MARVIN KALB: Hello and welcome to the National Press Club and to another edition of The Kalb Report. I’m Marvin Kalb, inviting you to a conversation with Journalist and Biographer Walter Isaacson, on the subjects of “Genius, Leadership and the Future of American Journalism.”

Walter Isaacson has done it all. He is now President and CEO of the Aspen Institute, a non-partisan think tank in Washington, D.C. and a few other places, too. He has run CNN, the Cable News Network. He’s been Editor of Time Magazine, which he joined as a political reporter in 1978. He’s also a best-selling biographer, most recently of Steve Jobs, but also of Albert Einstein, Benjamin Franklin, and Henry Kissinger. And, if our sources are right, he’s now working on another book that will chronicle the history of the digital age. Wow.

[laughter]

Welcome Walter Isaacson. It’s a pleasure to have you here.

WALTER ISAACSON: Well, thank you. It’s great to be back with you.

MARVIN KALB: My first question is the obvious one. When do you sleep?

WALTER ISAACSON: [laughter] At night. I actually get a good night’s sleep. I work late-- I love working late at night. And so, I kind of sleep late.

MARVIN KALB: But do you get up very early in the morning?

WALTER ISAACSON: No, no. I don’t do that. And it’s important to marry somebody who has the opposite schedule. [laughter] So Cathy goes to bed early in the evening, and she’s the one who wakes up early.
MARVIN KALB: Well tell me, if you were to do a biography of Walter Isaacson--

WALTER ISAACSON: -- Never. [laughter] Never!

MARVIN KALB: Where would you start?

WALTER ISAACSON: I’d start in New Orleans, because I always think that a sense of place is important in a narrative. And for me, growing up in New Orleans was the most important formative, you know, influence of my life, partly because New Orleans is a very diverse place with a mix of creativity. But also, because as Walker Percy, one of the great New Orleans novelists said, people in Louisiana either come out preachers or storytellers. And he gave me one piece of advice. He said, “For God’s sake, be a storyteller. The world’s got far too many preachers.” [laughter]

And so you end up wanting to tell stories. And I think that’s helpful.

MARVIN KALB: Would it be an admiring biography?

WALTER ISAACSON: Of me? No. Trust me, my biography doesn’t need to be written. I’m like you, people who really love to observe interesting people.

MARVIN KALB: Well, you’re a biographer, and you write about interesting and important people. And yet, you are, at this stage of your career, doing a history of the digital age, which sounds slightly off key because it’s not, initially anyway, biographical. [simultaneous conversation]

WALTER ISAACSON: Well, I wouldn’t want to make it biographical. And I think you and I are old enough to remember the first book I did with Evan Thomas, which was The
Wise Men, which was a joint biography of a group of people who were statesmen during the Cold War. I want to start with Ada Byron Lovelace, a truly wonderful-- [simultaneous conversation] 1840, Lord Byron’s daughter.

MARVIN KALB: I thought the digital age started 20 years ago. [laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: No, no, no, no. It started when Ada Lovelace came up with the first computer algorithm, working on Charles Babbage’s difference engine, which was the first sort of calculator. Obviously not digital, obviously not transistor. But done in the 1840s. She was Lord Byron’s daughter. And I’ve always liked to connect sort of the poetry and technology, which is what Steve Jobs did.

Lord Byron’s ex-wife, Lady Byron, was not particularly fond of Lord Byron at the time, and insisted that their daughter be a mathematician and not a poet. So she became one of the best mathematicians of the 1840s. And I would like to start with her and show how creativity works, even in a technology or digital setting, starting with her, and going all the way through the people who invented the computer, the internet, the personal computer, all the way through social networks and mobile technologies.

MARVIN KALB: But are you saying that that really started in the middle of the 18th century?

WALTER ISAACSON: Well, I think that the concept-- We sometimes call it, you know, “The Lovelace Concept” of machines that can be universal, can do any sort of calculation or algorithm or program you give it. That’s a really interesting concept. No, it actually starts mainly in World War II, when Allen Turing is trying to break the German Enigma Code at Bletchley Park in England. And so-- And likewise, at the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard and other places, where they're creating computers during the wartime, and even at the University of Iowa, there's a great professor there.
And coming out of World War II was the notion of needing a network, a communications network. And thus the Defense Department helps launch the internet.

MARVIN KALB: So--

WALTER ISAACSON: So I haven't written this book yet. [simultaneous conversation]

MARVIN KALB: No, no, but the history, then, of the digital age for you becomes a series of biographies, really, biographical sketches that take you up--

WALTER ISAACSON: Well, interesting people, yeah.

MARVIN KALB: Interesting people.

WALTER ISAACSON: I mean you look at the guy who invented the transistor, you know, in 1947, William Shockley, a crazed guy-- actually he turns out to be rather racist, I mean not a pleasant person. But he creates a transistor which really is the dynamo for the digital age. And you want to sort of weave all these people together.

MARVIN KALB: Steve Jobs, who was also not the most wonderful guy in the world, actually approached you to do his biography. And then you accepted, and you ended up doing 40 interviews, I’m told, in the course of doing that. But he was, during your research, a live subject. The book came out, he had already just died. So the question, is it easier for you to do subjects who are dead, like Franklin and Einstein, rather than live people?

WALTER ISAACSON: Well you and Bernie did Kissinger.
WALTER ISAACSON: And then I followed in your footsteps and did a book on Kissinger. And I don’t know about you. But, after I heard from Kissinger after the book, I said to myself, “I’m not going to do anybody who’s been alive for the last 200 years,” until I swore off of living people. But then, when Steve approached me, at first I deferred. It was 2004. He gave me a call. I had done Ben Franklin, was about to finish Einstein. He said, “Why don’t you do me next?” I’m thinking, “Okay. Ben Franklin, Einstein, you.” [laughter]

And so I said, “Well, I’ll wait 20 or 30 years until you retire.” He did not tell me, even though he had just been diagnosed with cancer, that he had cancer. So, it was when I found that out, and when he kept transforming industries, that I thought, “This is a guy who has applied imagination and creativity in a way that has totally transformed all sorts of industries,” starting with personal computer, but everything from movies to journalism, as you may have noticed, to phones, to the way we consume music, and even retail stores. And he was the creation myth of our time writ large. Somebody who had started something in his parents’ garage, with a friend from down the street, and turns it into the most valuable company on earth.

MARVIN KALB: So, when you do something with someone who is alive, I imagine your research technique is primarily the interview.

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah. I spent-- it was actually much-- it was more than 40 interviews by the end. And Steve loved taking walks. That was his way of talking. And we would walk his old neighborhood where he grew up, in sort of a tract home. Or we would, you know, walk around Palo Alto. But you're right. There is a problem with doing a living figure. I became extremely emotionally sort of compelled by this guy, even
though, as you point out, he wasn’t always the world’s-- you know, he wasn’t like you, the world’s sweetest, nicest person.

**MARVIN KALB:** Nicest guy.

[laughter]

**WALTER ISAACSON:** He could be rough at times. But I began to see, and I hope the narrative arc of the book shows this, that the roughness, his kind of petulance or impatience, was connected to his passion and the passion for making perfect products. So the notion that he could be jerky at times, look. We’ve all known-- There are thousands of people we’ve known who have been jerks, but none of them are like Steve Jobs. So I became so emotionally attached to him. And I thought he would be alive when the book came out.

**MARVIN KALB:** Right.

**WALTER ISAACSON:** And I was thinking he was going to read it. And I was bracing myself for that. So it was very difficult, not only writing about somebody who was living, but somebody who was dying.

**MARVIN KALB:** But, you know, it’s an interesting point that you raise, now, because you have run CNN. You’ve run *Time*, now Aspen. Supposing Jobs were working for you. And he was as irascible as you say, would you fire him?

