The Chaos Machine, By Max Fischer Back Bay Books, New York, 2022,

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A review and synthesis

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Fischer, a former reporter for the New York Times, based this book on interviews with hundreds of people who are experienced with social media. It also draws on academic research, court records and other primary sources. I found it to be professionally researched and packed with information, concepts, theories, and insights to the point that at times it was hard to digest it all. However, the process was worth effort. This 410-page book consists of twelve chapters, an epilogue, and an afterword as well as an extensive section of notes. I encourage you to read it.

**Synthesis**

Fisher develops three interwoven themes. The primary theme is that social media platforms, to maximize the amount of time you spend on their platforms (which increases ad revenue), have created recommendation algorithms that increase misinformation and extremism globally. These algorithms are based on the models used by casinos, and which are designed to provide intermittent rewards while capturing your attention through colour, sound and visuals.

The history and culture of Silicon Valley is developed as a second theme to explain the unwillingness of social media platforms to take responsibility for the consequences of their algorithms that promote misinformation, conspiracy theories and extremism. The culture is characterized as a digital culture built around nihilistic young men who dream of destructive revolution, extreme individualism, and unrestricted free speech.

The third theme relates to how we respond to these algorithms. At the end of chapter six, researchers William Brodey and Molly Crockett are quoted as concluding that “The platforms were reshaping not just online behaviour, but underlying social impulses, not just individually, but collectively, potentially altering the nature of civic engagement and activism, political polarization, propaganda, and disinformation.”

When we tie these themes together, addictive algorithms that present increasingly extremist material, corporate cultures that focus on increasing revenue through increasing user engagement and psychological proclivities that make us (or at least many of us) subject to adoption of extremist views, we have a recipe for social chaos. Fisher documents instances of this chaos from developing countries such as Myanmar, through mostly developed countries like Brazil to thoroughly developed countries such a Germany and the USA.

The author developed the argument that social media algorithms are behind much of our social and political unrest, using current research, expert opinion, and detailed examples of unrest across the globe. Given that he is challenging powerful corporations, it is understandable that he has been meticulous in documenting his assertions.

His recommendation, that we turn off the recommendation algorithms is sensible, but it leaves me a bit flat. However, it is a journalist’s job to document facts and alert us to critical issues. It is not their job to develop detailed policy guidelines.

My question is ‘will the politicians rise to the challenge?’

**Chapter by Chapter summary & Notes**

**Prologue**

Here Fisher presents the main questions of the book “What are the repercussions of social media?” and “What are the consequences of routing an ever-growing share of politics, information, and human social relations through online platforms expressly designed to manipulate attention.”

**Chapter One: Trapped in the Casino**

The chapter describes how Facebook’s s algorithm pushed people to more extreme sites. Fisher then argues that the cultural history of Silicon Valley led to the development of algorithms that maximized facetime on an app by presenting increasingly extreme content. “That pool of talent, money, and technology- the three essential ingredients – would be kept in the valley and the rest of the world kept out – by an unusual practice – Venture Capitalism.”

Fisher argues that the reinforcement of social media users is consistent with addiction. A ‘Like’ provides a dopamine hit which encourages you to contribute more content to get more likes.” This creates a “Social Validation Feedback Loop.”

He notes that, “The way to win the war for attention was to harness the power of community to create identity. Often this meant hyper partisan provocateurs, for-profit click farms, and outright scammers.”

**Chapter Two: Everything is Gamergate**

Gamergate illustrates the dark side of social media as it affected Zoe Quin. Quin, a well-known video game developer, was attacked by misinformation when in Aug 2014 a programmer named Eron Gjoni claimed she slept with a video game reviewer in turn for a positive review of her video game Depression Quest. This easily debunked claim produced a furious backlash against Quin and launched a new kind of politics (Trolling) defined by social media’s key traits

* A digital culture built around nihilistic young men,
* Silicon Valley dreams of destructive revolution,
* Platforms designed in ways that supercharge identity into a matter of total and existential conflict.

Other online communities followed a similar trajectory, leading to a shorthand rule “Everything is Gamergate.”

This culture was reflected earlier in the 1996“A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” which was addressed to the governments of the world and announced:

* You have no sovereignty where we gather.”
* The web would be a ‘Civilization of the Mind,’ ruled by the collective will of its users.
* Total freedom of speech.”

