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

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The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World, by Max Fisher. Little Brown and Company, 2022. ISBN: 9780316703321, 388 pages (hardcover).

Although recently published essays in *The Atlantic* and elsewhere have sported titles like "The Death of Social Media" and "Instagram is Over," Max Fisher's new book *The Chaos Machine* convincingly argues that research is still catching up with the psychosocial devastation inflicted by the major social media platforms. No one, including the software engineers at Facebook and Twitter, precisely anticipated the global consequences of their social media algorithms—an epidemic of teen mental health problems and suicides, addiction to Instagram and TikTok, chronic distraction, disinformation, local and foreign sabotage of elections, mass shootings, insurrections, and global conspiracy networks like QAnon and its German offshoot, the Neo-Nazi group *Nordkreuz*. These crises are ongoing; hence, reports concerning the death of social media are premature, an overreaction to the chaos and fanaticism unleashed by the new owner of Twitter, Elon Musk, who upholds free speech absolutism. Many people who have fled the new Twitter expect radical conspiracists to poison it relentlessly until it implodes in an orgy of barbarism. No sober person will disagree that social media looks radically different than it did during the idealistic days of 2006-2010, when many users felt it would save humanity by connecting everyone in a harmonious world order, a digital utopia ensuing from a digital revolution. All those homespun and cozy vibes about global community conveyed by Mark Zuckerberg that echoed AT&T's famous slogan, "Reach out and touch someone," turned into malicious slogans like "Where is Nancy?" inciting hammer blows to the skull of Nancy Pelosi's husband, an elderly gentleman in San Francisco.

As *The Chaos Machine* strongly suggests, social media will continue to stir up the masses and things will get worse before we see re-coding on a vast scale, e.g., privatized platforms or "intranets" of beneficent design

to advance "the best that is human" rather than algorithmic inhumanity monetizing the attention economy. Recent developments in fact suggest that social media will not disappear but decline into squalor—a digital ghetto where rage, racism, and scandal mongering (e.g., Hunter Biden's laptop) prevail over civil discourse. The subscriber base will become more debased in a seesaw motion: former users of Twitter with a moral compass flee the platform, while zany radicalized politicians such as Jim Jordan and Marjorie Taylor Green attract numerous supporters to the same platform. There is already evidence of this digital ghetto in the incipient chaos breaking out at Twitter headquarters as its new owner fires many of its employees and jettisons the discursive guardrails that Twitter established to regulate its platform and discourage gross incivility. In the immediate aftermath of the new ownership at Twitter, there are fresh reports that rightwing hate speech on Twitter is spiking by several thousand percent. Such deplorably radicalized outcomes prove that Musk is a postmodern geek genius devoid of *Paideia*, the noble spirit of the sage. He is intelligent, but unwise and impulsive. By taking control of Twitter and firing thousands of employees, only to abruptly rehire them, he has breached his zone of competence, which is technical and not diplomatic.

Although Max Fisher's book was preceded by some insightful critiques of social media and digital culture by the likes of Nicholas Carr, Jared Lanier, and Bernard Stiegler, all of whom expose the illusion of digital freedom due to algorithmic manipulation, it is crucial to recall a hard truth overlooked by all of them: the internet, as Rasmus Nielsen puts it, "is not a democratic technology." Nielson explains, "the vast majority of digital technologies were never developed to enhance democracy in the first place" (89). He continues his analysis as follows in his essay, "Democracy":

> When we look at what has been invested in the development of digital technologies, digital communication practices, and the infrastructures underpinning them, billions are being spent year in and year out on developing e-commerce, and hundreds of millions are spent on e-government, *whereas e-democracy is an afterthought, subject to much talk and a few millions now and then*. (89)

