**Ep #262: How Social Media Algorithms Really Work with Billy Seol**

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**With Your Host**

**<u>Simone Grace Seol</u>**

I Am Your Korean Mom with Simone Grace Seol

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Hey, I'm Simone Seol, *I Am Your Korean Mom* that you never knew you needed. I believe that we are all weird and glorious in our own ways, and I help people let their own glorious, inner weirdo out. Turns out, they're a genius! Let's get this going.

Simone Seol: Hey, folks, you ready to talk about algorithms? Damn. Everybody's so worried about algorithms, right? How to beat them, what exactly goes into them, how often they change, how they're changing, and what the hell you should do about all of it?

Well, today, I have the pleasure of bringing you an actual algorithm expert. That happens to be my one and only sibling, my little brother, Billy Seol. He's a software engineer and a life coach. Weirdly enough, he also happens to be a student and client of mine in the Integrative Change Work Certification Program, as well as Home.

He has some incredible insights to share inside Home about how algorithms work, and he made this post explaining it. So many people were like, "Holy shit, that just changed my life." So I was like, "Huh, let's have you on my podcast so that you could talk all about it in greater depth, and everyone who listens to this podcast can benefit from this information, too."

So, let's dive in. Meet my brother, Billy.

Billy Seol: I worked at many different tech companies. The first company I worked professionally is the largest search engine in Korea. Basically, the Google of Korea. Then I went to Apple. At Apple, I worked on Siri primarily. Siri is also tightly integrated into search, because people want to search for things.

I worked at Foursquare, which is a location intelligence company. Again, dealing with a lot of data. Where do people go? What's the hottest Mexican place around? How is this place relative in popularity compared to other venues? If we were to recommend 10 venues in New York City, which one

should we pick? So, we solved those kinds of problems. Now, I work at Disney, and I'm more of the infrastructure guy.

Big data has always been a big part of my career. But the problem that I specifically talk about in algorithms, is recommendations. Recommendations is really important for companies because, say you have an app, social media feed, if you open the app to see the same people posting over and over and over and over again, it starts to feel very stale.

So, what that translates into, in terms of corporate talk, is user retention is going to drop. Tech companies collect a lot of different data. So, when you open the app, how long do you stay static? When you scroll and pause, which posts did you stop on just to gaze for a second? Which did you click through? Which did you click through and leave immediately? Which did you click through and actually watched? To what percentage?

All of these are collected by the app and sent to the company in order to try to solve some human behavioral problems? So, coming back to why recommendation is meaningful, you need a little bit of spice in your feed. Like, things from people you don't follow.

Moreover, this gives ground for advertising. Because if you see and expect the same people on your timeline, but then you start seeing an ad, it's going to start to feel really intrusive. Like, "Oh, my God, no. This feed is my personal space, and now I feel like it's all fucked up." Right?

So, when you mess up the timeline, when you mess up the people, and when you start recommending random stuff, ads start to feel less intrusive.

Simone: Oh, so they have to introduce just enough random stuff, so that your ads don't feel weird, but it can't be too much random stuff because then it's like, where's the stuff I want to see? Ah, okay.

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Billy: Because there's no point then. That's why all the tech companies started to randomize their feed a little bit. I think this is around 2010s. Facebook used to be all chronological. Twitter used to be all chronological. And then, somehow it's like, "for you," and it starts showing people you don't follow. Sometimes it's good. "Oh, I didn't know about this. This is cool." Sometimes it's horrible. Like, "What the fuck? Why am I seeing this?"

But the end effect is you start becoming less emotionally attached to that concept of *your* feed. Now, you're subscribed to the company's feed. That's why recommendation engines are so important. Because it needs to find the thin line between two random versus very relevant and good for me.

Usually, in social media, there's two engines at work. One is "real time,' because when something is concurrent, for example, there's a big fire in Hawaii, there's a big earthquake in Morocco, people need to know about that, right? Or when there's big political news in foreign countries. Or things of significance like celebrity stuff.

These things need to propagate quickly, and the real time engine is looking for that spike, within the last hour, or within the last day. It's looking at very short-term windows. It's comparing what came up, what spiked just now, compared to the usual search volume.

