Chaos: the Enemy

This column has spoken many times of the need for people to become much more accustomed to the use of "informed" resources. To be very clear now, "informed," in this context, means to be based on proven facts and knowledge. My Apple dictionary says "based on an understanding of the facts of the situation." The "facts" is an unambiguous word.

Even I, however, did not, while arguing for "informed," appreciate the depth of remove from facts described in Max Fisher's new book "The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World" (2022). Max Fisher is a New York Times reporter. He has been an international reporter for many years and writes a column called "The Interpreter."

I can do no better to describe what this book is about than to quote from its jacket: "Max Fisher tells the gripping and galling inside story of how Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social networks preyed on psychological frailties to create the algorithms that drive everyday users to extreme opinions and increasingly extreme actions." In his telling, the algorithms are actually meant to drive up user time on-site for the purpose of building social network profitability. The consequences are incidental to profit-building. User time on-line and user Internet pathways are driven forward by "likes." The likes have the effect of channeling users to like-thinking silos. The silos become echo chambers for misinformation and emotions that are stirred by the addiction that is manifest. The book is replete with real life examples.

Obviously, the point is that these users are not being driven deeper into the silos by facts and informed resources. Quite the opposite. In many cases, they are said to actually shun more traditional, disciplined, and fact-based resources.

These are readers seemingly lost to Libraries. The uninformed world in which they travel is antithetical to what a Library is supposed to be. Theirs is a world of chaos, according to Fisher, disconnected from facts. It is apparently driven by psychological needs not met by any public Library. The author never even mentions the word Library.

So, what is the broader point of the book as it relates to Libraries? It is the story and example in extremity of how many people spend time in reading in the modern world. We can reflect on how that bears on a constitutional democracy, as Fisher does, but it also signals a threat to what we know as a public Library. People spend a lot of time on devices, whether silo-ized or not. Informed resources there are so entwined with uninformed stuff, that almost scientific training is required to sort out one from the other.

I think that this is probably the most important societal and technological change that Libraries must face going forward. For Murrysville Community Library, just past commemorating its centennial year, it is the essence of what is meant by defining the future in terms of the next centennial. Otherwise, the chaos machine of social

networking is bound to overwhelm this old "truism" from Andrew Carnegie: "A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people."

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