**WALTER ISAACSON:** No. You know, he starts off at Atari, the video game company. And Nolan Bushnell, the founder, is there with a couple people. And he’s irascible. He’s also become a vegan at the apple orchard where he worked, hence the name of his future
company. And he believed that, as a vegan, you didn’t have to shower or use deodorant. [laughter] Which was a mistake in theory. [laughter]

So they put him on the night shift. They decide, this guy is really tough, barefoot, you know, kind of irascible. But he’s a genius. And he has his friend, Wozniak, who keeps showing up. And in four days, they're able to take Pong, which you and I are old enough to remember, and turn it into Breakout, sort of a single player game. And so no. What you try to do is channel great genius, not sort of be afraid of the quirks of genius.

**MARVIN KALB:** But all four of your subjects were leaders in their field. And I'm interested, when you talk about genius, and link that to leadership for example. What are the qualities of leadership? How do you spot it? Or can you spot it at an early stage in someone’s career? Does it come up later, through maturation? What are the ingredients of leadership?

**WALTER ISAACSON:** Well, if there were a single ingredient, you know, you could just do a little formula and that would be it. If I look at Benjamin Franklin, and you say, “Let’s look at the founders, the greatest leadership team,” you know, if you wanted to pick one, there were different types of qualities. You had to have really smart people like Jefferson and Madison. You had to have really passionate people of conviction, like Samuel Adams and his cousin John Adams. You had to have men of great rectitude, like a George Washington. And even a Ben Franklin, who can be the glue that holds them together, is very clever, imaginative, and brings people together.

But, if I had to pick one trait of great leadership, it would be the ability to inspire. I’ve just finished a piece I did for *Harvard Business Review*, where people had been talking about how Steve Jobs could be, you know, kind of, you know, rough at times. And I said, “Yes, but that was connected with being inspiring. That’s what made him the leader.” People would walk through walls for Steve Jobs. And he created a management team
around him that, no matter how tough he was on a given day, they felt, “We want to keep marching into battle with him.” They could have gone anywhere.

MARVIN KALB: Is a genius always a leader?

WALTER ISAACSON: No, no. Einstein was not a great leader. Einstein had-- didn’t have a school around him. I mean other scientists of that time, whether it be Max Planck, or Ponqueray (?) or the others-- you know, they all-- Even the great quantum theorists of the time, you know, Niels Bohr, for example, has a school of people that become part of-- So Einstein did not lead by gathering people and having followers. On the other hand, he was a very gentle, wonderful soul, who could make science and his theories magical. So he inspired people without being a pure leader.

MARVIN KALB: Was Jobs a genius?

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah, Jobs was a genius even more than he was smart. In other words, I'm not sure he was-- I mean you and I know a lot of smart people, right. And they don’t usually amount to much. They're a dime a dozen. [laughter] It’s people who can make imaginative leaps that really amount to something. There is a quality of genius that I think is very intuition-driven. And Steve said that he went, as a 17 year old dropout from college, to India to study Buddhism. And he said he learned from that trip the limits of western rationale thinking, you know, what you would call intelligence or something, and the importance of intuition, the ability to gather experiential wisdom and make imaginative leaps.

If you look at the binary star system of the digital age, the two stars that orbit each other, it’s Bill Gates, Steve Jobs. I think Bill Gates may be the smartest person I’ve ever seen in action. He can have two computer screens going, each with seven windows, and process information in a really sharp, analytic way. But, he did not make the leaps of beauty,
aesthetics and the imagination that I think Steve Jobs did in some of the projects. And Steve would describe that simply, in his favorite phrase, which is, “Think different.”

**MARVIN KALB:** Tell me, how does a genius deal with the question of faith, of religion? Does he accept the concept of faith? Or must he have proof in order to accept something?

**WALTER ISAACSON:** Well, I actually end all three of the biographies-- With Ben Franklin’s, thinking about faith. He’s very empirical. He’s asked by Ezra Stiles, the President of Yale, whether he’s accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior. He said, “I’ve, you know, thought about that a bit over my entire life. Now I’m about to find out. So I’m going to quit worrying about it.” [laughter] A very pragmatic man.

Einstein actually had a deep faith, not in a personal God that you could pray to, to break the laws of physics for you, like to have the Redskins win or something [laughter], but a God who was manifest in the laws of the universe, a spirit manifest in the laws of the universe. So he said that made him feel humbled and awed.

As for Steve Jobs, he really did take seriously his Zen Buddhist training. And, near the end of his life, I was sitting in his garden and asked him that question. And I-- You know, he had just told me about his sense of design and simplicity had come from Zen, and why, even on an iPod, there's no on-off switch, because you don’t really need it. It’ll power itself down.

So I said, you know, “Do you believe in God still? Or do you”-- he said, “Well, I’d like to think, based on my training, that something-- there's something more than just what we see in this world, that something lives on after you're gone, that your experiential wisdom and all your knowledge somehow gets embodied into a higher spirit.” Then he said, “But
sometimes I think maybe it’s just like an on-off switch, die-- you die and-click-you're gone.”

So I took a deep breath, and waited a second. And he smiled that half smile he had and said, “That’s why I never liked to put on-off switches on Apple devices.” [laughter] But the answer to the question is, I think every one of them, and probably most people like that, are always open, that curious. They're questioning. They don’t think it’s--

MARVIN KALB: Well, I’m trying to understand--

WALTER ISAACSON: They're not sure.

MARVIN KALB: -- With respect to Einstein, he would examine the entire universe and be absolutely dazzled by the, as you described it, by the order of the universe. And then, to imagine that that wasn’t an accident, somehow that order had to be created.

WALTER ISAACSON: He said the most incomprehensible thing about the universe is the fact that it’s comprehensible. That we can understand it. That it has an order. It didn’t have to be that way.

MARVIN KALB: No. But, if it doesn’t have to be that way, and you're searching for an explanation as to why there is an order, can you advance to the idea of saying there is a God who has made all of that possible?

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah, I’m not sure he would put it in terms of a personal God who’s sort of a watchmaker at the very beginning, who sets everything in motion.

MARVIN KALB: Well not necessarily personal, but an explanation that is larger than his capacity to deal with it scientifically.
WALTER ISAACSON: Precisely. And that’s exactly what he said. Which is, you know, the greatest power is the mysterious, the notion that-- It was sort of like Spinoza’s God, he said, which is, you know, a God whose spirit is manifest in all the beauty and awesome order of nature. He said, “I feel humbled and awed by that. And that’s my spirit of a cosmic religion.” But he also didn’t go around preaching one way or the other, you know, that there was a God who is this way.

I think being a genius means you know the limits of your knowledge. And Einstein knew that the limits of our knowledge get up to that point, where you don’t quite understand the meaning and underlying nature of the universe.

MARVIN KALB: And explain to us, then, Franklin’s view of religion. He seemed more humanistic.

WALTER ISAACSON: Very pragmatic and practical. You know, he believes-- He starts off believing in religion because he said it's good for us. Whether or not it’s right or wrong, people are better if they believe in religion. [laughter] But he believes very tolerant about religion, which I think is the most important thing. I mean he-- During his lifetime, he donated to the building fund of each and every church that was built in Philadelphia. And, at one point, they were building a new hall for itinerate preachers.

If you go in Philadelphia, you look in Independence Hall, you look to your left, there's that old building still called The New Hall. And he wrote the fundraising letter, saying, “Even if the mufti of Constantinople were to send somebody to preach Islam to us, and teach us about Mohammed, we should offer a pulpit and listen, for we might learn.” And on his death bed, he was the largest individual contributor to the Mikveh Israel Synagogue, the first synagogue built there.
So, when he dies, instead of his minister accompanying the casket to the grave, all 35 ministers, preachers and priests of Philadelphia linked arms with the rabbi of the Jews, and marched with him to the grave. So I think his view of religion is that it should have a social utility and be used to unite us, rather than so often, in the past 3,000 years, use it to divide us.

