

MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #298

The Infinite Call: Inside the Taxi Driver's Shadow Network

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

Have you ever stepped into a cab and felt like a ghost in someone else's conversation? In this episode of My Weird Prompts, Herman and Corn dive deep into the "infinite phone call," exploring why taxi drivers across the globe seem to be in a state of perpetual dialogue. From using walkie-talkie apps like Zello to coordinate traffic "hacks" to maintaining a "virtual water cooler" that wards off the isolation of the road, they uncover a sophisticated shadow infrastructure that transcends borders. This isn't just social chatter; it's a decentralized security system, a real-time logistics map, and a vital cultural lifeline for the global diaspora. Join the brothers as they break down how human-driven networks compete with high-tech algorithms and discuss the technology—from bone conduction to VOIP—that keeps the wheels turning and the voices flowing.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

One of the great unsolved mysteries of the internet and the world is taxi drivers. Specifically, who are taxi drivers talking to? This is an issue that transcends cultures and countries—wherever you go in the world, your taxi driver is likely engaged in a lively conversation with someone else. Various internet theories have been proposed to explain this phenomenon, but what is the real explanation? Who are taxi drivers talking to?

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. I am Corn, and I am joined as always by my brother, the man who probably knows more about the internal workings of a taxi dispatch system than any sane person should.

Herman

Herman Poppleberry, at your service. And you are not wrong, Corn. I have actually spent an embarrassing amount of time researching the logistics of urban transport. But today's topic, which our housemate Daniel sent over in a voice note this morning, is one of those things that is so universal it is almost invisible until you point it out.

Corn

It really is. Daniel was asking about the great unsolved mystery of the modern world. Who are taxi drivers talking to? You know the scene. You get into a cab, whether it is here in Jerusalem, or in New York, or London, or Tokyo, and the driver is already mid-conversation. They have got that Bluetooth earpiece in, or maybe just a wired bud hanging from one ear, and they are talking. And they do not stop. They talk when they pick you up, they talk while they are weaving through traffic, and they are still talking when you get out.

Herman

It is the infinite phone call. It is a global phenomenon that transcends culture and language. It does not matter if the driver is speaking Arabic, English, or Portuguese, the cadence is the same. It is a low-level, continuous stream of dialogue that seems to have no beginning and no end. And Daniel wanted to know what is actually going on there. Is it a secret network? Is it family? Is it just one very long-winded friend?

Corn

I think most people assume it is just a social thing, right? Like, if you were driving for twelve hours a day, you would want to talk to your friends too. But when you look at the sheer consistency of it, it starts to feel like something more functional. It is almost like a secondary layer of the city's infrastructure that we, as passengers, are just eavesdropping on.

Herman

That is a great way to put it. It is a shadow infrastructure. And while there is definitely a social component, there is a lot of technical and professional utility behind those calls. If you look at the history of the trade, before mobile phones were everywhere, taxi drivers had CB radios. They were always talking to a central dispatcher, but they were also talking to each other. They would share information about where the traffic was backed up, where the police were setting up speed traps, or which hotels had a long line of tourists waiting for a ride.

Corn

Right, the classic radio culture. But the radio was public, or at least visible to the company. What we are seeing now with mobile phones and apps is much more decentralized. It is like they have taken that old radio community and moved it into a private, digital space.

Herman

Exactly. And the technology has evolved to make this easier. Most drivers these days are not just on a standard one-to-one phone call. A lot of them are using voice over internet protocol apps, or VOIP. One of the popular ones in the industry is an app called Zello. Have you heard of it?

Corn

I have seen the name, but I am not exactly sure how it differs from something like WhatsApp or a regular call.

Herman

So, Zello is essentially a walkie-talkie app. It mimics the push-to-talk functionality of an old-school radio but over a cellular data network. It allows drivers to join channels with hundreds or even thousands of other drivers. So, when you hear a driver speaking, they might be talking to one person, or they might be broadcasting to a group of fifty other drivers in the same neighborhood. Zello is a popular choice for this because it works even on low-bandwidth connections.

Corn

That explains the "revolving cast of characters" Daniel mentioned in his prompt. Sometimes they are listening, sometimes they are responding to something specific, and sometimes they are just part of the general chatter. It is a live, crowdsourced map of the city's heartbeat.

