't need to be physical anymore and there's just going to be a ton of real estate left over. The implications of that I can't even speculate about. I'm not an economist, but I think it's going to be pretty transformative.

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[00:37:38] JM: You probably do not enjoy searching for a job. Engineers don't like sacrificing their time to do phone screens, and we don't like doing whiteboard problems and working on tedious take home projects. Everyone knows the software hiring process is not perfect. But what's the alternative? Triplebyte is the alternative.

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Thank you to Triplebyte.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:39:55] JM: How have your own businesses changed? I'd like to know more about how you've seen the changes in society through the lens of each of your businesses. Anorag rendering Render, a hosting company, and Courtland running in Indie Hackers.

[00:40:11] AG: So for me, personally, and for render, I think we're actually seeing growth. We continue to see growth, but I don't know how much of that growth is just the growth that we would've seen otherwise versus growths because of the pandemic. It's really hard to tell and I think in some ways it's very early to tell, but our March numbers have actually been in some cases have doubled and April continues to look better in terms of just revenue and user growth as well.

Again, it's very hard for us to tease how much of that is just more people finding out about Render or more people using Render versus people doing more things because the virus. One indicator that tells me that it's perhaps not as much of a virus related thing is traffic on the weekends continues to be lower than traffic on weekdays, which means that people aren't necessarily building more things in their free time on Render and they're still using it for work. That's an educated guess. Again, we won't know until couple of months from now.

[00:41:17] CA: That's fascinating. Actually, I should check my weekend numbers and compare them to my weekday numbers. We actually had a pretty big weekend last week on Indie Hackers, which is pretty unusual for us, because we get a lot of our traffic during the week for people basically working on things. But what we saw in March was a pretty steep decline in traffic especially around like early to mid-March when I would say the West started to take the pandemic a lot more seriously. It was kind of this one or two week period where Italy went on lockdown and South by Southwest was canceled for the first time in its history and the NBA [inaudible 00:41:52] on their entire season, and suddenly everyone was thinking the coronavirus is just this far away thing that I read about the news sometimes. They're like this is actually affecting my life here today.

Like pretty much every week after that, our traffic would lower until the very end of March where we've sort of been having a V-shaped recovery, which is what some people are talking about happening to the economy. I'm not sure if that will happen with the economy, but with our traffic, it's gone way back up. People have just started – I think people were shell-shocked for a while. The only thing they wanted to read about was the coronavirus. With the Indie Hackers, since we're publishing a lot of content on how to start a business and how to market your business, etc., that just took a backseat to, "Oh my God! Is everybody going to die next week?" It just wasn't sort of up there in the list of priorities.

Now I think people have sort of adjusted. They've sort of gotten their bearings and figured out what's going on, and a lot more founders and entrepreneurs are coming to Indie Hackers to try to figure out, "Okay. What am I going to do? What does this mean for my business? I don't have time for this. I'm shell-shocked like I have been the last couple weeks actually to take action and do things."

We've seen a lot more conversations, more projects being started. I think some of the websites have seen the same thing. Sahil from Gumroad Twitter out a picture of the number of creators releasing products and Gumroad, and it was like an exponential graph with massive numbers of people selling things online in the last couple months. I'm not shocked by that. People are at home. A lot of people have lost their jobs, especially for what he's doing. With traders who don't necessarily know how to code, but can definitely put out some writing or some sort of digital product or sell goods online. Maybe that's their best bet to make money while they're looking for a new job. The unemployment numbers are pretty staggering. I think that plays a role.

[00:43:28] JM: Yeah. I mean, it would be really interesting to see how this ends up impacting the online gig economy, because I've always thought that Fiverr was an underappreciated place where people could earn a living. I think, probably, a lot of people that have been driving Uber may eventually find partially through this pandemic that there are a lot of like jobs on Fiverr, for example, that they could find and transition to a digital career, and that could eventually lead to maybe more of these people becoming Indie Hacker type people. It's kind of maybe a starry eyed or overly optimistic perspective on the impacts here, but there is an online gig economy. In addition to the online creative economy, there's an online gig economy, and hopefully some of the gig workers can utilize that, become more digitized.

[00:44:23] CA: Speaking of projects that people have released during the coronavirus, somebody I had on the Indie Hackers podcast recently released a website called [moderndayjobs.com](https://www.moderndayjobs.com) and the headline is changing times call for new ways of earning money, and it's just a list of 100 different ways to make money online as somebody who's not necessarily a developer. They've got UpWork and Fiverr on there. Rev for doing transcriptions, Amazon Mechanical Turk and 96 other different businesses and companies that you can use to basically get a job online if you're sitting at home all day not making any income.

