Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 127: DAVID BRAY

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption.

Our guest today is Dr. David Bray, an expert at leading in turbulent environments. David previously led the tech efforts for the CDCs – the Centers for Disease Control in the United States – their bioterrorism response to 9/11. He went to Afghanistan to help "think differently" on military and humanitarian efforts. In 2012, he led a bipartisan Commission reviewing the Research and Development efforts of the U.S. Intelligence Community. He also served as CIO or Chief Information Officer for the Federal Communications Commission here in the United States for four years, and currently serves as Executive Director of the People-Centered Internet Coalition.

A quick technical note before we start——my audio setup was a bit skeewampus on this recording, so you may hear some differences in the levels throughout the interview. Our sound engineer Whitney Jobe has done his best to even some of that out, but we wanted to let you know ahead of time that you might hear a difference in the sound quality, so here we go.

Whitney:	David Bray, welcome to the podcast. We're delighted to have you.
David:	Uh, thanks for having me, Whitney. Glad to be here.
Whitney:	First question for you is where did you grow up and what did you want to be when you grew up?
David:	Sure. So my father was a Methodist minister and my mother was a school teacher and we moved around about every three or four years, uh, to different churches. His skillsets were, uh, helping to heal fragmented congregations and capital planning. Uh, we were mostly in the state of Virginia, and so that's where I spent, uh my childhood and youth. When I was 15 I actually had an opportunity to work for the U.S. Navy.
Whitney:	Okay.

David: Uh, basically, uh, I was good at building computer simulations, and-

Whitney: Okay.

David: Uh, I, I had been approached and it was Dr. Robert Ballard, who was one of the individuals who helped find the Titanic. And they were doing a project called the, uh, Argonauts. The JASON and the Argonauts. And it basically was bringing classrooms through, at the time, the magic of cable television.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David: Uh, and, and satellite communications. And so, we were in the Sea of Cortez, uh, which is off the coast of Mexico. And we were mapping the hydrothermal vents and we were trying to understand how they hydrothermal vent activity would then tie to earthquake activity along the San Andreas Fault.

            And so, I was building a computer model, and working with scientists on the ship. And so I got to see that scientists and the U.S. Government actually do really interesting things. Uh, and at the same time, uh, that opened a world to me of how we could begin to make sense of this real world by using digital technologies.

Whitney: Your dad's a minister, your mom's a school teacher. How did the U.S. Government find you? Like this is like *War Games*. How did they find you?

David: (laughs).

Whitney: That's a really old movie for all of you who are under the age of 40. Um-

David: Right.

Whitney: How did you? How did they f-

David: (laughing) *War Games*, by the way, is a great movie.

Whitney: To do these computer simulations? Like how did that, how did that play out?

David: So it's worth playing a little bit of history and, and, and remember. So the Cold War in theory ended in the late '80s.

Whitney: Okay.

David: So then you had, uh, a lot of additional spending that had been spent on military purposes for the Cold War that was looking for civilian applications. In some respects we had been emphasizing science and technology and engineering and mathematics during the '70s and '80s because it was seen key to the Cold War. But when the Cold War ended then it was a question of what do they do with it. And so, the government actually was heavily scanning, uh, for interesting civilian applications. And that led to that I was good at science fair projects, and they approached me at a science fair and in addition to the opportunity with Dr. Robert Ballard and the U.S. Navy it led to also, uh, working at a Department of Energy facility in the state of Virginia. It was at the time called the Continuous Electron Beam Accelerator Facility, it's now called the Jefferson Lab. And it was again building computer simulations of the electron beam.

And then later when I was 17 got called down to the principal's office. Everybody's like oh no. And, uh, it was actually four individuals and one of the individuals, um, uh, was in a suit, and basically made the offer of, did I want to work on something that would be classified and, uh, involve small satellites.

And of course I said yes. I didn't even like ask what the salary was. Uh, and, it, it turned out I got to use some of the technologies from the ballistic missile defense organization, uh. They'll, they were, they were legacy technologies in their mind, but use them for trying to, could we do a prototype of picking up forest fires from space. Scanning the wind conditions, scanning the foliage, and trying to guess where the forest fire might go.

Whitney: What did your parents do with you? Like, and I, I mean this in the way of like what do you do when you have a child? And maybe this is a question I should be asking your parents - when you have a child who's interested in exploring things you have no idea what to do with it. Did they just sort of let you rip? Or do, do you have, um, was your mother actually secretly a physicist and you didn't know it?

David: (laughs).