Simone: Wait, hold that. You said, the reason that this can't be too predictable, is…

Billy: When it's too predictable, people are going to start farming for it. "Oh, so, when 10,000 people retweet the same thing, it's going to be in trending. You know what? Then I'm going to buy a bunch of bots. I'm going to just buy this keyword, and now I'm going to be in control of what's trending."

So, that's why how you determine trending can't be fixed.

Simone: Right. Because the minute you set up the algorithm, somebody's going to figure it out and buy bots to take advantage of it. And then, you

have to change algorithm, and the bots have to catch up with you. It's like a cat and mouse game, right?

Billy: Yes, exactly. That's why the companies are always experimenting with different ways. Sometimes, when they change the formula, it ultimately delivers a better user experience, right? Because sometimes, turns out the algorithm tweak was actually really beneficial for the user experience. These things happen, right?

Simone: Or sometimes not.

Billy: Yeah, but the thing is, again, it just can't be too predictable.

Simone: Is it safe to assume that whatever the algorithm is, it's always changing?

Billy: Yeah. Because if it's not, then the data scientists are out of a job.

Simone: And, they're always employed.

Billy: They're always employed. The thing is the user retention for any company has a certain percentage. Let's say, arbitrary. Let's say Twitter has X amount of retention. Let's say Facebook has Y amount of retention, no matter what the number is. That's why I'm quantifying it as X and Y.

Do you want more? It's like capitalism. Unless people are literally living in the app, it's never going to be enough. So, the data scientists are always looking for ways to make that even more and more and more. It's basically the capitalist machine.

Simone: What are some of the most algorithm heavy engines, that depend the most on algorithm? What are some of the least algorithm dependent platforms?

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Billy: Yeah, so this is just my personal opinion. But based on my experience on the platforms, I think YouTube is definitely one of the heavy hitting algorithm machines.

But it's sort of understandable, because, number one, YouTube is the, I think, only platform that actually gives you money, right? It's got a partner program. I think Twitter started doing it recently. But YouTube has a long history of giving creators money directly on the platform.

Which means it's very closely related to ads, because that's where the money they provide to the creators is coming from. So, of course, they always have to be on the lookout for, okay, which creator has the most ad friendly content for this ad that I want to place?

Because of this really heavy emphasis on ads, YouTube is very, very, very influenced by algorithm. So now, when you look at your dashboard, as a YouTube creator, how you can tell a recommendation spike from organic growth is, with organic growth your graph is going to just generally trend upwards, but it's going to be not really noticeable, right?

But when you write the algorithm, it's a distinct spike. When you have that, you know, "Oh, one of my videos just hit the algorithm."

Simone: Yeah, as a business coach, that's something that I am always seeing my clients contend with. People always laugh when I say this, and a lot of them don't believe me, but I've never gone viral. The only thing that I've created that has ever truly gone viral, in a true sense, is one post that I made about supporting protesters in Iran. And, that doesn't have anything to do with my business.

For some reason, the algorithm picked that out and that went properly viral. It had like hundreds of thousands of shares or whatever. But my growth has always been slow and linear. Well, not linear, but it's been very mellow over time. but because I never went viral, like ever, it made me not expect that there's supposed to be a big spike.

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But I think when people engage with these algorithm heavy platforms, like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube early in their career, and they taste that algorithm spike, they think it *should* be like that. They try to replicate whatever they did before to try to keep creating that spike.

I'd love to hear about your experience. But the more I see that, the more I feel like it's just not not healthy psychologically, and it's actually not supportive for your business in the long run.

Because what your business really needs is for you to nurture the people that you have, for you to do your best work, and to grow sustainably. It's very different work than what you need to do to capture the highest views and the highest engagement in the next hour, right?

Billy: Yep. So, to finish the line of thought around ranking the social media in terms of the algorithm importance, YouTube is at the top. Instagram, and the other vertical video formats like Snapchat, and TikTok, they're, again, very heavy.

Then, when it becomes more about text, like Facebook or Twitter, and Reddit, which I applaud, because of its relative transparency. That's why the most important platform is email. There's no algorithm there. But to come back to what you're saying, and I don't say this lightly, when you get a taste of that spike, and you try to replicate it, it's like seeking validation from a narcissist.

Simone: Oh, my God. Oh, stop. So good.