Most of the digital infrastructure is designed to enhance commercial prospects, to make astonishing and obscene profits for the precocious people who first conceived or invented the platforms and their algorithms. There is no secret altruism (or altruistic algorithm) hidden at the coreless core of the web, where commercial algorithms are coded to monetize the attentional engagement of users by captivating their available attentional capacity and maximizing affective range such that users are overwhelmed by unruly passions, making them volatile strangers in their own homes. It is common knowledge by now that "maximize user engagement" means "excite and enrage." If users are not excited, they act catatonic; such is the affective range on social media. When you see people going about like zombies with a disengaged and vapid look in their eyes, there is a good chance their attentional capacity (synonymous with *spirit* for Bernard Stiegler, and before him, Ivan Illich) has been depleted by endless scrolling, browsing, downloading, scanning, liking, and following. Once depleted and exhausted, the digital zombies are easy to seduce and manipulate with pornography, misinformation, and seditious propaganda.

Such addicted and alienated spirits need to be recharged with critical thinking and personal initiative, not socially mediated chatter; but where and how is spirit recharged when it gullibly "follows" others online into so-called rabbit holes? (Has anyone seriously analyzed the psychosocial implications for a generation whose first impulse is to *follow* influencers and not to individuate and/or lead by dialectical counterexample?) Are the schools and churches supposed to recharge attentional burnout? According to Kierkegaard, such institutions can only provide resources and opportunities to spark individual spiritual initiatives. As soon as an initiative receives mass institutional backing, spirit retreats so it can recuperate nuance and intimacy—so it can *compose itself* and *hear itself thinking*. Even religion, says Kierkegaard, declines into "indecency" when it is institutionalized: "Religious things have to do with a softly murmured soliloquy with oneself" (101).

It is much easier to recharge an electric vehicle than the human spirit, which is no longer associated with *Paideia*, the ideal of learnedness as a virtue, and *Bildung*, or selective (individually modulated) enculturation through learning and language study. Those personal and

social developments take time, and most readers are *in a hurry* (the web site *Axios*, which publishes a style guide for succinct prose, informs readers: "This section takes 3 minutes to read…"). While Kierkegaard suggested recharging occurs in solitude, Bernard Stiegler suggests a remedy that even Max Fisher, a journalist, never envisions because his main task is reporting problems and not prescribing solutions. In his book, The *Re-Enchantment of the World*, Stiegler argues that the very technologies that stifle or obstruct personal individuation for corporate profit must be converted to supporting initiatives of contributory individuation which reinvigorate spirit, a new *ecology of spirit* (51). This would have to be a revolution in the way digital capitalism conceives the attention economy. Instead of platforms that dominate and deplete individual attentional capacity for profit much as natural resources are depleted, digital capitalism will create sustainably productive modes of attentional life that engage individuals in other ways besides mass consumption and attentional maximization. Attention should be conceived and treated not as a commodity or currency, but as a treasured human resource.

The many valuable insights afforded by Fisher are largely based on interviews with individuals closely connected to social media platforms and technology both in the U.S and abroad. Permit me to summarize some of Fisher's primary findings in his research on social media.

First and most astonishing is Fisher's extended focus on the toxicity associated with YouTube, a digital platform owned by Google. I never joined social media and had the naïve impression that YouTube is a place to view old films for free, and instructional media such as how to repair cars, air conditioners, and faucets. Fisher's concrete, evidence-based research shows that YouTube is the primary source for untold thousands of rabbit holes wherein curious browsers and doom-scrollers get increasingly absorbed and radicalized by bogus gurus and disinformation. They become desensitized to extremist displays in a "radicalization pipeline" and soon find themselves in the company of "hatemongers, incels, and conspiracy theorists" (215-17). Fisher provides numerous examples of the way a hesitant viewer will skirt or scan a controversy, such as voting machine irregularities, then get algorithmically led into ever more incoherent and slanderous or conspiratorial treatments of that

initial controversy. Fisher's point is that this rabbit spiral of YouTube clips and streaming digital media deliberately radicalizes users, who "consistently migrate from milder to more extreme content" (217). Why? Because *extreme sells*; the most profitable thing is not to quell user anxiety and quietly inform, but to intensify the user's engagement, stir strong feelings so they return to the same theme in an excited and reactive state of mind. YouTube is not a tranquilizer; rather, it volatizes users into communities of uncritical, like-minded rage.