Whitney: Actually, secretly worked for the CIA and you didn't know it? Like what was that like for you? Because I'm just curious about that, that experience for you all.

David: The main thing they wanted was obviously for us to, to, to be happy in life. But they-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David: They were very wise in saying that happiness does not come from self-fulfillment. It comes from helping others and doing things for others, and I think that's, that's very true.

Whitney: Interesting.

David: I look back at, at the experiences where I feel happiness. It's actually when, when you're in service to others. And obviously they had picked their professions, minister, a Methodist minister, and school teacher to help others.

So I think that was something they imparted on, you know, if, if you are fortunate enough to have talents make sure you use them to help communities and help others. And so I think that was something very wise they imparted.

And then two, grit. I can remember like for example, I wanted to play the guitar. My father was like okay, you can play the guitar, but before you do that maybe you should try reading some music and maybe do piano for a while. And then you can do guitar later.

And for three years trying to learn piano and finger coordination - absolutely frustrated. But at the end of three years I actually found I loved it, and actually stuck with it and later did, um, jazz and classical.

But, that, that sort of don't quit just because it's challenging or don't quit just because you're not great at it at first.

Whitney: Hmm.

David: I think is something that, that again and, and, and, and since then research has shown - grit is something that's learned. It's not something that's innate. Uh, and so, uh, a- as a new father myself one of the things that I'm trying to help, um, my child with is, is one celebrate his gifts, whatever they are. And, and whatever abilities and things he's passionate about.

But then two, impart both empathy, so being able to imagine what someone else is feeling. Be able to imagine what someone else is experiencing aside from your own perspective. And then two, grit. I think those are things that I really consider myself fortunate in terms of what my parents imparted.

Whitney: So you've talked or described yourself - you see yourself as an usher. Can you talk to us, um, about what that, you know, the, the roots or the etymology of that word and, and like how, how, in what way do you see yourself as an usher?

David: Yeah, so. It's interesting how we have the phrase "ushering in the future." And it, and, and I, and I, and I, and then and when I thought about the phrase I was like well why are we ushering in? Why is it not say steering in or, or driving in the future? Why is it ushering?

And, and I think it's, it's because so usher comes from, um, French. And it's 13th century France. The idea that you are helping someone find a seat. And, and so you as the usher, you're not sitting down yourself, you're in the act of helping someone find a place.

And so it's interesting that we ascribe that to in this case the future, because I think it's in the context of whether it's helping communities, whether it's helping organizations, uh, societies, it's, it's about making sure we're intentional about this, this headlong 60 minutes, uh, per hour. 24 hours per day. It's always the, uh, the future's always flowing to us.

Can we be intentional, however, about where we want to put this future that is being thrown our way in terms of where do we want to put it. In terms of how does it impact our lives? How does it impact how we work? How does it impact how we govern, coexist?

To me, that I think is so critical because I think a lot of people are feeling like things are changing so rapidly. They're outside of their control. Or it's somebody else's responsibility. That it, that-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David: The government will solve it, or the businesses will solve it, or someone else will solve it. And what I'd like to do is try and help everybody recognize you can be more intentional about how you let the future shape and impact your life.

Whitney: Hmm. I love that. And something else you said that, that caught my attention is you started with this idea of how do you help others find a place in the future. So you can be intentional about how it shapes your lives, but how do you also, um, make a place for other people in the future. Which I thought was a- an interesting and lovely way, um, to, to think about it.

So, so one of the things that you, um, you think a lot about, then is the future. And, uh, can you talk through three negative trends that you're seeing and, um, and I don't want to spend a lot of time on this, because I think whatever we talk about we get more of.

At the same time, you know, whether it's a person or it's a trend in society, we need to like figure out what our derailers are and move off those. So what are one or two things that you're seeing? I said three, but, you know, you can one, two, or three that you're seeing. How we, you and I specifically, might be contributing to that. And then how could we counteract it so that there will be less of it?

David: Right. So. I agree with you 100 percent that, that while we don't want to dwell on the negative it's worth a trying to identify the problem we want to solve, because-

Whitney: Yup.

David: That's the only way we're going to get better.

Whitney: Hmm.

David: So, so the three problems I would like to see us to try and address and solve is the first is, the good news is - technology is super empowering individuals and, and people to do things that were unprecedented 30, 40 years ago. That, that were only poss- possible by large nation states.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David: The, the challenge with that and the thing that I'd like to see solved is we're finding increase apparently, increased reports of loneliness, uh, people feeling like they don't have connections. I mean, it, it's amazing that that actually a recent, I think it was Pew that actually showed that in terms of generations Millennials report higher incidences of feeling lonely compared to Gen X or Baby Boomers.

