

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Jim VandeHei
CEO and Co-Founder, Axios
Co-Founder, Politico

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I: The Digital Revolution (0:15 – 46:15)

KRISTOL: Hi. I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm pleased today to be joined by Jim VandeHei, the founder and CEO of Axios, a very successful online publication. Before that, founder and CEO of Politico, another very successful publication, a must read. And before that when we first met, a reporter, a lowly reporter –

VANDEHEI: Lowly reporter.

KRISTOL: – at an old-fashioned print newspaper like – I think when we first met, you were at *The Washington Post* maybe.

VANDEHEI: *The Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*.

KRISTOL: And *Wall Street Journal*. I really can think of no one better to discuss media, the transformation of media, where we're going, where there might be dangers and opportunities and so forth. So what do we think? Where are we? Has it really not changed as much as people say? You know how people are exaggerating it. 'Of course there's the internet, but at the end of the day, it's, you know, it's still media, it's still print, it's still people reporting and so forth.' Or are we really in the middle of a pretty fundamental transformation do you think?

VANDEHEI: Pretty fundamental transformation. I think about it a lot too, through the lens of my own career in that I was a traditional reporter. I worked my way up at a relatively young age to cover the presidency and I covered for the *Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*. And then media really started to change in the mid two-thousands, so like 2005, 2006. We launched Politico in 2007.

I think most people realize that most of that change was spurred by the Internet, right, and the ability for people to get a lot of information for free. And at that point maybe one of the biggest tactical blunders in the history of industry, the media collectively deciding that they'd give away their product for free online and habituated an entire world to expect content, which is really expensive to produce for free. And so we've been paying for the consequences of that. And the emergence of Google and the Facebook is the biggest threat to traditional media. We've been paying for that ever since.

But back then – you got to go back to even the early two thousands – you used to not have that many choices of where you're going to get your news, right. You had a few TV stations, you had your evening news, you had your big newspapers, you had your local newspapers. The critique, probably fair, was that most of it was run by people who were slightly left of center or more than slightly left of center.

But there was kind of like a shared truth. There was sort of shared understanding of the news. And there also was time to breathe, right. Like back then you didn't really have the ability to hyperventilate at speed or at velocity or at scale. A good story could last for days and people would think about it and they'd react to it. I was thinking about that this morning, if I had a good piece at the Wall Street Journal – I fish a lot, and the way my mind worked was like if I had one good piece every two weeks, my editors would be so happy and my standing would be so strong that I could just sneak out and go bass fishing during the day as long as I produced my really good story every two weeks. Like now a good story, you're lucky if it lasts two minutes, two hours.

KRISTOL: I mean even in daily journalism, as you well recall, there was that whole cycle of the day. You get some story, then you work on it, and then you file at 5:00pm and your editor works on it for a while and then you put it to bed and it comes out the next morning. And then there's the internet so then it comes out maybe that same night.

VANDEHEI: Yes.

KRISTOL: But the degree to which, I agree, the change was later than just the internet, right? I mean that's what strikes me. At *The Weekly Standard* too the real change was more like the mid two thousands, that decade I would say.

VANDEHEI: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Not earlier.

VANDEHEI: Even late because when we launched Politico –

KRISTOL: People were still sort of thinking well, we have a print magazine and we'll update the print story. You know what I mean? But it wasn't like there was no such thing as a print story anymore and there's no such thing as a normal closing time and so forth, you know.

VANDEHEI: Well, this is how much in terms of like how profound is the change, this is how profound the change is. We launched Politico in 2007 because our observation of the market was there wasn't enough political coverage, there wasn't enough urgency to it, and there wasn't enough voice and depth to political coverage. That was 2007. If we said that now, you would kick me off the set. You'd think I'm on drugs, right.

KRISTOL: That was the key to your success.

VANDEHEI: But back then it was key to the success, but also that was the reality in that moment. People were not – other than the true cable junkies, people were not thinking about politics at an hour-by-hour basis. They were not reacting so quickly. The news cycle still had length to it. And not that Politico caused it. We probably were an accelerant to it. But now like the amount of political coverage that the average news consumer is consuming, it's not just high; it is like dangerously and epidemically high. Like we're not as a species programmed to have this much of our consumption diet to be dominated by politics.

You go back 15 years ago, maybe 5, 10 percent of what you were consuming was politics. Now if you're a news consumer, look at the ratings on cable TV, look at Facebook, look at Google, look at the stories that move the needle on the New York Times and the post. It's all politics. And that's not healthy because then it becomes so much more visceral instead of academic. It becomes much faster instead of sort of taking time to breathe and think about what these topics mean.

So I think we're years away from actually answering your question in terms of like how profound is the change in terms of its lasting effect on society. And I always try to remind people of that, that these technologies that all of us are using, iPhone, Google, Instagram, Twitter, go down the list, none of them existed pre-2007 really. Like these are all, they're babies. In terms of human history and certainly communications these are all baby products, and we're treating them like babies.

We're still very adolescent in our usage of these really cool technologies, which if used right, can be transformative in a very positive way. If abused, they could really grind up and grind down our country. And like we are still pretty irresponsible in our usage of them, not just our kids; like *we're* irresponsible in our use of them. My guess is like over time we kind of figure out better boundaries and different ways to sort of put either government regulation and self-regulation around it. But yes, this is like – I can't see anyone sitting here making the case that the change is anything less than profound in the moment.

KRISTOL: And do you think we're sort of – I guess the question always in these things is how far along the curve of change are we, right. I mean 2007 does seem pre-iPhone, Google existed obviously, but pre so many things, pre Twitter, pre Instagram. I mean I find myself, the mistake one makes though is to think okay, well we've gone through this pretty amazing wave of change and now it's going to be pretty much the same for the next 10 or 20 years.

VANDEHEI: Right.

KRISTOL: But is that even right? Or I mean what do you think? I mean how fast are – you're running an actual –

VANDEHEI: I don't know.

KRISTOL: – news organization. But how fast are things changing like in real time?

VANDEHEI: I mean so fast that I don't understand how these companies do year-long planning. Like how do you run a company in this era and do year-long planning? We do our budgets, we do our strategic planning on three-month intervals. You have to because things are changing so quickly how people consume information, their expectations, the devices that are available, the way the platforms are treating your content change.

So in terms of like where are we, I don't know. Every year I think "ah, this is sort of peak change." And like the next year there's more change. And so there's nothing that I see in the immediate future that tells me this slows down. Technology tends to be an accelerant on everything, and the technology is only getting better so I assume the change continues to accelerate. Think about this show right now.

So you're a podcast and you're a show. You're on YouTube, but you could be a TV show. Now think about just what happened to our industry which kind of blew up because of technology. These two, TV and podcast are about to – you're about to have everything that you know in terms of how we grew up consuming TV and TV content, it's all going to change radically in the next couple years.

You basically have this war between Netflix and Disney and Warner Media and now Apple after their announcement. You're going to have like five – Comcast. You have five or six companies that are competing as everyone cuts their cord where we now all go into our little lanes of content consumption for TV. Podcast, a baby industry, but you're seeing the same thing. You're going to have a couple of big players, probably Apple, Spotify, probably one or two others that we're not even thinking of right now who are all fighting to try to basically aggregate high-quality audio content and then get people to subscribe to those channels.

So the change, it's still coming with real velocity. That doesn't mean everything changes. The New York Times isn't fundamentally that much different today than it was 20 year ago, but like all the things around it, they are. Like is there going to be evening news 10 years from now? Like no. Is cable TV going to look

like it does 10 years from now? Probably not. Are you going to be reading publications that don't exist today? Absolutely. Are there things that you're reading today that won't exist in five years? Sure.