Herman

It really is. And think about the "why" behind it. Driving a taxi is an incredibly isolating job. You are in a small metal box for ten to twelve hours a day. Even though you have passengers, those interactions are fleeting and often purely transactional. The phone call is a tether to a community. It is a way to stay sane. Sociological research has explored 'occupational community' among taxi drivers and found that these continuous calls serve as a 'virtual break room.' Since they do not have an office where they can gather around a water cooler, the phone call is the water cooler.

Corn

That makes a lot of sense. It is a psychological safety net. But I wonder about the safety aspect in a more literal sense. We have talked before, I think it was back in an early episode, about the "gold standard" of uptime for systems. For a taxi driver, their "uptime" is their shift. If they get into trouble, or if a passenger becomes aggressive, having someone on the other end of a line is a massive security feature.

Herman

Oh, absolutely. That is a huge part of it that passengers often do not consider. If a driver feels like a situation might go south, having a live open line to a group of peers is a deterrent. They are essentially saying, "I am not alone here. There are twenty people listening to this interaction right now." Many drivers use informal code words on these channels to signal for help without alerting the passenger. It is a decentralized security force. It is essentially social monitoring in real-time.

Corn

So it is a mix of a social club, a real-time traffic app, and a security system. But what about the family aspect? I have heard many drivers who are clearly talking to their spouses or children. In a lot of countries, taxi driving is a job taken by immigrants who might be working long hours to send money home or to build a life for their families.

Herman

You hit on a really important point there. For many immigrant drivers, those calls are a vital link to their home culture and their family. If you are working the night shift in a city where you do not feel fully integrated, hearing the voice of your mother or your brother back home is a powerful grounding force. It is not just about passing the time; it is about maintaining an identity outside of the car. They often use apps like Viber or IMO, which are massive in South Asia and parts of Africa, because they handle international data roaming so efficiently.

Corn

I remember reading something about how these calls also help with "information arbitrage." Like, if one driver finds out there is a massive flight delay at the airport, they can blast that out to their network. Suddenly, twenty drivers know not to waste their time heading to the terminal. It is a way of optimizing their earnings in a very competitive gig economy.

Herman

And that is where it gets really interesting when you compare it to the algorithmic dispatching of apps like Uber or Lyft. The algorithm is trying to optimize the whole system from the top down. But the drivers, through these phone calls, are trying to optimize their own experience from the bottom up. They are sharing the "hacks" that the algorithm might not account for. Like, "Hey, don't take the bridge, there is a construction crew that just started," or "The street fair on fifth avenue is causing a mess, stay away."

Corn

It is a fascinating conflict, actually. You have the high-tech, data-driven optimization of the app versus the high-touch, human-driven optimization of the phone call network. And I suspect the humans are often faster at identifying real-time anomalies than the software is.

Herman

I would bet on the humans every time for those hyper-local details. But let's talk about the "etiquette" of it, because this is where the friction comes in for passengers. Daniel mentioned that it feels like a "lively conversation" that the passenger is just a ghost in. In some cultures, this is seen as unprofessional. In others, it is just the background noise of the city.

Corn

Yeah, I have definitely had rides where I felt like I was intruding on a private conversation. It is a weird social dynamic. You are paying for a service, and there is an expectation of a certain level of focus or at least a "customer-service" persona. But when the driver is on the phone, that persona disappears. You are just a cargo that happens to be a person.

Herman

It is a shift from "service industry" to "utility industry." If you view the taxi as a utility, like a bus or a train, you do not expect the driver to entertain you. But taxis have always sat in that middle ground. However, with the rise of hands-free technology, the barrier to entry for these calls has dropped to zero. You do not even have to hold the phone anymore. It is just... there.

Corn

That brings up a technical point. Bluetooth technology has come a long way. Remember when a Bluetooth headset was this big, clunky thing that blinked blue every three seconds? Now, in twenty-twenty-six, they are tiny, almost invisible. Some drivers even use bone conduction headphones so they can hear the call and the ambient noise of the road at the same time.

Herman

Bone conduction is a game changer for professional drivers. For those who do not know, it vibrates the bones in your skull to send sound to your inner ear, leaving your ear canals open. It is much safer because you can still hear sirens, horns, and the passenger if they need to say something. It is the ultimate "multi-tasking" tool. Brands like Shokz are widely used by drivers globally.