Whitney: Hmm.

David: And, and that supposedly this is the connected generation. These are the digital natives. And, and I think what we're finding is, is there that there are certain things that evolutionary pressure shaped us for. Which is yes, maybe you've got 30 thousand online friends that are following you, but who do you go to when, when you really need to have a heart to heart talk with?

           And, and so I would love to figure out how do we balance the digital with the real world so that it's collectively improving people's lives. I think we may discover we spent a lot of time doing technology that either empowered corporations or empowered individuals. But one thing we forgot was how do we empower communities and the sense of community to be created. So that's the first one.

Whitney: What would, what's one thing you do to counteract that?

David: Well one thing I do, uh, and, and it's a fairly big thing and we can drill down deeper if you want. Uh, so I'm with what's called the People-Centered Internet Coalition.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David: Uh, Vint Cerf, uh, was one of the co-founders. We've been around for about three years. We are trying to do demonstration projects that measurably. And I, I want to emphasize the word measurably because I think that's key. Uh, improve people's lives or livelihoods.

| | And so we're working with Native Americans, uh, who have been neglected in terms of helping them get connectivity. But then too it's not just enough to have connection, but actually have conversations and give them a locus of choice about how they want to use these technologies, uh, for education, uh, for entrepreneurship, for healthcare. And the reality is different tribes are going to have different answers. |

One of the things I learned, because I later went into public health is the best way to have a public health approach be effective is to give someone choice, control, and, and actually knowledge as to how they want to move forward as opposed to coming in and assuming you have all the answers yourself.

Whitney: Right. Okay. All right. So that's something that you're specifically doing is, um, so I guess my question is as you talk specifically about the increased rates of loneliness, how does the People-Centered Internet Coalition help, help that?

David: So, that is actually to be honest, uh, we're, we're in our nascent stage. We are looking for answers. We actually just had an event yesterday that was looking at the increasing polarization between, uh, Silicon Valley professionals and, uh, the U.S. National Security community.

Now that's not loneliness, but what we are trying to do is convene different groups together to actually say how can we improve this situation. And so, one of things that we are considering to do is do the same thing, which is if loneliness is a multifactorial issue in terms of it's a combination of we feel like we're more connected, but we're not. We may be having technologies that are all about making us have an emotional visceral, almost addictive experience where you want to use those technologies again. But then after that high fades we realize what did we do.

And so, uh, we've in- Been in conversations with Ashoka, which has their, their change makers, their change agents. And trying to, to begin to identify who are willing participants to begin to, to, to almost it's almost like stone soup, which is what are you willing to put in the pot that by itself may not be sufficient to tackle this, but if enough people put in carrots, onions, vegetables, a little bit of meat, it becomes a really delicious stew.

We know we're, we're, we're not large enough to tackle this by ourselves, but can we convene different people in a safe space where people can politely disagree and it's respectful. But at the same time begin to examine it and try to work towards the shared goal of what can we do to uplift communities as a whole.

Whitney: Interesting. So one of the things I would definitely look at on this, and I don't know if you've met her, her name is, um, Talia Milgrom-Elcott. And we have her on the podcast, and she, um, has an organization called 100Kin10, which was, their mission was, you know, 100 thousand STEM teachers. This is at the call or, uh, of President Obama. 100 thousand additional STEM teachers in 10 years. And she's-

David: Hmm.

Whitney: Done a really good job of convening a lot of different parties and, um, uh, this stone soup idea. You can tell you have a two year old. Um-

David: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: And, uh, and bringing those and so that might be an interesting conversation for you to have. And I think as I listen to what you're saying, sort of counteracting the loneliness, a, a, um, a, a very simple thing would be is just you know when we're in the store shopping to be willing to chat with people and not just chat with people who are, you know, Xers or Boomers, um, but chat with Millennials and have conversations with them so that the world feels a little bit more connected, even in those sort of, sort of places that feel like there doesn't need to be connection. That it will make a difference. So that's, that's one thing I thought of.

David: Interesting. Well, and it's interesting you say that, because, I started what I called an informal creative brainstorm session. And it was just a non-attribution, Chatham House Rules, safe space to, to have people come together and talk about issues that span sectors.

             And we've been doing them now once a month, uh, since 2010. And so it's, it's been several meetings. I share that because, uh, when you mention the supermarkets I can remember as a child. So, my father, my sister, and I we're all the introverts of the family. My mom was the extrovert.

