

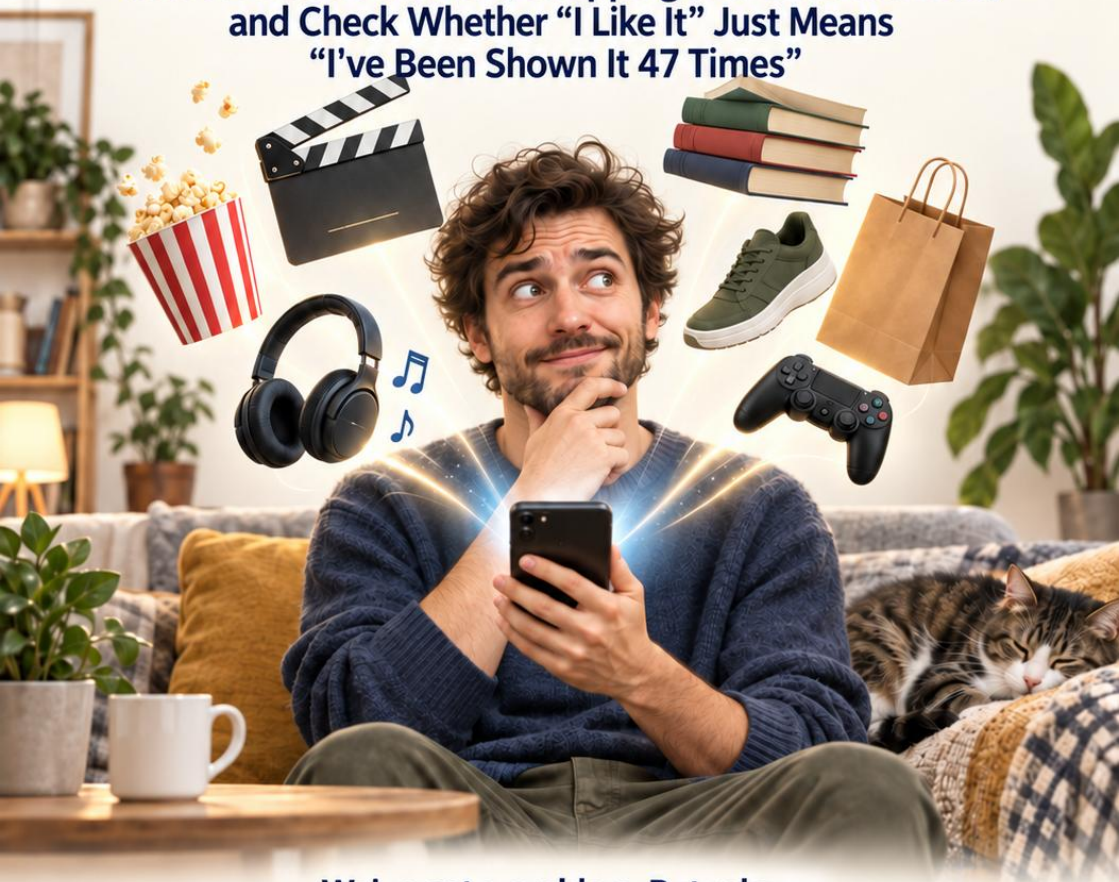
Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

I Don't Know If I Chose It or the Algorithm Chose It for Me

**How to Reclaim Your Own Taste, Make Conscious
Choices About Content, Shopping and Entertainment,
and Check Whether “I Like It” Just Means
“I’ve Been Shown It 47 Times”**



**We've got a problem. But relax.
It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.**

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ISBN: 978-83-8483-616-3

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INTRO

You are standing in a supermarket, holding a bottle of hot honey that costs considerably more than you expected honey to cost. Three weeks ago, you had never heard of the stuff. Now you apparently need it to complete your existence. You have seen it drizzled over pizza, poured onto fried chicken, stirred into elaborate sauces, and enthusiastically recommended by people whose kitchens look as though nobody has ever actually cooked in them. One creator called it life-changing. Another declared that ordinary honey was officially over. A third looked directly into the camera and whispered, "Trust me." And here you are, inspecting a bottle of sweetened bee-related enthusiasm while wondering whether your dinner has been fundamentally incomplete for the past thirty years.