Corn

But even with bone conduction, there is the "cognitive load" issue. We have all heard the stats about distracted driving. Does being in a continuous, twelve-hour conversation affect their ability to drive safely?

Herman

That is a controversial area. Some studies suggest that "hands-free" is not actually "brain-free." Your brain is still processing the conversation, which can slow down your reaction time. But on the flip side, some researchers argue that for professional drivers doing repetitive routes, the conversation might actually keep them more alert by preventing boredom and "highway hypnosis." It is a delicate balance.

Corn

It is like having a podcast on, I guess. Only you are an active participant. Speaking of which, I wonder how many taxi drivers listen to My Weird Prompts while they are between calls.

Herman

I hope a lot of them do! We should do a shout-out. To all the drivers out there on the midnight shift, we see you, and we appreciate the hustle. But back to Daniel's question about the "revolving cast." Have you ever noticed how the tone of the conversation changes?

Corn

Oh, definitely. Sometimes it is very intense, almost like an argument. Other times it is just a rhythmic "uh-huh, okay, yeah" for twenty minutes. It feels like they are part of a massive, ongoing soap opera.

Herman

It basically is a soap opera. If you are part of a group of fifty drivers, you know everyone's business. You know whose car is in the shop, whose kid is sick, who had a bad tip from a passenger. It is a community that exists entirely in the ether. And it is not just localized. With apps like WhatsApp, drivers are often in groups with people from their home villages who are now driving taxis in Paris, New York, and Dubai. It is a global taxi-driver diaspora.

Corn

That is incredible to think about. A driver in Jerusalem could be talking to a friend driving a cab in Queens, New York, comparing notes on the price of petrol or the best way to handle a specific type of engine trouble. The internet has turned the taxi cab into a global node.

Herman

It really has. We talked about the Israeli logistics paradox in a previous episode, and how information moves. In the taxi world, information moves at the speed of voice. It is the most efficient network because it does not require anyone to stop and type. It is all hands-on-the-wheel, eyes-on-the-road communication.

Corn

So, if we were to break down the "who" for Daniel, it is a hierarchy. At the top, you have the immediate family for emotional support. Then you have the "local squad" of fellow drivers for traffic and safety info. And then you have the broader "community" for general banter and passing the time. It is a multi-layered social ecosystem.

Herman

And let's not forget the "dispatch" element. Even with apps, many traditional taxi companies still have a human dispatcher who might be part of these groups. Or, in some cases, the "dispatcher" is just the most senior driver in the group who takes it upon himself to coordinate everyone. It is a self-organizing system.

Corn

It is a great example of emergent behavior. No one sat down and designed the "infinite taxi phone call." It just evolved out of a combination of technical availability and human need. The need for connection, the need for information, and the need for safety.

Herman

Exactly. And I think there is a takeaway here for all of us, not just taxi drivers. We often talk about how technology isolates us, but for this specific group of workers, technology has done the exact opposite. It has created a tight-knit, supportive community where there used to be only isolation. It is a very human use of digital tools.

Corn

That is a really positive way to look at it. Even if it can be a bit annoying as a passenger when you want a quiet ride, knowing that the driver is part of a supportive network makes the whole experience feel a bit more... I don't know, grounded?

Herman

I agree. Though, I will say, if you really want a quiet ride, most of the apps now have a "quiet mode" setting. But for a regular street-hail taxi, you are just a guest in their mobile office. And in that office, the conference call is always on.

Corn

It is a permanent meeting. I wonder what the longest continuous call in history is. I bet a taxi driver holds the record.

Herman

I would not be surprised. I have heard stories of drivers who leave the line open even when they go home, just so they can hear the chatter of the night shift while they fall asleep. It becomes the soundtrack of their lives.

Corn

That is actually quite touching. It is a form of digital companionship that is very specific to our era. Before we move on to the practical side of this, I want to touch on the "misconception" aspect. A lot of people think the drivers are being rude or ignoring them. But from the driver's perspective, they are just doing their job in a way that allows them to remain a functioning human being.

Herman

Right. It is not an act of aggression against the passenger. It is a survival strategy. If you had to drive in Jerusalem traffic for ten hours without talking to anyone, you would probably lose your mind too. The "rudeness" is really just a clash of expectations. We expect a certain type of service, but the driver is providing a different one.

Corn

So, what can we actually do with this information? As passengers, how should we handle this?