MARVIN KALB: Well how did you come upon these three characters? Put Kissinger aside for a moment.

WALTER ISAACSON: Well, I can't put Kissinger aside. Because what happens is--

MARVIN KALB: You can never put Kissinger aside. [laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: Nor would he want you to. [laughter] That’s right. Marvin, I'm surprised you would even consider putting me aside. [laughter]

MARVIN KALB: You are not as good as Hannity. [laughter] Hannity would never--

WALTER ISAACSON: No, no--[laughter] When I did that book, I was struck by the realism, the realpolitik of his foreign policy, and why it didn’t quite mesh with American idealism. And I was looking for the roots when I was writing the last chapter of the book, of realism in American foreign policy.

And I stumbled across Ben Franklin, who is in Paris, trying to get France on our side in the Revolution. Even back then, France was a bit of a handful. So they had sent old Dr. Franklin over. And he does this great “balance of power” game with the Bourbon pact nations--France, Netherlands, Spain--explaining their interest, vis-à-vis England, why they have to come in on this side of the war. And I was thinking, “Gee, people write about Ben Franklin as some doddering old dude flying a kite and writing, you know, ‘A
penny saved is a penny earned,’” but this guy was a great diplomat. And I looked for biographies of him. There were great biographies of him, like Carl Van Doren’s biography. But Van Doren was an English professor and writes about Franklin as a writer.

So I wanted to do Franklin-- You know, I wanted to do Kissinger-- I mean after Kissinger, I wanted to do Ben Franklin. After doing Franklin, once again, you're struck by something you didn’t know. With Franklin, is that he was a really good experimental scientist. That flying the kite thing, that was the most important experiment of the time, the single fluid theory of electricity. And that lightning is simply a spark. And he captures it, puts it in batteries. Comes up with the name “battery,” all that.

And he would have thought us Philistines if we didn’t love science the way he did-- botany, electricity, physics. And I thought, in my generation, there's a divide between those who tend to love the humanities and those who love the sciences. And I wanted to celebrate the beauty and magic of science. And the best way to do that was through Einstein.

So you have a reason when you write a biography.

MARVIN KALB: And then to Jobs?

WALTER ISAACSON: Well, I actually went off on a dead end at one point. I was starting to write after the hurricane on Louis Armstrong, because I’m from his neighborhood in New Orleans. And I wanted to show that ethnic diversity, that sort of the mix of people, and a culture that rubs elbows and sometimes bumps elbows, adds to creativity. This is where you get great jazz. This is where jazz is born, because of this.
But I couldn’t quite decode Louis Armstrong. I had to give it up. Because I found out I knew everything about Louis Armstrong, everything he did, every day of his life, except for who he was. I didn’t know--

MARVIN KALB: What do you mean by that?

WALTER ISAACSON: I didn’t know what was behind the smile. I didn’t know if he was happy. I didn’t know if he liked white people. I mean, these are fundamental things that, even though I knew I could have written a biography telling you everything about him, but I couldn’t crack the code. And sometimes you just have to give up on something.

And at that time, too, Steve had already talked to me about doing it. I began to realize that he was, indeed, fighting cancer. He had taken a medical leave. I also thought that Steve was a good example of creativity in which you mix a sense of the humanities with a sense of science, technology, and business. And so I became interested in that book instead.

MARVIN KALB: Explain to me, also, why somebody like Jobs, who, from everyone’s testimony, was such an unpleasant man.

WALTER ISAACSON: Well, he wasn’t really that. I mean he was totally charming, charismatic. He ends up-- You have to look at how does it turn out. He turns out with a really loyal set of friends, a really loyal set of colleagues who had been with him for the past 20 years, starting when he came back-- well 15 when he came back to Apple in 1997, and even before. These people could-- These friends could have said, “Hey, this guy is too much trouble,” easily gotten a job at Hewlett Packard or Microsoft. But they stayed loyal to him because the sort of rough edges, you begin to find him charming and emotionally compelling, as I did.
Likewise with his family. He would tell me, “I’m not the world’s greatest family man.” But he had four loving children, a great-- I mean astonishingly great wife, a loving sister, Mona Simpson, the novelist. So you can't make the judgment that this guy wasn’t all that likeable when so many people liked him.

So you have to say, “Okay, he had his rudenesses and rough edges. But what made him so compelling, so inspiring, so charismatic?” And that’s what the narrative of the book tries to do, take a guy who can get kicked out of Apple the first time around, because he’s too much of a handful to deal with. But, in the end, become the greatest and most inspiring technology leader of our time.

MARVIN KALB: But then, is it possible that you were simply taken in by Jobs?

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah, and that’s a problem about writing somebody alive. Jobs had, around him, what was known as the reality distortion field from Star Trek. [laughter] Which meant he could make you believe things that were impossible, just by-- I mean he could make Woz believe he could do Breakout in four days. Woz said, “That’s impossible.” Steve said, “Don’t be afraid. You can do it.” And Woz did it. And, you know, make Corning Glass believe they could make the type of glass that is on your iPhone and iPad. He goes to Wendell Weeks, the CEO, and says, “Don’t be afraid. You can make this type of glass.” And they do.

I think being around Steve, you know, there’ll be other people who write about him, who maybe have more of a distance. I think all of us, you know, you were in the bubble with Henry Kissinger, shuttling the Middle East. So you write from that vantage. I’d come along. I was not on the shuttle missions. I have a bit more distance. And certainly, other people come with more distance. There’s a value to being up close and maybe being
caught a little bit in that force field. And there's a value 10, 15 years later, of, you know, being more objective.

MARVIN KALB: Very good answer. [laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: Thank you.

MARVIN KALB: Now I’d like to take just a moment, now, to remind our radio and television audiences that this is The Kalb Report. I’m Marvin Kalb. And I’m talking with Walter Isaacson the journalist and biographer.

Walter, two of your subjects, Franklin and Jobs, both had an enormous impact on American journalism. And Franklin, you know, helped develop printing press and, as you were saying before, start-up newspapers. Jobs invented the very devices that most people in this room use to find out about the world, to find out news. So my question is, does the new technology, the web, the iPhones, iPads, all of that, do they help raise the quality of journalism?

WALTER ISAACSON: Yes, in most but not all ways. One thing they do-- and you and I were lucky. We were in an age right before this-- is they break the power of the gatekeepers. You worked amongst the greatest of gatekeepers, including Walter Cronkite, who would tell us every evening, “That’s the way it is.”

MARVIN KALB: And most of the time, that was the way it was. [laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: Correct. Which is why it was okay. But a lot of the time, those of us at Time Magazine, CBS News, we were the gatekeepers. We got to decide what people, you know, what opinions they heard, etcetera.
The glory of the digital age, the internet, your iPhones, your-- you know, your ability to search news, all the apps you get on your iPad, is you have thousands of ways to get news. Some of them good-- Like if I'm worried about what’s happening with Netanyahu’s visit, I can go to Haaretz and the Jerusalem Post, not just the local papers. Also, if I'm worried about what’s happening in the central city Broadmoor of New Orleans, where, you know, my family is from, there is now 20 or 30 people doing their own blogs or whatever. And I know which ones are good and which ones not to trust.

Obviously, there is a down side, (a) to the destruction of the business model for many types of journalism, like daily newspapers have had, you know, their business model devastated by many things, including the end of classified ads in the big department stores. But also, the fact that you can get what you want online. You may not want to pay for a newspaper. I think that’s a passing, you know, thing. We will figure out the next business model. We’re already figuring it out. And I would say that, even though we can be grumpy about bad bloggers, the notion that the supply and sources of information have expanded, you know, 10,000-fold is so good that it overwhelms the bad.