The peculiar thing is that nobody forced you into this decision. You watched the videos voluntarily. You found the recipes appealing. You walked into the supermarket using your own legs, picked up the bottle with your own hand, and could put it back whenever you wanted. Every visible part of the decision belongs to you. Yet somewhere between the first cooking video and this supermarket aisle, an unfamiliar product became something you genuinely wanted. Did you discover a new preference? Did repeated exposure gradually make the product seem desirable? Or did several influences combine to create an appetite that now feels entirely spontaneous? The answer matters, particularly when similar processes affect more expensive purchases, personal interests, entertainment, and the information you consider important.

Recommendation systems are extraordinarily convenient. They help us discover artists, navigate enormous catalogs, find useful products, and avoid wasting time searching through thousands of irrelevant possibilities. Without them, choosing something as simple as a podcast could become an archaeological expedition through the internet's accumulated debris. But convenience has an interesting side effect. When a system continually suggests what we might enjoy, we can gradually lose sight of where the suggestion ends and our preference begins. We stop noticing the difference between something we deliberately searched for and something that became familiar because it kept appearing in front of us. Eventually, the phrase "That's exactly my taste" can describe both a genuine passion and an extremely successful sequence of recommendations.

An algorithm doesn't need to read your mind to influence your choices. Depending on the service, recommendation systems can use information about previous interactions, content characteristics, similarities between users, and other available signals. They may predict what you are likely to click, watch, buy, or engage with. That is not the same as understanding what would make your life better. You might watch an argument because it annoys you, examine an outrageous product because you cannot believe it exists, or spend fifteen minutes reading about a celebrity you actively dislike. Your behavior provides information, but it doesn't always explain your intentions. A system can make useful predictions without knowing the full story. Sometimes, unfortunately, the next recommendation arrives as though the system has mistaken your horrified fascination for a lifelong commitment.

There is another problem hidden beneath the apparent abundance of choice. You may have access to millions of songs, films, articles, and products, but you never encounter them all at once. You see a selection, presented in a particular order, with certain options highlighted and others buried deeper. That arrangement can shape what seems normal, desirable, popular, or worth investigating. Imagine entering an enormous museum where a helpful guide continually redirects you toward paintings resembling the ones you have already admired. You might have a wonderful visit. You might also leave believing the museum contains nothing but landscapes, because nobody mentioned the extraordinary sculptures in the next building. The guide doesn't have to be malicious for your experience to become unnecessarily narrow.

Popularity complicates matters further. When thousands of people praise something, we naturally become curious. Their enthusiasm can provide a useful clue, especially when we're unfamiliar with a subject. But popularity doesn't establish that something will suit us personally, and repeated exposure doesn't guarantee genuine enjoyment. Familiarity can sometimes make a thing feel more appealing, while excessive repetition can produce boredom or irritation. Context matters. So do expectations, mood, previous experiences, and the people around us. Our tastes have always been shaped by outside influences. The digital world simply offers new ways to organize, repeat, and amplify them, often at extraordinary speed.

And this influence isn't limited to choosing entertainment. It can shape what we consider an ordinary lifestyle, a reasonable purchase, a successful career, or an acceptable standard of appearance. If your online environment

constantly presents extravagant morning routines, you might eventually feel inadequate for getting dressed, eating breakfast, and arriving at work on time. Apparently, a proper morning now requires seventeen supplements, an ice bath, handwritten affirmations, and a sunrise viewed from a house nobody can afford. The comparison can feel personal even when the content was never created specifically for you. Your ordinary life hasn't necessarily become worse. The reference points surrounding it may simply have changed.

The usual responses aren't particularly helpful. One approach is to trust everything recommended to us, assuming that a personalized system must know what we're going to enjoy. Another is to reject recommendations entirely, as though accepting a suggested song constitutes surrendering our independence. Some people attempt a dramatic digital detox, delete half their applications, and return a few days later to discover that their needs for entertainment, information, and human connection have inconveniently survived. Others become suspicious of every preference they possess. They can no longer enjoy a popular movie without wondering whether their appreciation has been secretly manufactured. This is an exhausting way to spend an evening, particularly when the movie contains excellent explosions and wasn't asking to become a philosophical examination.

