The co-creator of Twitter and Blogger has decided that “the internet is simply a giant machine designed to give people what they want.” Here’s what this grand unified theory means and where it came from.

Twitter Founder Reveals Secret Formula for Getting Rich Online

By Ryan Tate
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Ev Williams. Photo: Andrew White/WIRED
Ev Williams has figured out the internet.
That’s what he told the gathered tech heads at the recent XOXO conference in Portland, Oregon, and while he may have said this with tongue partly in cheek, he spent the next 30 minutes unloading his unified theory of the global computer network, an interpretation formed after 20 years of hard thinking — to say nothing of his experience creating seminal internet companies Blogger and Twitter.
In his speech, Williams explained what the internet is, how it works, and how to get rich from it. Truth be told, Williams is not the best public speaker, but his message was clear: At a time when so many internet entrepreneurs are running around Silicon Valley trying to do something no one else has ever done, Williams believes that the real trick is to find something that’s tried and true — and to do it better. It’s a speech that should serve as a signpost, a bit of much-needed direction for the Valley’s younger generation.
The bottom line, Williams said, is that the internet is “a giant machine designed to give people what they want.” It’s not a utopia. It’s not magical. It’s simply an engine of convenience. Those who can tune that engine well — who solve basic human problems with greater speed and simplicity than those who came before — will profit immensely. Those who lose sight of basic human needs — who want to give people the next great idea — will have problems.
“We often think of the internet enables you to do new things,” Williams said. “But people just want to do the same things they’ve always done.”
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— Ev Williams

In 1994, Williams was a Nebraska college dropout selling tutorial videos to help people get onto
the net. In those videos, he described the global computer network as “a puzzle comprised of three things: Computers, information, and people.” But he no longer sees it that way. After leaving Twitter in 2011 and helping to incubate, among other things, the blog network Medium, Williams found himself rethinking his original formulation. Computers have proliferated and diversified, in size and function, to the point of being unremarkable. Information has become similarly abundant, rendering the term unsatisfyingly generic. And after 20 years, the types of people and groups you find online are basically identical to the people and groups you find in the physical world. What’s now important are the connections between the people and the machines.

“There are hardware connections, then there are all these interactions involved with data and software,” Williams says. “And if you look at any big internet thing, you see it’s basically a big hive of connections. A Follow is a connection. A Like is a connection.

“What the internet is doing now is connecting everyone and everything, every event and every thought, in multiple ways — layer upon layer of connection. Increasingly, everything that happens and everything we do, everyplace you go and check in, every thought you have and share, and every person who liked that thought... is all connected...and it keeps multiplying relentlessly.”

These connections aren’t just proliferating, he said. They’re proliferating in a particular direction. There’s an organizing principle that explains what thrives on the internet and could potentially predict what will thrive in the future: Convenience.

“The internet makes human desires more easily attainable. In other words, it offers convenience,” he said. “Convenience on the internet is basically achieved by two things: speed, and cognitive ease.” In other words, people don’t want to wait, and they don’t want to think — and the internet should respond to that. “If you study what the really big things on the internet are, you realize they are masters at making things fast and not making people think.”

Google, Facebook, Amazon, and Apple were all excellent at delivering this sort of convenience, Williams said. They often got there by removing steps from what had once been a more complex series of actions, precisely the trick that allowed Williams’ first big invention, Blogger, to dominate how people put new content on the web. Instead of creating a new document, saving it, manually uploading it, and viewing it in a web browser, people could simply type their content into a web form and click “publish.”

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The key to making a fortune online, Williams told the XOXO crowd, is to remove extra steps from common activities as he did with Blogger.

“Here’s the formula if you want to build a billion-dollar internet company,” he said. “Take a human desire, preferably one that has been around for a really long time...Identify that desire and use modern technology to take out steps.”

His recent example is Uber. “How old is the desire of getting from here to there?” he said. “How hard was it really to do? They took out some steps in that process...They formed a connection between you and the driver.”

Williams’ philosophy might seem pedestrian. But that’s the point. Twenty years after people began using the web en masse, it’s time, Williams said, to accept that the internet isn’t a magical universe with boundless potential. It’s just another engine for improving quality of life.
“The internet is not what I thought it was 20 years ago,” Williams said. “It’s not a utopian world. It’s essentially like a lot of other major technological revolutions that have taken place in the history of the world.” He compares it to, well, agriculture. “[Agriculture] made life better. It not only got people fed, it freed them up to do many more things — to create art and invent things.”

The rub is that we often take convenience too far. “Look at the technology of agriculture taken to an extreme — where we have industrialized farms that are not good for the environment or animals or nourishment,” he says. “Look at a country full of people who have had such convenient access to calories that they’re addicted, obese, and sick.” He likens this agricultural nightmare to our unhealthy obsession with internet numbers like retweets and likes and followers and friends.

That warning wasn’t so much a slam on Twitter, which Williams helped create, as it was an observation about human nature. People will be people. The internet wants to give them exactly what they’re looking for. And people who understand how to channel that tendency will be disproportionately powerful.

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Ryan Tate is a WIRED senior writer and the author of The 20% Doctrine: How Tinkering, Goofing Off, and Breaking the Rules Drive Success in Business. Email: ryan_tate@wired.com

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Don't be a genius and attempt to think up something new, be a businessperson, and do something existing but in a better way.

Avatar Christina Trapolino → Bruce_Tutty • 13 hours ago
I don’t think it’s as simple as doing something that’s never been done before versus doing something in a better way.

I think the actual advice here is about building a company that focuses on solving a real problem, instead of building a company that creates products that are "revolutionary" but are looking for problems to solve.

Sometimes problems get solved with brand new thinking, but usually it's about removing steps in existing processes, as Ev says. A blend of "genius" and "businessperson" is probably better than one or the other on its own. :)

Avatar MagicBishop → Christina Trapolino • 8 hours ago
To add. There are no shortcuts. It’s important to know what’s in the box, before thinking outside of it.

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