

[Transcript] Plain English with Derek Thompson / MAILBAG: Why Does the Internet Make Us Depressed? Where Does Good Writing Come From? Is College Worth It Anymore?

Hi, I'm Erica Ramirez, founder of Ili and host of What About Your Friends, a brand new show on the Ringer podcast network dedicated to the many lives of friendship and how it's portrayed in pop culture.

Every Wednesday on the Ringer Dish Feed, I'll be talking with my best friend, Stephen Othello, and your favorites from within the Ringer and beyond about friendships on TV, in movies, pop culture, and our real lives.

So join me every Wednesday on the Ringer Dish Feed where we try to answer the question TLC back in the day, what about your friends?

Today, it's our first mailbag in what feels like forever.

We've already done two episodes this week on the News of the Week in Economics, which was the absolute calamity of Silicon Valley Bank, followed by the near banking panic that nearly swept over the entire mid-sized and regional bank community.

I am very interested in and very closely following the emergence of GPT-4, the new AI from Open AI and playing around with it on the new chat GPT-plus edition, which is powered by GPT-4.

Some incredible things happening there, some spooky things, according to some talking heads.

So I'm looking forward to an episode in the next week or two weeks to break down this phenomenon.

For now, I don't know how much news there is in this particular sphere.

It's really cool.

Some of the implications are awesome.

Some of the implications are extremely spooky.

Today we've got a really fun bunch of questions, questions about why the internet turns us all into doomers, where good writing comes from, why it feels among some like college isn't worth it anymore, some questions about the labor shortage, the future of nuclear power.

It's a really fun lineup.

As always, we so appreciate all your support.

If you have some time and you haven't done so already, give us five stars on Apple Podcast.

Give us five on Spotify or wherever you get your podcast.

Leave a nice review.

It always makes my day to see a nice review, especially on Apple Podcast.

And yeah, hope you enjoyed this mailbag.

I'm Derek Thompson, and this is Plain English.

Okay, so this one is from Dawn, who says, long-time listener, first-time writer-inner.

You got me thinking about something that's been bothering me for a long time on social media, specifically Instagram.

For context, I'm in my mid-30s, independent voter, and if I had to guess, 80 to 90 percent of my friends from college, work, and home are solidly liberal left-leaning.

There seems to be a pervasive amount of demerism from people I would consider well-off. You can tell it by their posts and stories.

How can so many people who have so much be so miserable all the time?

And on top of it, they want to share their misery upon the rest of us and demand that we feel the same way.

The order of posts goes, here's something good I ate.

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Now here's another thing about modern society that enrages me.

Am I wrong to think that my generation is wasting essentially the best time in the history of Earth to be alive, being consumed by misery?

Thanks, Don.

Thanks, Don.

Well, you've pointed to two things that I have written about and obsessed over, even when I was a little bit afraid to write about them.

The first thing that you pointed out, this behavior on Instagram, I called it Instagram socialism once.

I was pointing to this tendency among some people to toggle between capitalist status obsession on the one hand and socialist political sloganeering and their online presence on the other.

And I do think that juxtaposition is very interesting.

On the point of demerism, I've thought about this a lot, and I think it's a very meaningful detail that you said this is something that you see among people online, because I think I understand why demerism and crisis mongering is so replete on the Internet.

It exists because it works, period.

I think people are doomy, crisis mongering catastrophes on the Internet because human behavior is downstream of reinforcement mechanisms, and too many of the incentives on social media

say you should catastrophize the shit out of everything.

All of the benefits of retweets and shares and likes flows out of our capacity to grab people's attention, and what grabs attention is a five-alarm fire, not a one-alarm fire.

So every fire should go to five.

And I think that sucks.

I think it makes online versions of people whom I like a little bit insufferable, but also maybe it makes the online version of me a little bit insufferable as well.

But also, more deeply, I do think that there's an aspect of demerism that is fundamentally insincere, because I think in the so-called real world of bodies and parties and people in rooms together trying to be happy, I don't think people are like this.

I remember a few years ago, when it was really popular among a certain set of online liberals who shared a lot of my politics, to attach all personal struggles to national political causes.

And for example, they would say, if you, an individual, if you, my reader, are feeling overwhelmed or burned out or depressed or anxious, self-help is not remotely enough.