And by the way, this isn't unique to media. You think about the internet and the profound effect that had on almost every single industry. AI is going to be – artificial intelligence, machine learning, its application is going to be – I think it's going to be the internet at scale in terms of changing every dimension of your life.

So it's not just media; it's almost every job or every industry and every person. Your world is just going to change, and it's going to keep changing really fast. And so when we talk to business leaders, I'm like "just keep expecting velocity and volatility." There's no signs especially in the political system or media system that that's going to abate. If anything, I would say it gets a lot, I'd argue, probably worse before it gets better, but you're definitely getting a lot more change before you get anything that approximates static.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I've been struck by that. I mean in the early days of the internet you know how people were saying "oh, huge transformation, third industrial revolution" or second or fourth or whatever it was. I can't remember. And I was "oh, come on. I mean look it's changing an important part of our society, communications basically, information. But, you know, Wikipedia is different from the old encyclopedias and, you know, searching something online instead of going to the library and reading stuff online and so forth, having fresh content every hour, every minute as opposed to once a day. But is it really changing that much?"

But I was totally wrong. I mean I do think this is a very – don't you think this is of the scale of kind of the Industrial Revolution in terms of not just changing communication as that industry, but changing all industries, I mean everything, right? I mean in terms of –

VANDEHEI: Look at your stock exchange. What are the top five stocks on a routine basis? Microsoft. You got your Amazon. You got Google. We did a piece not long ago looking at just Google and how it has its tentacles into so many different parts of your life. At Axios we found 20 different products owned by Alphabet or Google that are plugged into our system. Like it didn't exist before. These companies, these big companies that are data driven, they only get bigger, they only get more powerful. I mean it's a data game now.

And so yeah, it's like you've got Google and Facebook, which you can make a very plausible case are the two most powerful companies in the history of humanity in terms of their reach, in both the breadth of the reach but then also the depth of the reach that they have into our lives.

And again like a lot of it is good. Like I love the fact that one of my – I have some gifts, but one of my weaknesses is I don't have a great recall memory. So I google. So I'm as good as you. We're all equal now because we've got Google, and it's really good. It's an amazing search engine. And Facebook is like an amazing way for me to keep track of what's happening with my nieces and my nephews and my friends that I went to high school with. That's great. It's also a great way for the Russians to manipulate an election.

And we were so oblivious to it. That's what's – Yes, there were some people sounding the alarms, But we're just like, "I love my iPhone, man." Well, shit, man it turns out it's reprogramming my brain in real time. "I love my Facebook." Well wait, it turns out for a couple of rubles I could probably create some fake bots and potentially like stir up division around race and religion and maybe affect a vote or two. And so we're just now in the last couple of years starting to deal with it.

Remember these tech companies, they were darlings. We loved them. Their favorable ratings were through the roof. And it's only in the last 18 months really that people are rethinking these things and saying well, "wait a second, like how much data do you have of mine?" And "wait, what can foreign entities do on your platform?" And "well, is this really having like a chemical re-engineering of my brain because I'm staring at this stupid screen all the time?" We're just now thinking about that 15 years in.

KRISTOL: Maybe that's always the way it is I guess, right.

VANDEHEI: Yeah.

KRISTOL: It's like some people, especially if it looks favorable, they sort of accept it and they're happy about it and why shouldn't they be? So how optimistic are you and how worried are you that it really is just accelerating out of control? Having as many deleterious effects as good effects, or having unanticipated effects also which you only learned later are really either changing the way our brain works or changing the way our political system works or changing, you know, all kinds of things that we maybe don't want to change quite the way the technology is changing? Are you on the worried side or on the "oh come on, these things always work out?"

VANDEHEI: I'm like naturally an optimist. I'm on the darker side of this one.

KRISTOL: Yes.

VANDEHEI: I just am. I don't see – I mean I try to like look at life not as I want it to be but sort of clinically. Like what are the trends that we're seeing, what is the data? I don't look around and see a whole lot of trends or data that suggests like we're about to make really good decisions. I look around and I see the number of people who don't believe anything that they read unless it reinforces their view going up.

And I look in my own life, if it were just people who don't pay attention and don't care and they didn't believe truth, that's one thing. The number of really smart, thoughtful people, highly educated, that I know that don't believe a damn thing that doesn't reinforce their view is what alarms me. And so I worry that we're losing our connection to truth.

And it matters because the thing I always try to remind people of is like whether you love or hate Trump, the last couple of years by most human indicators have been about as good as it gets like in terms of peace and prosperity that we're seeing. And I don't mean to downplay that there isn't plight and that there aren't pockets of trouble, but by most indicators, this is about as good as it gets.

KRISTOL: Not just the last two years, the last – you could argue the last 20 or 30 years, right.

VANDEHEI: Right, right, for all the –

KRISTOL: Despite problems.

VANDEHEI: – hangdog views, like life is pretty darn good. And we've had this level of mischievous and manipulation and problems when things are really good. Well, what's going to happen in this next phase where at some point things are naturally going to get tougher? We're going to basically move from this period where we had not just – we didn't just have growth here, we had synchronized global growth where you had basically your largest economies all growing simultaneously and playing off of each other.

So you had for economic prosperity like a nice period. Well now you're seeing economic contraction in all those places and ultimately you will see it here. Ultimately we will fall into recession. So when there are fewer jobs and there's authentic reasons to be concerned, if we're behaving this poorly in good times, not terribly optimistic about how we're going to behave in bad times. You have this like rise of people not believing in anything. You have sort of this division at a time when things should be pretty good.

And I just don't think we've really done anything to get at the heart of some of these issues in terms of whether it's screen addiction or just like what can happen on these unregulated platforms of Facebook and Instagram and Google. We haven't really done anything. And I think the way government works, we're years away from like putting some rules around privacy and data and like who's responsible for content that appears in different places.

And so I worry, and I worry too about – I mean I have mixed feelings about China's capacity to execute long term, but like you look at their GDP growth, you look at their growth in terms of just like securing both talent and products using AI, you look at the money that they spend to create alliances where we've pulled back, and I think they play the long game.

I think in their minds the Chinese historically have played the long game. And I worry. Like they do have a plan to try to eat our lunch, you know, by 2025 and by 2050. And if we just sit here, and we're not just polarized, we're paralyzed by the polarization, that doesn't make me super optimistic about 15, 20 years from now. That doesn't mean that we can't figure this out and that capitalism isn't far superior to communism and that democracy is not far superior to authoritarianism and that history has shown we usually do figure it out and hopefully we will figure it out, but those things worry me.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Well, that was a very good survey of – there's so many different worries and things, so let's go through some of them. I very much agree on that if you predicted the demagogues and populous movements would rise up not in, you know, not like the '30s, right, the middle of the Depression and 15 years after disastrous war and with another war on the horizon, but in the 2015, 16, 17 you know. Is it like, are things so terrible? And it makes you – now you can say it's a delayed reaction to 2007, 2008 I guess in some ways.

VANDEHEI: Right.

KRISTOL: But still it does make you wonder what happens when there's an economic contraction? Or what happens when we stumble into a Vietnam-type war or something and people, you know. I mean there's the political side I guess. Talk about that a little bit. I mean it's so ironic, right. The internet was supposed to and does erase boundaries, let people read things they never could have seen before, give people exposure to a massive amount of material, and the effect of it seems to be sort of the opposite, right, siloing and echo chambers and so forth.

VANDEHEI: Right.

KRISTOL: How serious is that problem do you think? You study this.

VANDEHEI: It's big, right, because you –

KRISTOL: You actually bought a company that deals with it. I mean –

VANDEHEI: There's like two sides of it. Like right now you have more access to more good information than at any point in humanity times like a million. Like this should be and can be information nirvana. At the same time more people have more access to your mind through more channels at any point in humanity. So like right now I don't see the side of utilizing technology to sharpen our minds to become better decision makers winning the war.

