

Keynote Address: Crosby Kemper, Director, Institute of Museum and Library Services – Audio transcript

[Please standby for realtime captions]

A we're three minutes away from the keynote speaker so I don't think we have time for a break so I'm going to go ahead and announce it is my pleasure to announce to you Mr. Crosby Kemper, the 6th director of the museum and library services known as IMLS. He was commissioned on January 24, 2020. Without other ado please welcome Mr. Kemper.

Great. Thank you very much. I appreciate that. Can you hear me? Am I on?

Yes, we can.

Yes.

I am going to take that as a yes. Sorry. I'm coming to you from my basement in Kansas City, so since we're 100% teleworking, that is where I have been spending a good part of my time. I have been not only to do C but traveling to visit libraries and museums in New Mexico, Chicago, West Virginia, Little Rock and Bentonville, so I have been getting out and about.

I want to talk to you today about three subjects. One misinformation and realm project reopening our libraries and museums and as an example of the problems and opportunities . for the third thing, the library role, not in Soming exactly because this is a problematic issue that were not going to solve but we can deal with it, we can make it better from our own point of view. It may involve for many of us as you'll see an attitude adjustment in how we look at information and the library's role in providing good information as part of civic dialogue.

First I want to tell you a little story. A boy comes home from school with a really terrible report card. He throws that report card down in front of his parents and he asked the question what is it environment or heredity?

I probably shouldn't explain this joke. One should never explain a joke. But I want to say of course the point of the joke is well it may be partly environment, it may be partly heredity, but maybe it is also the boy, himself. Maybe the character or the attitude of the young man. So polarization, poleization is not new in this country's history. We go back to our founders to Jefferson fighting with Hamilton and Adams and the bitterness of that. You can go to the period before the Civil War and the Civil War itself obviously. And many other periods in our history. We have always been polar raised to some extent. It rises and falls in waves, but here is a change in our polarization that is important to note. Jonathan hate has written about those and you can see a version of what I'm about to say in a philanthropy round table conversation he had that included the director of story core, MP R's story core in which he talks about gallop polls that have been done. I am going to con flate a little bit here, but this is essentially correct. Gam lop polls done since 1960 about what polar rises this show the following. It is a little surprising in light of the last couple of years and yet, not surprising.

Race and religion were the greatest divisions in 1960. If you asked the question who would you want your daughter Orson to marry or to move in next-door to you, you would be most opposed to someone of the opposite race, whites and Black Lives Matter alike, and the blacks and blacks and whites and broad des Stants not wanting to intermarry. And in 1960 it wasn't asked, sexual orientation.

Not even considered.

In 2020, similar polls show that race and religion are no longer as divisive. In fact, they are not very divisive at all, at least that is what people will tell the gallop pollsters. And this is not to deny the obviousration 6:00 that still existing in America but to show its intensity has declined and we all know and understand that religion has declined in intensity. And now, you can ask the question about sexual orientation and it is not a divisive thing anymore and that could be the fastest and most extreme change that we have seen.

But there is one thing that has grown that wasn't an issue in 1960 about who your daughter would marry or would would move in next-door. You didn't care if a record can or Democrat moved in next-door and your son married a democrat, you didn't care. Today you care a lot. At the is the single biggest division in America today is single most intense division is a political division, and not a good thing. A very big deal.

And one of the things that seems to be true that perhaps agree like ours needs to understand is that this is on both sides. Jonathan in the book, the coddling of the American mind, there are a couple graphs on page 128 and 129 that show from about 2004, a hockey stick like increase in the intensity of division around a party. Race, religion, education, age, gender, have maintained an even and low level flow of division relatively small numbers find those things divisive and polarization Democrats versus Republicanness and Republicans versus Democrats, the decline in interest in understanding the other side is equally negative. It happens on both sides.

There are in addition to hate's work there are a couple of books that I would ask any librarian who is concerned about this to read. There are informative and deal with the basic research. And those books very good books Chris bail's breaking the social media priz sim out recently and the older outnumbered which is main lie about algorithms. We have read about algorithms and I'm going to guess most people in this audience believe that algorithms particularly in social media, on Facebook and Twitter, have increased polarization and I'll pet you believe most of that comes from the right. Sumter says page 142 that the tendency to extremism is based entirely -- not entirely, is based significantly on the time you spend -- sorry. The time you spend and the number of tweets or posts that you make that the more time you spend, the more tweets and posts, the more extreme you become and that is true both left and right.

It is true by the way interestingly enough of both scientists and conspiracy theorists he says. I think that is amusing and frightening, both.

There is Jonathan rakee work. Some of you will no classic back the righteous mind. And he has written a new book called the Constitution of knowledge which I think is one of the most important books of the last few years.