[00:44:55] JM: That's great. One thing I've been pleased by is the fact that this is shown as that the Internet can give us a lot of resilience to these like societal black swan events. I've typically been kind of afraid of the fact that the entire world is now running on AWS and it is kind of this company. That's a single point of failure, but in some ways it's provided our society with extreme resilience. I don't know. That is one nice lesson to come out of this.

[00:45:28] AG: Yeah. I think the Internet is actually getting better as a result, because we're now creating more capacity, both network capacity and compute capacity just in response to just heavily increased online activity. I think that this capacity isn't going to go away. In some sense, we come out of this with a better Internet, a more resilient Internet, just as a result of this.

[00:45:53] CA: Yeah. I mean, if you'd asked me six months ago what do I think will be more catastrophic, AWS going down or all of American small businesses shutting down for weeks. I've probably would've chosen the latter, and now we're getting to see how that plays out. Surprisingly, I mean there're no riots on the street. It's not good. It's obviously not a great situation. It's going to take a long time for all the sort of second order effects to play out and the second-order effects, of those second order effects to play out. But I feel like there's an underlying resiliency. The Internet is getting stronger and it makes me a little bit less worried about there being a single point of failure to see that people are dynamic creatures. We react, the government reacts. When things happen and things go down, we figure out ways around it.

[00:46:36] JM: What something each of you have learned about yourself from this virus experience so far that you didn't know about yourself beforehand?

[00:46:42] AG: That I absolutely dislike working from home.

[00:46:48] CA: I don't know. I think my ability to predict the future is really not that good. Maybe I was overly confident. In January –

[00:46:53] AG: Well. I mean, this is a black swan event. I don't think you can do anything about that.

[00:46:56] CA: You can't, but there is news coming out about this in January, and I remember actually sitting at one of these poker games that I was a part of and we had a graph up of the infection rate in Wuhan. We're looking and there's like 1,200. A day before there'd been like 900 or something and we're worrying about it. I have like a little chat in my Google Hangouts with some friends like, "What should we be doing? Should we like leave major cities? What we do?" My have friend is like, "No. No. No. There's nothing to really be done. Don't do that."

But I was worried enough about it back then actually be talking about it in January, yet I didn't change anything. I didn't buy any stocking. I didn't sell any stock. I didn't buy any precautions, stockpiling goods. I didn't do anything. I just sort of sat there like a deer in the headlights. Yeah, I guess it taught me that in the case of a zombie apocalypse or any other like foreseeable event that starts, I'm probably just not going to do anything. That's worrying.

[00:47:48] AG: Well, now that you're aware of it, you're probably going to do something next time because you'll be like, "Ooh! Last time this happened."

[00:47:55] CA: Hopefully. Hopefully. We'll see.

[00:47:57] JM: But it's like one man's decisiveness is another man being panicked.

[00:48:02] CA: You know, that's a good point. I've talked to so many people and I keep hearing this word panic. I remember like in February telling my mom to stay quarantined at home, and a friend was like, "Oh! You're spreading panic." But when I look out, I just don't – I don't see that much panic. I don't see stores being looted and riots on the street. I see a lot of people dying from a virus, and I think one form of panic is basically being the deer in the headlights. I think it's

not just fight or flight. I think it's fight, flight, or freeze, and that a lot of times when we interface with these extraordinary decisions and events we just freeze up and we don't take any action. But I think not taking action is a decision in and of itself, and you got away the cost and the benefits of that as well. I think you're right. We shouldn't make these like hasty panic decisions just because something is happening. It doesn't mean we need to take action. Oftentimes taking action is better than doing nothing, and sometimes not taking any action at all is itself a way of panicking.

[00:48:53] AG: I am little worried about the stores being closed and some of these closed stores being vandalized or looted. The instances of that seem to be growing. I just hope that this isn't something that accelerates as more people lose their jobs and we truly get to a source being looted muted situation.

[00:49:13] CA: I mean, I think it will accelerate. Hopefully not that much. I guess for me it's just the cost benefit analysis. What's more? Should we have kept everything open to avoid panic? But then develop the cost of digging mass graves for 2 million people. I don't know. I don't know if the tradeoff makes sense. But now it's for sure a concern. People don't have jobs if they don't have income, and stores are closed and this last for months and months and months. I'm sure we're going to have to pay those costs too.

[00:49:39] JM: All right, guys. Well, just to close off, any other reflections on how life has changed for you or what you expect in the near future?