And then you made an important point. We have a tendency in this country to like – and natural, right, to look at it as oh, just like in America, an American phenomenon or a Trump phenomenon. Like it's actually not. You look at what's happening with Brexit. You look at what's happening in Germany. You see little dimensions of this in Hong Kong. You look at what's happening in Italy. It's the exact same thing, like the rise of nationalism and populism, economic stagnation, like real racial tensions that comes from immigration here, migration over there and then just sort of worries about like technology and globalization. Very similar in all of these places.

And sort of short term, the end effect of that is that you have this massive rise in nationalism, in populism, that's really defining our politics of the day. It's happened at different points in the histories you know and probably does ultimately settle down. The reason it might not settle down right away is that to me when you look at those countries – and then I'll take it back to America.

I feel like politics for my lifetime and having covered it and been interested in it until about five years ago was like fundamentally academic. Like are you for big government versus small government? That was sort of the lens through which we looked at most political debates. I feel it's gone from academic to visceral. It's more now about your identity. Do I like the world as it looked and felt when I was growing up? Do I like those values? Do I like those social norms? Or do I like the diversity, the speed of change, the changing complexion of my country?

Well, once you get to that, when it becomes visceral, that's where it really becomes like it's an attack on your fundamental being and it becomes much more emotional. And I think that's why you just see so much more emotionalism in our politics. And I don't know that that changes especially here because you just look at the demographics and our country just is changing.

Like again like I don't really care what your personal view is on it. Like we are becoming a majority minority nation, and you see it happening because of birth rates and immigration patterns. And you ain't going to change birth rates for a long time, right. So like this is inevitable. Well then it changes your politics.

You look at a state like Texas. Like why is Texas a place where Beto O'Rourke could only lose by two points in a state that used to be solid conservative? Well, a lot of it is because it's just a changed state. There's just a big rise in the number of Hispanic voters, and any place here you have that, you have change. And there's just some people who don't like the change. And again I don't know that it – it's not always or even mostly rooted in racism. Some of it probably is, but I think it's more like there is a lot of change. It's authentic change. And especially when people are playing on that change, you're just going to end up having this streak that's running through our politics.

KRISTOL: Yes. So we have all this change and automation and globalization, both of which contribute to the change, but which are sort of different from what you're talking about or added on to what you're talking about.

VANDEHEI: Yeah.

KRISTOL: But then the media, you know, landscape to return to that, seems to I guess the word you'd use is "be an accelerant" to the dissatisfaction, to the tensions, to the tribalization and all that as opposed to one could imagine it having the opposite effect, right.

People have an instinct that "ooh, I'm very nervous about this." And other people have an instinct of contempt for the people who are old-fashioned. But, you know, one could imagine each side being a little more appreciative of the other, and a little more tolerant, and the political system working out ways for everyone to live together, federalism. We have all these devices in America that are supposed to help do that right, pluralism.

But it does seem like that's where I do think, don't you think, the change in the media landscape is not, you know, is making – already there are going to be tensions and the tensions are getting worse not better or are being strengthened, not resolved.

VANDEHEI: For people who are hyperactive in political news consumption, it's just a lot easier to get pulled to your furthest, sort of the furthest edge of your ideology. And again part of this is these technologies being babies and us still trying to figure it out; because yes, there was cable TV, which sort of gave rise to, you know, each team had a show to watch that got them jazzed.

The bigger change was – is you as an individual, if you have a view pre-2006, 2007, 2008, not much you could do with it. You could have a view and you could bark at the TV or you could like run around your neighborhood barbeque and bitch and moan. You couldn't do that much.

KRISTOL: You could listen to Rush Limbaugh or you could listen to left-wing radio.

VANDEHEI: You could listen to Rush Limbaugh, but now you as an individual can hop on a platform. You say things loud and proud enough, you can get a lot of followers, you can get a lot of fans. The more followers and fans you get, the louder you're going to speak, and there is like a dopamine response to that. Now you can speak and have an audience at some scale that didn't exist before sitting in your living room or in your car. Like that is different.

So you have the bubble of like you have your Rachel Maddow if you're a lefty and your Sean if you're on the Right. But then you also have your little bubbles that you can create in just where you're consuming information, sharing information, and commenting on information. Again, like it's a little overblown in that I do think like the two sides clearly, the people who are the hyperactive, maybe the 20 percent on each side, have become more extreme. And you see that now manifested even in the 2020 race in terms of where people are politically.

I still do think like the corrective measure, and we've never sort of figured out how to get to these people, but I will still say like my sample of most people I run into, most people really are still normal. I think so much of our society is defined by weirdos. Whereas, like most people are kind of normal, like they do their job and they volunteer and they care about their kids and they do the right thing when people aren't looking. Like that still is to me fundamentally most of America.

But because the other things are so unappealing to them, they've gotten out of the system. They're not on Twitter arguing. They're not ever going to be featured on any of the talk shows. And ultimately they don't vote because they don't believe it makes that much of a fundamental difference. And so if and when things correct, it probably corrects because like most of the country remains sensible.

Like right now it still is just very much defined by the two sides. I mean think about politics right now. I can't think of a time in my lifetime where both political parties, their fundamental ideology was being rewritten in real time and we don't actually know where it ends up, right. Like so you have like what does it mean to be a conservative? You've a very different conservative than a Donald Trump conservative. Paul Ryan's a very different conservative I guess and maybe even Mike Pence is now as part of the Trump Administration.

Like I don't even know what I would say what is a conservative today. Well, and that a lot of people pay attention to. I'm almost more fascinated by what's happening with Democrats where you have Democratic candidates, almost all of them taking positions that Barack Obama never would have taken. He would have said that is insane politically. Like there's no way that we could ever do it. There's lots of reasons for that. A little bit of it is a reaction to Trump. A little bit of it is probably over interpreting the power of Twitter and sort of the talkers there.

But pretty interesting, right, if you think about very rarely do you have those two things happening simultaneously. And I think they are related to what's happening in the media and how people get their information.

The other thing was how do you even define media, right? *The Wall Street Journal* is not fundamentally that much different today than it was 20 years ago. *The Post* is a lot different largely because of its technology and Bezos' investment in the core technology of the company. *The Times* not that radically different. What's different is that's not where most people are getting their news.

You look at a lot of the exit polls and where most people got their news pre last election, it's on Facebook. And the thing that drives me nuts is "oh, I read that on Facebook." I'm like dude, like Facebook's a pipe. It's not actually a media publication, and not all things are equal. Like some idiot who you don't trust, or don't know, writing something is treated on par with *The Wall Street Journal*, but it's actually not on par with *The Wall Street Journal*.

KRISTOL: But once it's circulated by email or by Facebook or other ways, it's unclear what's –

VANDEHEI: Once it's circulated, there's indifference.

KRISTOL: – what's from *The Wall Street Journal* and what's made up, right.

VANDEHEI: Right.

KRISTOL: I mean that's a huge problem I think.

VANDEHEI: Huge problem.

KRISTOL: And the conservative/liberal thing is so interesting because I very much agree that they're both in dispute, being redefined you could say. One could say that's a healthy thing. Why shouldn't that be happening after the Cold War with globalization, automation, cultural changes? You wouldn't expect everyone to sound like Ronald Reagan on the one hand or –

VANDEHEI: Yeah.

KRISTOL: – Bill Clinton or George McGovern for that matter, you know, on the other.