You don't have to choose between blind obedience and permanent suspicion. An excellent recommendation remains excellent even if a computer introduced you to it. Something widely popular can genuinely be your favorite. A spontaneous purchase can bring lasting enjoyment. The useful distinction is whether you can recognize what you want, understand the relevant trade-offs, and decide what to

do with a suggestion. Sometimes the answer will be yes. Sometimes you'll discover that you were responding mostly to convenience, excitement, repetition, or social pressure. Neither discovery needs to become a moral verdict on your personality.

Consider a small experiment. The next time an unfamiliar product, activity, or piece of entertainment catches your attention, notice what attracted you before doing anything else. Was it a feature you genuinely need? A detail that sparked curiosity? An impressive demonstration? The number of people praising it? Or simply the fact that you've encountered it repeatedly? You don't need to reject the suggestion or launch an investigation into the motives of everyone involved. Just identify the attraction. If the decision matters, give yourself enough room to consider alternatives and practical consequences. A moment of attention can reveal information about your preferences that another hour of automatic browsing might never provide.

This book is about developing that kind of freedom in everyday situations. You'll explore why certain recommendations feel uncannily accurate, how interface design can encourage one decision over another, and why browsing more options doesn't necessarily produce better choices. You'll learn to recognize the difference between useful information and persuasive presentation, between entertainment that genuinely satisfies you and activity that simply continues, and between a passing fascination and an interest worth pursuing. The goal isn't to transform every click into a lengthy research project. Real people have jobs, responsibilities, limited budgets, tired evenings, and better things to do than conduct a formal inquiry before selecting a sandwich.

There will still be moments when you happily follow a recommendation, discover something wonderful, and wonder how you ever lived without it. There will also be mistakes, impulsive decisions, and occasions when the internet knows exactly which ridiculous video will make you laugh. None of those experiences disqualifies you from having independent tastes. What matters is keeping enough curiosity and awareness to recognize when you're making a choice rather than merely continuing a pattern someone else's system has made convenient.

So buy the hot honey if you genuinely want to try it. Maybe you'll love it. Maybe it will sit in your cupboard until somebody asks why you own an expensive bottle of spicy optimism.

Either outcome is perfectly survivable.

The important thing is that the next time somebody tells you a product, film, song, or experience is absolutely essential, you can recognize the difference between an invitation and a decision.

The internet can suggest what comes next. You still get to decide whether it's worth your time.

Chapter 1 - The Invisible Shortlist: Who Decided What You Get to See?

At 7:30 on a Saturday evening, you decide to discover some new music. Not the usual artists, not another playlist assembled from songs you've heard a thousand times, but something genuinely unfamiliar. You open a music platform, ready to broaden your horizons. The first suggestion is a new release by an artist you already follow. The second is a playlist containing music similar to your recent favorites. The third promises exciting discoveries, although most of its tracks sound suspiciously like the second playlist wearing a different jacket. Forty minutes later, you've listened to several enjoyable songs, but you haven't ventured particularly far from familiar territory. Your musical exploration has taken you on an impressive journey from your living room to a slightly different corner of your living room.

Nothing went obviously wrong. The application worked perfectly well. Its recommendations were relevant, the interface was convenient, and the music sounded pleasant. You weren't tricked into listening to something terrible. Yet there is an important difference between discovering what exists and receiving a selection of what a system predicts you'll enjoy. The first involves exploring possibilities, including unfamiliar ones. The second involves evaluating a shortlist prepared according to particular criteria. Both can be valuable, but they aren't interchangeable. When we forget that distinction, we may begin to mistake the limits of our recommendations for the limits of our interests.

The problem isn't that algorithms prevent us from making choices. In most ordinary situations, we can reject a suggestion, type a different search term, or leave a platform altogether. The difficulty is that our attention is limited, while the available options are enormous. We cannot personally inspect every song, article, product, video, or cultural event that might interest us. Something must determine which possibilities appear first. Sometimes that something is an editorial decision. Sometimes it's a search engine ranking, a popularity measure, an advertising arrangement, or a recommendation system. Often several mechanisms work together. By the time we encounter an option, someone or something has already influenced its chances of being noticed.

