

AMERICA THIS WEEK

# Transcript: "America This Week," May 5, 2023

"Take this Internet and shove it!" Walter Kirn and I decide to tune in, turn on, and drop out, to fuller lives in the political wilderness

MATT TAIBBI

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Writer Walter Kirn and I haven't been working together on *America This Week* for too long, but thanks in part to the amusing circumstance of both of us — well, I do this, anyway — using our weekly conversations as therapy for being trapped in co-dependent relationship with The News, this week was a breakthrough. Not to give away the ending, but I broke out in a cathartic laugh after a serpentine discussion about the clock finally running out on any hope of algorithmic mass media redeeming itself ended in Walter's conclusion: "Fuck it. In a positive way!"

We've decided it's time to prepare for life outside The Borg, where some of us may build little Walden-houses and rediscover the human experience — one including all five senses, not just glare-bathed eyes and a click-finger. Excerpts from the discussion:

*On last week's massacre of the binary news model:*

**Matt Taibbi:** Welcome to America this week. I'm Matt Taibbi.

**Walter Kirn:** And I'm Walter Kirn.

**Matt Taibbi:** We're going to make a big pronouncement this week, which is out of character for us.

**Walter Kirn:** Really? What is it?

**Matt Taibbi:** Well, it's your idea.

**Walter Kirn:** Which one? I have so many, which was the most beautiful?

**Matt Taibbi:** We're going to suggest that the future of media now has been reduced to podcasts and maybe a few other things — we can get into those, but a succession of recent news events has obliterated any possibility of widespread audience trust in the traditional news landscape. There's just no way to get information about anything important through the places from which we used to get information. And the most recent episode, which I think has had a devastating effect. I don't even know how you characterize this, but removing Tucker Carlson from the lineup of Fox News has not only obliterated Fox's ratings, it's flattened the news binary. We have blue news and red news. They're both massively distrusted now by their own bases. Fox had a [catastrophic audience loss](#) just in the last couple of weeks.

**Walter Kirn:** What are the numbers on that, do you know?

**Matt Taibbi:** So, just as an example, Brian Kilmeade, who I think is trying hard, had 1.33 million viewers during the 8:00 PM slot on Wednesday. That's a *56% drop* from the Carlson show from the previous period. We've obviously also heard they've had a [plunge](#) in stock price. There are indications that its overall audience is now going to drop to the point where it's going to have to compete for the number one spot, maybe even the number two spot, where it's dominated cable news, almost without exception since the

Lewinsky story. Now it's nose-diving, which leaves most of America with what, exactly? MSNBC, CNN, CBS, NBC, ABC — those outlets already suffered their big blows with their base audiences. So what's left?

**Walter Kirn:** It's definitely a fragmentation and atomization of the news landscape. I think part of Fox's problem is that they have not explained to their audience at all why they took Carlson off the air, and they really just took him off the air. They didn't fire him, and because they didn't fire him, it makes you think, there wasn't a fireable offense. It's just an editorial decision in some way. But it's an editorial decision at variance with their audience's preference, which makes it completely mystifying because we thought we were in a capitalist world, but it turns out we're in an ideological world, which won't explain its ideology. The total effect of these events is to make you feel you're on a breaking-up ice floe. That there's nowhere to stand, and you can't even hop around in any assured way, because everything's just becoming slivered and fractured. And you start to wonder if truth or reliable information can be had from places that are undergoing this process. I think to decide negatively about the whole thing is rational at this point.

**Matt Taibbi:** Right — I don't think there's any other way that audiences can respond. I can see a strategy. It's the strategy that I have gone with for years which is to watch a representative sample of both left and right media, and use the Kremlinological technique of picking out certain facts and trying to figure out if

there's anything at all in there that isn't bullshit, and what you can garner from that. But there's no place I would trust as a comprehensive news gathering organization now. Not even the foreign ones. I used to read BBC, AFP, *Der Spiegel*, as a way of kind of supplementing coverage, especially of American foreign policy, which has been so bad for so long in this country. Those places now appear to be under their own form of capture. So, I don't know where you get comprehensive information. What do you do?

**Walter Kirn:** Maybe we should train an AI to scrape the news landscape and use some algorithm of discounting various prejudices and so on. But imagine that we could. Would it still yield anything like truth? I don't think it would. What you have now is a multi-partite argument between institutions, which frankly have their institutional interests first and their audience and ethical truth-seeking interests second or third or whatever. In none of these investigations can anything be counted on. It's weird, with the Fox thing, when you can't even count on greed! When you can't even count on them serving up red meat to their audience. What are we to think?

*On media reaching the "Ghost Dance" stage:*

**Matt Taibbi:** Something I've wondered about for a while — take Jen Psaki, whose audience for a while at least was minuscule. She's got AOC on her show. They're proposing outlawing Fox News, saying "de-platforming works," etc.

## AOC and Jen Psaki talk abortion rights, the climate crisis



With what do they want to replace Fox? There's no theory there of what they want to insert, in place of shows with mass organic appeal. They wanted to get Joe Rogan off Spotify. There are campaigns against other types of media that don't fall within the usual categories, but there's no plan to come up with anything that has any kind of chance of appealing to those same audiences. It's as if they don't have interest in trying to reach those audiences, or interest in those audiences at all, beyond cutting off access to what those people have chosen to watch.

So what's going to happen to those people? They're just not going to listen anymore. They're going to be off wandering the wilderness. They're going to stop searching, and the first step is

going to be just turn off. And then the next step of either organizing, or — I don't know.

**Walter Kirn:** In finance, it's called capitulation. It's the point at which a stock has gone down and down and up a little, and then down and down, and finally you go, "You know what? I no longer have hope for it ever to go up, even though I've lost tons of money, even though I'd like to be invested. I can't afford it anymore. I see no upside. I'm selling, I'm out. I'm liquidating." I feel that that point has been reached by millions, even tens of millions of people. It's been reached by me. If I didn't have an interest in an informed podcast every week, if I was just out there making a living at something else, I'm not sure what yield I would see in tuning in anymore.

**Matt Taibbi:** I just find it enraging most of the time.

**Walter Kirn:** Well, and rage and unfocused frustration are the opium of the people. Now, you know, it's not religion that's the opiate of the masses anymore. It's news or it's politics, or what we call politics. I think we should start to game out a future in which we have capitulated and are either building new institutions or developing — I don't know, Stoic or Zen Buddhist stances toward reality, that are at least more tolerable than a sense of constant frustration and fury.