Whitney: (laughs).

David: My, my mom would definitely be that person that would approach people in supermarkets and talk to people, and that, that was not the skill or the strength that I had. Um, but I find that, that the one thing I get excited about is when it is talking about ideas. I get very-

Whitney: Hmm.

David: Excited, very passionate about that. And so, um, you know, people have asked, like, how can you continue to have this group that's, you know, it's a loose confederation of now more than 450 people. Fortunately they don't all show up at once, or else that would be very crowded.

             But, you know, we get together about once a month, uh, some people don't even live in the area where we're at, they just occasionally fly in and they meet with us. And it's, it's about the ideas. And so I think there's going to be different groups that are going to have different reasons to pull them together.

             It is worth thinking about how as we've rolled out technologies we've lost, you know, we have work and we have home. But the, the French have this idea that we humans need to have this, this third space. Uh, whether the third space is the bar you hang out with, which increasingly doesn't seem to be place where people are going. Churches, that's a place. Or synagogues. Mosque.

             But that we need to have a third space that is neither home nor work where we have a sense of identity there and connectivity to people.

Whitney: Interesting, interesting. And, and you pointed out this idea of like for you that, you know, talking to people in the supermarket isn't going to make you feel connected. It might just create anxiety. Is, it's the, the convening around ideas and so, what does that look like, but, but there is that, still that human connection and finding ways to do that and facilitating that.

             Okay. So, so do you want to do one more negative thing or shall we flip to the positive?

David: Well, I mean, I, I, I, and then maybe I'm doing it as problems to be solved. I always like, I mean. I will say-

Whitney: (laughs).

David: Myself, I'm a creative problem solver, so-

Whitney: Okay.

David: Another problem to be solved?

Whitney: All right. Well-

David: Um-

Whitney: Yeah. Let's do another problem to be solved, David.

David: Uh, well in the U.S. uh, we know wh- Again, I think this was Pew and other resources that say that, that we have increasing polarization whether it's on political dynamics or community issues or things like that. I mean a scary stat is for the two political parties that we have, more than one third of the members of each political party view the other political party as not just someone they disagree with, but an enemy. Uh, which is very troublesome. Uh-

Whitney: Hmm.

David: I'm nonpartisan when I did serve in public service, I, I was always a nonpartisan and served under different administrations. But I would say it was starting at about 2015 actually that for whatever reason that tipping point happened. And it's interesting because with the People-Centered Internet as well with Singularity University I, I do do efforts with the governments of Canada, uh, when conversation with the governments of UK and other countries in Europe, um, other governments, in, in southeast Asia on trying to address polarizing social wedges, polarizing misinformation, that that is either information that is intentionally trying to inflame issues on both sides of the extremes. Or to create social wedges to divide.

            And it's fascinating. Here in the United States right now we have a situation where for whatever reason both political parties think that misinformation, these social wedges, are only done to negatively impact them and that somehow the other political party is benefiting. And this is true for both political parties, and it's kind of confounding when I meet with both and I'm like do you hear yourselves, because the reality is it's dividing all of us. Divided we fall, united we stand.

            And, and I raise that because this does tie to again this, this whether it's intentional or unintentional impacts of technology we've rolled out is the good news is anyone can print whatever they want. The bad news is anyone can print whatever they want. Uh, and we are now seeing again obviously with video technologies, audio technologies, these deep think technologies where you can't necessarily know what's true anymore and even if you do, at the end of the day this really gets to a question of belief. A- and if you want to believe something's true more facts will not change your mind. Confirmation bias kicks in.

Whitney: That's right.

David: So the other thing to think about too is this thing called cognitive easing. And cognitive easing is where if you repeat something enough, uh, people begin to believe it's true regardless of the actual underlying facts. And it's interesting because we're, we're okay with that in terms of advertisement to a degree. That's what advertisement-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David: Does. It repeats it to you. We're okay with that in terms of rhetoric. Political rhetoric is all about repeating, too. But at what point does that begin to almost become toxic where you no longer have independence of thought. You're no longer thinking critical. Instead now you just had the beliefs set in. And, and, and again, the research has shown. More facts will actually not make you change your mind. Instead there's a backlash effect where you dig in further.

And so, I think the interesting sort of paradox for the decade ahead is we're rolling out all these interesting technologies, and we're coming face to face with human nature. And human nature's kind of hard to change. Uh, it really hasn't changed one might say.