Billy: I have very close, first-hand experience. So, "Hey, you know what? Today, I'm going to give you all the love of my life." Then tomorrow, just like a cold shoulder, and you never understand why. You try to replicate it. "Oh, it must be this, right? It must be that." You try to do all these crazy...

Simone: And, "If I'm not getting the love that I got nine days ago, it must mean I'm doing something wrong. There must be something I could do to

change." It's never-ending sprinting on a hamster wheel, to get a crumb of something that is completely outside of your control.

When it does happen, it feels amazing for a second. And, it feels totally random. Then you are back again at, "How do I create this again?"

Billy: Yep. Now, there comes a point where you get it, and then you start fearing, what if I lose this again? That's a whole different roller coaster that you get to ride. Then, what if you never ride it again? You're going to just spend the rest of your business life in complete misery. Zero out of… Would never recommend.

Simone: Totally. When you are used to that kind of narcissistic rollercoaster… I mean, not to overdo this analogy but I think it's a really excellent analogy in this one regard.

When you're used to riding that roller coaster of you feel good, you feel like your business is doing well. If it's favored by the algorithm, and you have to keep… When you get off of that ride, where there are extreme highs and extreme lows, and the day to day is just kind of not that remarkable, not that dramatic, there's no crazy highs, it can feel like something is wrong.

It can feel like there should be something you can do to make things more dramatic. That's why I think so many people just don't continue to put in the effort of nurturing relationships, creating value, actually being useful to people, doing better work, like the bread and butter. Bread and butter? I don't know, it's the basic nutrients of what you need to do to make a business grow.

Because there's so much out there that teaches you how to get ahead of the algorithm, right? And so, I just want you to know that if you spent a lot of time and energy on that, please be compassionate with yourself. They've programmed your brain to seek out the next high of algorithm spike.

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It can take a little bit of adjustment to come down. To it being slow and undramatic and kind of frustratingly feeling like nothing is happening from time to time. But you know what? That's what a healthy business looks like. That's kind of what a lot of healthy relationships look like. There's not a lot of tremendous highs and lows. It's just kind of long term, steady, things are generally good, kind of thing.

Billy: Yeah, it's like you cook dinner every day and your dinner sustains you. That should be your normal day-to-day business. Right? But then, your skill at making dinner improves. So, day after day, year after year, you're going to start feeding yourself better. But then, every once in a while, you're going to get your hands on this really fresh farm-raised chicken breast that just can't compare to anything else you've ever eaten.

Simone: I mean, okay, not chicken breasts. You mean like chicken leg, chicken breasts sucks.

Billy: Yeah. Or, I don't know, some artisanal

Simone: Wagyu beef.

Billy: Yeah. Sometimes you get your hands on those and you cook yourself a wonderful meal with that. I think that's how you should approach the algorithm spike. If you happen to get it, it'll be a once in a lifetime kind of a meal. But that doesn't mean that all the other meals in your life suck. Your dinner is pretty good.

Simone: Yeah. Sometimes, a basic meal is a good meal. So, I loved your plug for why, given all of this, the Garbage Post Challenge is so important and so useful. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Billy: Yeah. If you want to write the algorithm, there are things you could do. Companies usually like to push new features, right? So, if an app has a new feature, when you use that, you're likely to write the algorithm. Aside from that, it's like scratching a lottery ticket, right?

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Now, here's what's going to happen, when you think of it as a lottery ticket. You start expecting it. Every time you post, you expect it. You inevitably get disappointed. You expect it, you post, you get disappointed. You expect it, you post, you get disappointed.

So, if you don't garbage it, you're never going to get the chance to desensitize yourself from this lottery mindset. Right? The Garbage Post Challenge, literally is like, "Oh, it's okay, what I'm doing. It's garbage, that's the whole point."

Your nervous system is used to making posting just not feel like this one ray of hope in your barren land that's going to make your business thrive, right. This happens time after time with every person who does the Garbage Post Challenge. The first 10 times is going to be like that. But the first 20 times…

Simone: There's so much emotional investment on every piece of copy. You overthink everything, and once it's up you're babysitting it. "What's happening? Is anybody engaging? Oh, my God" It's so much drama pre and after every post; that's like the first 10 posts.