Its precepts remain the foundation of the social media industry today. The fundamental ambition was to create a root and branch revolution – to transform society.

It reflected a tech culture that was hostile to anyone outside of a long held male misanthrope ideal. Fisher traces these attitudes back to the founding companies -Shockley Semiconductor Laboratory and Hewlett-Packard.

These attitudes were described by Christopher Poole founder of 4chan (2008), “Power lies in community to dictate its own standards.” Transgressing taboos became the norm on 4chan and 8chan. These activities evolved into trolling. E.g., posting comments for no other reason than to annoy someone or disrupt a discussion.

As the 2000s ended, Chan communities migrated to FB, YouTube, and Twitter. The algorithms of these sites exacerbated the extreme tendencies of these groups.

This exacerbation occurred in part because Facebook succeeded in breaking the Dunbar Curse. -a theory that humans are cognitively capped at about 150 relationships. To do escape this limit, engineer tweaked their algorithms to push users toward weak ties – friends of friends, contacts of contacts, cousins of cousins. The algorithm pushed people to increasingly extreme groups because people spend more face time on groups that get a reaction. “By having engagement-division metrics you created a world in which rage filled content would become the norm.”

**Chapter Three: Opening the Portal**

Chapter three recounts how Redditt championed extreme free speech and how it become a haven for extreme sexism and hate speech. Efforts by the CEO Ellen Pao to control this resulted in an extreme backlash that resulted in her resignation. The trolls won.

In another example, MiloYiannopoulos, who worked for Breitbart, specialized in creating posts that spoke to white nationalist grievances and motives - and in so doing created the Alt-Right. Facebook can be credited with merging internet troll culture with the mainstream right. e.g., on Facebook Breitbart edged out Fox news as the main right wing news source. Breitbart clearly benefited from the Facebook algorithm. Social media platforms unleashed a cycle of aggrievement, resentment and anger.

**Chapter Four: Tyranny of the Cousins**

Ernest Geller in “The Tyranny of the Cousins” argued that tribes became leaderless societies held together by fealty and shared moral codes enforced violently by the group adults. Similarly social media platforms had learned to indulge the outrage that brought their users a rush of purpose, of moral clarity, of social solidarity. A digital tyranny of the cousins.

The key is moral outrage – a social instinct, which is exactly what extremists, despots and propogandists have learned to invoke, rallying people to their side by triggering outrage.

**Chapter Five: Awakening the Machine**

This chapter focuses on the development of the algorithms behind social media’s recommendation software. This software learns combinations of text, images & sounds to keep us scrolling. NETFLIX’S credits its algorithm with subscriber retention of $1 billion/year. The effect of algorithms is to pull the user to evermore titillating variations of their interests. This can create a ‘filter bubble’ – showing only posts that speak to one’s existing biases. Clearly, algorithms are influencing policy.

**Chapter Six: The Fun House Mirror**

Describes how social media distorts our perceptions of reality. For example, ‘Conspiracy belief’ is highly associated with ‘anomie,’ the feeling of being disconnected from society.

DiResta, an executive of a logistics company, wrote regarding the Facebook Pizzagate event, “The social media companies knew that the real concern was not fake news hoaxes, but system wide radicalization, reality distortion and polarization. For certain targeted communities this becomes the majority of what they see because your fucking algorithms keep recommending it to them.”

Research on how negative emotions spread found that moral outrage can become infectious in groups and alter the mores and behaviour of people exposed to it. Researchers also found that false polarization is worsening, especially around partisanship, altering the conceptions liberals and conservatives have of one another.

William Brodey and Molly Crockett concluded that “The platforms were reshaping not just online behaviour, but underlying social impulses, not just individually, but collectively, potentially altering the nature of civic engagement and activism, political polarization, propaganda, and disinformation.”

**Chapter Seven: The Germs and the Wind**

This chapter recounts the impact of Facebook on Myanmar and the attacks on the Rohingya.

In 2013, Facebook launched ‘Free Basics’ on smart phones and allowed users to get their news from Facebook. It also allowed a small group of Buddhist extremists to promote hate to most of the population. Ashley Kinseth, a human rights worker in Myanmar wrote “There has never been a more powerful tool for the rapid dissemination of hate speech and racist nationalism vitriol than through Facebook and other social media.” Fisher recounts comparable results in Sri Lanka.