You can actually go back to the founding of this country a- and for, apparently for the first four to five elections that were done in this country, political candidates actually called their opponents sometimes the devil. Um, so they were, they were. And then back into the 1700s and 1800s that was-

Whitney: That was serious stuff.

David: That was pretty vicious.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David: (laughs). So in some respects human nature hasn't changed. What's changed though is the immediacy of this and the fact that people themselves can propagate. You don't have to have access to a printing press to print things. You don't have to have access to a television station or a radio transmitter.

And so here we are. A planet of 7.6 billion people that in the next five years will be 8 billion or more, we've got to figure out how, how to coexist as open societies. For those of us that are living in open societies. If we, if we don't embody what President Lincoln said, which is, "I do not like that person. I must get to know them better."

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David: If, if we don't embody that, then we're going to start becoming echo chambers where we only associate with people that think and act the way we do, because we somehow think that's right. And that's very problematic because those echo chambers become autocracies of thought. And then may very well become autocracies in reality.

Whitney: Okay. So. We all agree with you.

David: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: What's one thing that you're doing in your work, and for those of us who are listening or, I'm not listening, well I'm listening, too.

David: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: Um, what are one or two things that we can do? Because I mean I, I listen and I'm like, yeah. I get it. So, how do I curb that?

David: Well, the first thing is, is mindfulness of the fact that we all are subject to confirmation bias and kind of-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David: Abusing. Um.

Whitney: Yup.

David: And I-

Whitney: Which by the way-

David: Get so annoyed.

Whitney: By the way, David. That can work in our favor. Cognitive easing can work in our favor. Because if we want something to be true we tell ourselves it enough times and it does become true. So, that you can flip that on its head, right? In a positive way.

David: It can as long as you are very judicious in when you use it. Because the trouble is sometimes people use that for wish fulfillment.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David: And that, that they, they, they want to think that that person that they disagree with is wrong, and therefore they repeat it enough in their head and becomes a-

Whitney: Right. No, that's, that's when it's harmful. But I'm saying, so for example I want to believe that I, I'm a good student, right?

David: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: That I'm a capable student. That I get good grades in school, and I tell myself that. I, you know, I'm so happy and thankful that I'm capable that I, I study hard. That I'm able to, um, be, you know, work well within school.

  If I tell myself that enough times, that cognitive easing can actually be positive. So I just wanted to make sure-

David: Definitely.

Whitney: That we're, we're pointing-

David: Right.

Whitney: Out the fact that it. We're talking about how it can be used for ill, but it can all- Actually also flipped as well. So, anyway.

David: No, I agree. And I think what you're hitting on is, is all of these things are human behaviors that, I mean even confirmation bias. I mean, while it's, while I'm, we're talking about the harm it does. The reality is nobody has the time each day to rethink their complete views of the universe and how it works on a daily basis, because-

Whitney: (laughs). Right.

David: You wouldn't get out of bed in the morning.

Whitney: Yup.

David: So, these are all neurological phenomenon that it deal with being human that that in general work well until we get into a hyper-connected world. And so, so the first step is just mindfulness that these things are present within all of us.

            The second thing I think that people can do is, is, and we mentioned earlier about empathy and we talked a little bit about that, is practice that. I mean as, as, as Lincoln said it's all about can you put yourself in someone else's shoes. Um, you know, when they teach debate to be an effective debater you have to be able to, to articulate the other side's position as good if not better than your own. And, and I think a lot of people aren't doing that. Um, and, and so it, it really is the empathy and trying to understand.

            And, then the third thing people can do is recognize. I wanted to say grace, and in fact I will say grace. That it's practice grace. But it's even further than that. It's, if you're in an open society, if you're in a society in which you have freedom, uh, to act and do and think, recognize that every era needs to make a conscious choice to recommit to that freedom and recommitting to that freedom involves responsibility, and that part of that responsibility is tolerance.

            Not of hate speech. If it's hate speech definitely no place. But, but beyond that is tolerance of perspectives and, and views different than your own, and recognizing that in a free and open society you won't always get your way, but you will get that freedom which we all value. And I think we have missed that opportunity. We're actually probably more than a decade or more overdue to recommit to the fact that with freedom comes responsibility, too.

Whitney: Yeah. So fascinating. This, so there's research that's been done and I'm sure you're familiar with this, is a by Dr. Judith Glaser on that, you know, looking at the neuro- neuroscience is that we're all addicted to being right. And so is it-

David: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: It's a big challenge, right? It's a really big challenge to do this idea of tolerance, and, and also a willingness to say okay, X just happened and I'm happy that it happened, but the way it happened was inappropriate and can I put the shoe on the other foot and really look at the process and, and what are the implications of, of this action.