Billy: Yeah, yeah. When you reach 20 posts, it gets a little bit easier, but you still care. You've reached 30, it's like you could continue caring about literally everything on to your thousandth post, but it's not going to be a good experience.

You're going to start wondering, what's the point here? Is the point my business, or getting more likes? The Garbage Post Challenge gives you an opportunity to face that question. Why am I doing this? I think the best way to change, especially if you're feeling stuck, is to meet a catalyst.

That's why a lot of coaches ask, "Okay, if you were truly rejected, how would that feel? If you never actually got a return call back from the employer how would that feel?" The coaches like to ask a lot of questions that raise the internal stakes, because it's a catalyst for change.

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So, the garbage post, seen in this perspective, is the perfect catalyst for change because you're forcing yourself to put something out there hundreds and thousands of times, until you come face to face with the ultimate question, why are you doing this? Why are you posting? You can't really get a chance to explore that unless you've done it like 100 times.

Simone: Once you get all of the drama, all of the ego trips, and all of the over attachment out of the way, most of the time what remains is the real why of you're doing it. It's like, "Oh, I'm doing this because I actually want to connect with the people that I want to talk to. Because I want to help them. Because it feels good to express myself and to be creative in this way. It gives me a feel for my own voice and what it's like to be me."

Every successful content creator that I've seen, and I know this from people who are nowhere near my world of coaches. I watch beauty YouTube influencers, whose whole thing is talking about skincare and makeup. The successful ones stay. No matter what your niche is, the secret to success, to sustainable success, is being your unique self and bringing something unique to the market that no one else can do.

Because it's your perspective and your voice. Most people never get close to really finding out what the heck their voice even is because they're so busy worrying about doing it right, getting the immediate validation from other people, following the rules, being pretty, and being acceptable.

All of these things get in the way of your voice truly shining through. The Garbage Post Challenge just removes all of the blocks, all of the mental drama that gets in the way of that.

So, if you're new to my world, and you're like, "Okay, what the hell are we talking about? What is the Garbage Post Challenge?" Go to Episode 160 of this podcast and catch up on my super famous challenge that has changed countless lives. That's a big claim, but it's real. The Garbage Post Challenge, go learn all about that in that episode. I teach the whole thing there. Okay, so, that's why the GPC is so amazing.

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Now, here's my final question. Are there times when you should know a little bit about the algorithm? I'm totally playing the devil's advocate, because I don't give a fuck about the algorithm; never have, never thought about it. But, is it wise to completely ignore it?

Aren't there things that we should know and try to keep up with so that we have an advantage, even if we're not going for those dramatic spikes? What do you say to that?

Billy: Well, I mean, you could. Am I arguing that that's bad? Am I arguing that making it on a platform "is good?" I mean, it's bad? No, I'm not arguing that at all. Of course, I want success for you. both in terms of your actual business success, and I also want you to succeed on the platform.

But I think what ultimately matters, and how I define you being adept on a platform, is less about getting a best metrics out of it. It's more about being truly comfortable, and being at peace with posting a bunch of stuff on that platform.

When you remember the first time you got the smartphone, and you're like, "Whoa, this is really cool." Do you remember when Instagram was actually about uploading photos? I still remember that time, right? It didn't used to be all screenshots and meme videos. Instagram always reminds me of that really fun time when I had really, a blast sharing pictures that I took.

Even now, when I'm posting on Instagram, yeah, do I post text and screenshots? Yes, I do. But at the same time, that's what I feel when I upload on Instagram. That's why I'm not massively successful on Instagram. But that's why I feel like I'm adept at using Instagram.

Same with YouTube. I remember what it was about this quirky space, where everybody could upload their sketch comedies and their really random impressions of everything and they're really funny pets. Right? I still remember that really random and fun and quirky YouTube.

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That's why I have so much fun uploading stuff on YouTube, even though I'm not the algorithm king. And here's the funny story. I get a lot of emails from a lot of people saying, "Hey, July Life Coach, we noticed you're trying to grow your YouTube. But the thing is, your SEO and everything is wrong. Here's a screenshot explaining what you need to improve."

But here's the thing, if I'm doing everything wrong, how the fuck did you even find me in the first place?

Simone: That's so funny.

Billy: Whatever your platform is, just feel at home with it. That is one way to be adept at using a platform.