**Chapter Eight: Church Bells**

This chapter presents the negative effects of social media in various countries and introduces its psychological effects.

* + In Myanmar SM indulged the fears of the Buddhist majority who felt democracy undermined their privileges.
  + In India it was the Hindu majority on similar grounds.
  + In America it was a backlash against immigration
  + In Nigeria, a similar pattern

Across all these countries the outrage can be defined as “Status Threat” – when members of a dominant social group feel at risk of loosing their position, it can spark a ferocious retaliation. Social media promotes this due to a process of ‘deindividuation’ – a mob mentality.

A 2018 study of violence against refugees in Germany found that “Whenever Facebook use rose by one standard deviation above the national average, attacks against refugees increased by roughly 35%. Attacks on refugees are among the purest expressions of status threat combining fear of demographic change with racial tribalism.

Much of the extreme material comes from Super Posters who are individuals who post repeatedly and tend to be exceptionally influential. Neurological experiments confirmed that super posters are drawn toward and feel rewarded by negative social potency – deliberately inflicting emotional distress on other and being rewarded by greater reach. Super Posters are artificially pushed into our moral fields by social media.

**Chapter Nine: The Rabbit Hole**

This chapter provides an account of the havoc wrought by social media. For example, in Chemnitz in eastern Germany Neo-Nazi riots were based on false reports of immigrants murdering, raping, and looting. A researcher found a network of YouTube far right videos. He found that in just two steps a viewer is immersed in Alt-right content.

Charlottesville, and Unite the Right is born (Aug 2017). The rally and the group behind it were connected to social media. Facebook algorithms merged disparate right-wing communities into “Unite the Right.” Fisher notes, “It was rarely hate that pulled people into extreme alt-right forums. Rather, it was content that spoke to feelings of alienation, of purposeless.”

“Aggrieved Entitlement” – resentment that a perk had been removed also played a role. “People in these communities are often drowning in despair and are susceptible to corruption by charismatic, lucid evil, offering what seems like the only lifeline.” There is a crisis, the out-group is responsible, your in-group offers the solution. When people feel destabilized, they often reach for a strong group identity.

October 2017 - the birth of Q-Anon - posts about the deep state or secret cabal that socially controlled American life. Conspiracies insist that events, are part of a hidden plot whose secrets you can unload. Q-Anon followers found a sense of belonging after feeling alone and isolated.

**Chapter 10: The New Overlords**

Describes the desultory efforts of social media companies to control hate speech and misinformation. By outsourcing content checking, Facebook dumped sensitive work that impacts world security on multi-nationals that care only about maximizing productivity.”

In Renee DiResta’s address to senate select committee – “big problem is the algorithmic amplification that led bad actors to leverage entire information ecosystems to manufacture the appearance of population consensus. Responsibility for the integrity of public discourse is largely in the hands of private social platforms.”

Fisher introduces Cyberdemocracy and its effects. Online social media is replacing traditional gatekeepers. Their algorithms and incentives determined who rose and who fell.

Between 2000 & 2010s the average number of mass movements per year jumped nearly 50%. However only about 30% succeeded. Many fail because social media allows organizations to skip steps. E.g., mobilize community outreach, and organization – years long work but it made the organization durable. Social media mass movements skip these steps, and commitment is lower.

**Chapter 11: Dictatorship of the Like**

Recounts the rise of Jair Bolsonaro a minor far-right Brazilian politician, to be president of Brazil. Consensus is that he effectively used U-Tube to spread false and exaggerated messages. Social Media amplified his messages and facilitated his rise to power. U-Tube seems to be the main culprit.

Pedro D’Eyrot coined “The dictatorship of the like” – users produced increasingly extremist videos because these generated more likes.

**Chapter Twelve: Infodemic**

By 2018, social media had become a vector for medical misinformation. By Feb 2020, major social media platforms were awash in misinformation. It also describes the growth of right-wing materials on social media e.g., Boogaloo.

Fisher argues that a flood of social media misinformation and the refusal of social media companies led to Jan 6.

**Epilogue -**Recommendation: Turn off the recommendation algorithms and the AI supporting them