And that's fine, but I guess it's one thing to have this debate and feel like at the end of the day arguments are going to win over other arguments. Reality is going to have some effect. Some policies are going to work and others aren't and people are going to come to judgments. That's fine. That's how countries progress and how movements change and so forth. But if these debates are being resolved simply by kind of who screams the loudest, or who can demagogue certain issues the most, or who has, you know, could appeal to grievances and anxieties on either side, that's more worrisome.

It does feel like somehow not just the media but the media and political environment very much rewards the first and the anxiety-mongering and not the problem solving to put it simply.

VANDEHEI: For sure. I mean and maybe some of that will change when it's clarified where it's one candidate. I mean Trump will do what Trump's going to do, but when there's one Democratic candidate, they're going to have to sort of talk about [inaudible].

KRISTOL: But more broadly even in the presidential. I mean just look at what people running for – one doesn't have the sense people are saying, "I want to be more progressive and so let me really think about what policies would lead us in that direction." Or on the right of course, you know, "I want to be, I don't know, help middle America and so –" It's more "I want to help middle America. What's middle America most upset about? I'm going to exaggerate what's wrong, the things they're upset about and make them even more upset and demonize a few people or causes or individuals."

I mean the discussion of the tech companies themselves were very interesting where I think what you said would suggest that it was probably healthy in a way to lose the excessive adulation and sort of credulity about them that we might have had three or four years ago. But is the debate about them now very intelligent or informed? It just seems –

VANDEHEI: No.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

VANDEHEI: Not to be like to do-goodery about it, but like it's always been true, but there's such a disconnect even from if you just – I always try to look at things through like now like running a business. Like when you're running a business, one, there's like a ruthless dimension to it, and there's like a clinical dimension. Like what am I good at? What's my market opportunity? What am I bad at? What do I have to offset?

Well, if you take that approach to government, which fundamentally you should do, right, like what are our assets, how do we increase and play to those, what are our weaknesses, how do we offset those?

We're not really talking about almost anything that matters. Like if you step back and you say okay, what are the things that we should really thinking about? You should be thinking about how do we pretty quickly put some rules around technology, which has like now infiltrated every part of our life.

You would think about how do you get ahead of AI and machine learning in both like the upside of it but also the destructive capabilities of AI, which could make the manufacturing crisis look like small ball if we don't get that right. You would do, and to Trump's credit I think he talks about a lot of this, like China is hell bent on replacing us as the dominant super power. It seems like a pretty big topic that we should be thinking about.

And running a company – we were talking a little bit about this off set – like right now there's a huge flaw in our education system that we're not actually producing the type of people that I need to hire in terms of I need a lot more technologists. I need people who understand data science and who understand machine learning. There's a disconnect between the education system and kind of what we need as employers. That seems like kind of a big deal.

And then there's like existential threats out there, right. Like the next big crisis like most people who study this or live in the trenches of government will tell you it's going to be cybersecurity. It's going to be something we're not thinking about that's going to be really destructive at scale that we're probably not super capable of responding to in the way that we'd want to respond to it.

And then you can say we could debate like the speed at which global warming will start to fundamentally change things, but like it's going to fundamentally change things, and it seems like something we should probably be talking about.

Like those are the things, but often we sort of get spooled up on either backward looking topics or things that are just sort of emotional in the moment. And there's others like Andrew Yang talking about AI and its destructive capabilities, but he's, you know, at this point a fringe candidate with three percent or whatever in the polls.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I mean one might say the political market should take care of it. It should reward candidates who emerge who seem to be dealing with problems that people genuinely are concerned about, rather that society needs to be concerned about.

VANDEHEI: Right.

KRISTOL: That's also striking to me that it's not obvious to me that that's really happening, you know.

VANDEHEI: Well, you've been around longer than I have. I mean there was a time where like running for Congress was a good job and there was like a social responsibility dimension to it. Like you have to be nuts to run now. Like it's really hard. One, the amount of scrutiny. Two, the weirdness of media, the demands to be such a true believer to get through your primary process. And then even if you can get through that, you get into a Congress that's terribly dysfunctional.

So it's like we're not – I wish we were recruiting the best and the brightest, and there are some smart members of Congress. There's a lot of people that I'm like how are you a member of Congress?

KRISTOL: Right.

VANDEHEI: And it's not super reassuring.

KRISTOL: The polarization and the partisanship are a big deterrence I think.

VANDEHEI: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Just in the last week – we are talking, what, it's mid-September – talking in the last couple of weeks to people thinking of running, Republicans, a couple of 9/11 vets, post-9/11 vets thinking of running in this cycle. And it's like "Geez, but then I don't really like Trump, but can I run as a Republican and then say I'm not going to support the Republican presidential nominee? I mean that seems a little crazy. Maybe I'll just wait. I'll just stay in business for a few years."

Which is fine, and maybe this is just a Trump specific phenomenon and there some are impressive Democrats who won in 2018 and there are other impressive Republicans who won before that. I always thought the 9/11 generation would be, having seen, especially the ones who fought, I mean having seen those challenges up close and having vision to the occasion would be the types to step back and say "hey, we have to be serious about China or cybersecurity or what the rules of the road should be for the technology."

Maybe that will happen and maybe it's happening a little beneath the radar and it's happening at the local level and state level. We haven't quite seen it here. Maybe we're lagging here in Washington. Maybe people thought this in, I don't know, 1893 or something. Maybe we've got a bunch of senators and congressmen who are fighting about benefits for elderly Civil War veterans and who's dealing with the emerging technologies and the Industrial Revolution and Standard Oil and then 20 years later, 10 years later people did deal with it.

So maybe we're in sort of a window here where we're catching up, but I guess that is the question. I mean how easy is it for the political system, given the incentives and constraints, including those pushed by the media environment, how easy is it for the system to adjust?

VANDEHEI: It feels like you just answered it, right. I mean what I would say is show me a trend that points to improvement, that gives you hope, right. There's just not a lot of trends in terms of like the system and the quality of politician that it produces. Is there any trend that shows that there's a movement towards where there's a market for the middle, that there's a market for compromise, that there's a reward for sort of hard, tough decision making?

There's not a lot. And so a lot of it's hard to do because even the House of Representatives really has become like very not representative, right, because of the primary process and a little bit because of just like all of us where we're moving, we've sorted ourselves.

KRISTOL: Right.

VANDEHEI: We don't want to live next to people who don't share our political views. You do end up with a Congress where the two ends are just like – it's not like they're pretending that there's no compromise. They live in two different worlds. There really is no compromise. So that makes governance hard.

And I don't know. Other than a presidential leader – and people ask the question all the time "well, how do you fix it, how do you fix it?" I don't know. We spend a lot of time marinating in these topics and trying to think about them.

Other than presidential leadership, and Trump has shown it again, and it being sort of top down and sort of changing how people think about politics, like I don't know. That is the easiest fix is that you have somebody who comes in and says, "here's a series of problems that need to be fixed and we're going to fix them. And I'm not going to like sit on Twitter all day." Or "I'm going to try to do whatever I can to sort of tone it down."

And short of that, I don't see an uprising of people. I know you think a lot about like challenges, both like to Trump but also like third parties. Not a lot of signs that there's serious people that are interested in it or putting together the infrastructure that could be able to pull it off. It is a potential solution, but I've just never seen anyone do it and there's a lot of institutional obstacles that would prohibit it actually from happening.

And so I think you're right. Like a lot of this will unfold slowly, and *history* unfolds slowly. We do have expectations of some really short quick satisfaction now, but this is probably going to be a long process.

We were talking before about education and technology. One of the things government is going to have to do is it has to figure out how to *recruit* more technologists, like people who actually want to get into government to help fix these things. Like you think about defense. You think about space. You think about your healthcare system. A lot of these are technology problems now, and it's not like you look around the government and say oh, we've got the best technology available. Because that's ultimately how these wars are going to be won. Like if China displaces us, it's going to be because they won the AI war, they won the quantum computing war, and they won the race to space war if you're playing the long game.