The second major issue that Fisher unearths and clarifies in *The Chaos Machine* is just how much mortal harm has been done through misinformation and disinformation (deliberate misinformation) in social media. This damage has been catastrophic in three primary vectors: health-related problems; political awareness; and political uprisings. The latter, in the example of the January 6 insurrection of 2021, is most familiar to me and citizens of the U.S. Most people are at least vaguely aware that the cultish insurrectionists were hyperactively radicalized into acts of sedition via filtered bubbles of cultish social media. Less familiar is the Zika vaccine controversy in Brazil, Zika being an insect-borne affliction horrific in its consequences for children who are not inoculated. As with the conspiracy theories associated with the COVID vaccine in the U.S., radicalized groups in Brazil stirred up doubt about the safety of the Zika vaccine in thousands of concerned mothers, many of whom, utterly confused and stymied in their decision making, endangered their children and themselves. The social media in Brazil, mostly through famous digital platforms and YouTube, intensified this public health chaos; the same social media (mostly YouTube) was used in Brazil by the rightwing politician Bolsonaro to bolster his chances for election to the Presidency, as Fisher shows in detail.

Fisher's research helps us understand widespread gullibility via two rhetorical vectors: repetition and consensus. A false claim, no matter how wildly absurd, becomes believable to many people when they hear it repeated. Fisher shows how Bolsonaro was elected in Brazil based on frequently repeated campaign discourse on YouTube in support of his candidacy. There is also the force of *consensus*: when someone who is wavering in their belief of a conspiracy sees that everyone else around her believes it, she falls in line. There is the force of *authority*, whether based

in wealth or status: millions believed Trump because they admired wealth; and once he became #45, the prestige of the presidency effectively doubled his authority (221).

Since one of the main strengths of Max Fisher's book is his detailed analysis of social media's "radicalization pipeline" through an algorithm called *Reinforce*, it pays to look more closely at concrete examples from contemporary campus life, where my male students perceive Jordan Peterson in a continuum with Alex Jones, Joe Rogan, Rush Limbaugh, and Donald Trump. Not long ago, when I taught some Critical Thinking courses, it was common for male students who overcame their initial reserve or insecurity to ask my opinion of the Canadian guru, Jordan Peterson. Although they considered him an eminent philosopher, I knew nothing about him. I was secretly astonished that so many male students had viewed his videos and were engrossed with Jordan Peterson's YouTube disquisitions. (I said to myself, "Heck, if only they did this fandom thing online with Plato and Kant!") It was typical for male students to ask questions during an interval before or after class, and not during class where they risk appearing conspicuously diligent to peers. For obscure psychosocial reasons, diligence and sincerity are not trending among males, who defensively prefer unrelenting sarcasm. Among college students, there are very few young men who have the confidence and intellectual wherewithal to ask sincere questions in front of their classmates. If they ask a question, Max Fisher's book suggests, it is usually "poisoned with irony" and cynicism (186). But not with Jordan Peterson, who they respect and "follow." Through social media such as Facebook and YouTube, Peterson's word had become gospel, espousing regressive convictions that seek to recuperate vintage hierarchical relations between the sexes, between the "man of the house" and his compliant spouse or "housewife." Jordan argues on YouTube files that young men have been severely disempowered by progressive cultural movements such as feminism, transsexuality, and civil rights. These are facile observations that do not get to the matter at stake in a rigorous way, unlike Richard Reeve's timely study, *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It.*

It was striking to me that the same male students who expressed admiration for Jordan tended to be diehard supporters of Joe Rogan, Alex