Herman

Well, the first takeaway is empathy. Understanding that the call is a lifeline makes it much easier to be patient with it. But also, it is okay to set boundaries. If you need to make a phone call yourself, or if you have a headache and need silence, a polite "Excuse me, would you mind if we had a bit of quiet for this ride?" usually works. Most drivers are happy to oblige; they just don't realize it is bothering you because for them, it is just white noise.

Corn

And if you are curious, you can always ask! I have had some great conversations with drivers where I asked, "Who are you talking to?" and they explained the whole system to me. It is a great way to break the ice and learn something about the city you are in.

Herman

Definitely. Another practical takeaway is for anyone who works a solo, remote job. There is a lot to learn from the taxi driver model. If you are feeling isolated working from home, why not start a "body doubling" call with a friend or colleague? You don't even have to talk the whole time; just having the open line can provide that same sense of community and accountability.

Corn

I love that. The "virtual office" for the remote worker. It is the same principle. We are social animals, and we are not meant to do these repetitive or isolating tasks in a vacuum.

Herman

Exactly. Now, looking ahead, I wonder how this will change with autonomous vehicles. When the "driver" is an AI, who will it be talking to? Probably just other AIs, exchanging petabytes of data about road conditions and battery levels. But the human element—the jokes, the venting, the family updates—that will be gone.

Corn

It will be more efficient, but much less interesting. I think we will miss the "infinite call" once it is gone. It is a piece of urban folklore that is being written in real-time every day.

Herman

It really is. It is the heartbeat of the city, transmitted over five-G.

Corn

Well, I think we have thoroughly explored Daniel's mystery. It turns out the answer is "everyone and no one all at once." It is a beautiful, chaotic, digital village.

Herman

A village on wheels. I love it.

Corn

Before we wrap up, I just want to say a huge thank you to everyone who has been listening. We've been doing this for over two hundred episodes now, and the community we have built here is something special.

Herman

It really is. And hey, if you are enjoying these deep dives into the mundane and the mysterious, we would really appreciate it if you could leave us a review on Spotify or whatever podcast app you use. It genuinely helps other curious people find the show.

Corn

It really does. And remember, you can always find us at myweirdprompts.com. We have the full archive there, plus a contact form if you want to send us your own "weird prompt." Maybe your question will be the basis for the next big episode!

Herman

That would be amazing. Also, a quick thanks to Daniel for the prompt today. It was a fun one to dig into. I might have to go take a taxi ride now just to see if I can spot a bone conduction headset in the wild.

Corn

Just don't forget to tell them you are a fan! Alright, I think that's it for this week.

Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts.

Corn

Stay curious, everyone. We will talk to you in the next one.

Herman

Goodbye!

Corn

So, Herman, be honest. When you were researching this, did you actually download Zello?

Herman

Oh, I absolutely did. I spent about three hours listening to a channel of truck drivers in the Midwest. It was fascinating. They have their own entire dialect. I didn't understand half of what they were saying, but the sense of camaraderie was palpable.

Corn

See, I knew it. You can't help yourself.

Herman

It is a sickness, Corn. A beautiful, information-seeking sickness.

Corn

Well, I suppose there are worse things to be addicted to than "boundless curiosity."

Herman

Exactly. Anyway, I think I hear the kettle. Coffee time?

Corn

Definitely. Let's see if we can get Daniel to join us. I want to hear what he thought of our explanation.

Herman

He's probably on a phone call.

Corn

Ha! Touche.

Herman

Alright, let's go.

Corn

Thanks again for listening, everyone. We really do appreciate you spending your time with us. It means a lot to two brothers in Jerusalem who just like to talk about stuff.

Herman

It really does. Catch you later!

Corn

See ya.

Herman

Wait, one more thing. Did we mention the OSI model in relation to the taxi network?

Corn

Herman, we are not going back into the OSI model. We did that in a previous episode.

Herman

But it is a perfect analogy! The physical layer is the road, the data link layer is the...

Corn

No. Coffee. Now.

Herman

Fine. But I'm bringing it up at the coffee table.

Corn

I'm sure Daniel will love that.

Herman

He will! He's a man of science.

Corn

He's a man who wants to drink his coffee in peace, Herman.

Herman

We'll see about that.

Corn

Alright, signing off for real this time. Bye!

Herman

Bye!