Simone: Because there is only one way I can guarantee that your effort is not going to be sustainable, you're going to burn out. you're going to hate it, and burn everything down to the ground. Or develop a weird, resentful relationship. Either way, there's one way I know that whatever you're doing is going to go down south eventually, and that is if you don't feel like yourself, if you don't feel at home, doing the thing that you're doing.

It sounds like the reason that you're able to keep up with everything you're doing is because you do it for reasons that feel true to you, that feel meaningful and fun for you. That has always been my experience, too. I get a ton of those emails, too. "I can help you 10x, optimize…" whatever the fuck. And, most of those people make less money than me; who've never listened to any of that advice.

Billy: You touched on something in the beginning that you really didn't really give me a lot of help. I really need people to know that…

Simone: I'm giving you help now because you have your own podcast. But prior to now, I didn't get to help him at all.

Billy: Yeah. This is important to say, because Simone's very influential, and I'm a beginning life coach. If I were to suddenly show up and just nepotism

on everything, that would really tarnish my sister's brand. I don't want that, as family. But the thing is, because of that, Simone said, "I made it to this point in a relatively short amount of time." But the thing is, I'm on the computer 24/7. It's my life. It's how I make my bread, primarily. It's how I coach people on Reddit. It's how I actually coach people on Zoom. It's how I do everything. I'm always on the computer.

So, while the number of days may be around a year, I actually went through all the drama. I know what you're thinking because I went through it. I know what it's like to just fucking dread sending another email or posting something because it feels so fake. Because it feels so desperate. I want to feel that sweet taste, that nectar of the gods, like algorithm. I've been through that phase before. But I just went through it in a rapid pace, because I'm just on the computer all the time.

Simone: Yeah, I can say you worked really hard. I didn't give you any help. I didn't give you any advice. I never gave you coaching. But I was watching you, and I was like, damn, he's really going for it. He went through so many iterations in just a year. I think he really condensed many, many, many years of work into one year.

Of course, you had a lot of privilege that allows you to do that without worrying too much. You have a well-paying job, and you have a stable home life. You have the time and the mental space to devote to something like this. So, I want to make that very clear, too.

But even so, I think what you did is very commendable. I'm happy. I feel like, this feels like, a good time to introduce you to the world. Because I feel like you don't need me, and you've never needed me. But I feel like you really… I mean, look at everything you said today. I'm having such a proud sister moment. It's so valuable.

I know that it's really going to help so many people to hear it, and I want to have you on again in the future to talk about how to get clients from Reddit.

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Because that's something that I've never heard about, never even thought about, until you decided to pioneer it. Let's talk about that later.

But for today, thank you for the fascinating discussion on algorithms, how they work, and why not to worry about it. If people want to find out more about working with you, where can they go?

Billy: Yeah, my website is JulyLifeCoach.com and I'm on Reddit.

Simone: Why? What's up with that? Is it because your birthday is in July?

Billy: It's because my birthday is in July. When I just got back from coach certification program and I looked at the calendar, it said July. Something was so captivating about it just being July. I love summer and I went for it.

Simone: I think you should change it BillySeol.com, but that's just my random opinion that you didn't ask for. Because I'm always like, "That's so random. Why is he doing that?"

Anyways, you can go to JulyLifeCoach.com for now, until I tell him to change it. Find it. Are you taking one-on-one clients?

Billy: I am taking one-on-one clients. A lot of my body of work is very accessible and available either for free or very affordable prices. So, if even if pricing is a concern for you, just come and talk to me. I'm sure there are many ways I can help you out.

Simone: Okay, everybody, thank you for listening to us two Seol siblings talk to each other. We will talk to you later. Bye-Bye.

Billy: Bye.

Hey, if you're looking for a one-stop shop where you can find the best of my teaching, all organized into a beautiful and actionable sequence, guess what? I got you. I took the best of my podcast episodes and created a

whole damn workbook around them. It's called *The Simone Starter Pack* and it's the ultimate marketing cheat sheet.

I got countless emails from folks who downloaded it, saying, "This free resource is worth more than all these courses I paid thousands of dollars for." So, what are you waiting for? Go grab *The Simone Starter Pack.* The link is in the show notes. I can't wait to see what amazing results you'll get from it.