A selection is not the whole universe

Imagine receiving a beautifully designed catalog of vacation experiences. It contains mountain adventures, city breaks, seaside resorts, and cultural activities. Every photograph is attractive, and the descriptions are persuasive. You choose a weekend in a historic town and have a wonderful time. Later, you discover that the catalog was prepared by a company working with only a small group of accommodation providers. Your trip hasn't suddenly become less enjoyable. But the catalog wasn't a complete picture of the possibilities, even if its presentation encouraged you to think otherwise. The important missing information concerned the selection process, not necessarily the quality of the options.

Digital environments create similar situations, frequently without an obvious catalog boundary. A page appears to offer endless choices, but the visible portion has already been filtered and ordered. Even scrolling further doesn't

guarantee that you'll eventually encounter everything relevant. Different platforms use different systems, and their exact ranking methods may be partly undisclosed or regularly revised. Some take account of previous interactions, content characteristics, popularity, or other signals. Advertising can also affect what receives prominent placement, although advertisements and ordinary recommendations should not be assumed to operate identically. The essential point is simpler: what appears on your screen is the result of a selection process, not a neutral inventory of everything worth considering.

This matters because visibility can quietly become a substitute for importance. When a particular type of content repeatedly appears in prominent positions, we may begin to regard it as central to a subject. Suppose you're interested in learning about contemporary architecture. Your recommendations concentrate on enormous houses, spectacular interiors, and buildings designed to look remarkable in photographs. You could gradually conclude that architecture is primarily about visual extravagance. Meanwhile, practical questions about accessible buildings, neighborhood design, affordable housing, or everyday public spaces receive much less attention in your personal feed. They haven't disappeared from architecture. They simply haven't been given comparable visibility in the material you're encountering.

Over time, that imbalance can affect more than individual preferences. It can change what we recognize as normal, desirable, or even possible. If most of the examples we encounter share certain characteristics, we may begin to treat those characteristics as the standard. This doesn't mean that repetition automatically rewrites our opinions.

People interpret information differently and can resist or reject familiar messages. But the material available to us supplies many of the examples from which we form expectations. A system doesn't have to announce that it is establishing a standard. Providing a narrow range of examples can sometimes be enough to influence our sense of what deserves attention.

The recommendation isn't necessarily working toward your goal

Recommendation systems are often judged by whether they predict a particular kind of user response. Depending on the platform, relevant goals might include engagement, purchases, viewing behavior, user satisfaction, or a combination of different measures. The precise objectives aren't always visible from outside. Whatever the details, we shouldn't assume that the system is necessarily optimizing the outcome we personally care about at that moment.

Suppose you open a video platform because you want to understand the basics of investing in renewable energy. You need a clear explanation of the subject, including relevant risks and limitations. The recommended materials may include thoughtful educational content, but also dramatic predictions, enthusiastic success stories, and videos promising astonishing revelations. The most attention-grabbing option isn't necessarily the most useful introduction. In financial matters especially, popularity and persuasive presentation shouldn't replace reliable information or qualified advice. Your purpose is to learn enough to understand a topic. The platform may be selecting from a much broader collection of behavioral signals than your current learning objective.

This difference is easy to miss because recommendations often feel personally appropriate. A system may correctly infer that you enjoy technology, business, and environmental subjects. It can therefore suggest something related to all three without knowing why you're interested today. You might be seeking a balanced introduction, preparing for a professional discussion, or simply satisfying curiosity. Similar-looking content can serve very different purposes. Predicting that you'll find a video appealing isn't the same as knowing whether it will answer your question.

The challenge becomes greater when you haven't fully defined your intention. If you open an application merely hoping to find something interesting, the visible suggestions help determine what interesting means. There is nothing inherently wrong with allowing yourself to be inspired. Serendipity is one of the internet's pleasures. But when the same arrangement supplies both the possibilities and the criteria by which you evaluate them, your apparent freedom can become narrower than the enormous catalog suggests.

What never appears cannot compete

An overlooked possibility doesn't get the same opportunity to win your attention as something placed directly in front of you. This sounds obvious, yet it has an important consequence. We often evaluate our decisions by comparing the options we considered, without asking whether the original set was sufficiently representative.