Attempting to help yourself is a doomed enterprise.

We have to burn down and transform systems of oppression and inequality, and only then can we hope to eke out some kind of happy existence under it.

And this group seemed to have a lot of bad blood against the so-called self-help gurus, the people who were saying, no, I think individuals can actually help themselves.

And my whole thing, you know, sort of watching this from afar and being a little bit too nervous and too cowardly to intervene was to say like, wait, if a friend came to you, if your best friend came to you in a time of need, and she said, I'm overwhelmed, I'm

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burned out, I'm depressed, I'm anxious, you cannot possibly convince me that the first thing you would tell them is to say, well, first we have to universalize health insurance, and then we have to nationalize parental leave, and then we need to triple the Earnicom tax credit.

No, that's not a response to an individual's suffering.

Those are policies I support.

I support universalized health care.

I support national parent and sick leave.

I support expanding the Earnicom tax credit, but we cannot hang any one individual's hope of eking out a happy life on the dream of achieving a kind of policy utopia that might never materialize in their lifetime.

We have to find some way to talk about individual happiness in a way that does not assume or require the existence of any one individual's preferred utopia.

Happiness is not about structural systems exclusively.

They are, happiness is also about our own struggle against a world that will never be perfect.

And speaking of our attempts to make a more perfect world, I think it's meaningful that the most effective movements for social change historically have not been doomer, crisis, mongering narratives.

Right?

Yes, we can.

The people united will never be defeated.

Si se puede.

These optimistic messages from Obama, RFK, MLK, they used a sense of unity, a sense of optimism that transcended the kind of doomerism that succeeds in the ecosystem of the internet.

And I would love for more internet conversations around anxiety and even around political change to frankly adopt the same compassionate optimism that we show for our friends when they come to us individually, not requesting the utopia of their dreams, but reaching out for help and saying, what do you have in mind?

Okay, this next one is from Bridget.

And they say, hi Derek, the question I would like you to tackle is whether critical thinking is a dying skill.

I believe it is important personally, professionally, and in how we function as a society.

A few things have brought this to light for me.

Number one, anecdotally, I have noticed that people do not seem to be good critical thinkers any longer.

Even when talking to highly educated, high-functioning people with professional jobs, when conversations

turn to tough topics like climate change, politics, the COVID vaccine, etc., people love to quote social media or opinion-based news sources as rationale for their thinking, not actual facts or considered thoughts.

Number two, in Nate Silver's podcast, they discussed the growing opinion that college isn't worth it and how that opinion plays out along partisan lines.

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College isn't just about learning skills that make you employable.

It's about learning how to think and expanding your worldview.

Would love to hear your take on this.

Thanks, Bridget.

Thank you, Bridget.

So these are, I think, two separate questions.

Question number one is critical thinking and decline.

And question number two is the value of college and decline.

Very different questions, but as you'll see, I think my answers are going to land in pretty similar places.

So question number one is critical thinking and decline.

I do not think so, but I understand why it might appear to be the case.

It seems like we live in an age where conspiratorial thinking can go aerodynamic because of the nature of social media and the nature of opinions hurting on social media, especially around very extreme opinions.

I absolutely see that to be the case.

But fundamentally, when the question is our capacity to think critically and decline,

I do not think it is.

I think what you're observing is that the internet gives us a front row seat to more people's opinions and the opinions of most people have always been terrible.

So what you are seeing is a more high fidelity picture of the nature of human thought and the nature of human thought has always been a horror show.

I think if you had some kind of pre-internet machine for understanding the opinions of most people in the 1800s, throughout the 1900s, you would be astonished and horrified by just how bigoted and how irrational and how hateful most people's thoughts about the world have historically been.

Now, there's this idea in, I guess, education research called the Flynn effect, FLYNN effect, which refers to the interesting observation that we've actually seen a steady increase in IQ in the US and around the world throughout the 20th century.

Some of this might be education.

You've had more people going to high school, more people graduating from college, but some of that I think is the removal of barriers that has allowed human flourishing to naturally express itself, less disease, less poisoning people with lead.