Jones, and Trump. This affinity was not self-evident. Surely Jordan was not promulgating Trump as a masculine ideal type. Nor could Trump--nor Rogan or Jones--be mistaken as a philosopher. Apart from their strident and opportunistic conservatism, what was the connection between Jordan and these radical blowhards? According to the media research disclosed by Max Fisher in his *The Chaos Machine*, YouTube algorithms such as *Reinforce* led viewers of Jordan Peterson's videos toward more radical sites, wrathful and outrageous videos in an escalatory pattern arousing ever more rage and rebellion, such that even ordinary viewers would become radicalized partisans and devoted worshippers of outlandish figures such as Trump, Alex Jones, Joe Rogan, Rush Limbaugh, and other blustery blabbermouths who will say *anything outlandish and preposterous* for money and incremental gains in power and popularity. Here's Fisher's analysis:

> YouTube upgraded its algorithms over 2016 and 2017, adding a system it called Reinforce, which recommended users into unfamiliar subgenres. Even if you never searched out Peterson-style alt-right gateway videos, you might get nudged into one anyway, just to see if it took. Stories of YouTube radicalization were suddenly everywhere, their details repeating with machine-like consistency. "One of my closest friends was radicalized by YouTube," Chris Sacca, a Silicon Valley investor and Google alum, tweeted. "It started a few years ago with 'thought-provoking' and 'contrarian' videos. But, thanks to the suggested videos algorithm, got darker and more violent, he lost his wife, kids, and friends, and none of us know where he is today." (213)

In other words, there was no intrinsic affinity between Jordan Peterson's neoconservative monologues, which are intellectual, and extremist political ideology in QAnon, Trumpism, Alex Jones, and absurd militia formations such as Oath Keepers. The affinity is *by suggestion* via *digital proximity* and *reinforcement.* The Google/YouTube algorithms impose this serial adjacency or proximity between them to drive increased engagement with affective (therefore profitable) intensities—rage, anger, loyalty, betrayal, revenge, and so on.

Will the research of Max Fisher save those who have plunged headfirst into social media rabbit holes? It is unlikely they will read

anything Max Fisher's *The Chaos Machine*. After President Biden's speech in Philadelphia on Nov. 3rd, 2022, about imperiled democratic norms, the *New Yorker* writer Susan Glasser posted the following comment on Twitter: "Biden sounds like he's trying to persuade Americans about the threat to democracy. But who is there left to persuade?" She meant that in our polarized culture, half of the citizens blindly revere Trump and his Big Lie, and they are impervious to Biden's wisdom. The other half of the U.S. population is already worried about the precarity of democratic ideals and needs no prompting on that issue. This audience dichotomy haunted my reading of Max Fisher's sustained condemnation of social media in his book, *The Chaos Machine*. He is preaching to the choir through no fault of his own. The people who most need to read *The Chaos Machine* and become informed voters and digital netizens will never read it. The people whose worldview needs to be contravened by truth are out of reach within their own conspiratorial worlds and filter bubbles. As a personal aside, I should add here that the most difficult topic for my advanced students in Critical Theory class is the social media they were born into and grew up within. It is like the birth mother to whom they owe their ontogenesis—their psychic bonding with social media is that tight and unbreachable. In fact, the difficulty students encounter unpacking and theorizing social media is so entrenched and unnegotiable that I have considered removing it from the syllabus, although it arguably poses the most pervasive psychosocial problem of their generation. The fish, content if not joyful in their aqueous milieu, do not seem capable of describing the waters in which they swim and are disindividuated. Over the years, a few exceptional students have been blessed with the capacity of a flying fish to briefly survey and critique social media, become a transcendental onlooker and critic of the socially mediated world. But so-called "netizens" have a remarkably tough time performing the phenomenological epoché that will enable them to (1) bracket social media as an objective topic of critical inquiry, and (2) rigorously illuminate the way their subjectivity has been emptied of personal selectivity due to algorithmic coercion.