Consider a person looking for an online course in illustration. The first results feature polished commercial platforms with attractive websites, professional advertisements, and recognizable instructors. Those options might be excellent. Yet smaller independent teachers, free educational collections, local workshops, and alternative

teaching approaches may be harder to discover. If the person chooses the best course among the first results, that could still be a sensible decision. But being the strongest member of a visible shortlist doesn't automatically make something the best fit across all available possibilities.

Of course, nobody can evaluate an unlimited number of alternatives. That would turn choosing a six-week course into a six-month research project, at the end of which you'd be too exhausted to draw anything except a deeply frustrated stick figure. The objective is to recognize when the original shortlist needs expanding. For an inexpensive, easily reversible decision, the initial results may be sufficient. For a costly commitment or something that strongly affects your time and interests, a little broader searching can be worthwhile.

One useful distinction is between searching for an item and searching for a category of possibilities. If you already know which specific work you're looking for, direct search is efficient. If you're trying to discover what kinds of work might suit you, a broader exploration can reveal alternatives you didn't know how to name. Someone searching only for "best digital drawing course" may see a very different range of options from someone exploring community art classes, independent illustration teachers, or self-directed drawing exercises. Different entry points can change the shortlist without requiring elaborate technical knowledge.

Learn to recognize the frame

A practical way to understand your digital environment is to notice how a particular set of choices has been framed. Start with the page itself. Is it presenting search results, personalized recommendations, paid promotions, editorial selections, or some mixture of these? What appears first?

Are there visible labels indicating sponsorship or popularity? Are you able to change the ordering, filter the results, or search within a more specific category?

These questions don't require you to become an expert in recommendation technology. They help you understand what kind of information you're looking at. A paid promotion can introduce you to an excellent product, but its placement shouldn't be confused with an independent quality assessment. A popularity ranking can reveal what many people are engaging with, but it doesn't necessarily identify what suits your individual needs. An editorial recommendation may reflect knowledgeable judgment, but it also comes from somebody with a particular perspective. Each selection method offers something useful when interpreted appropriately.

Try this with a subject you genuinely care about. Open the place where you normally discover relevant content and examine the first several suggestions. Notice whether they share the same format, viewpoint, level of difficulty, or style. Then use a different route to the subject, perhaps a specialist publication, a public institution, a direct search, or a carefully chosen independent creator. Compare the kinds of material you find rather than attempting to prove that one source is universally superior.

You may discover that your ordinary recommendations are remarkably good. That is useful information too. The point isn't to manufacture suspicion where none is warranted. You might also notice that a narrow range of content has been dominating your view, while other approaches would better serve your present interests. In either case, you've learned something about the relationship

between your choices and the environment in which those choices appear.

There is a further complication: alternative sources aren't automatically unbiased. A specialist publication can have commercial relationships. An independent creator can hold strong opinions. A public institution can select material according to its own purposes. Moving away from personalization doesn't transport you into a magical kingdom of perfectly neutral information, staffed by impartial librarians who have never expressed a preference about anything. You still need judgment. What multiple sources can provide is a broader understanding of how a subject can be presented and which possibilities one particular system might not emphasize.

The value of a door you open yourself

The easiest improvement isn't necessarily replacing your favorite platforms. It may be establishing a few ways to reach things you care about without depending entirely on the next recommendation. If you enjoy a particular subject, identify reliable places where it is regularly discussed. If you have a specific question, use a direct search rather than beginning with a general feed. If you're exploring something unfamiliar, vary your starting points instead of relying exclusively on one service.

Different situations justify different levels of effort. You don't need to investigate the architecture of recommendation systems every time you want background music while cleaning. Nor should you automatically assume that unfamiliar sources are better than convenient ones. The relevant question is whether the selection process matters enough to your decision to deserve attention. When it does,

expanding the range of possibilities becomes a practical way to exercise more control.

It's also worth remembering that recommendation systems can introduce genuine surprises. Some are deliberately designed to balance familiar interests with novel material. Even highly personalized platforms can lead you somewhere unexpected. Nothing about algorithmic discovery automatically makes an interest less authentic. A new passion can begin with a suggestion you never requested and become deeply meaningful through what you choose to do afterward.