[00:49:47] AG: For me, another thing that's been crazy is recruiting in this time. We continue to hire people and engineers and not being able to see them face-to-face before making them an offer is not something we've done in the past, and I think that that has been challenging. Being able to quickly adapt our on-site interview process to a remote on-site in a process has been challenging not just for us, but I think for pretty much any company that's hiring right now.

In some sense, it's also challenging for people who are looking for jobs. Even for people who aren't looking for jobs because they were laid off, but because they just want a new job. The recruiting industry I think is going to be impacted by this in a lot of ways, but I'm hoping that

somehow this also helps make it easier to interview engineers remotely. Hopefully someone will come out with tools that make a remote on-site easier.

[00:50:40] CA: I think the cool thing about running a business is you constantly run into other business ideas. There are so many things like, “Oh! I would love to pay for this, but it doesn't exist.” I hope someone starts a company to do this thing.

[00:50:51] JM: The interviewing.io, CoderPad suite of things, that doesn't do it for you?

[00:50:57] AG: I think they're okay. I don't think that they replace the experience of just spending more time with a candidate when they're online or when they're on-site, and getting that kind of just ambient signal both for the candidate and for the company in terms of how they interact with other people around them. How they work with the team? When we go out to lunch, what are the things they talk about? You can't really do the lunch interview anymore unless you want to make it really awkward. I think you're missing out on some of those signals. It's not the worst thing and actually compared to everything else, but it is something that is interesting and something that we have adapted.

[00:51:36] CA: Yeah. Indie Hackers, we're an all remote team. I'm working from San Francisco. My brother is working for New York City. Our community manager is working from the UK, etc. Our sort of interview process hasn't –We haven't been really had to sort of evaluate people on these like how do we connect in-person type things, because we never actually have to connect in-person. But one thing we have had to shift on in lot of the recent weeks is just the way that we do our content, the way we do our podcast, the way that we write our newsletters. We're doing a little bit less evergreen stuff, a little bit less like tried-and-true business advice and stories. A little bit more current events, news, things that are important to people right now just because we've seen the shift and what people's attention is focused on. People care about what's going on in the lives right now. That's an interesting tradeoff to make. There's all sorts of implications if you're trying to do things that are relevant in the modern day and how fast you have to have your turnaround time become, and I'm struggling with that a little bit, but I think that's probably the biggest change for me in my work life and in my personal life. I think it might be time for me to hire a poker coach if I want to be playing every night. It gets expensive if you lose a lot. That's all it changes for me.

[00:52:41] AG: The only other thing I think that I have realized is just how fortunate I am and just how much of a difference it makes when you have a financial cushion, when you have a job and you don't have to worry about being laid off. You don't have to worry about getting sick or going to the doctor. Not having insurance. It just underscores all the ways in which my life is so much easier because I've just been lucky.

[00:53:07] JM: 100%. I mean, I basically feel at this point like – Or at least I feel like I'm in virtual reality. The life that I live is so dissimilar from the average person just in terms of – As a digitally empowered person, you really just have such a massive advantage and massive fortune. That is definitely something to reflect on.

[00:53:29] CA: Yeah. I think we're all very lucky to have found ourselves in the careers that we're in, and I worry a little bit that there's increasingly becoming two Americas. There's people who live like this and people who don't, and it's just hard to be part of the group that's not. I feel incredibly fortunate and lucky as well. I'd like to see people build more things to get more people online and get more people building companies online and figure out ways to sort of spread the benefits of basically having an income that you derive digitally that's little bit immune to some of the things like this, because I think it's evident from all of our lives that like, yeah, we've had some inconveniences, but life goes on and we're fine and we don't have to deal some of the disastrous consequences. Hopefully, we can use this whole disaster to sort of get more people to a place like that and change some of the infrastructures so that people don't have to worry about healthcare, they don't have to worry about their next paycheck, and it's not just us sitting on this podcast talking like this.

[00:54:18] JM: All right. Well guys, great talking to you. Anurag, keep the business going. Courtland, don't lose all your money. Don't become a degenerate. Get some sleep. Guys, thanks a lot. It's a real pleasure talking to you and really grateful to have access to you.

[00:54:34] CA: Yeah, thanks for having us, Jeff.

[00:54:34] AG: Yeah, likewise.

[00:54:35] JM: Okay, guys.

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[00:54:45] JM: Apache Cassandra is an open source distributed database that was first created to meet the scalability and availability needs of Facebook, Amazon and Google. In previous episodes of Software Engineering Daily we have covered Cassandra's architecture and its benefits, and we're happy to have DataStax, the largest contributor to the Cassandra project since day one as a sponsor of Software Engineering Daily.

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