Like the way you defeat that is like okay, this is still a far superior system where the smartest people want to live and work and create jobs and ideas. You'd have to re-engineer it to make sure that we're doing everything with our policies to attract those type of people. And then you'd have to take it one level up to get more of those people involved in government to solve what are super complex problems to solve.

But what turns technologists on are super difficult problems to solve. That is the number-one way to hire a technologist would be like this is a really hard thing to solve, but they're not going to do it if they find the person in the office abhorrent or if they find government too terribly inefficient to actually do something. So like they are, they're complex things.

KRISTOL: And I'm struck as someone who's so involved in the new media world, the technology of it – not in government – how much you think – and I'm not quarreling with this. Ultimately for some of these big problems government needs to step in, needs to set the rules of the road. The private sector can't sort of by itself compete with China.

VANDEHEI: Right.

KRISTOL: The private sector can't by *itself* figure out cybersecurity. We can have a massive amount of technological innovation from the private sector, which is great, and we're leading the world in that. But am I right in saying that that's sort of your view? I mean I'm inclined to agree with it but –

VANDEHEI: Yeah. I guess I look at it like pragmatically.

KRISTOL: – you can't sort of avoid – you can't avoid politics. I mean that is to say –

VANDEHEI: Yeah.

KRISTOL: – some people might say, a lot of the tech types might say, "Leave us alone, we can do the tech stuff. Medicine is going to improve a ton because of machine learning. You know, government can quibble about reimbursement rates, but it's not really going to matter that much at the end of the day if AI can help us diagnose things and help us devise drugs that are much more targeted and we're going to make big improvements. And as long as government doesn't really mess it up, we'll be okay." I mean is that – how sympathetic are you to that view? I mean –

VANDEHEI: Yeah. Like I'm at heart a capitalist and I think markets often work, but I don't understand like the world is just hyper interconnected now and technology is interconnecting us. Like that isn't something that can just be "solved" if you do need rules of the road at a state level or at a local level. Like if you're going to think about data protection, it probably does have to be solved at a federal level. If you're going to think about are there rules that need to be applied to Facebook and like who's responsible for content, you can't really do that at the same level.

KRISTOL: And you think they are.

VANDEHEI: I guess the Attorney General is good.

KRISTOL: I mean I'm saying – I'm not quarreling. I'm just saying you think, you look at the situation and you think we just can't just go on with this kind of Wild West –

VANDEHEI: Maybe we can. It just seemed hard if like – if it's so easy to move fake news, so easy to move fake-ish news, so easy to move emotional news, and it's so easy for the Koreans or the Iranians or the Russians or the Chinese to be able to look at us and see that we're easily divided over race and religion and immigration and be able to create fake accounts to be able to play to our fears. Maybe we just self-correct. That'd be great. I would love to see that, but I don't – I just find that hard.

And I'm not saying you need like governments to step in and regulate everything. But we are interconnected. These are really tough problems. When you think about like creating like a cybersecurity network that can protect the country from foreign adversaries who can infiltrate at any different point, there's only a federal government solution, right. There has to be like some federal involvement in that.

And I don't really know how it will play out because right now the tech debate is – or part of the tech debate, you have these attorney generals that are going to go after Facebook and Google and I think make the argument that you have to break these companies up. It puts you in interesting territory because we as a nation have looked at antitrust law through the prism of 'is a concentration of power leading to like higher prices or worse choices for the consumer?' That's basically fundamentally like is it affecting like how much of the product that I'm buying.

Well, it's actually been the opposite, right. Like concentration of power and data actually gives you a lot of choices for free and happens to drive down a lot of your actual cost. And so when we start to think about antitrust, do you start to look at it like the Europeans do in terms of like fairness and the broader effect on society? I don't know actually where the country will come down on that, but it's an interesting debate.

KRISTOL: It strikes me that on antitrust – and I myself was part of – I co-signed a report that suggested we should look at using antitrust. It does seem a little crazy that Google controls 92 percent of search and Facebook has two billion people on its platforms and so forth.

But I now think in a way that is a classic case of society looking for an old solution. "Hey, it worked with Standard Oil sort of we think or with AT&T so let's try it for this." But does it really address any of the problems we really have with Google or Facebook or the iPhone or whatever? And in fact, could it even make them worse? I mean if you think it's, you know, if you think Facebook has trouble controlling the content that goes through its pipes, let's have five Facebooks and then see how that looks.

VANDEHEI: Or do what Facebook is doing, move to an encrypted world. Once you're in an encrypted world, it's a lot harder to get visibility into the information that's moving. They're not easy questions.

Okay. Even if you take my view that okay, there's a lot of stuff that's happening on these platforms that's manipulative or that has an ill effect, well then if you say okay, then you got to go regulate that, now you're sitting smack dab in the middle of "what is freedom of speech?"

Like if you think about all the freedoms that we have, it's kind of our – it's our golden trophy, right. It is the thing that gives us freedom of expression, freedom of media, freedom of religion. It defines the very essence of being American. Well, to put restrictions on that, you actually have to kind of rethink free speech. Like how much speech should you have? Like how much freedom should you have? And that's the argument, by the way, that Mark Zuckerberg would make if he's sitting here. He would say like I'm always going to err on the side of humanity's right to connection and humanity's right to freedom of speech.

It doesn't mean that we won't terminate accounts that we think are doing things that are explicitly hateful, but like we're always going to err on the side of freedom. And like yeah, that's great. Like freedom's awesome. Right now we're dealing with some of the consequences that all of us can communicate at

scale with velocity at a low cost and not be held accountable for most of what we have to say, whether it's real or not real. Again, they're just interesting. I don't know how that shakes out.

II: More Tumult Ahead? (46:15– 1:17:45)

KRISTOL: I suppose one thing one would want to look at – I, myself, would be on the side of sort of erring on the side of freedom of speech. Who wouldn't be probably? We all would be. That's why the society has gone so far in that direction – is how serious is the problem?

So you've thought a lot about this just in terms of 2020 and the next few years. I mean how worried are you that we really could have a presidential election in which there's fundamental – I guess we had in 2016 in some ways but even worse interference than 2016, even more intentional and more successful propagation of just simple falsehoods? And, you know, the technology has gotten much more effective in terms of deep fakes and AI and stuff presumably. I'm just curious. You've followed this very closely both as a political reporter but also because you actually understand it.

VANDEHEI: It will be worse with the potential of being way worse than 2016.

KRISTOL: That's good. Okay.

VANDEHEI: Well, one, like we haven't really done – there's very few new rules of the road. So anything that happened at 2016 can easily happen in 2020. I look at it – this is where like I have an –

KRISTOL: And people having seen 2016 probably are more incentivized – if you're another government, right, why not try something in 2020?

VANDEHEI: Let's be real about it. So if you're the Chinese, the Koreans, the Arabians, and the Russians, and you looked at all of us, what would you do? I would go and I'd go to Macedonia and I'd go to Beijing and I'd set up all of these little shops to create personalities, bots, fake personalities. I'd put them onto these social platforms in America and I would go all in on rage and religion and immigration and I would just sow dissent, sow dissent, fog, fog, fake, fake. Like why wouldn't you? Why wouldn't you try to manipulate the system?

KRISTOL: Set up a fake news organization, right?

VANDEHEI: And all of that can happen. And like right now you're dealing with it mainly in sort of the text base. I don't think we'll be there by 2020, but you're seeing some decent advancements where you're now able to manipulate voice and ultimately you're going to be able to manipulate and create false identities that look visually real.

