

Book Review

The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World

Max Fisher

New York, NY: Back Bay Books; Little, Brown and Company, 2023

Reviewed by Eleanor D. Glor

In *The Chaos Machine*, journalist Max Fisher employs a journalist's strength—the ability to research, consolidate and integrate information, and build up a strong contention. Starting with a summary of his argument, he goes on to establish and support each element of his reasoning. He contends that through its algorithms, social media has deliberately pointed readers to more and more extreme positions. They have done this because extremists remain on social media longer and this gives social media more opportunities to show readers advertisements, thus making more money for the social media companies.

Fisher convincingly shows that the companies' actions have led readers to adopt more extreme positions, directing them in particular to far-right positions. This, he indicates, is the root cause of the much-increased partisanship, intolerance and bigotry demonstrated not only in the United States but in a number of other countries, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, where civil wars broke out; India and the United Kingdom. He describes the dictatorship of the "like" and social media governance. Silicon Valley companies have engineered their software less for liberation, as they claim, and more for anger and conflict. Fisher describes the Silicon Valley culture and the spread of misinformation.

The companies, such as Facebook, Redditt, Instagram, Twitter (X), and Spotify, have refused to accept responsibility for the damage to society that they have done, resisting taking down extreme material at every turn, sometimes promising improvements, then backtracking, as Facebook did, once Donald Trump became President of the USA. The corporations have tied up efforts by governments to address these issues through resistance and the courts, much as the cigarette companies did for decades regarding the detrimental effects of smoking on health.

Fisher makes his representation based on four types of evidence—scholarly research, interviews, insider information and logic. He is convincing. He acknowledges the points of those who dispute his assertions and addresses their points.

While some elements of Fisher's reasons have been made for some time by a number of others, including scholars, social media employees and ex-employees, Fisher has systematically integrated the arguments.

An interesting component of his representations is his contention that companies have rewired their users' brains and world to the corporations' advantage, by keeping people on their

sites beyond their physical and mental capacities. This has changed their brains and made them more susceptible to influence. It seems similar to brain washing, a technique used on captives and debated during the Cold War.

The book's chapters are organized by elements of the argument: 1-Trapped in the Casino, 2-Everything is Gamergate, 3-Opening the Portal, 4-Tyranny of Cousins, 5-Awakening the Machine, 6-The Fun House Mirror, 7-The Germs and the Wind, 8-Church Bells, 9-The Rabbit Hole, 10-The New Overlords, 11-Dictatorship of the Like, 12-Infodemic, and Epilogue-Whistleblowing.

Fisher calls the position of the social media giants an ideology. He does not name it but I would call it Libertarianism.

(L)ibertarianism can be seen as either the contemporary name for *classical liberalism*, adopted to avoid confusion in those countries where liberalism is widely understood to denote advocacy of expansive government powers, or as a more radical version of *classical liberalism*.

-David Conway

Classical liberalism regarded justice and liberty as requiring a much more limited role for government than do modern forms of liberalism....apart from the provision of a limited range of goods that benefit all but that, most contend, society seems unable to secure save by governmental provision (so-called public goods, such as roads and harbors and, more controversially, relief of destitution), the only role for government that classical liberalism considers consistent with human liberty and justice is that of restraining individuals from constraining others, plus protecting individuals in the possession of whatever lawful property is theirs.

-Merriam-Webster Dictionary

John Locke, English philosopher and physician, 1632 – 1704, is considered the father of liberalism and was one of the most influential Enlightenment thinkers. The Enlightenment was

a European intellectual movement of the 17th and 18th centuries in which ideas concerning God, reason, nature, and humanity were synthesized into a worldview that gained wide assent in the West and that instigated revolutionary developments in art, philosophy, and politics. Central to Enlightenment thought were (was) the use and celebration of reason, the power by which humans understand the universe and improve their own condition. The goals of rational humanity were considered to be knowledge, freedom, and happiness. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Enlightenment-European-history>)

Fisher sees the social media giants as having assumed responsibility for governance. Any elected governments that attempted to regulate social media were fought tooth and nail. Authoritarian governments that sought to control or cancel social media in their countries were not successfully resisted for the most part. Even when social media agreed to controls, compliance was spotty. Notably, while Facebook promised the U.S. Congress it would moderate

its content, this was contracted out, and moderators were given an average of 15 seconds to decide whether content was acceptable or not. When Donald Trump was inaugurated a second time as USA President, Facebook immediately cancelled its moderation function. Social media, including Twitter and Facebook, are awash with misinformation

Social media have also become a vector for medical misinformation. This has had a detrimental effect on control of vaccineable infectious diseases and led to many additional deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media is a machine engineered to distort reality (p. 298). During 2020, coronavirus conspiracies were only one of three forces at work on social media. The others were long-term, mounting strains of online extremism and ultrapartisan outrage and exaggerated misinformation to the point where armed rebellion was considered not only acceptable but necessary. All three drew on causes that existed apart from social media—the pandemic, white backlash and President Trump (p. 299). “Manufactured virality” reposted already viral content to lure in readers. This was a favoured tool of scammers, clickbaiters and Russian influence peddlers.

A World Health Organization official, Andy Pattison, concluded the problem he had with social media was to convince them to put sustainability and maturity above absolute profit. Some described resistance to COVID measures and its effect as a Plandemic. Chat pages were dedicated to fantasizing about a nationwide insurrection or civil war. Viral communities feared lockdowns as the power grabs described in viral conspiracies such as Plandemic and QAnon. A conspiracy-monitoring group warned viral insurgencies were developing, that said “Some people have to go.” The QAnon cause held the belief that Trump and loyal generals were on the verge of a military coup that would overturn the governing cabal. The military would execute tens of thousands of Democrats, Jewish financiers, federal bureaucrats and cultural liberals. In the USA, on January 6, 2021, the Capitol (that houses the Senate and House of Representatives in Washington, D.C.), was attacked by a mob of supporters of President Donald Trump in an attempted coup. In Canada a truck convoy took over the national capital for a month and forced closure of four borders with the USA. The USA is Canada’s only land border. Outrage one-upmanship developed between right and left. Numerous individual and multiple killings have occurred.

At the same time, social media employees have walked out and whistleblowed. Resistance to the irresponsible behaviour of social media companies thus developed externally and internally. After Joe Biden was inaugurated as President of the USA in 2021, two Democratic members of Congress wrote to the presidents of four social media companies, suggesting the impacts were severe enough that they threatened American democracy. Since President Trump’s second inauguration January 6, 2025, further evidence for this has been enacted by the President, who has been governing by decree, creating and imprisoning scapegoats, and ignoring the courts (as the Nazis did).

About the Author:

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