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The threat to subjectivity posed by forces of disindividuation in the hive mind of social media was uncannily anticipated by the reclusive Kierkegaard in his efforts to reclaim the nobility of spirit in separate individuals "apart from the crowd." The fear of being excluded motivated people in his Denmark to join mass society much as it motivates young people to join social media. He wrote: "Most people become quite afraid when each is expected to be a separate individual" (102). A genuine individual will "never be popular not because he is so difficult, but because it demands quiet and prolonged working with oneself and intimate knowledge of oneself as well as a certain isolation." As we saw earlier, Kierkegaard argues that even "religious things have to do with a softly murmured soliloquy with oneself" (101). This is the theme most neglected by Max Fisher, whose study is congested with research findings of a lopsidedly *social* nature. A journalist by vocation, Fisher does not privilege the Eurocentric individualism of the existential philosopher.

But then, where does subjectivity come from? Those who have read Kierkegaard know that in his case it comes not only from suffering personal heartache, but from intense, solitary lucubration (reading and writing) and prayer. "The yardstick for a human being," he wrote in his diary, "is how long and to what degree he can bear to be alone, devoid of understanding with others" (103). What remains unsaid here is that this human being is undistractedly alone in a library with books to ponder and interpret, be it literature, biology, poetry, holy scriptures, or philosophy. Such is the solitary route to critical self-understanding and the life of spirit. Exegesis, quietly done in most classrooms for generations, is a critical exercise in the formation of individual cognition, taste, and selectivity. But as Maryanne Wolf has shown in *Proust and the Squid*, it is an increasingly anachronistic activity. Although these days one often comes across the expression, "Digital Revolution," that is not the case with the "Reading Revolution," a phrase describing the development of the reading brain in human beings over a span of five thousand years. Wolf explains that humans are not genetically predisposed to read; hence, it will always take a certain amount of sustained effort and focus to become a serious reader, since meaning, in both literal and figurative modes, is not always self-evident and requires interpretation. Social media and artificial intelligence offer numerous recipes for bypassing exegetical effort. Plot

summaries, templates, and essay algorithms such as GPT-3 will arguably make the essay assignment obsolete, an argument made by Stephen Marche in his essay, The College Essay is Dead." We must keep asking how individual cognitive development will be altered by this development, and how education can compensate for the loss.

As I said above in concurrence with Maryanne Wolf, exegetical reading was central to higher education for the centuries that preceded the digital revolution. It constituted a certain type of human being—not only English majors and bookworms--endowed with literary cognition and intelligence. In comparison, digital scanning, file transfer, tweets, wikis, and "streaming visual content" are quick and convenient, but they are typically modes of information, not literature. Both revolutions have rewired the brain and brought about prodigious transformations in cognition and attentional behavior that are largely antithetical to each other. Reading spawns autonomy, and social media, sociality, or worse, heteronomy. I often say to my students: reading gives us the *time to compose ourselves*. The time of reading is not only slower than digital temporality, but according to Wolf it is projective and synthetic; a pause of reflection after finishing a page or chapter, a glance outside the train window into a landscape that you remake for yourself with the help of the book in hand, that inserts you into Margaret Fuller's 19th-century New England or Daphne du Maurier's 20th-century England. These projective worlds help us understand ourselves and others, help us think beyond the given, and this transcendental thinking, Wolf argues, is "the reading brain's greatest achievement" (229). The reading brain encourages individuation due to the sequestered (or niched) attentional focus required in deep reading, enabling the reader to "allocate more cognitive time and ultimately more cortical space to the deeper analysis of recorded thought," while the digital brain of social media forecloses opportunities for personal individuation under the protocols of public sharing, shaming, and voluntary self-exposure. My own opinion is that the type of person formed by deep reading will become a distinguished and valuable minority. English majors and philosophers will one day be worth their weight in gold, but they need to be patient while discovering which sector of the economy will most appreciate them--education, government, business, etc.