Steve Jobs, you know, really understood, too-- For example, take music, which was, you know, it’s not like journalism. Music was being destroyed, in terms of the business, by Napster and peer-to-peer file sharing. And Steve said, “In order to make it work, we have to compete with the fact that on Napster, Kazaa, you know, the peer-to-peer sites, you can get your music for free. So let’s make it simple, elegant, easy and trustworthy.”

And he comes up with iTunes and the iTunes Stores, and originally 99 cents, it’s that easy. And it helps create a new future for the possibility of music, in which it’s not just the big labels that get to decide, with their ANR people, who’s the next big band. But, you know, you have a chance on iTunes or anywhere else to be a band.
Likewise, with the iPad, one of the most amazing things about the iPad, besides its beautiful design and incredible software, is the notion of the app. Something he didn’t think of right at first. In fact, had to be talked into it. Which is, everybody, from my daughter to, you know, anybody can be working in the garage, or an apartment, or a dorm room, creating a beautiful app that might do something kind of cool, might tell you what’s really happening in the college quad or whatever it may be. And I think apps allow for enormous creativity and a pretty good business model, because you can actually sell apps.

**MARVIN KALB:** Now, I want to go back to the first part of your answer, which had to do with journalism. You were saying, if I understood you right, that the good thing about the new technology is that it allows you to get to many different locations for information. Fine. Accepted. My question had to do with the quality of the journalism that you're getting. Has the new technology, in your judgment, improved the quality of the journalism that we’re getting? Not that you can go to an Israeli newspaper, and an Arab newspaper to find additional information. But, is the information that you're getting better? Is it cleaner?

**WALTER ISAACSON:** Is it more objective? Well, on the more objective, no. But sometimes that’s an upside, which is, people have passions in one way. People have passions the other, as opposed to everybody having to be part of, you know, what you would call a network news model of objectivity.

In terms of reliability, surprisingly more reliable than you would think, just like Wikipedia surprises you as being astonishingly reliable, which you would think a crowd source encyclopedia would not be. But it is. Likewise--

**MARVIN KALB:** It could be awfully inaccurate in many ways as well. I mean it’s getting better.
**WALTER ISAACSON:** I wouldn’t want to debate Wikipedia. But, if I read something in the Britannica and Wikipedia these days, I might trust Wikipedia more, I mean in terms of its updating quality, especially since the Britannica is no longer printing. But that’s a different area.

**MARVIN KALB:** Okay.

[laughter]

**WALTER ISAACSON:** So I think one of the odd things about the past 25 years of the digital age was it got a little bit too much, in my mind, web-based. Meaning, it was based on websites in which everybody sort of put out information, as opposed to creating communities, which is the way the internet was before the advent of the web, which no student here will remember, but back in the days of bulletin board services and online and the well. People shared information and learned who to trust in communities of information.

We are about to see that happening again. That’s what social networks are. That’s what Facebook is. And even on mobile technology, it tends to be based more on social networks rather than websites that are published. So I think there is a reliability that comes from social networking.

**MARVIN KALB:** Okay. Steve Jobs. I can accept that he has changed journalism. But I’m still not hearing an answer that he’s actually improved it.

**WALTER ISAACSON:** It’s hard. I mean I go to-- about half the sites I go to on my iPad every morning are traditional. I subscribe to the *New York Times*. I pay money so I can get every article. I do that with great magazines, from *The New Yorker* and *The*
Atlantic to Time Magazine, my old place. But I also find there are new journalistic outlets that are just as reliable, such as Politico, that really couldn’t have existed before the advent of even the iPad or the digital age.

Secondly, I find that there are sources of information I get that are not pure journalism, but are people who are writing blogs about the New Orleans Saints, you know, the football team I follow, or the rebirth of this neighborhood in New Orleans. And to me, that’s a wealth and richness of journalism which would be 100 percent great if it weren’t undermining the traditional journalism, which I still think we need. And it’s undermining it in terms of the business model. But that’s really just a question of-- well, I guess the business model is a big question. But it doesn’t automatically make journalism worse. It just makes the business model harder.

MARVIN KALB: No, I don’t mean making it worse. I’m trying to think of ways in which you are describing a new technological system that makes the product better. But I think I note the--

WALTER ISAACSON: Well real quickly, you know, we talked about this earlier, but crowd sourcing can be good or can be bad. And the fact that, whether it’s after a hurricane or in a big world event, you’re getting a lot of people creating a crowd sourced pool of information, that is really cool. I mean this is great. Yeah.

MARVIN KALB: My friend Ted Koppel, probably your friend too, warned years ago that the technological tale, as he put it, has begun to wag the editorial dog. And do you see that danger now enveloping what might be called the endangered species of modern-day journalism?

WALTER ISAACSON: I think that, if you don’t adopt-- and I think there are some things that aren't great. I mean I think, you know, every journalist in the world is
Tweeting every 12 seconds. This is probably not adding to the wealth of knowledge as much as it’s detracting from the amount of time you have. I also think that probably, we’ve reached the tipping point, where there are more people blogging than actually reading blogs. [laughter] And so, I do think these will-- you know, fads will pass, and MySpaces will disappear.

But I think what Steve Jobs did, with the iPad in particular, is create a platform for the next wave, where you can make not just some random blog, but a really beautiful product. And Steve was able to connect content, technology, software and hardware. I think the iPad will transform journalism for the better.

It’ll transform textbooks for the better, same reason. Textbooks are a brain-dead industry, unlike our old industry of journalism. And it deserves to be disrupted. I think, you know, you’ll have really bright people creating great ways-- like Kahn Academy to learn algebra, that are much better than the textbooks being approved by, you know, some school board somewhere.

MARVIN KALB: I think you’ll agree that the big question these days, taking all of that into account, is will people pay for the content? You alluded to this a moment ago. Steve Jobs said, “I believe people are willing to pay for content.” And, reading your stuff, I get the impression that you essentially believe that as well.

WALTER ISAACSON: Correct.

MARVIN KALB: And, what I want to know is, where’s the proof? Where’s the beef?

WALTER ISAACSON: Well, as I said with songs, they used to be essentially free.

MARVIN KALB: No, journalism.
WALTER ISAACSON: Okay. So on journalism, I-- the New York Times, to take what I think is the greatest, you know, serious journalism right now, for 15 years it seemed, gave away the New York Times for free. I was a subscriber to the Times. I paid quite a bit of money. It was like a hundred and some-odd dollars. I finally said, “Why do I have it delivered and pay for it, now, because I read it the night before on the web.” So I quit getting home delivery of the Times. This was a really bad business model, I think, for the New York Times, to take paying subscribers and say, “Never mind. Take it for free.”

MARVIN KALB: Okay.

WALTER ISAACSON: Now the New York Times, both with its iPad apps and with its web product, is charging people. And it is doing it successfully. It’s giving you some articles for free, but then making you subscribe. We’re all like blind men, sort of feeling our way to what’s the light and how will it work.

MARVIN KALB: Some new financial model.

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah. I pay now for Time Magazine. I pay-- you know. So I also think that eventually, we will have an easier payment system. And this is something that Steve would have, you know, Steve Jobs talked about, where instantly, you can pay 99 cents for something. So it can be a spur of the moment purchase to get this week’s New Yorker or this week’s Time Magazine. I think that will [00:38:17]. Because people don’t mind paying 99 cents. They mind the whole mental transaction costs of passwords and filling in your credit card and going through all that. But, if it’s “Click here for, you know, one click, 99 cents, for this week’s Time Magazine,” I think people will do that. And we have evidence that they do do it, I mean that people do small payments easily.
MARVIN KALB: I'm fascinated by one thing about your career. Why did you leave *Time*, where you were editor of the magazine, and join CNN? And why, two years later, did you leave CNN to join Aspen? And I’m wondering whether you can keep a job.
[laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: Well, I was at *Time* for 1978 to 19--

MARVIN KALB: Okay, so you kept a job at *Time*.