And here he has got a list of biases that have been developed over time in various social science studies. And he takes this from an article in the Atlantic. Then you go to -- I'll lest them, but I'll highlight a couple

of them. Overconfidence bias, to over estimate our chances of success. We all have that. Availability bias. Over estimating the things that stick in our mind of events and possibilities that stick in our mind.

Familiarity by Yas. Fluency bias. Statements written in high bold, and statements a companies of the day by photos and even not accompanied by information.

And asymmetric in sight, presume that we understand other's thinking and motives better than they understand ours.

He points out that this one and another one superiority bias, to over estimate how competent we are that these biases are most easily held by people of higher intelligence and greater education.

Higher intelligence depending if it is IQ test or SAT scores. Educated people are more biased about their ability to reason a problem than and be competent toward a problem than are people with lower edge cases the source confusion. This at Trib base of where we learned information and why we -- what we know and how we know what we think we think we know. Gambler's fallacy that the notion if we if we flipped a coin five times in a row, heads came up, that it will come up tails the next time. The anchoring affect over emphasizing the first piece of information, framing affects, tendency to believe things based on the way the content is phrased or presented. Perseverance by Yas, a tendency to hold on despite disconfirming evidence. the most interesting thing about this, these biases are held at least much by edge cases people as they are by uneducated people and some of them are held to a greater degree by those of us who are educated.

Then there is haunts Ross Lynx's book. Fact full endorse, a bestseller. The late haunt Ross ling of the [Speaking Foreign Language]

A Swedish healthcare scientist. And fact fullness he present as list of 13 questions and he submitted to them to various groups, their updated versions of the backs from one of his children, another person submitted these to me bell prizewinners to various groups and including professionals of various kinds and rarely does anyone score even 50% on these questions which are about basic facts about our world. Basic healthcare facts, basic economic facts about our world. But the point he makes is that particularly Nobel Prize winners do badly. Highly educated professionals do badly in part because of this by Yas towards assuming their own views are better educated and more reasonable than other people.

In Sumter's book he talks about friendship networks on Facebook and how they are not as politically segregated in spite of some recent confirm maces to the contrary, aspirins political blogs of the right or the left.

20 percent of liberals have a conservative friends and significant slightly more significant number of conservatives have liberal friends in their friendship networks. Conservatives are slightly more exposed to contrary opinions than liberals. This is also confirmed in Bales book on social media by Yas.

there is a fundamental social science problem here. He has written a great book on thinking fast and slow. And his recent book talks about the tendency of social psychology research in recent years to produce many non-replicable studies. Research in social psychology in particular seems to follow a system of biases and though he hopes there is a conversation you can see on YouTube with the Israeli journalist, he refers to it in this new book noise. He hopes that the failure of rep. plic case of some of

these studies is now leading to better protocols or serious self criticism in the world of social psychology in particular which is his field.

I saw for instance in a recent book on trust and misinformation, on brain research in which certain parts of the brain representing fear are found to be more active in conservatives, certain aspects of the -- certain parts of the brain that relate to creativity more likely to be exercised among liberals. I thought about this for a little while. Number one, I looked at the research and what not, the author of the book, and decided the study hadn't carefully studied the section on limitations of the study, but I thought, you know, I hope my brain will exercise the part of it that is related to fear if I ever am chased by a bear. And I hope it is always being exercised the creative part of moi brain is exercised when I go into a museum, but I wonder how the brain deals with cancel culture. I wonder how the brain deals with safe spaces and micro-aggressions.

So Tad el lock has done research referred to in Sumter's book on the predictive success of social science in which he shows that the chances of success prestick tive success in a limited group of social science predictions that he looks at are equaled by chimpanzees throwing at a dartboards. I think woke all understand the reality of that from what we have been going through with the pandemic and predictions that have been presented by various social and physical scientists to us during the course of the pandemic.

Our realm project shows this, as well. Reopening archives libraries and museums started as a project because we did in the first weeks of the pandemic in March and early April of 2020 Webinars. Webinar with the CDC, March and the first week of April I think it was, we did a Webinar with Smithsonian and Johns Hopkins. not Smithsonian. CDC and Johns Hopkins had done know thinking about public spaces likely beers and museums for their planning for the pandemic and what happened while we were a few weeks into the pandemic. And that startled us, that they couldn't D that. And that they didn't -- they hadn't done much thinking about materials inside libraries and museums, books, interactive exhibits, et cetera. Computers, computer surfaces, that kind of thing. So we went to work on this. And it is interesting. There are three relatively recent books, three I think best books that have come out, so far that I read. There are some coming out right now that I latchn't read on the pandemic. And they agree on one thing. I'm talking about the premonition by Michael Lewis, the plague years by Lawrence Wright. And doom, by Neal Ferguson. And the one thing all three of these books agree on is essentially the fairly our of the federal government, of the failure of the science organizations CDC, science oriented FDA, FEMA, and HN department health and human services. They are all three good books. They all three suffer from the timingment they were written at the end of last year and so some of the things they say turn out not to be true. Ferguson in particular wrote as if the pandemic was coming to an end. He clearly finished November 1st before beginning of this year and the substantial increase in the surge. But their agreement is correct, I think, about -- sorry. I hope you can still see me. My screen just went dark.