All of this allows critical thinking to flourish in a way that it historically has not or at least allowed my proxy for critical thinking, IQ, to flourish in a way that it historically has not.

Your question also makes me think of this idea that, and I'm not trying to put words in your mouth, Bridget, but this idea that we can always point back to a golden age of thought or a golden age of morality, golden age of ethics, and one of my most closely held hypotheses is that the past is shit.

Let's go back to the 1990s.

Great decade in many ways.

Gay marriage, as a political cause, was considered absurd in the 1990s.

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Less than half the country approved of interracial marriage in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the early 1960s, we were in a world before the Civil Rights Act.

We were in a world before Medicare or Medicaid.

One of the things that makes me most optimistic about the present is my profound pessimism about the past.

I'm a historical pessimist, I guess you could say.

I think history sucked.

Being a historical pessimist always makes me dispositionally optimistic about the present, and therefore optimistic about, for example, the idea that critical thinking is not endangered in some way, there's something about the internet that allows for thought to array itself around the most extreme opinions.

I observe that, but our critical thinking capacities, I think, are arguably better than they were in the past, and that might be an unpopular opinion.

Question number two, is college worth it?

What a great and enormous question.

Let me see if I can break it down into two more digestible questions.

Sub-question number one is, are Americans starting en masse to doubt the value of college?

The answer is clearly yes.

I think this is driven, not exclusively by material reality, but by education polarization in politics.

You mentioned a 538 article that points to one of, I think, the most fascinating phenomena happening in the American electorate.

That is education polarization, the electorate used to be more polarized by race or more polarized by income, but today, the most important dividing line in politics is arguably education.

Did you go to college or did you not?

Since the late 1990s, college-educated voters have swarmed toward the Democratic Party, and voters without a college degree have become decidedly more Republican-leaning.

That's straight from the 538 article.

As a result, if you poll, especially Republicans or right-leaning centrists, about the value of college, they're much more likely to say than they were in the past, no, I don't think college is worth it.

Part of that, I think, is an affective bias.

It's a bit of motivated reasoning.

If you've come to think the college elites are woke shitheads, then, of course, you're more likely to say that going to college isn't worth it.

Even, by the way, if you went to college and you want to send your kids to college, you're picking up a kind of political bias rather than maybe an authentic or sincerely held opinion.

Now, the second question here is, is college worth it financially?

This is complicated.

On average, yes.

There is something called the college premium, which is essentially a statistic that shows that for the average person going to the average college, they earn, over the course of their

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lives, millions of dollars more than someone who didn't go to college.

But this very famous college premium is declining for a couple reasons right now.

It's stalled out in the 2010s, and in part because of inflation, eating, this is a little bit ironic, eating high income wages faster than low income wages.

You're seeing that low income wages are catching up to high income wages, and that is scrunching the college premium.

Another way to look at this is to say, when is college not worth it for people?

Well, I think if you go to college and drop out, it's not worth it, especially if you have college, if you have a student debt.

If you go to a low quality college, I think it might not be worth it.

If you go tens of thousands of dollars into debt to major in a subject with a low expected value in the labor force, it's possible that in time, you might realize, I actually don't think that my four years were particularly well spent from a financial standpoint.

If you read a lot of poetry and you loved it, well, then maybe it was worth it for your life.

This reminds me of a recent article about the death of an English major in the New Yorker that a lot of people have been talking about for the last few weeks.

My response to that piece by Nathan Heller, an incredible writer, was that I don't necessarily blame young people who love reading for looking at the expected value of, say, an English major versus a business or an economics or a computer science major and saying, if I'm going to take four years and tens of thousands or, in some cases, hundreds of thousands of dollars to go to college, I'm going to major in compsci and read novels on the side.

I think that's a reasonable decision to make on the margin.

I'm not trying to advertise or encourage the death of English majors, but I'm making an observation that the popularity of traditional liberal arts might naturally decline as the cost of college goes up and the college premium becomes endangered.

More people are going to say, I can't justify taking one year to just study James Joyce.

Ulysses, if I need to learn stats and programming to make it in a very competitive economy, I'm very sympathetic to that view.

So his big picture, I want to tie these answers together.

And if I could use one word to tie them together, it would be oversupply.