WALTER ISAACSON: 2000, yeah.

MARVIN KALB: You're keeping your job at Aspen.

WALTER ISAACSON: 32 years, yeah.

MARVIN KALB: But there were two years at CNN [simultaneous conversation]

WALTER ISAACSON: I will tell you something you don’t want to hear.

MARVIN KALB: What?

WALTER ISAACSON: I didn’t like television.

MARVIN KALB: Why?

WALTER ISAACSON: I didn’t have a feel for it.

MARVIN KALB: They took those beautiful cameras--
WALTER ISAACSON: I know. I like you on television. [laughter] You have to have a feel for the products you create. I loved print. It’s an old technology, but there are those of us who love it. I love the creation of beautiful magazine pages, or, for that matter, a book, or even an eBook, which is basically print on a digital screen.

And Time, Inc., or Time-Warner, which owned my magazine after I had been there 30 some-odd years, said, “Why don’t you go to CNN?” And I thought, “Well this will be great. I’ll learn something new.” But I wasn’t great at it. I just didn’t have the feel for what makes great television. And sometimes, in life, you go on a detour and you say, “You know, I will never be as great as your producer” -- you know, anybody. She worked at CNN. All these people knew television. It wasn’t something I knew.

MARVIN KALB: Then why did you get into it at all?

WALTER ISAACSON: You know, I actually was-- I mean, I don’t want to get into the gory details, but I had, you know, been there for 30 some-odd years and had resisted being moved to television. But the people at Time-Warner said, “Oh no, you really should do this.” And I got talked into it.

MARVIN KALB: What was it, specifically, then about television that you didn’t like?

WALTER ISAACSON: I loved the journalism, and I loved CNN and what it stood for, and I love CNN now and what it stands for, which is good, I think objective, journalism. I did-- It wasn’t so much I didn’t like, but I didn’t have a feel for how it worked, how you put it together, how you created shows. And, if you don’t have a feel for something in your fingertips, it’s hard work. And I would get up in the morning, and Larry King would say, “The President’s speech is during my time slot. I should anchor it.” And Anderson Cooper would say, “No, I should.” And Wolf Blitzer would say, “No, I should.” And I wouldn’t know the right answer. It’s just that simple. I wasn’t good.
MARVIN KALB: Why not?

WALTER ISAACSON: Why not? [laughter] You should have come there and talked to me.

MARVIN KALB: I know. [laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: I think that there are certain forms-- I won't call them art forms, but trade forms or whatever, that you begin to love and really have a feel for. The putting together of magazines is a very arcane one. The writing of narrative nonfiction is an arcane one. Running a think tank is an arcane one. But those are ones that made me feel comfortable. But trying to figure out how do you produce a TV show just wasn’t in my comfort zone.

MARVIN KALB: Okay. So why, then, did you leave the world of journalism into what is probably called the think tank world?

WALTER ISAACSON: I wanted to get engaged in public policy. I cared about the substance of it. And, to be blunt about it, journalism, at that period, with the rise of various cable TVs, and the different types of shout shows and whatever, had gotten more and more away from the substance of policy, governance, world affairs, and more into whatever it was. And I wanted to move to the other extreme.

MARVIN KALB: But you're not blaming television news for that, are you?

WALTER ISAACSON: No. I think that there's--

MARVIN KALB: Or are you?
WALTER ISAACSON: I do think cable, the rise of cable television nighttime talk shows, just like the rise of AM radio talk shows, has not been the most edifying advance in journalism in our lifetime. [laughter]

MARVIN KALB: Who is responsible for that?

WALTER ISAACSON: I think when I was at CNN-- and take Christiane Amanpour, who I loved, Amanpour, who I really admired. And we’d spend a lot of time doing a really great piece, say even before the Iraq war, on women in Iraq. And then, boom, something would happen, like a car chase, or an OJ Simpson, or whatever. And you could get much higher ratings by having very opinionated people giving some thoughts about OJ Simpson than doing that interesting long-form journalism.

Whose fault is that? I don’t know. But it’s sort of the system wasn’t-- But I now think there is a hunger for good reported journalism, whether it’s in print, or at CNN, or, for that matter, the other cable networks. And so, I do see it swinging back.

MARVIN KALB: I hope so. Your friend Richard Stengel, another editor at Time, once said, “There are two Walters, one who goes to parties and one who stays home and writes all the time.” And the New York Times once referred to you as, “The consummate partygoer, the operator of all time.” Are you, in fact, a big party--?

WALTER ISAACSON: Not anymore. I think those were the days before I was, you know, happily married, had children, you know, whatever.

MARVIN KALB: No, no, because I’m thinking, if you were, when did you find the time to write these books?
WALTER ISAACSON: No, no, those were-- I vaguely remember those days. [laughter] Fondly but vaguely. [laughter] In fact, probably more fondly than they deserve. But yes.

MARVIN KALB: Where is the leadership of journalism today?

WALTER ISAACSON: That’s a good question. I think there are good leaders in journalism at the great papers. I think what we’re missing is the innovators in journalism that are really keeping a step ahead of the game, leaders the way Steve Jobs was a leader in the technology field. And so you have, I think, great editors running the great newspapers-- *New York Times, Washington Post*, others. I think it’s hard for them to be running great papers but also saying, “How do we reinvent this animal called journalism?”

MARVIN KALB: You mean at a time of this financial in-between world, where we don’t know quite what the new system is going to be.

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah.

MARVIN KALB: There is no time, really, to develop the leader?

WALTER ISAACSON: I think the time, the resources, and whatever, to totally innovate. This is why Steve Jobs was such, in my mind, a genius, which is, whenever he had something vaguely successful going on like the iPod, he said, “Let’s cannibalize it, because we have to figure out the next thing.”

MARVIN KALB: What do you mean cannibalize?
WALTER ISAACSON: Well, in other words, you’d take the iPod, it has a thousand songs in your pocket, and he says, “Why don’t we make a phone and put the songs on the phone?” And people say, “Well, that’ll destroy the market for the iPod.” He said, “Yeah, but we have to innovate. We always-- Because if we don’t cannibalize ourselves, somebody else will eat us for lunch.”

MARVIN KALB: Well, to go back to my earlier question, to whom do we look these days for inspiration in the field of journalism? Who are the new Edward R. Murrows, for example?

WALTER ISAACSON: I’m sorry. Every now and then you have to just say, “I don’t know.” And I don’t.

MARVIN KALB: Whom do you look to for inspiration in the world of journalism?

WALTER ISAACSON: I look to great writers who believe in reporting. And those are people I follow, often in the mainstream press, whether it’s, you know, David Brooklyn, Tom Friedman and people like that, or even online, you know, Jeff Goldberg of the Atlantic. I mean I think the Atlantic Monthly is a great magazine. I think The New Yorker is astonishingly good as a magazine. I think Time Magazine and Newsweek, now, with Tina Brown, are really good magazines.

Obviously, as I said, I happen to be one of those five percent of the people whose fingertips love magazines as opposed to remote controls or, you know, whatever. But I read those magazines, and I’m awed by them. People who are not just sitting in their basements bloviating on a blog, but are out there, you know, in the Middle East, in Tahrir Square, or, for that matter, in Ames, Iowa, actually doing some reporting. And you can find that. You can find quality journalism, you know, in cable as I said, a lot of the CNN stuff I love. Obviously, I still think the network news are very, very good. I love the PBS

**MARVIN KALB:** But that’s an awful lot for you to look at, and to read, and have the time to run Aspen, and to write all of these blockbuster bestsellers.

**WALTER ISAACSON:** Trust me. If you're spending your time reading a good magazine or something, it’s a more efficient transmission of information and ideas than getting it through, you know, other means.