Hold on just one second. Thank you. Ap

Lewis book suffers from the fact it is a brilliant story, a wonderful story that a Fien age girl in Texas is responsible for the best parts of our pandemic planning from a science fair exhibit she did that her father who was engaged with administration's pandemic planning helped her within which she proposed that the social activities of teenagers would be a model for the way a pandemic would spread. As it turns out, as we know, teens are the least affected by the pandemic. The effective of teenagers pandemic on teenagers is less than a flu season and remains that even with Delta variant. And Wright's book while it is good on the politics and international aspects of this is not terrible bly good on

the science, yet he is too interested in the failures and not interested enough in the successes of vaccines, et cetera.

Ferguson, which is probably the best on the research as I said suffers from the fact that he finished too early. He says basically that the pandemic will be like the Asian flu in the '50s and it is significantly work than that.

My point about this is to say that we were taught at the beginning of the pandemic to trust the science and absolutely we should trust real science but epidemic knowledge is a science of probability and we were not paying attention to that. We were not paying a lot of attention to the actual statistics so for instance, The New York Times as recently as April in what is the ideological frames of the pandemic which has been a huge problem for us to understand the science. I'm talk for a minute about The New York Times but then I will talk about the Wall Street Journal and their ideological frames and this isn't just I want to blame the media for this. This happens in political parties and that happens among us, all of us, citizens of the United States, left to right. There is this ideological frame that has led us to ignore the realities of this pandemic. So in April The New York Times did a front page graph showing republican Counties and democratic Counties and vaccinations and whatnot. They shortened the axis on this to make the counties look much larger and indicated there would be a huge problem and republican Counties, Republican states and democratic states would deal very differently and have a very different affect from the pandemic and they did this at a time when New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts had the highest death per capita. They did this at a time when the real differentials in the pandemic were between age groups and people with underlying conditions. And because there is a difference in age group, unless you're including the variable of age in anything you do, you're getting a very incomplete picture. I once chaired a commission on higher education and I was -- I felt it was very unusual the information that I was being given by education researchers and finally, one of the best of them, a guy Mike, chairman of the economics department at the University of Missouri, he said you have to understand the most powerful law of social science. The law of the omitted variable. And in so much of what we have been presented in the media, by politicians, and in discussions that we have had, discusses in the library world, museum world including that with scientists, has omitted the important variables. I think of Norton County, Kansas which in November of last year was the worst hit County in the United States and it was attributed by some to politics in Kansas, democratic governor leading one direction and Republican legislature lead in another direction. And I would agree that the Republican legislature wasn't making a whole lot of sense, but it had nothing to do with politics. It had to do with a fairly typical underlying conditions. It had to do with two institutions, the jail, and the senior citizens center which were all infected and the infection rate stated the virtually entire infection rate because everyone in the jail and everyone in the senior center was infected.

Take the debate on masks and here is where I'll go after the "Wall Street Journal" and folks on the right. Recently, in the journal, in the Claremont review books in Manhattan city books journal, John Torney who I thought was a great journalist and the Trump Administration entered an attack on mask wearing saying that the science does not tell us that mask wearing helps and they used as their primary example a Danish study done in April and May of last year. You'll note that is April and May of 2020, a couple months into the pandemic. you'll also note it was April and May so a two month study so not a longitudinal study. It was done in Denmark. Denmark, frequently used in social science as a baseline to compare the United States and here is the omitted variable. The omitted variable in Denmark is that 80% of Danes self identified as Lutherans and as we know that means they are all above average. But what it really means of course is they have a very coherent civic culture. It is under challenge and by immigration these days and things are changing in Denmark but it still has a much more coherent civic culture

than the United States or most countries in the world and so the single variable like mask wearing that isn't longitudinal is not going to tell you anything. And indeed in this study the Danish study of April and May, that the authors say that. There is a limitation paragraph just after the abstract that tells you that which is not referred to by the Wall Street Journal or by the City journal, not referred to by the Claremont review books. And my point here is that on both sides of the divide we're seeing an ideological framework and you're seeing this even in the science. The most referred to article about mask wearing is from October of last year and that will tell you something reviewing the research on mask wearing means all the research is preOctober. From nature, from the magazine from that journal, nature. I'll give you an example of the what I think is clearly an ideological framing of this issue on the other side. So there is a paragraph that is used as an example of why mask wearing is important. A man flew from China to Toronto and tested positive for CoVid-19. He had a dry cough and wore a mask on the flight and all 25 people closest to him on the flight tested negative for CoVid-19.