            Um, you know, separating it from the outcome. Maybe I got the outcome that I wanted, but this is not good. This is a slippery slope. This is very dangerous, and what do I need to do to make sure that I'm not somehow sanctioning it, which is, is interesting.

David: Right. And I think, and actually to build on what you said, you're absolutely right that all humans, I mean, nobody wants to be wrong. That, that would be, that would be crazy. But,

if there can be a slight pivot from wanting to be right to wanting to be both be understood and understand others. I think that's, that's enough of a pivot that can still give you that. Because kind of at the end of the day -

Whitney: Mm.

David: Uh-

Whitney: That's good, David.

David: Where divisions happen, where arguments are lost is when you thread in someone's identity to the point where they're now in self-preservation mode.

Whitney: Yes.

David: A- and like you said, if you are challenging that that you're right and they're wrong they're going to kick into self-preservation mode. If instead you try to reframe it as it's not us versus them, but it's all of us trying to reach greater understanding.

             So, lift it up a level that's where you can actually have that grace and that, that, that. I- i- it, it does require sometimes putting aside one's ego and putting aside-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David: Wanting to be right. Even, or and then, and thinking that you're right. But at least it elevates the conser- Conversation where then everyone can find a place in that shared understanding.

Whitney: Right, and when we're willing to make just even a slight step in that direction, if every single person can take one step in that direction then that's a tectonic shift, because it, because as it aggregates up.

             Okay. So, next question for you is let's talk about, um, AI briefly. And you just talked about this ability to debate and so I want you just to play out for a minute, um, the pros and the cons. You know, maybe one fear that people have and, you know, why they should be fearful, but then also why they should be ecstatic about AI.

             So, I'll let you play both sides on that for just a moment.

David: I always like to give historical context, uh, before I dive in. And so, this is technically some would say third, the third wave of artificial intelligence. We've seen this before in the 1950s, Herb Simon, who was later a Nobel Prize winner and others, um, were looking at trying to create machines that can play games as good as humans.

             And then in the 1970s, 1980s it was about expert systems. Could they answer questions as good as a human expert? Uh, and those were the technologies we later saw win Jeopardy, and things like that.

             This third wave we're now facing however is, is machine learning, that which is a subset of artificial intelligence and even deeper than that you have, uh, neural networks and, and deep learning. And, and all this is trying to mimic what is done in a human brain when we're all little children.

You don't teach a third grade, a three year old or a four year old, uh, specifically subject, verb, object. You don't, you don't teach them to diagram sentences at that age. You just expose them to enough language, and eventually they say "I'm going to run to school today." And if you ask a four year old why do they say it that way, they're going to say that's just because how I heard it. And, and that anything else would, you know, they're not going to say "To school today, I'm going to run," because that sounds awkward.

The same is true with machine learning technologies. The good thing is you don't have to explicitly tell the rules of the game. You don't have to explicitly tell what experts are doing in an expert system. You just expose it to enough data and it begins to identify patterns that match what it's seeing.

The challenging thing, and why people should have some concern, but it's, it's some concern is that works as long as the data that's provided to the machine is representative of whatever you're trying to teach.

Uh, and so we already know unfortunately there are cases where facial recognition algorithms cannot recognize people of certain minorities, uh, because that data was not present in it. And so, um, certain minorities when they go up for facial recognition it's just doesn't work. Which is wrong. That's not right.

So, this will have subtle impacts when we're thinking in the future about how machine learning will help decide what, who's going to get the more generous credit offer or the lowest interest rate. Or who's going to be elevated to the top pile of people to be considered for jobs.

And we shouldn't just fault the machine. We know from studies that the taller you are the more you are paid. Which maybe that makes sense if you're in NBA player and you're playing basketball, but it probably doesn't make sense if you're a chief financial officer.

Um, we know it's also unfortunately that there is a discrepancy in pay between genders. Also not right. Um, so these are all human flaws that are then feeding the machine and that if we're not careful, human flaws will be reflected in what machines learn and amplify.

So, this really is going to require us in the decade ahead to have some deep discussion of yes, humans are flawed. We can overcome that with education. We can overcome that with greater experiences and understanding. To a degree.