The technology is still a little too complex for people to just sort of do it in their basement, but we're not that far off. Well, all that's going to be able to – Instagram is the new place where you now have to worry about fake identities and fake information moving. And so my guess is you're going to see a lot more of that. You're going to see a lot of sophistication from the campaigns.

Look where Trump spends his money. The Trump campaign spends most of its money, a lot of its money on Facebook and Google. Very sophisticated in terms of who they're targeting. Like even on immigration they'll do a mix of messages. Like you assume it's just all Trump hitting – like getting people riled up on immigration, but he also does a lot of very specific targeting to Hispanic voters who are more sympathetic to his view on immigration with a much different message. So the candidates are getting more sophisticated about how to utilize these platforms.

And then I don't have a ton of faith at the state level that the systems are all wholly impenetrable from foreign countries. I know we've seen a lot of that. There's lots of efforts to try to manipulate those systems. That doesn't mean that all of this in aggregate *will* affect the election. It does mean all of it in

aggregate *could* affect an election. So just something we should be aware of. And I don't know that anything has changed from last time around.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I recently talked with someone who works at one of the big tech companies. I mean the degree to which we might see genuine "deep fakes," I guess they're called, in the campaign where Democratic nominee Elizabeth Warren looks like she's saying – there's video and audio – and it looks like she's saying x, y, or z and it's totally made up or it's distorted. And people presumably – I raised this question with the fellow from the tech company, and he said "Well, that's worrisome. We'd catch up with that pretty fast. I mean if they're distorting the presidential nominee's words, it probably would get out fairly quickly that it happened. But there's so many more subtle things that can happen beneath the radar. The more effective way to do it would not be to, you know, blast out a fake video of Elizabeth Warren which everyone would see right away. It would be to selectively distort things and target very specifically those distortions to people who care about particular issues and who are susceptible to certain arguments." And he thinks that's very doable and pretty soon. I mean, you know, he's pretty worried about that.

KRISTOL: So the big tech companies, as you probably know, what they do – and Google has an entire arm dedicated to this – is they basically try to anticipate what are the threats a year from now based on watching nefarious actors. And what the nefarious actors do is they don't initially target America. They go to the weakest place. They go the Ukraine or other elections that they can start to test different things to see if you can manipulate human behavior based on sort of basically technical things.

One of the things that they're seeing that they think will be worrisome over the next 18 months is it goes even a layer deeper, that you will be able to create large numbers of essentially fake people that look real. So you'll be able to connect someone. The face will look like my face. It will look like a real person. They'll be able to attach an identity to it like a name and other things and might even be able to sort of get it out there, and if you Google it, that person looks like they exist.

KRISTOL: Wikipedia.

VANDEHEI: And they could all be sort of amplifying and saying the same things. It would be hard. Like yes, we'll figure out technologies to be able to detect it, but that's where things are headed. So like the fake world just gets fakier, right, and we just have to –

And that again goes to your question about government, like not advocating like government regulation, but I don't know how do you deal with facial recognition technology or deep fakes. You can't really do that at a local or state level. So in terms of setting the rules or how do we deal with those things, they kind of have to be sort of federal responses or international responses.

KRISTOL: I mean how much do you worry at Axios even that Mike Allen's morning newsletter, which ends up in half a million inboxes and 200,000 will open it, which is a *huge* impact, I don't know, couldn't someone sent out a fake Mike Allen newsletter –

VANDEHEI: Yeah.

KRISTOL: – that would look like it's from Axios.com and report something? Everyone thinks well, that's true, it's from Axios, which is, you know, reliable and not partisan particularly.

And now I suppose again you would quickly see it and you would catch up with it and one could fix that pretty quickly.

VANDEHEI: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And I suppose the more subtle kinds of ways of propagating falsehoods are more effective.

VANDEHEI: Right.

KRISTOL: But the degree to which the cost of doing the fake Axios newsletter is going down rapidly, right? I mean you've built in I'm sure all kinds of attempts to make that harder and they can't get to your list and so forth.

VANDEHEI: No. It's all – everybody has to worry about that. Every company has to worry about it.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Well, that's the other thing. If you want to destroy, the North Korea Sony thing seems like the tip of the iceberg, and it was North Korea so everyone thinks that's just so weird and crazy that it doesn't tell you much. But I mean if you can take a billion dollars off a company's market cap with, you know, propagating fake news about the company basically, or fake news *from* the company or whatever –

VANDEHEI: I'm surprised more that it doesn't happen.

KRISTOL: I'm sort of amazed more that doesn't happen. I mean people don't really – I mean I don't know. I think people are very complacent in general, and I myself have been I would say about data privacy, data security, data reliability. I mean we haven't all had our – the whole financial system hasn't been thrown into turmoil by someone deciding to try to make all of our bank accounts, you know, confusing all the numbers in all our bank accounts.

But it doesn't seem like that's quite so impossible. *That's* difficult because the financial services industry presumably has spent a lot of money on their security. But the information side of things is much looser of course, right. I mean –

VANDEHEI: For sure.

KRISTOL: Yeah. What about – so that's not going to get better presumably. And then the whole blurring of the line. I was recently re-reading – I teach this book in a course at Davidson – Neil Postman wrote this book in 1985, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

VANDEHEI: Right. Yeah.

KRISTOL: Which is really – I mean I'm not sure it was right about 1985, but it was very prescient I think about the next 30 years and the blurring of entertainment and news. And a lot of it was a reaction to Reagan and maybe a silly reaction in some ways. We had Michael Deaver in there staging events for TV and now it seems it's kind of antiquated that that's the thing. But the degree to which, you know, politics is entertainment, well, that's always been partly of course.

But the degree to which it's just the total blurring of the lines. And Trump seems to have had more of an instinct about this than obviously our more traditional politicians, right. How much does that continue do you think and –

VANDEHEI: It's hard to tell because he's not –

KRISTOL: – voters like to be entertained, you know.

VANDEHEI: He's not the first, right. There was Sarah Palin. There was Michelle Bachmann. There's definitely people who sort of had that celebrity dimension. And Trump in that way probably is a black swan. Again, like love him or hate him, there's parts of him that he's kind of a genius. Like in terms of like his understanding of the media ecosystem and his ability to be sort of the cast, the character, the star, the choreographer of a show that becomes all-consuming for the percentage of Americans who care about politics is – like there is a brilliance to it.

Like do I think it's like a healthy brilliance? Probably not. Again, I don't like this much drama in politics and in government. There's no way that that's a positive for the country. But I mean he really did tell staff

early on think about the White House as a reality show and like every day is an episode and how do we make sure that like we're controlling that episode and that people are tuning in?

I think so much of that goes to like *him* in his mind and how he is seeing the world, because remember he was even a – even in a pre-internet world, he was kind of a master of the tabloids if there was a master of the tabloids. He was quite good with conventional TV in terms of *The Apprentice*. And then he is probably the best political practitioner we'll ever see in terms of using/manipulating Twitter.

And so like he's probably unique in that. Does it then habituate people to want a certain level of drama? Yeah. Like even to this day like by the time at this point in the Obama presidency or the Bush presidency if there was a speech in the airport and the president was speaking, like were you definitely going to like go out of your way to listen to it? Like with Trump you just never know. So there is like an entertainment side to it that can be like captivating and obviously for his base intoxicating.

I don't know what comes after that. It's not spreading to the whole thing because you wouldn't say like if I was casting a TV show, that Elizabeth Warren would be my star or Bernie Sanders would be my star or Joe Biden would be my star, right. They're the three at the top of the pack on the Democratic side. So the question is – at least on the Republican side are they habituated to wanting that? I don't know.

I don't know that the celebrity thing is the thing that would concern me most about politics. It would be like kind of the lack of seriousness sometimes and then just how, what we talked about earlier, just how visceral things have become.