The oversupply of other people's opinions is making it seem like, at large, humans are becoming worse critical thinkers, even, ironically, in an environment where our collective IQ is going up.

But also in college, I think there's the elevated supply of low quality colleges and the elevated supply of college students in the economy in general has, I think, contributed to a decline in the college premium.

And that number, that decline in the college premium could absolutely be read as the declining value of college.

Okay, this next one is from Michelle, who says, Hello, big fan here, I've listened to almost every episode.

I would love if the podcast covered the topic of the labor shortage in the US.

For context, my parents own a restaurant and we have struggled to find people to hire

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since the middle of the pandemic.

I understood the staff shortage during the pandemic, but now it's difficult to wrap my head around.

Why is it that so many businesses are struggling to hire?

What are people doing if they're not working?

It feels almost ridiculous to ask.

Michelle.

Great question.

So labor shortage, where are all the people?

One way that I answer this question, one way that I answer a lot of different economic data questions is I go to Fred, the St. Louis Federal Reserve website, that's fred.stlouisfed.org.

You type in their employment population ratio, did I say that right?

Employment population ratio, that's a weird tongue twister.

And you can see a graph that shows that in February 2020, around 62% of Americans in the country were working, today about 60% of Americans are working.

So we are a little bit down.

Where is that deficit coming from?

You go into prime age workers, really no change there, 80.6% of prime age workers were working in February 2020 before the pandemic.

Today it's 80.5, basically no change there.

Most of this is about seniors.

It's mostly about seniors.

Some people who are older, they're 60s especially, 70s, 80s, who might have been working earlier and are no longer working because they dropped out of the labor force, in many cases, to stay safe from a virus that disproportionately affects the elderly with severe illness.

And they stayed out of the labor force, whether it was because they looked at their retirement accounts, they looked at their home values and said, you know what, I don't necessarily have to work.

I don't have to put myself at risk.

So we are seeing fewer older people working.

But we're also seeing something else, which is that the economy of February 2020, the month before the pandemic, is not the same economy that we have now.

We are much bigger.

We have a lot more demand.

And so what's happened is that demand, especially in services like retail and restaurants and travel, hotels, airplanes, demand has surged in the last few years.

But the U.S. employment population ratio is still down from where it was.

We don't have enough workers.

So how do we get more workers?

Well, you could put a wall up around the entire United States and simply say, we're going to stick with everyone that we have here.

We're going to try to pull people from the sidelines by offering higher wages.

That gets a little bit tough in a period of inflation where what the Federal Reserve wants

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to do, what frankly a lot of people in government want to do, is to restrain wage growth so we don't have a wage price spiral that takes inflation out of control.

The other solution here is immigration.

The U.S. had an immigration recession in the few years before 2022.

Lots of reasons for this.

You had Trump sort of shutting down on immigration.

You had a pandemic, which really closed a lot of borders.

But last year, immigration really perked up.

And that makes me optimistic that if we have people in the White House, if we have people in government who understand that in order for this country to service the demand that exists, the demand that we expect to exist, and also by the way, service the social welfare net that we want to provide for seniors and people who are too sick or disabled to work, we simply need more people.

The fertility rate, which also bounced back a little bit last year, is still below replacement.

You're not going to get a growing economy in a growing population, I should say, with the fertility rate that's below replacement.

The only other option here is just it's incredibly simple arithmetic.

We need more immigration.

We need more immigration, and we need immigration to be a priority for people in government.

It's not yet, but I think it should be.

Okay, this next one is from Paul, who says, Hi, Derek.

Can you explain on the show how you have become the Steph Curry of making analogies?

It seems on the show that you just spontaneously come up with incredibly helpful analogies to explain complex phenomena and simple terms to listeners, but I imagine there is a craft that you've been honing for years and would love to know what tactics you use.

Thanks, Paul.

And this one from Dave, who says, Hi, Derek.

I've been an English teacher for 15 years, the last 13 of them at a bilingual French English independent school in New York City.

I'm a fan of your work at the Atlantic and on plain English.

Like you, I'm 36, like you, I'm a staunch advocate of simple language.

I'm wondering what advice you'd give to a fellow 36 year old disciple of words with very different professional experience who might want to move from teaching words to writing them.

Fun question.