The important distinction is between accepting a recommendation because it works for you and accepting the limits of the recommendation system as the limits of your world. You can appreciate the convenience of a prepared selection while knowing that alternatives exist beyond it.

So the next time an application presents a perfectly arranged collection of things it believes you'll love, enjoy looking through them. Choose something if it appeals to you. But remember that the collection has boundaries, even when the screen appears endless.

You don't have to inspect every possibility beyond those boundaries. You only need to remember that there is a beyond.

And occasionally, that's where you'll find the thing you didn't know you were looking for.

Chapter 2 - Your Click Has Been Taken Out of Context

Your friend sends you a video of a man conducting an orchestra made entirely of squeaky rubber toys. It is simultaneously ridiculous, strangely impressive, and impossible to explain to anyone who hasn't seen it. You watch the entire performance because you're trying to work out whether the squeaking follows an actual musical arrangement. Then you watch it again because one particularly enthusiastic rubber chicken appears to be performing a solo. Finally, you forward the video to another friend with the message, "Human civilization has reached its natural conclusion." You've now watched the same material twice, spent considerable time examining it, and shared it with another person. None of these actions means you intend to become a collector of novelty musical poultry.

Nevertheless, a recommendation system may register some of those interactions as useful information about your interests. The exact signals collected and the way they're interpreted depend on the service. A platform might consider viewing duration, repeat views, reactions, sharing, or other available behavior when selecting future content. It doesn't necessarily understand the joke you attached to your message, the reason you replayed the performance, or the expression of bewilderment on your face. It observes certain actions and attempts to use them to predict others. That distinction is fundamental: behavior provides evidence about interest, but it doesn't fully explain intention.

We encounter this difference constantly outside the digital world. Imagine watching somebody examine an

expensive sports car through a showroom window. Are they planning to buy it? Admiring its engineering? Wondering why anybody would choose that color? Perhaps they're waiting for a friend and the showroom happens to be directly opposite the bus stop. Watching the person tells you something about where their attention is directed. It doesn't reveal the entire meaning of the experience. Digital systems face a similar challenge, except they process enormous quantities of behavioral information and may turn the results into recommendations before we've finished thinking about why we clicked in the first place.

Attention has several meanings

When we say something caught our attention, we're describing an observation, not necessarily delivering a compliment. An alarming headline catches attention. So does a beautiful photograph, an irritating argument, a complicated explanation, or a mistake so spectacular that we feel compelled to inspect it. These experiences can produce similar visible actions while having very different meanings.

Suppose you're browsing a professional discussion forum and encounter advice you believe is seriously misguided. You read the post carefully, examine the responses, and write a detailed correction. Perhaps you return later to see whether anybody has addressed your concerns. From the outside, you've demonstrated considerable engagement. But engagement isn't the same as approval. You may be spending time with the material precisely because you consider it wrong.

Some recommendation systems may use such activity as one signal among many, potentially contributing to further exposure to similar content. This doesn't mean every platform automatically interprets criticism as enthusiasm.

The specifics matter, and systems can incorporate negative feedback or other distinctions. But the possibility illustrates a common mismatch between what a person experiences and what a behavioral record can readily communicate.

The same issue arises with material we watch out of concern. You might research a product recall because somebody in your household owns the affected item. You may spend considerable time learning about a medical subject on behalf of a relative. You might read about an unfamiliar professional field because you're helping a colleague prepare for an interview. These activities may be meaningful without representing your own permanent interests. A system observing the activity alone may have limited information about why it occurred.

Even explicit reactions can be ambiguous. A person might like a post to acknowledge a friend's achievement rather than endorse its subject. Sharing can mean recommending, criticizing, asking for clarification, or simply saying, "Look at this extraordinary nonsense." A purchase might be a gift. A search might settle a disagreement. Human intentions are wonderfully inconvenient things to compress into tidy categories.

And yet tidy categories are useful. Without some way to interpret behavior, personalized services would struggle to identify relevant content. The problem isn't that making inferences is inherently wrong. It's that predictions built from limited signals can become misleading when we treat them as authoritative descriptions of ourselves.

How curiosity becomes a recurring appointment

One of the most interesting consequences appears when a brief curiosity produces a longer sequence of