KRISTOL: Those are related in some ways.

VANDEHEI: Yeah, they're related.

KRISTOL: These entertainers are good at appealing to emotions and so forth. And the question is whether 25 and 30-year-olds and 15-year-olds for that matter are sort of thinking well, this is the future and if I'm interested, this is the way to be famous as to, you know. I mean I don't know. I mean do people –

VANDEHEI: But there's no – but if you look at the data of younger –

KRISTOL: Right.

VANDEHEI: – of younger people, like there's no data that I've seen that suggests that that's true. And in fact, the data that I look at shows that like people are really engaged and socially conscious and really thinking about topics maybe even with more depth and interest than my generation did. It also shows, by the way, that there's a massive rethinking of capitalism. I think people are way undervaluing the potential that we move towards socialism, at least in a short-term basis.

I think the market – almost everyone I talk to assumes oh, we would never elect a socialist. I'm like yeah, and you said you'd never elect Donald Trump, and you might want to take a look at what's happening in the Democratic race where two of the top three candidates are definitely moving, one sort of self-confidently as a socialist, one that's not that far away, Elizabeth Warren, to where Bernie Sanders is.

And there's like a 50/50 chance if not better that one of the two of them is the nominee and then there's a 50/50 chance they become president. So I think people are downplaying the potential for that on the Democratic side.

KRISTOL: That's interesting. I think the fact that young people are more sensible in some ways, more sensible about the media for one thing, about the new media environment, they're not the ones falling for the fake news. This is a real unfair I think attack on the millennials or even the post-millennials –

VANDEHEI: Right.

KRISTOL: – that somehow things are going to get worse. Well, they seem to be much more sensible about consuming this new information than people my age and up who are falling for all kinds of stuff.

And so in that respect there's hope that maybe people who grow up in this environment have a better understanding of it, are more suspicious of, you know, more cautious about it, more suspicious of it. On the other hand, I am struck – I'm teaching a class a little bit this term. There's a way which though even there the kind of – everything is about you and how you present yourself and what you feel about things. Maybe it's always been that way of course to some degree.

VANDEHEI: Yeah.

KRISTOL: It's performative so to speak. They're a little shocked when you say well, what will the consequences of this be, you know. I mean let's debate it and maybe it's a good policy, maybe it's a bad policy. But it can't just be about you wanting to feel good about something. And there's a way which that has become so much more – I mean it's always been big obviously, but that fits in the way with – that's the nice, you know, the soft side of the appeal to emotions and sort of demagoguery and appeal to anxieties and resentments.

It's nicer, you know. People want to do good. But when you actually try to debate what really does good, they're a little "No, no, we don't need to do that because we're on the right side of this and we're against this bad thing. So of course that's what doing good is," you know. I mean I'm sort of struck. Maybe young people are always that way and et cetera and maybe I'm just being silly, but you do wonder whether we are capable of having like a debate about actual policies, is this helping or hurting people.

That fits in with the socialism. So a young person said to me a few months ago – he's sort of where I am, probably politically. He hoped he wouldn't grow up to have a politics where he had a choice between socialism and nativism. So that was a nice formulation. He said this is more about the parties, didn't want a socialist and nativist party. He wanted some maybe a centrist third party or an old-fashioned conservative party or an old-fashioned Clintonian liberal party.

But I think it's also true in a deeper way almost, that the socialist reaction to Trumpism if you want to call it that is itself a kind of – it's partly reacting to the real world and the concentrations of power and wealth, but it's partly a kind of, you know, expression of sentiment on the *other* side, you know.

VANDEHEI: Yeah.

KRISTOL: There's an awful lot of expression of sentiments.

VANDEHEI: I'm with you. I don't know different that is from –

KRISTOL: Well, that's the question. I mean it's not like we didn't go through all of this.

VANDEHEI: – [inaudible] of being in your twenties. I mean I wrestle with this a lot as like a manager because it's like most – so we have 200 employees. I think 60, 65 percent are under the age of 35. We had a similar dynamic with a larger staff at Politico.

And so many CEOs I talk to think about millennials with kind of like a roll of the eyes in the sense of entitlement. Some of that's true. But the flip of that is I do see an idealism that is sort of like if you speak to it, you get as good a motivation and probably better results because they're entering with probably more technical sophistication than we did into the marketplace.

They're not motivated by profit or stability of your company like your generation and my generation were. But it doesn't mean that they're any less hardworking or that they're any less capable. It's just that it's a different language that you have to speak. It's a big problem for CEOs because I don't think they know how to – I think most 55-year-old white male CEOs don't know how to talk to a millennial base of people

who like want to know that you stand for something other than making money. Like that's just not good enough anymore.

And so who knows what happens as a generation grows up and how much of like you said with socialism is it just sort of a reaction to like listen, like there has been economic stagnation for a massive chunk of the country since 1980, right. So like there's a sense of like unfairness. And so like aha, let's be fair; let's give everybody everything. Well, do they actually really think that once they get older and get into government or do they really believe it? I don't know.

KRISTOL: I'm very much with you on being pro the younger generation. So I mean it's very bad for the baby boomers who mess so many things up to sort of be, you know, looking down at these younger people who are trying to grapple with a very different world. We have not been serious about grappling with this. We're coasting along in our politics and now we're unhappy, a lot of us with our politics. But whether we're happy or unhappy, we're not dealing with these challenges in my opinion in a very serious way, whether it's national security or technology. So I think that's not their fault. That's not the 25-year-old's fault. They didn't fail to make, as you say, fail to even think – even to have a congressional debate about it, even to have serious commissions about rules of the road on privacy or tech or, you know, preventing everything from becoming crazier and crazier in terms of our public discourse. So I very much agree with that.

I also very much agree though, and I'd like to talk about that a little more, I mean the range of outcomes people are underestimating, don't you think? I mean just as you say with socialism. I mean what the world could look like and what politics could look like, society, international relations in 5, 10, 15 years.

We're still a little bit well, "all this stuff's happening, a lot of turmoil, a lot of superficial turmoil. Trump's very weird, you know. But at the end of the day it's going to be sort of recognizable." And I'm just less and less convinced of that. I mean we're not going to go back to Bill Clinton's world or George W. Bush's or Barack Obama's after Trump I don't think, do you?

VANDEHEI: Right. I don't. I mean I think there's a segment of society that's delusional right now that thinks ah, like whatever is happening is like Trump caused it. Like Trump didn't cause this. Like the underlying things in terms of us not wanting to live next to people who don't share our political views, the emergence of these big social media platforms, the polarization of our media consumption, like all of these things predated and were made possible with Trump.

It's not like Trump goes away and we revert back to like some kind of norm. Like could George W. Bush win the nomination in this environment? Probably not. Could Barack Obama if he stuck to the positions that he had in 2008 and 2012 win the nomination today? Probably not. Like things have probably changed in both parties. I don't think the people who are consuming politics the way they're consuming it are going to suddenly change.

And so I think whatever we're locked in, we're probably locked in for some period of time. What I don't know, what none of us know, especially on the Republican side is like it's so foggy to me now. Like what does the Republican Party look like when he leaves, particularly if he leaves and he's still around?

KRISTOL: Does he really leave?

VANDEHEI: Does he really leave?

KRISTOL: Does Trumpism leave even if he doesn't leave, right?

VANDEHEI: I mean again that goes to the power in terms of like positive outcomes. It goes to the power of the presidency. Like not to be super cynical, and I say this with some disdain and maybe a tiny bit of affection. Like we're sheep. Like we're more sheep than I ever thought, like right. Like our ability to like change direction as a herd is just more intense than I had appreciated.

