

Social Media: Rewired for Good?

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Abstract: *Many are concerned about how social media affects students: from school librarians, teachers, and administrators to parents, lawmakers, and the world at large. Inspired by a reading of Max Fisher's (2022) *The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World*, this article discusses questions, talking points, and takeaways from the "Social Media: Rewired for Good?" session at IASL in Rome, July 2023. A link to the full slides with a plethora of resources is included.*

Introduction

A question mark ends the title of this presentation intentionally: "Social Media: Rewired for Good?" Are we rewired "forever"? Are we rewired for "good" or "for bad," or a combination of both? After reading Fisher's (2022) *The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World*, I was stunned. I knew I had to discuss this book and its findings with others. What better place to present this topic than at IASL, where librarians from all over the world freely share ideas about what is happening in their schools? Engaging, robust and thoughtful discussion was the desired format for this session. The fact that so little of the presentation slides were viewed during the presentation before the session ended indicated the success of the presentation attendees' discourse.

Discussions Among Librarian Attendees

After an ice breaker activity (L. Tierney, personal communication, April 4, 2019), where attendees shared some photos from their phones with others at their tables, they were ready to

communicate easily with one another. When asked to discuss their thoughts about social media, attendees remarked:

- “It’s a devil or a blessing.”
- “It’s a battleground between parent and child.”
- “It’s a digital tattoo. You can’t take it away. Our whole identity is tied in with what we have online.”
- “It’s a way to keep friendships/connections throughout the world.”
- “It’s a battleground; how do we limit use? Need to talk about consumerism and body image.”

Several in attendance had heard of Fisher’s book. Some already had the book and could not wait to read and/or listen to it after IASL. Attendees discussed platforms that their students are using: Instagram, Finsta (“fake Instagram”), Snapchat, TikTok, BeReal, Discord, Tinder, Threads, and others. One librarian mentioned that neuroscientists have found that students cannot use the same device to do work and play. Young people do not distinguish between using technology for work vs. using it for play. It is key for librarians (and other adults in students’ lives) to have discussions with students about their social media and device usage.

Other Questions Worth Pondering

Other questions in the presentation that lacked time for discussion follow:

- What’s worse? Social Media or Global Warming?
- Boys: What are you noticing about the boys in your school? What are they talking about? Who do they look up to?
- Is social media turning us into clones?
- What is going on in your country with the law and social media platforms/tech companies?

Resources to Explore

Fisher (2022) focuses mostly on Facebook, Twitter (now known as X), and YouTube. This meticulously researched book shares horror stories about social media’s harmful effects throughout the world that grow out of the companies’ ethoses. Yet, at times, Fisher (2022) demonstrates where one person’s humanity (whether the former head of a Silicon Valley company or a gamer, for instance,) realized his previous actions/beliefs created ill effects

which caused him to speak out against a social media platform to encourage others to change course.

The Social Institute (2023) is another resource to explore that excels at pulling in students' points of view. Lessons are updated constantly and incorporate articles from a vast amount of media sources to present a wide perspective on issues. Students' share their thoughts about a TikTok ban and how social media can affect students' body image, for example. The Social Institute's "Weekly Huddle" is a free weekly subscription sent to email subscribers.

Common Sense Media (2023) advocates that adults talk to students about content quality and mindset over the amount of time spent on screens. Have students think about not only how much time is spent using devices, but also ponder the quality of what they are watching and listening to. TikTok, for instance, created a 60 minute time limit for students under 18; however, not all students are truthful about their ages when creating accounts. Having students who regulate themselves, instead of companies regulating them, is usually the best scenario. Fairplay (n.d.) sponsors a program called Screen-Free Week each May. It evolved from TV Turnoff Week back in 1994. Fairplay (n.d.) argues that in the past companies heavily marketed children.

In contrast, nowadays: "Today, OUR KIDS have become the product—their attention, their preferences, their connections, their content, their locations are all being captured, tracked, bought, and sold between tech giants and brands worldwide" (Fairplay, n.d.). It is key, therefore, for students to know and understand how companies are using them and their attention for profit.

In addition to companies, some individuals greatly profit from their followers on social media. Jordan Klepper did a segment on The Daily Show (2023) called *Andrew Tate & Re-Examining Masculinity*. Klepper asks excellent questions. Who are boys' role models? Who are they watching? What are they watching? This is key. He states that boys and young men should be watching people like Keanu Reeves, instead of people who spew toxic masculinity concepts that will taint viewers' perspectives of women.

The link to the full slide presentation "Social Media: Rewired for Good?" can be found here: bit.ly/Rewired2023 Hermon (2023) who attended the session live at IASL 2023

also did a *School Librarians United* podcast episode “Social Media: Rewired for Good?” to spread the word about and more of the resources from the slides prepared for this IASL session.

Companies’ Responses

Through his research, Fisher (2022) shows how most tech giants simply want to maximize profits. Some are beginning to make small changes though. Instagram is one example. Malik (2023) explains how Instagram, for instance, is testing age verification tools. This is completely possible and quite necessary.

LifeBrand (2023) explains its purpose as the following: “Leading AI-powered tool to help you quickly find forgotten posts and clean up your social media.” The company states that it wants to help students with digital citizenship and their social media presence. I would argue that if students use social media safely, carefully, thoughtfully, and productively, then they are less likely to need to use a platform such as LifeBrand to clean up their posts. Likewise, how safe is it to allow a company access to your social media accounts, and, therefore, a plethora of personal information?

Conclusion

General consensus during the IASL presentation was that social media can be harmful. It can also be used for good. Some suggested catch phrases at the end of the presentation follow:

- “Use your phone as a tool, not a toy.”
- “The school library is the sanctuary.”

With the ever growing presence of Artificial Intelligence, librarians and libraries can serve as that place to balance technology and human interactions in real life. It is essential to include students in the conversations about social media and to have repeated conversations with them about these powerful tools and platforms. Interestingly, some young people have abandoned Smartphones in exchange for flip phones in recent months. Will the pendulum swing and this become a larger movement? A recent read of Kimmerer and Gray Smith’s (2022) *Braiding Sweetgrass* reminded me that with all of the algorithms and technology



inundating our lives, we need to get reconnected with the earth and each other as much as possible to improve everyone's quality of life.

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Biography

Valerie DiLorenzo has been teaching (English, Social Studies, Communications) since 1993 (middle school through community college level). She has been a school librarian since 2007, completed her MLS in 2009 from Southern Connecticut State University, and has presented at a variety of librarian, technology, literacy, and independent school conferences (Connecticut, New England, national, and international) through the years. Val has been at Rumsey Hall School since 2010 teaching Library & Information Literacy (a curriculum she created) to pre-K through 9th grade students. She is the Vice President of CASL (CT Association of School Librarians.) Though she has dual citizenship (USA and Italy), her first trip to Italy was for the IASL conference in Rome.