

John Matze, host of *Greater Perspectives*, takes his turn in the hot seat in this short podcast special to talk about life after Jan. 6, the hard lessons he learned from the fallout, and how Hedgehog became his answer to Parler.

This transcript is edited and condensed.

John Matze, Host of *Greater Perspectives*

Hello and welcome to another episode of *Greater Perspectives*. I'm your host, John Matze, and today we've got a very special episode. We will be interviewing...me.

We've got Andrew Pestano here with our editorial team at Hedgehog, and we'd love to have him introduce himself to you and get this podcast rolling. Andrew?

Andrew Pestano, Editor at Hedgehog

Hey, how's it going, John? Thank you so much for having me.

I am a journalist. I've been a journalist for the past decade. My career started at UPI, the wire agency, where I was a Latin America and global conflict correspondent. I used my experience from being a Venezuelan immigrant and my knowledge by speaking two languages, English and Spanish, to give us the best coverage we have of the Latin American region.

After that, I worked for NBC and Telemundo 51 in South Florida where I handled local coverage for those stations, including hurricanes and the Olympics. Then I was promoted to the NBC and Telemundo national syndication team in New York before I landed here at Hedgehog.

And John, we have done it. We have launched a new community platform.

Andrew Pestano

Walk us through your motivation for why you wanted to start Hedgehog? And especially because knowing your history with the media – the media has been kind of tough on you.

So why do it all over again?

John Matze

It wasn't especially easy to convince a lot of the people that we have working with us. Even in the beginning, everyone was a little skeptical, right? "What is it that you're doing? Isn't he the one who was a part of that crazy right wing platform?"

Let's back up and let's take a look at what happened.

When I created Parler with my team, we were building a free speech site that was to promote free discussion, debate, and discourse in a time where a lot of the moderation online was getting really heavy handed and crossing a lot of boundaries. I think there's been a lot of

experimentation on the part of social media as a whole, trying to figure out what direction they want to go with all of this and how they want to handle moderation.

I don't think social media as a broad genre of business has even tackled moderation correctly, even to this day. I think a lot of mistakes that have been made in the past with moderation might even show up again unless things change.

That's what really motivated me to go out and say – hey, we need to make a new platform that gets people talking to one another again, that gets people discussing things in a way where the community feels empowered and in charge to also be a part of moderation.

When you take a look at the social media landscape, I think that you have a lot of players doing it the old-fashioned way, if you will, continuing to rely heavily on a centralized authority to moderate.

They're going to get it wrong and it's not going to make people happy. No one's going to be happy with the decisions of a central power.

By giving this kind of moderation capabilities to people while also having a very stable set of rules that we can rely on and a lot of gates – keeping out the bots, the trolls, the marketing spam, ad spam and all the other stuff that ruins a community and giving people the ability to really own the community – that's something that's truly unique.

I think it's something that is going to make us, in the long-term, very successful. We're hoping for slow growth. Over time, we're going to see some serious success come out of this different model and different approach to not just moderation, but to what I'm calling community-building, because we're building a community at Hedgehog.

That's really important to me.

Andrew Pestano

I read your [“Where Have I Been”](#) post on your website, and in that you mentioned that discourse in the United States is broken.

In my journalism experience, I've witnessed the public treat the other side as enemies instead of opponents. On top of that, misinformation has created confusion and facts become secondary to opinions and feelings.

Considering your prior experience to now, can you delve into that a little bit more specifically? What suggestions do you have to fix social media and public discourse in general?

John Matze

Taking a look at discussion, debate, and discourse, broadly, in the United States today. People are really kind of unhappy. And I think social media has a lot to blame.

They... you know, a lot of the design of social media in general has incentivized people to really get angry at each other because the more toxic and the more aggressive, the more viral that content goes. Sometimes the more disagreeable somebody is, or the more confident somebody is in something they know nothing about propels them to virality online.

You've seen a lot of people get their egos inflated over this. And you've seen a lot of public figures on other social platforms get more confident in things they don't know.

It's a result of this trend in social media to incentivize the wrong things.

We need to create social media in a way that reflects real life more. When in real life have we ever gone out in public and get attacked by a mob of trolls? That doesn't actually happen in real life, but it happens online and social media.