**MARVIN KALB:** True enough. What is it-- How do you work your day? I mean you're running Aspen and you're writing bestsellers. [simultaneous conversation]

**WALTER ISAACSON:** I get up late.

**MARVIN KALB:** How do you do both?

**WALTER ISAACSON:** Aspen has got a really good team. And I go there-- I love having a day job, meaning I'm not one of these people who just wants to get up and write a book. I tend to consume information in the morning when I’m hazily drinking coffee. And I do it now on my iPad more than on paper. But I do get a couple newspapers on paper. But I flip through, sometimes just lying around, you know, my iPad going to the sites I like, and the-- you know, whether it’s the ones we mentioned.

Then, there's a wonderful team at the Aspen Institute. And then, at night, I write books. I tend not to, as I say, watch TV as much.

**MARVIN KALB:** So you're not doing the big party circuit?
WALTER ISAACSON: No, I tend not to watch TV as much-- I mean, as I said, or go to movies, perhaps, as much as I should. And I tend to try to write every night, from nine p.m.--I'm not going to quite make it tonight-- until about 1:30 or two a.m. So I get four hours of writing every night. And two a.m. is pretty late. But, if you sleep until, you know, 8:30 or nine, it’s not that bad.

MARVIN KALB: So you do your writing, then, after your day job is over?

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah, there's nobody phoning me. There’s nobody around. There's no reason to check my email if it’s one a.m. And so I can write.

MARVIN KALB: Right. Do you have a team of researchers to help you?

WALTER ISAACSON: No, no, no, never have had.

MARVIN KALB: You have never had?

WALTER ISAACSON: Never used a researcher, never known how to use a researcher. [laughter] Meaning, what-- Do they go interview people for you? Then you miss it. Do they go searching the archives for you? Then you miss things. So I’ve never figured out why. Plus the fun is the hunt, the hunt for that information. Why let somebody else have the fun? [laughter]

MARVIN KALB: Do you see yourself giving up that day job within the next couple of years, and just devoting yourself to book writing?

WALTER ISAACSON: No. I tend to actually like to have a day job, a place where you have interaction with people, where there's a coffee machine, and where you have to-- I love face-to-face meetings. This is something else Steve Jobs said that connected with
me. Which is, here is a guy in the digital age. And you would think you could do everything by email and whatever. He said, “No. Creativity comes when real people actually get together face-to-face. And you’ve got to ban PowerPoint presentations. They actually have to engage in a real discussion, not show slides.” But he built the Pixar headquarters, and then building the new Apple headquarters, to have these huge atriums that you have to go to, to get to the bathroom, even, so that, by serendipity, you run into a lot of people. And he ran a lot of freewheeling meetings, where everybody challenged each other.

I think that having face-to-face exchange of ideas with people is the most exciting thing you can do each day, which is why I like going into the Aspen Institute office each day.

MARVIN KALB: But I’ve stopped by the Aspen Institute as much as I can, actually. And it’s a wonderful place. And I’m thinking that it is a spearhead, really, for a discussion of public policy issues.

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah.

MARVIN KALB: And you said earlier in our interview that, when you left journalism, you wanted to go into a world of public policy. Do you see yourself one day being a diplomat?

WALTER ISAACSON: Nobody’s asked. [laughter]

MARVIN KALB: But would you like that kind of life?

WALTER ISAACSON: I don’t know. I mean you had the same issues yourself. There's many things-- You know, one of the things about life is, there's so many forks you could take, and you kind of wish that life was not a sequential chronology, but was a way you
could explore many paths. And there are many paths I didn’t take that I would kind of be curious what they’d be like. There are many paths I would probably like to take. But there's a lot of, you know, juggling. And we’ll see what comes along.

MARVIN KALB: Okay. There are many young people in this audience, as you can see. And I’ll bet any number of them would like to be journalists. At this particular point in your own career, as you look back upon your career, all of the problems that you’ve already-- we’ve been talking about here, would you heartily recommend a career in journalism to all of these young people?

WALTER ISAACSON: Well, not if you want to make a living. [laughter] Actually, I would. First of all, journalism has been for centuries, and will remain for centuries, the most glorious, exciting, wonderful and magical trade that you can be in. You get to-- Whatever interests you, you pursue. Whatever your curiosity is piqued, you get to ask the questions. You get to write about it. You get to share information and gather information. This is awesome.

MARVIN KALB: Somebody once told me you get a front row seat on history.

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah. And that’s a little bit of a problem, too, because you're sitting as an observer of history, not a maker of it. So you always know that as a journalist. And that’s one of the “in the arena” quote of Teddy Roosevelt, which is, “Are you truly in the arena?” I think, as a journalist, you can be in the arena.

I think, also, it’s a very exciting time to go into journalism now, because, as I watch people in college that are about to do it, there are so many new ways to do it. You can invent an app that will gather information in a certain way. You can create--

MARVIN KALB: Who’s going to pay you?
WALTER ISAACSON: I think that, in the first year after Steve Jobs opened the app store on iTunes, I think-- it’s in my book, but-- two billion dollars was paid out to people who made apps. An entire industry was born instantly, because you can click. And, whether it’s slinging Angry Birds or having, you know, an app that tells you about the NFL football games coming up, people pay $2.99, $4.99, whatever it may be, and a lot of people do it, and that’s a whole industry. And people coming out of college, like my daughter, are creating books that are apps, teaching apps, you know, curricula, music apps, apps to create things, and journalism apps.

MARVIN KALB: Give me an example of a journalism app.

WALTER ISAACSON: I use Politico on the iPad, which is not a super sophisticated thing. But it means I can just click, and things pop up. I can search. I have the archives. I know how to get what I want. I can get feeds of material. If I like Mike Allen’s letter, it feeds in because of that. This is-- And those are very reliable, very good journalists, Mike Allen out there on the trail, all the people doing Politico. That would be the app I hit first in the morning when I want journalism.

Secondly, you can take a traditional app. Like Time Magazine has an app on the iPad. But it gives you a different-- it gives you deeper, richer, more, allows you to share information, what you're reading. So it gives you more functionality than the old newspaper does, even though it doesn’t give you the wonderful feel of the paper.

MARVIN KALB: Quickly, 20 years from now, are we going to have newspapers to pick up and feel?

WALTER ISAACSON: I think so. I think everything will stabilize. [simultaneous conversation] Okay. They’ll stabilize. Paper is a great technology. Not everybody will
use it. But, if we had been getting all of our information on an iPad and a screen for the past 400 years, and then Guttenberg had come along and said, “I can put it on paper and deliver it to your doorstep. And you can take it on the bus and in the backyard and the bathtub,” [laughter] you’d say, “Wow. Paper. That’s a great technology. It will replace the internet.” [laughter]

MARVIN KALB: Walter, I’m sorry to say that our time is up. But you’ve exhausted my knowledge of the new technology, anyway. [laughter] But I want first to thank our wonderful audience here and everywhere, for their interest, for taking the time to tune in. I want to thank our guest, Walter Isaacson, for sharing his time with us and his optimistic insights into the new world in which we live, and for all of you who share my passion, anyway, for a free press as the bulwark of a free society, thank you. Thank you. Thank you. And that’s it for now. I’m Marvin Kalb. And, as Ed Murrow used to say, good night and good luck.

[applause]

WALTER ISAACSON: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[applause]

MARVIN KALB: Thank you all very, very much. There are microphones over there and over here. And, if you have a question, please go to the microphone, identify yourself. If you're a student, tell us at what university, where you are in your career. And please ask a question. I get terribly impatient if you make a speech. And I’ll probably cut you off. And I don’t mean to be rude, so I’m laying the groundwork out right now. We’ll start over here. Please identify yourself and ask a question.