Thank you, guys.

So first I have to say that when you call me the Steph Curry of making metaphors, I'm going to choose to take that in a positive way.

Steph Curry is incredible.

But also I imagine that some of my critics, I hear you, I see you, critics will say, Yeah, Derek is the Steph Curry of making metaphors because he makes the most metaphors.

He takes the most shots, but doesn't necessarily have the highest 3-point percentage in this particular category.

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I'm a little bit like the sort of mid to late career Russell Westbrook of metaphors in that case.

Lots of sprayed threes and also a lot of bricks.

Just move beyond the metaphor thing.

I think in a way the interesting question here is, what do I think people who want to get into writing should do?

It's a really, really hard question.

Writing is a very competitive industry and I don't necessarily think I understand it that well in part just because I've only worked at the Atlantic and I guess the ringer in my career.

I have this sort of encyclopedic understanding of how to get into writing across the entire landscape.

But maybe I'll just tell you a personal story about two ways that I've changed my mind about writing and a writing career.

And hopefully those two stories will connect with you and help you.

So first, I used to think that being a complex writer was the right way to signal the people that I was smart.

I thought that using big words was a good way to tell people that I was smart.

Using arcane language, I guess using adjectives like arcane.

Now I think being a simple writer and being a simple talker is the right North Star.

There's this really interesting study by the Columbia University psychologist Adam Galinsky where he said, when people feel insecure about their social standing in a group, it ironically makes them more likely to use jargon in an attempt to be admired and respected.

You use the acronyms.

You use the shorthand in order to try to get other people to see, oh, look how much I belong to this group.

Look how much you should assume my intelligence.

But that is fucking kryptonite for writing.

It really is.

I try to see the world in metaphor.

No, you know what, scratch that.

I automatically see the world in metaphor.

I can't help it.

It just like ideas just appear to me kind of visually.

And writing is a process of smushing complex, big, hairy ideas into the straight jacket of a simple analogy that I can write and remember.

That's how writing comes to me.

That's how it falls out of my fingers at a laptop when I'm writing an open to a podcast or writing an article for the Atlantic.

And it's one of the reasons why I named the podcast Plain English, not because simple thinking or simple writing came easily to me, but because I wanted to make that the benchmark for a podcast.

And I want to make it the benchmark for my writing.

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I think simple is smart.

And being able to express interesting and complex ideas in simple language that retains the nuance of the originally complex idea, that is what I try to do.

That's what I want to do.

And it's how I've really changed my mind in many ways about what makes writing good.

The second point is that throughout my career, I've had a sort of shape-shifty relationship with skin thickness, I guess you could call it.

When I was getting started in journalism, I was really scared all the time about being criticized.

An email from a critic could ruin my day, an online comment, a tweet, maybe some comment on Reddit could just absolutely crush my confidence for a week.

And it took a while for me to realize a few things.

Number one, it doesn't make any sense for me to outsource my self-confidence to people I've never met and will never meet.

That's just not a good way to go through life.

It's actually a recipe for immiseration.

But second, I realized that I needed to sort of internalize, I needed to pull inside of myself any sense of progress.

It was most important that I feel like I was making progress in my writing.

And so over time, I got a thicker skin and a thicker skin and a thicker skin.

And then I remember, someone told me, I know who this journalist was, but I'm not going to say the name.

They said, they'd read an interview with a famous sort of kind of pastor prime journalist who said, the way that I deal with criticism is I just don't listen to it.

I just don't read any letters.

I don't take any negative feedback.

And at the time, I was like, oh my God, what an ingenious way to deal with the world of feedback, just simply block it out.

But over time, I've realized that the same way that having too thin a skin can be bad for you, having too thick a skin can also be bad for you.

Because if you block out all the criticism, if you block out all of the feedback, you're not going to get better.

Your meanest, rudest critics sometimes contain within that criticism a kernel of genius.

And you have to be open to it.

So I wrote this article for The Atlantic about some of my writing tips.

And I said there, I wish there was a formula for growing one's ego epidermis to the perfect level of thickness.

I stand by that.

I wish there was some way to do it.

And it's part of my struggle as a writer, part of the project of being a writer is to think about what is the right level of skin thickness to learn from the world of criticism and feedback without letting it fester under the skin and poison a week of self-esteem.

