TECHNOLOGY

Messing With Fate

NEW "SOCIAL DISCOVERY" APPS TRY TO ENGINEER CHANCE ENCOUNTERS. COULD THEY SPOIL TRUE SERENDIPITY?

By Andrew Keen

THE EVENING BEFORE I went to South by Southwest, the interactive technology festival held each March in Austin, I got together with an old friend for dinner in San Francisco's Mission District. Our meal, meticulously engineered via multiple e-mails, was anything but serendipitous. We met at a South Indian restaurant popular with the city's tech crowd. After squeezing in at the bar, we slapped down our iPhones, like digital gunslingers. But as we caught up, I was distracted by a continual buzzing from her phone, which vibrated so relentlessly that it seemed to have a mind of its own. "It's Highlight," she apologized, switching off the device. "Have you tried it? It's so annoying."

I had, as it happened, tried Highlight. And Glancee, Sonar, and Banjo, a handful of the "social discovery" apps that are the latest new new thing. They allow our mobile devices to alert us to the presence of people we know, and to introduce us to people we don't know—people the apps think we might like to meet. "Strangers," Brett Martin, the CEO of Sonar, explained to me, "often have a lot in common." The idea of engineering serendipity, of manufacturing good luck, used to be a science-fiction trope; now it's the holy grail of mobile technology. The goal is to create what Andrea Vaccari, the CEO of Glancee, described to me as "surprise" and "delight." "We want to create serendipity on steroids," he added, unappetizingly.

Applying algorithms to the personal data on networks like Facebook and LinkedIn, these apps try to introduce us to nearby people whom we might like to meet—because we listed the same career on LinkedIn, say, or because we "liked" the same bands on Facebook. That's why my friend's phone was buzzing: it wanted to introduce her to strangers in the vicinity of the Indian restaurant who, like her, were on Highlight. And it's why, when I arrived at the Austin airport the next day, I was bombarded with notifications that potential "friends" were nearby: tens of thousands of techno-hipsters had just descended, and every one of them seemed to have downloaded one of the social-discovery apps that pundits were predicting would go mainstream at this year's South by Southwest.

My own experience at the festival, however, was decidedly short on serendipity. Everywhere I went, my new apps tried to connect me to people I didn't want to see—business partners from failed ventures, Web developers I'd fired, entrepreneurs who were selling things I didn't need, the inevitable ex-girlfriend. Worse, the people I wanted to bump into never popped up on my phone. In the end, most people who came to Austin seemed to agree with my friend: these apps are, in their first-generation form, *annoying*. (Forget Big Brother; imagine a mutual-surveillance network of little brothers.) Their incessant matchmaking drains both patience and batteries.

In Silicon Valley, however, failure has a way of previewing the future. Just as social networks like Friendster gave way to Facebook, so will these early social-discovery apps mature into something more user-friendly. What, though, will the eventual success of such technology mean? Will it, as Amber Case, a South by Southwest keynote speaker and a "cyborg anthropologist," suggested to me, "amplify our humanness" by compounding the coincidences in our lives?

Future generations of these apps might very well help us flourish in what Reid Hoffman, the co-founder of LinkedIn, describes as the "Start-Up of You" economy—a Darwinian world in which we must continuously network to survive. But "amplifying our humanness"? Do we really want the preternatural ability to avoid entering any Starbucks where we might encounter an ex? Do we want to wonder, during a conversation with a delightful stranger, whether that person plotted our "chance" meeting? And the reverse: Do we want to find ourselves forever stalking people in airports because an app says they might be professionally valuable?

Ultimately, apps that claim to engineer serendipity seem more likely to do the reverse. Their main offense is not ubiquitous surveillance, but that they stand to destroy surprise and, with it, true serendipity. Rather than enriching our lives with unexpected encounters and genuine strangers, they threaten to take the mystery and the magic out of people we don't know. ■

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