If we're not careful though, we will reflect our flaws and amplify our flaws in what the data sets that are presented to these machines are. And we can end up creating, I mean already unfortunately you're beginning to see, see some people suggesting they should use facial scans to determine your trustworthiness. Which to me is very scary. It smacks of, um, how in the 1930s and 1940s Nazis were claiming that your skull shape could determine your intelligence. Um-

Whitney: Hmm.

David: Which is very worrisome. So, if we're not careful we could end up creating some very nasty, ugly societies if we're not intentional about how we use these tools.

Whitney: All right, so a couple of questions as we start to wrap up. One is, um, you have said, um, if we want to, our open pluralistic society to stay an open and pluralistic society, and by the

way, can you just define pluralistic for everybody who doesn't know exactly what that means?

David: Sure. Um, so pluralistic is simply. So, well, actually I mean, dilute it, because again, I'm going to give you a historical context.

Whitney: (laughs).

David: Um-

Whitney: Okay.

David: Um, so, so, uh, Rousseau, philosopher Rousseau argued that actually democracies were corrupt regimes, because they only emphasized self-interests. And what you really wanted was a plurality, which was all the things that a democracy embodied. It was people were in power, they had freedoms, they, they actually helped elect their leaders with an additional caveat. Which is you also thought of the good of the community.

                  And so when you talk about a plurality versus democracy, plurality is all the things that a democracy includes, or, or a republic includes. You elect leaders, you have freedoms, people have freedom of action, freedom of speech, with the additional caveat that you also need to think about the good of the community as well.

Whitney: Hmm.

David: Now, Rousseau at the time argued that while that was necessary you wouldn't find enough people that would care about the community. That everyone would be self-interested and it would pull things apart. But, that's why I do the People-Centered Internet, that's why I do what I do in public service, is to try and push for enough people. And I would argue you probably don't need everybody. But if you get enough of a concerned minority to care about communities it can uplift us all.

                  And so when I talk about a plurality I'm really talking about you have all these freedoms, you can think differently, you have diversity, you respect that diversity, and you still manage to coexist.

Whitney: Go it. Okay. I'm actually really glad I asked that question, because I think even if people looked it up in the dictionary they would not have gotten that explanation. All right. So, what are one or two things as people are listening to this interview and are feeling inspired by what you've said, what are one or two things that people can do now in order to help ensure that we continue to have an open and pluralistic society? Simple things.

David: Simple things. Well, simple thing first is visit our website at peoplecentered.net. I recognize that is a self-interested action of my own, but, uh, hopefully it'll also benefit the community, and sign up for our newsletter. Uh, a- and, and ask about if you want to get involved send us an email. If you want to be, uh, doing some projects because I'm a big believer of w- whenever I talk to different audiences and I give public talks, I ask who do you think is going to solve these issues of increasing polarization or increasing loneliness or the fact that if we're not careful AI will end up reflecting the ugliness of humanity as opposed to good things of humanity.

                  And I ask how many think it's the government. Not too many people do. Like how many people think it's corporations. Not too many people do. And I'm like so who's going to fix

it? And people don't have an answer, and the reality is we've learned helplessness and that's leading to anger and frustration.

All of us can do something small. A- and, and as you said, what are some small things people can do? Start talking about these issues and talk about these issues with a bent towards being a creative problem solver. So don't admire the issue, but put forward possible suggestions.

You can start having conversations in your local community about these issues towards the goal of one greater understanding of the possible solutions that can be done, and then you start to build a coalition that says let's try and do things.

For example, um, have dinners where you intentionally try to invite people that you normally wouldn't talk to, because they're of different perspectives or different political persuasions than your own. That's a very small thing, but I guarantee you will learn and they will learn something from that experience.

Try and do more face to face and practice of empathy towards people you disagree with as opposed to, uh, going online and venting your anger or spilling it all over Facebook. Um, try to, try to be the change you want to see in the world when it comes to, uh, as you mentioned, loneliness.

If enough of us do small actions they'll become large actions that can actually move us forward.

Whitney: Hmm. All right. So on the dinner idea. I have a question on that. Is there something, do you have on your website, um, uh, you know, questions or things that people would ask, you know, when you say to someone so, let's get to dinner. I know, let's go to dinner, let's talk to each other. I know we, you know, don't necessarily agree on lots of things, let's see what we can agree on. Or is it, is it that explicit or are you thinking, is it more implicit? Or it just not even mentioned, and you just talk-

David: Uh, right now it's implicit. However, I think what you're touching upon I'd be happy to work with you. It shouldn't be too hard to put together a webpage, that, that actually just says questions to try and achieve greater understanding with people that you normally wouldn't meet.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David: And, and I think, I think, uh, whether you call that dinner with strangers, uh, I, I think, or strangers becoming friends.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David: I, I think it's needed because the beauty of the United States. And this is not just the United States. I see this in Europe as well, and, and Canada. We have so many differences and, and we, it's a beauty of differences. However, it, if we, if we resort back to our more basic tribal natures and we don't take the time to understand those differences we will miss out on something that, that, that makes us all human in my opinion.