[side remarks]
Q: Hi there, Mr. Isaacson. Thanks a lot, Mr. Kalp and Mr. Isaacson. I’m a producer here in the city. First of all, my apologies to my lady friend for showing up late. Second, when I was an undergrad I came across a book written by Evan Thomas and some other guy, who had noted Chip Bolin, Avril Harriman, a few other folk, about the six men and the world they made. Who, aside from Steve Jobs, Bill Gates maybe, and Andy Gross would be the six men this day who made the world that we live in? Thanks.

WALTER ISAACSON: Thank you. *The Wise Men* was, as I said, about the creators of American foreign policy. If you were to take the current move of the digital age, it is, I think, towards social networking and mobile. And I think the creators of that new age are Larry Page, Mark Zuckerburg, Steve Jobs in, you know, our memory. Probably I would put still Microsoft in there, because I think they're going to do some gaming things. I am not a total expert on mobile gaming. But I think Zynga and others that are creating social networked gaming, the people creating that, I would consider that.

If you want to go back a little bit to what I would say would be the wise geeks of the time, as I say, the twin pillars were Steve Jobs and Bill Gates. But you also have to put in the people who did the microchip, which is mainly Robert Noyce, and creates Intel, and the people who created the internet, which are not very well known, other than Al Gore. [laughter] You know, Lich(?) Leiter(?), Len Kleinrock, Vint Cerf, and others.

So it’s odd-- and this is why I’m trying to do-- why I wanted to do Steve Jobs, but I also want to do this next book-- that we don’t celebrate the creative heroes of our digital age the way we might our sports heroes, or our-- even our political-- You know, there are more books about, you know, politicians who didn’t get elected than there are about people who invented Facebook and Google. I can't quite see with that light.

MARVIN KALB: There is somebody there. Yes, please.
Q: Hi, I’m an engineering student at George Washington University. I am specifically interested in Jobs’ technical background. I mean he was at the Vanguard Art of Technology, but his university education was incomplete.

WALTER ISAACSON: To put it mildly, yes.

Q: And, in terms of the technological innovation, was he more of someone who knew how to surround himself with talent to fulfill the vision of technology he had? Or how much did his own technical background play into that innovation?

WALTER ISAACSON: I think the former is true. He was able to— I mean, you know, Wozniak was the great engineer, the guy who does the first Apple and the Apple II. Steve is a person who says, “That’s an amazing circuit board. And, by the way, you can make it better.” And he pushes him to make it better. But also says, “You’re waving this circuit board around the home brew computer club, and want to give out the schematics to a whole lot of, you know, hobbyists with bad facial hair. Why don’t we actually package it, put a case around it, power supply, monitor, keyboards, make it a consumer product.” So his field was not for the engineering but for the creation of a consumer product.

Q: Hi. I’m Harris Davidson, a student at GW University. So you talked, a lot about, in the Jobs book about his famous temper, and how he was very volatile, but how he was also a very compassionate figure. I’m wondering if he ever got angry with you during the interview process, if he ever cursed you out, and how you reacted.

WALTER ISAACSON: Well one time he did. It was actually the day before the iPad, the original iPad was launched. And my publisher had put in the catalogue, in the database for forthcoming books, a cover of the book with the title, which we hadn’t really gone over that much. But they just needed a placeholder, so obviously reporting the book.
And it was a picture of Steve Jobs in an apple. And it sort of said, “iSteve.” And I didn’t pay much attention to it. But, of course, in this day and age, you put that in an obscure catalogue in a database, and suddenly people are blogging it all over the place, because anything to do with Apple people blog like crazy.

I didn’t even know it was being blogged all over the place that day, because I had forgotten they had put it up. But I land in San Francisco Airport, and I’m on that big United Airlines, you know, concourse there. And I take out my iPhone, and I see the thing you least want to see, which is seven missed phone calls from Steve Jobs. [laughter]

Now this is the day before he’s launching the iPad. So I know he’s not calling me to ask how the family is, right. [laughter]

So I hit “return call,” as you can, just by going like that, ingenious of the interface. And the worst thing happens, which is, he answers right away. Because usually, he can ignore when it says “Walter Isaacson calling,” and he doesn’t want it. And he reamed me out, from here to Sunday. It took me about a minute or two to figure out what he was reaming me out about. But I had no taste. That cover totally sucked. It showed how stupid and what my bad taste was, that I’d even allow that to happen. He did not want to cooperate with me anymore. And didn’t even want to see me at the iPad launch because it was such an ugly cover design.

And I didn’t get a word in edgewise for a while. And I’m standing there with the phone in the San Francisco Airport concourse. And finally, he says, thank God-- because he had asked for no control over the book. He said, “I’m not even going to read the book. You have total control. I want it to be your book, not-- you know, I want it to be independent.” But he said, “I’m only going to keep cooperating because nobody’s going to read your damn book anyway. But they’ll look at the cover. I’m only going to cooperate if you let me have some control over the cover design, let me help with the cover design.”
It took me close to half a second to say, “Yes. Sure.” [laughter] I mean, here is the greatest graphic design eye of our era saying, “Let me help design the cover of the book.” Does anybody have the book? I mean, I’m sure you all have probably seen. But, and look at that cover. That cover is Steve Jobs designed it. I mean, and it is so Steve Jobs-like, you know, absolutely simple, absolutely clean.

**MARVIN KALB:** And absolutely magnificently egocentric.

[laughter]

**WALTER ISAACSON:** But so anyway, that was the worst run-in I had with him. The good news was, I didn’t have to say anything during the half hour it happened, except for, “Yes, sure,” [laughter] when he asked me if I’d let him control it. And then he said, “Fine. I’ll be-- You know, we’ll talk about it tomorrow.” And that was it.

But the other quick-- I’m sorry to taking the time on this-- There were times that I really saw his petulance. And, you know, you could just get on his wrong side by saying, “It was so sunny today. We took a walk.” And he’d say, “It wasn’t sunny,” you know, or something. He would just-- So one time, really just less than a year ago, I was coming out there. My wife happened to be with me. We landed and got to Palo Alto. I texted him saying, “I’ve gotten into town,” you know, where I am. “And my wife is with me.” And so boom, he texts back to me, “Bring her on over. We’ll just eat in the kitchen,” because his family was out of town, his wife and kids.

So I say to Cathy, who you know, I say, “Now Cathy, be prepared. This guy is prickly. He can be kind of rude. If you ask him a question, he can sort of dismiss it as stupid,” etcetera, etcetera. We get to the house, and there he is. He’s actually, you know, putting the food-- not exactly the biggest feast in the world. It’s, you know, vegan from the garden, but that’s all right. Putting it on. And he starts talking to Cathy. And he’s totally
charming. For a full hour and a half, he just-- Doesn’t even notice me. I tried to say something, he’s like ignoring me. “Tell me what you do,” to my wife. You know, he’s, “What do you think of this? Let me show you this new product I’m doing.”

So Cathy comes away and said, “You're totally wrong about this guy. He’s the sweetest, nicest, most polite, kindest person I’ve ever met.” I said, “Yeah, okay, okay. He’s good,” I said, “He’s good at doing what he does.”

Q: My name is Cecile. I’m a GW exchange student from France. I have a question. For me, one of the main changes that the digital age brought that you did not talk about is how the internet changed newspapers and TV shows into global media accessible all around the world, on YouTube or through websites, and how some news websites decided to open. For example, like I know the Huffington Post opened recently a French edition. And so my question would be, do you think, in the future, we’re going to have media that are more and more global? And do journalists think that their audience is now not only national, but global when they're writing?