I mean look at the Republican Party, right. Like you're in the heart of it. If you would have said four or five years ago that he could change by double digit points how the party viewed Vladimir Putin who was Mitt Romney's number-one geopolitical threat, that you could change the views on free trade, that you could change the views on deficits, the way that he has this flirtation with Kim – go down the list of things that he's been able to change people's views on that I didn't think you could change so quickly.

KRISTOL: Well, has he really? Would be the counter argument.

VANDEHEI: But it kind of has, right. There's not –

KRISTOL: They're accommodating. He's the President. They don't want to break with him. They hate the left more than they worry about some of these things he's doing.

VANDEHEI: You think it goes away and those views change?

KRISTOL: No, I don't think so, but I think it's an open question. Some of it goes away, or how much of it or how much of it is – certainly a lot of people tell themselves, I think you may be right that they're telling themselves something that's a fairy tale that, you know, those are kind of bugs of the – not features of the Trump presidency, and we'll get back to something more normal, not exactly back to George W. Bush obviously.

And it's unfortunate a lot of more sophisticated people would say who have accommodated Trump, "but the system has also prevented him from coming through on a lot of these things. We still have a global trading system after all even if he's messed it up a little bit with tariffs and the same. We still have forward deployed troops even if he doesn't like NATO and so, you know, NATO still exists."

VANDEHEI: Right.

KRISTOL: The degree to which people rationalize that a lot of that stuff isn't *really* going to affect things. I am sort of more where you are. It really is going to affect things.

VANDEHEI: That's why I say "with affection" right, like there is a way that the right person comes along and you move people back.

KRISTOL: Four years maybe doesn't affect things. Eight years of it really would affect things. Four years of it with a reaction against it that goes far in a different direction would also affect things.

Four years of it where Trump loses a close election and three-quarters of the party thinks he was cheated and goes in a younger, more in a way coherent Trumpy direction, that would be – that would not be – you could have politics by 2024 where you have – where the Trumpiness of the Republican Party is more Trumpy and the Warren Sandersness of the Democratic Party is more that way, don't you think? I don't think that's at all out of the question.

VANDEHEI: Right.

KRISTOL: The notion that everyone's going to come back to the center after this weird episode I think is very dubious and not much evidence for it and pretty worrisome if you think that's probably not a very healthy way to run your politics.

VANDEHEI: By the way, there hasn't been any evidence of that for the last 15 years. I mean that trend line again was a pre-existing condition. It wasn't a Trump condition.

And then the question of what happens with the media, like let's be honest. Like if you look at the ratings, if you look at the web traffic, I'm sorry, like Trump is like – the Trump bump or whatever, it's beyond real. It's just like if you look at like why does every cable show only talk about Trump? Because the minute

that they don't – they look at ratings now minute by minute. The minute that they don't, the ratings fall down.

KRISTOL: Is that true? It's really just –

VANDEHEI: Yeah, it's real. And you look at what stories move the needle on *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* or us, like it's real.

KRISTOL: Even for you guys?

VANDEHEI: Oh my god.

KRISTOL: You've tried pretty hard not to be Trump obsessed if I would say.

VANDEHEI: I think of our 60 reporters, 4 cover politics, and politics is probably 70 percent of our traffic.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

VANDEHEI: And here's the thing that worries me.

KRISTOL: And you have very good coverage of tech and stuff.

VANDEHEI: We've got great coverage on AI, robotics. But even like let's take again like a lot of our stuff is kind of elite coverage for people who really need high-end information to do their job. But even take something like Elon Musk. Like come on, there's hardly anything more sexy right now. Like here's a guy who's terribly erratic yet there's a side of him that's a total genius that's reinvented multiple industries, is willing to go on Joe Rogan and smoke weed. Like this is it. This is the full package. It's like this is like – it should be the equivalent of a Sarah Palin or a Donald Trump or an AOC. And the drop-off between Trump or AOC in a Musk story, it's way, way, way down here.

Like it's just like the public is in terms of the people who are consuming a lot of news, they're now habituated for politics. And by the way, we're complicit in this. People need to be honest here. Like look at the number of hires that your major media companies are making. How many of those are covering China or are covering AI or robotics? Almost none of them. They're all "let's add more people covering politics so we can produce more political content, so we can habituate more people to want our political content."

The New York Times has a massive team covering politics and now they've started over the last five years to really put money into technology but still much smaller than they would have on the political side. This is true of almost every publication.

Even the publications on the periphery. If you look at how they get any traffic at all, it's to pounce on any political story. So if Elizabeth Warren did something controversial or interesting today, maybe a hundred different publications would write about that. Well why? Like there's probably only three or four people who are really wired into the Warren campaign who could tell you something that's illuminating about it. It's because that is the thing that moves the needle.

And when I'm talking to like audiences who are like into the political stuff, I'm like I'm sorry. The analogy I use is Doritos. Like I like Doritos and if I have a Dorito occasionally, that's fine. But like if all I eat is Doritos, I'm going to be an unhealthy, obese guy, and it's not good, right. Like you have to be able to balance these things, and we're not. We're like gorging on politics and we're habituating people to gorge on politics.

And yes you could watch this and say, "Well, Jim, aren't you blame? Like you are a political writer. You started Politico and you have Axios and you guys interview Trump." Sure. Like we're definitely part of it. And people ask "well, isn't Trump great for business." He is and he isn't. Like on the one hand like we

are probably one of the better wired publications into the Trump White House, so we break a lot of news. That's good and that gives you a big audience.

But we're trying to create a publication where politics is 10, 20 percent of the content because we think AI and China and technology and business and globalization are equally important, but Trump ends up like being the tech story and the AI story and the China story, and it's all consuming in a way that makes it hard for people to start to sort of rejigger how they consume information to make sure that they're getting the information inputs that they need so they can make better decisions.

And it goes to what we talked about at the beginning

KRISTOL: Yeah, responsibility, citizenship. That's a good thing to end on, an appropriate true thing. I mean I guess I would say maybe the sunny side or the silver lining on the obsession with politics that you're right about to some degree is this can be either foolish or destructive actually. I mean maybe people sense what you were saying earlier. We have all these problems. The political system ultimately is the way we deal with them. It's not just going to work itself out.

And right now they're clicking on maybe silly or incendiary or fake stuff when they click on political stories, but in a funny way you could argue just the interest in politics isn't a bad thing. As you said earlier about young people, it's, you know, participation is up. That's good presumably. The question is, is the current system at all configured to transform that kind of vague sense that gee, we have kind of big political challenges and we need to do something about it in the interest of politics into something – a reasonable way to deal with these issues as opposed to just more and more and more churning and anger and polarization I guess.

VANDEHEI: I mean I think you are right, and I think the numbers do show you're seeing a surge in turnout in the off-year elections in the Presidential election. You're seeing a surge in the number of people who are consuming the news. The question is how will they ultimately respond to it?

I kind of think of my brother as a good example of this who is not interested in politics at all and was kind of captivated by Trump as a celebrity, I think liked the idea that he was kind of a middle finger to my industry and to Washington. But then once he started following it, would then start to ask pretty thoughtful questions about like, "oh wait, is that real? Is that not real? Like how does that work?"

So if more people do get engaged and they see that this stuff is consequential at scale, then maybe in a saner environment it will allow for some of these things to take place. Like that would be the most optimistic spin. And what the hell, I'm going to start to think that way.

KRISTOL: Let's end on that. And you'll come back in a year or two and we'll see where on the optimism, realism, pessimism scale we've ended.

VANDEHEI: The utopian studio or the dystopian studio.

KRISTOL: Absolutely.

VANDEHEI: We'll find out.

KRISTOL: Jim VandeHei, thanks very much for joining me today.

And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]