Whitney: All right, David. Last question for you. It's just interesting to me as I, as we have this conversation, um, a- and your, your, your mind is acrobatic in a really positive wonderful way. Um, there are many, many things you could be doing. Um, that are probably

financially more lucrative. And yet you've chosen to do this work that you are doing. Um, what is your why? Like why do you have to do this? Because my sense of you and the few times that we've interacted is that you must, you have to do this. What's your why?

David: Well, uh, I mean. The simple answer is I, I, I'm, I, I became my mother and my father.

Whitney: (laughs).

David: Uh, they both chose their professions out of service, not out of the, the salary. Um, the more complicated answer is now having a child of my own and thinking what 2030 looks like, uh, when he is 12 or 13. I want to make sure it's brighter. A- and I see a lot of storm clouds on the horizon. I, I, I've always for better for worse I've always seen challenges before others did. Uh, and that, that's not always rewarded. In fact sometimes it can be very harsh when you're trying to share what you see and try to help people avoid a, um, bad outcome, and people aren't seeing it and they think you're wrong.

Um, back in 2000 when I was with the bioterrorism program it was thinking about what we would do if bioterrorism event happened and literally we were told every six months we didn't need to exist. And, and it was actually scheduled weeks in advance as for me to give a briefing to explain why we needed to exist, and this was scheduled September 11, 2001 at 9:00 in the morning.

8:34, world changed. Everything was canceled because unfortunately the events of 9/11 happened and we piled computers into cars, dealt with the response, uh, didn't sleep for three weeks. The deadline October 1st and then October 3rd, uh, I ended up, uh, giving the briefing to the FBI and the CIA as to what we would do technology wise should a bioterrorism event happen. And 24 hours later the first case of anthrax showed up in Florida. And then we later dealt with the anthrax events of 2001.

That put me on a path of later than when I was in Afghanistan, trying to think differently about what we could do to make that situation better. And one of my recommendations at the time was we didn't need to be there. I- i- in terms of general forces. We still needed to have some presence there, we still needed to have some non-government presence and outreach efforts. But that general forces was not the right solution. It wasn't going to work.

And then later with dealing with misinformation, disinformation, and the fact that people are writing automated programs and bots to create these wedges. Uh, that's what's led me to PCI and the People-Centered Internet and working with Vint Cerf.

And so, I, I guess I, I, I gravitate towards the places that allow me to use the fortunate abilities that I have to try and avoid bad outcomes wherever possible.

But they're often messy, they involve humans. Not just technology.

Whitney: (laughs).

David: Humans have all sorts of challenges. And it's precisely because at the end of the day if I'm fortunate enough to live until I'm 85 or 90 I want to say that we went through some very turbulent times as a species, um, a- and as societies. But I did my best to try and make sure whatever outcome occurred it was the most uplifting wherever possible to as many people as possible.

Whitney: David Bray, thank you so much for being on the podcast today.

David: Thank you. Again, appreciate it, Whitney. This was great.

We look around and see the speed at which innovation occurs and how quickly it feels like the world is changing, but in all the things we talked about with David today, whether or not that technology ultimately helps or hinders the world depends on one common variable - the humans using the technology.

I'm also thinking about the "third space" that David mentioned to connect in person with others. That all the connectivity in the world doesn't help us if we don't also do the real, in-person work of being with each other face to face.

This was such a fascinating conversation, and here's what it has left me thinking about. One of the most important reasons to take stock of your strengths and utilize this 7-part framework to disrupt yourself is so that you can find yourself at the crossroads where David finds himself——using his unique abilities to make the world a better place. It takes a great deal of work and timing, but it's possible for all of us. We make our greatest contribution when we help others.

Practical Tip and a challenge:

I love what David said about doing more face to face interaction with others. His suggestion of having a dinner where you intentionally invite someone you wouldn't normally spend time with. To listen and be the change you want to see in the world. I'm going to try it and will report back in my weekly newsletter and I hope you'll join me and do the same thing. Let me know how it goes at wj@whitneyjohnson.com.

Thank you again to David Bray for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Nancy Wilson, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.