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah, I did try to talk about the fact that I love going to websites, be it from New Orleans or Jerusalem or Bethlehem and Ramallah, you know. So I think that’s great that everything we do is global. I think it’s trickier than that. But Arianna Huffington is a great strategist at figuring it out and very smart, which is, everything is both global and hyper-local. In fact, if you look at what Huffington/AOL is doing with Patch, it’s doing things that you couldn’t do before, like covering my old neighborhood of Broadmoor Central City in the heart of New Orleans, in a way that, you know, couldn’t be covered even by the Times-Picayune because it’s like every middle school sporting event, and every new restaurant that’s opened in the neighborhood.

And so, what that allows is a global citizenry to get to the very niche, and sometimes local, interests they have. So I can be traveling, as I was last week in Sao Paolo, Brazil,
but I kind of want to know, you know, everything from Jeremy Lin to uptown New Orleans, and if they're going to open the new library finally, and what day it’s going to open, because I might go there.

And so, from my iPad in a hotel room in Sao Paolo, I can be reading a neighborhood report from inner city New Orleans. So it’s both global and hyper-local, if you know what I mean.

Q: Hi, I’m Rob Kimmer. I’m a GW law alumnus. Mr. Isaacson, do you-- In terms of the next big thing, you're exposed to a lot of geniuses through the Aspen Institute and [01:08:28] and everything. Do you think you’ve met the next game changers? Or do you think there's sort of a lapse of time that has to happen between, sort of, the real big--

WALTER ISAACSON: Well, I think, you know, you can see the glimmers of the next big game changers saying-- pick a field. But, if you want to pick technology, which is, I think, what you're asking, the huge game changer will be voice recognition, which we’re starting to see with Siri on the iPhone, voice recognition, meaning I can say-- At Steve’s last board meeting, when he submits his resignation, they are introducing-- I don’t know if you know-- On your latest iPhone, you can talk to it. And there's something called Siri, SIRI, which is the program that understands what you say, which is a difficult-- one of the most difficult things in the world. We think computers are really smart. But a two year old can understand language better than the biggest computer sometimes.

But you’ve now gotten, as you probably know from your iPhone, the ability to actually have a phone that can figure out what you're saying. And so Steve is trying to stump it at that meeting. He says, “Do I need an umbrella tomorrow?” And it says-- It knows exactly where he is because of GPS. And it knows how to translate that. “Umbrella, do I?” It says, “It’s not supposed to rain in Palo Alto tomorrow,” it says. You go, “Wow. That’s pretty smart.” He even tries to stump it, you know, with a few other questions. Finally he
says, “Are you a man or a woman?” And this-- because it’s a very good program, it knows how to do that. It says, “They have not yet assigned me a gender.” [laughter]

I think voice recognition will totally transform what technology is. Because, at the moment, you have to physically use technology. You have to go and enter information and get it back. It would be nice to walk into this room-- or not this room, it’s a little bit-- but, you know, walk into my office at Dupont Circle or my house in Georgetown, and say, “Did the Saints win? What’s tomorrow’s weather? Can you get Charlie Rose on TV?” I’m sorry. We have Charlie Rose. I can use Charlie Rose. Not a real competitor, you know, for your show. “Can I get Marvin Kalb on The Kalb Report tonight on TV?” and have it be what’s called a natural interface.

That will be, I think, the next great breakthrough and will make computing ubiquitous-- I mean computers-- it won't be computers, but the digital technology so ubiquitous, it’ll be like electricity. You won't even think, “Oh I’m using technology.” You’ll just interface with it that way. That’s one of a hundred examples I could give. But it’s probably the most exciting in the next five years.

MARVIN KALB: What about a way to end war?

WALTER ISAACSON: You know, I’ll take that seriously for a moment.

MARVIN KALB: I hope so.

WALTER ISAACSON: Which is, the ability of social networks to cause people to change behaviors they don’t like, including leaders, whether they be Mubarak or the people trying to stop-- I don’t know-- contraception-- you know. I mean, being part of healthcare plans. Or you wrote with your daughter a book about how social movement
finally ended the Vietnam War. I’m simplifying part of the book. But that could happen in the digital age at about a thousand-fold the speed, I’m just guessing.

And so, if people decide that something is really bad-- I mean you looked at-- it’s kind of a messy example. But the Lord’s Resistance Army, and the social media that was popping up around it, that’s not going to end that war. And so, we don’t automatically do it.

But I do think social media has the potential, both to cause wars at times-- I mean, you know, [01:12:35] people off, but also to stop leaders from doing things that the people don’t approve.

MARVIN KALB: I hope you’re right about that. We’ve got about three more minutes to go.

WALTER ISAACSON: I’ll answer more quickly.

Q: My name is Brandon Smith. I’m from Utah State University. My question is, you talked about business models being changed with technology. We’ve got the internet, bloggers, apps, and how those have changed the media outlet and their business models. How do you see people who-- the push for self-publishing, like in Amazon, people self-publishing. How is that going to change the business model for books? And how do you see that playing out in the future?

WALTER ISAACSON: Well, I see two things playing out in the book market in the future. One is that, just as in the music market, you no longer need the big labels or publishing houses. I think that they will serve a purpose. They’re great industrial organizations for creating books, marketing them, editing them. I have a great editor, you know. I want Simon and Schuster.
But, it will be possible for, instead of 20 people per season to publish big books, the way it was— or 40 people, you know, 10,000 people can publish books. The problem then doesn’t become how can you publish a book, but how do you find the right book? Some, especially with music, it’s done through social networks, where I’m on, you know, Ping, or I’m on Facebook. And it’s like your friends are listening to Cold Play— show my age—or something. So it’s finding books in an age in which there are no more gatekeepers saying, “There's a limited number of books that will be published this year, and then we will advertise them and get book reviewers with the New York Times that will review them.

The second thing that happened is, we’re still pouring old wine into new bottles. My Steve Jobs book gets poured into electronic form for your Kindle and your iPad. My daughter is creating books that are made for the digital platform, meaning they embed everything from video to audio to, “Let’s drill down deep on how the iPad was designed,” or, “Let’s go off on a tangent to find out what Wozniak did after he left Apple.” So you can have a book that is not made to just, you know, as a narrative that was made for paper poured into a digital form, but something that’s very interactive, that might allow people to say, “I’m going to annotate Walter’s book.”

I was actually at Next(?) Computer in the late 1980s, and here is what he did when he designed that box. And so, you can get my book with, also, many people’s annotations. There’s a million things we can do with creating a new form of content created for this digital age, more than just many more people writing traditional books and pouring them into electronic format.

MARVIN KALB: We’ve run out of time. But I’d like to be fair and try to get one more question in.
WALTER ISAACSON: I said I’d be short and I can’t.

MARVIN KALB: One more question please.

Q: I’m Rachel, and I work for NPR, which I was sorry not to hear you mention as one of the examples of great journalism.

WALTER ISAACSON: It is an example of great journalism and great shows.

Q: Yeah, I agree. [laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: No. I mean, it’s not just they have good stories, they have wonderful shows-- from All Things Considered to This American-- [simultaneous conversation]

Q: Which I can't take credit for. But my question is, what do you think the skill or skills that aspiring or entry level journalists should be-- would be best served to be learning right now, to not only get a job, but to be innovative?

WALTER ISAACSON: The same thing that Walker Percy told me, the novelist I mentioned [01:16:02] growing up, which is, the world’s got too many preachers. For God’s sake, be a storyteller. There's so many people blogging in their pajamas right now, preaching at you about what you should think about something, and not many people going out saying, “Let me take long walks with Steve Jobs,” or whatever it may be, “and tell you a story.”

And I think reporting and storytelling and narrative storytelling is going to be the most important talent in a world in which people bloviating on blogs with opinions is out there
for free in a zillion different sources, will place a premium on things that actually got reported.

Which will bring us back to the quality journalism that both you, this show, and the Ethics of Excellence in Journalism Foundation help support. So thank you, Marvin.

MARVIN KALB: Thank you very, very much, Walter. Thank you.

[applause]

END