What is the omitted variable here? The omitted variable of course is that airplanes are among the safest places to be during the pandemic because in a typical recently built or remodeled airplane, say over the last 20, 25 years, really since smoking became, it was important to get smoking and other airborne viruses out of the airplane passengers ahead, the air is changed on an airplane between 30 and 40 times an hour. The circulation of air is it best in the world on an airplane and what we know about the virus today, what the science tells us is that airflow is probably the single most important thing because the other thing is the thing that we don't know, we still don't know that we're narrowing the focus and it is important for mask wearing point of view is that we haven't known what the infectious dose is. No of the we know it is not droplets. In the can be droplets but it is particles, small particles and what this means for mask wearing again, we do have some actual laboratory experiments with mask wearing, and I'll confirm this. Particles are so small that particular a cloth mask or N95, or folks in hospitals wear these days, particles will penetrate. Where the cloth mask they will stay on it for a period of time when you take that off if you're then have been with someone who has the virus, some particles may float into your nose or mouth when you take the cloth mask off which means that mask wearing is part of a defense but not -- not only not complete but not a very strong defense. [Captioners transitioning] Force It is not important as airflow and it is far, far away from it is important as vaccinations. I realize I am going on pretty long here. Want to convince us a little bit and say that vaccinations are an example of what we need to be working on. We also need to understand what science is telling us. There is one other thing that two of the three books I mentioned agree on. And I think it is the Lewis book, they talk about human error and which is defense. If you don't understand or if the number of variables is complicated in any enterprise, what you want is a layered defense. What we need to think about is a layered defense in terms of vaccinations, masks, social distancing, and cleanliness, washing your hands, et cetera. What can libraries do about all of this? What can we do about the ideological framing of this? What can we do about working on science and the people understanding the science as opposed to the etiology of the pandemic? Well, just as to bundle said, all politics is local. All public health is ultimately local. Chris Bell, the author of the social media book, is a professor at Duke and working on a project. He is also as to the dialogue book. -- Project. It is about one of the things that we know from all the research on this is that face-to-face conversation is the one thing that can change people's names about vaccinations and mass or at least about the way they should react to other people's views of vaccinations and masks. Hearing from someone you know is the most important thing. The trust that libraries have is really important in this environment and this ecology. Presenting local evidence with your healthcare authority, your public health care authority, with your city together and forms in which it is discussed, not authoritatively presented, but discussed, in which you understand the local customer and understand that those people that think they are libertarians. They self describe myself historically as a libertarian. I watched the libertarians today I am not sure where these libertarians were previously.

We do have, of course, date mandates in all 50 states and have since the 50s. There are mandates on measles and polio and mom's and tetanus, et cetera.? Have at least five universal mandates in this country. Everybody has been vaccinated except for a very tiny percentage. It seems to me that telling people that at the local level and discussing that at the local level reduces the tension and informs in conversation about this. We needed debates. There is a great book called resolved in which he discusses the fact that some high schools in this country or basing the curriculum on debate in which folks are engaged in debating both sides of the question and therefore understanding size of the question. They themselves do not hold. You learn empathy when you do that. Our common purpose at the American Academy of arts and sciences has produced our common purpose with the Library of Congress in which our shared ideals are shared culture represent shared experience. Libraries are good at that. Trust ultimately is a local. Honesty and empathy at the local level, display of responsibility and character from librarians is the best thing that we can do. It is the environment. We do inherit a political culture that is polarized. We do have an environment that is full of tension. But it is the character that is on those that wish of the ability to navigate and that we are honest about it. In particular, honesty and understanding of why other people feel the way they feel are so important. I want to end by saying I think what you do is so important here. And what we all do together is important. It must be done with the character and ethics and that the the kind of information that leads to real knowledge and real critical thinking we have very little real critical thinking today. We have a lot of people talking about it, particularly educationally. We have people talking about various forms of critical thinking. But the core of critical thinking is a self questioning, public presentation, public description, public understanding of information. And we have got very little of that. We have attuned this amount of assertion. I would urge you to think about real critical thinking, which is self-critical. Thank you.

Thank you. I am going to circle back with you because you did reference a lot of titles and I think folks in our audience would be very interested in reading those.

I'm have be to preside a bibliography.

This is a group that deserves a bibliography.

Thank you very much. For the staff and folks that are online, we're going to circle back we have a break and we will be back at 2:15. Will get in touch and get that bibliography to our library community.

Thank you.

Thanks.

And we will be back in just a few minutes at 2:15 for making the biennial survey data account.