I don't have a perfect answer there, but again, setting that North Star of ideal skin thickness

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I think is really important to making it as a writer.

This one is from Joshua.

Hi, Derek.

Please can you do an episode about the debate around nuclear energy?

Over the past few years, I've heard arguments that nuclear must be a part of our energy plan if we are ever going to decarbonize our grid, your podcast included, while also hearing about the dangers it possesses.

So is nuclear something we've been told to fear but is really one of our best tools to fight climate change?

Joshua.

This is a great question.

One way to start is to say I love the mini-series Chernobyl.

I think the showrunner Craig Mason, who's also behind The Last of Us, is just utterly exceptional.

But it is very reflective of a popular idea in media about nuclear power, which is that nuclear power is purely scary.

It's Chernobyl.

It's in the US, Three Mile Island.

That is the go-to example of how freaky nuclear meltdowns can be.

But if you look closer at what happened in Three Mile Island, 1979, it destroyed the reactor, but it did not destroy the reinforced steel and concrete structure around it.

It released very little radioactivity into the atmosphere.

There were studies done, many, many studies done.

One found that all of the 1,080 children tested for thyroid gland exposure showed results within safe limits.

There were, in fact, no harmful effects found in the 195,000 residents living in the vicinity of the plant, who were screened decades later.

There are studies of the safety of nuclear power operations that suggest that they have occupational deaths around 600 times less than oil, around, I think, 800 times less than coal.

If you look at death rates by the terawatt hour, nuclear energy is safer than natural gas, safer than biomass, safer than hydropower, safer than wind, and it's also, from a greenhouse gas emission standpoint, not only, I think, 273 times more efficient than coal, this information is coming from our world and data, but, again, more efficient than hydropower, more efficient than wind, more efficient than solar.

I mean, nuclear energy is fascinating to me because it's like, I once asked this question in an Atlantic article, what if humans invented a technology to save the planet and then just refused to use it?

What if we invented a vaccine against all disease, but we simply just stopped making it?

It's kind of like what happened with nuclear energy.

We invented this technology that could have bequeathed decades and decades, centuries, perhaps, of clean energy, and we simply stopped building them.

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Now, part of it, we stopped building them because they were really expensive, they kept coming in over budget and behind schedule, but this is going to be complicated to sort of get out, but if you stop building something, you get worse at building it, right?

Does that make sense?

Like, without the practice of building it, you get worse, and so there was a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We stopped building nuclear power plants in the US after the 1970s, 1980s, and as a result, we aren't very good at building them now.

It's just a tragedy to me.

I think the reputation around nuclear power is horrendous compared to the promise, and I am hopeful that we'll have breakthroughs in smaller, well, across clean energy for sure, but in smaller nuclear reactors that can maybe allow for faster build times that don't go so horrifically over budget.

The truth is, I am a bit of a bull when it comes to nuclear energy, and I would love to have a podcast in the near future about it.

This, by the way, is a good time to say that this summer, May, June, and July, the plain English podcast schedule is going to be a little bit truncated because I will be on book leave.

I am writing a book about American progress and why America can't build and invent enough to accelerate progress with a New York Times writer, Ezra Klein.

That book is due toward the end of the year.

We got to write it.

I have to write it, so I have to write my half, Ezra's not going to be too happy with me if Halloween comes around and half the book is unwritten.

I'm taking May, June, and July off from the Atlantic.

My hope is that I can continue to have some kind of truncated podcast schedule in those three months, loving the momentum that I am seeing with more people listening and more people downloading, more people commenting, and talking about the show.

I think it's fantastic.

I don't want to lose that momentum entirely.

We're going to try to do one show a week, but I can't promise that every single week

I'm going to have time to produce a new show.

We'll see what happens.

I am going to do my very best, but just know that coming up this summer, we're going to have maybe a little bit of an interruption to the planning the schedule as you've come to understand it.

With that, I want to thank everyone for these questions.

My God, we had hundreds and hundreds of questions.

This is the tip of the iceberg that I scraped here, but thanks to you guys for listening for asking really fantastic and curious questions of this show, really understanding what we're all about, and I will talk to you next week.