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Maryanne Wolf asks: "What would be lost to us if we replaced the skills honed by the reading brain with those now being formed in our new generation of digital natives…?" (221). In response to Wolf's question, Max Fisher tells us what will *replace* the reading mind, namely, social media and algorithmic unfreedom; but it was Kierkegaard who foresaw what would be lost, *subjectivity*. If Kierkegaard was alive today, social media would be his worst nightmare because it extinguishes subjectivity, relying as it does on the hive mind and commercially generated algorithms for determining taste, selection, decision, and valuation. It is so easy and so mindless to allow amazon.com algorithms and reader reviews to determine my reading list for the holidays. This is to say that the ordinary person sacrifices their subjectivity, their potential for individuation, on social media. The category of the separate individual becomes obsolete when engagement is based on the semiotics of following and imitation, then preserved through filters that reify group identity in a fortress mentality or hive mind. Evidence of this phenomenon can be seen these days in the way that college students apply to graduate school. Rather than do individually tailored research for programs that meet one's specific goals of self-determination through topic or field specificity and associated professors, students apply to schools based on the advice of friends on social media who have a very imprecise understanding of the applicant's scholarly interests and capabilities. They are attracted to the brand prestige of certain schools based on national magazine and web site rankings that have been posted by bots in their social media news feed.

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My initial abstention from social media as it began to colonize the lifeworld around 2006 was based on both public and private concerns, each with its own vector of problems and possibilities. You can call my concerns Kierkegaardian. Underpinning both vectors was my worry that nascent opportunities for personal individuation (hence, autonomous reasoning) such as reading, travel, and music appreciation were being

digitally collectivized and articulated as social experiences, neutralizing their individuating force. Instead of discovering your favorite writer on your own, and absorbing, owning that discovery as intimate self-discovery, as becoming distinctively yourself through selective reading, you follow a title "liked" on Facebook and enjoy it with millions of other fans. The stage of personal discovery is lost in the crowd. Instead of finding a fabulously gorgeous and secluded beach at the end of an unmarked road on your own by accident, or with your lover, you visit a crowded beach of selfie-takers that was brought to your attention by an influencer on IG.

Why does it matter if an algorithm makes our choices for us? What's the big deal about personal selection, which *takes time* and requires you to *know yourself*? The selectivity exercised in your personal interests, tendencies, and tastes differentiates you from others and sets a pattern that is uniquely yours. It gives you traction and ownership beyond the ever-changing trends of commercial origin. Your love of science fiction is not because of a social media fan club, or the recent film version of *Dune*, but the long-term outcome of choices you made in a library during middle school when the teacher gave everyone one hour to find a book to sign out for the weekend. Your bond with science fiction is not trendy, but durable and heartfelt, here to stay and not gone tomorrow. During childhood and adolescence, the books and films you chose distinguished you, constituted your personal archive, your tertiary memories, and those set a pattern (your subjectivity) for primary memory and perception. When you enter a bookstore, you do not feel confused, lost, or bored, but know *exactly* where to look--the aisle with mythology books, or science fiction, or philosophy. Your memory makes a claim and situates you in a world that you helped design; unlike your peers, you don't feel like a stranger in bookstores, libraries, and classrooms. According to Bernard Stiegler's *Age of Disruption*, your memories invisibly guide your choices in the future and personalize them. They empower you to think for yourself (217). Before social media, if you were standing next to a good friend and some strangers in a bookstore, it would be very unlikely that you would all reach for the same book on the same shelf: *Game of Thrones*. Indeed, you would probably be in a different aisle. ("Hey there; I wondered where you were.") The *Harry Potter* extravaganza was the outcome not only of aggressive marketing by commercial publishing and book selling, but of "liking" on

social media on an unprecedented global scale. While the collective memory of your friends and you reading the same book gives you a cozy feeling, it will not help you gain traction in later life through the forces of your own memory and selectivity, your own GPS, which sustain your existence and personally empower your choices. I often ask my students: "When the boss asks you to name your favorite book during an interview, and why you admire it, will you call your friends on social media for advice?"

Max Fisher, a journalist, reports on problems and controversies in social media that are of predominately social consequence. Insofar as I, a philosophical critic, study the extinction of subjectivity in social media, you can call my concerns Kierkegaardian. There is plenty of work left for both of us.

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