We need to break past all that and create an alignment structure, an incentive structure, if you will, that really incentivizes people to have good faith discussions. To break down those barriers, to allow other people to say, hey, I might not be an expert on this. What's your opinion? Well, I disagree with your opinion still, but I really respect that we at least understand where our difference lies.

That's the kind of discussion I'd love us to get towards in this country. Unfortunately, we are nowhere near that. Platforms – and I'm going to call them out directly – platforms like Twitter are making it worse.

We need to see some kind of improvement here. I don't think our discourse in the country is going to improve until our social media discourse improves.

Andrew Pestano

I think a good rule should be that if you're not going to say it to someone in front of their face, don't say it online.

You have been on the receiving end of that level of hatred, that online vitriol. You do mention that at the end of your time in Parler, that your house was – figuratively – a smoldering heap you needed to get in order.

What did that smoldering heap look like? How did you fix it?

John Matze

My personal life kind of started to suffer and fell apart. That didn't end very well at that time. The business was kind of falling apart. I had people who were my friends that were a part of the business turn on me.

Some of those people are in the litigation I'm pursuing against Parler. Some of those people, people who I would spend holidays with, were stealing equity from me for – less than a cup of coffee – that was valued at hundreds of millions of dollars.

It was a troubling time. I went from being on television three, four times a week and having an app with 15+ million people to nothing. Not going on television anymore – not because I wasn't being asked to, I had nothing to talk about.

And I had a lot of soul searching to do, if you will. I had a lot of brand reputation to repair.

After that all fell apart and if you look online and you Googled my name, people genuinely got the false impression that I was somehow right-leaning and they got the false impression that somehow I [created] a right-wing social media.

Of course, it's easy to see why people came to that conclusion. But that was never my mission and that was never the mission of that company. A lot of that got polluted in the last few months we were online, at the end of 2020 and 2021.

Over the last few years, you go from feeling like you're on top of the world to being at the bottom of it. It makes you really consider what's going on in your life pretty heavily.

Andrew Pestano

So you just launched Hedgehog during an election cycle, featuring Joe Biden – and more than likely, Donald Trump as the candidate. You also had Parler years ago during an election cycle at its peak with Donald Trump and Joe Biden in the election.

What differences do you see in the political and social media landscape when you compare the then-and-now?

John Matze

I think people are a little bit tired of these two candidates, to be honest, if I'm going to just comment on the election itself, I know I personally am tired of this. I was also not exactly a big fan of either one of those candidates back in 2020.

Social media [in] 2020 did a whole lot wrong with regards to the political election. There was a lot of over-censorship. There was a lot of overreaction, knee jerk reactions on social media.

Going into this election cycle, I think it's really important that we think of this from a standpoint of getting people to talk to one another again, getting people to debate, getting people to have proper discourse without losing it, without getting angry.

Yes, there are important consequences to a political election cycle. But we shouldn't lose our humility. We shouldn't lose our humanity. And we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that we're all Americans and we're all having a discussion about what we personally think is best.

Whether you disagree with somebody else on that topic, you have to know that both people really want what's best and what they feel is best.

As Americans we should feel like we have that right to share our opinions and discuss this and that's really important, but we shouldn't lose sight of the bigger picture here.

It's more important that we discuss things with one another, that we respect one another, and our rights to have our differences in opinion, than it is to throw tantrums on the internet that doesn't help anybody.

[Outrage] might get some very big figures and clicks and likes on big name social media platforms. It's not going to work out that way on Hedgehog because Hedgehog is built about getting people to talk to one another. And that's what we're trying to do.

We've designed features to do that as well.

Andrew Pestano

I was curious about those features that you're talking about. I mean, the landscape has also changed.

Four years ago, we didn't have AI-generated robocalls. We didn't have AI-generated videos polluting the election cycle. So what is Hedgehog doing to combat misinformation better than the other platforms?

John Matze

We didn't have a lot of the problems of AI. And if you would have asked me in 2020, what's the importance of journalism in social media? I think in 2020, I would have said, well, journalists, they're all lying and have an agenda or whatever.

Today, I have completely pivoted on that, because of AI, because of robocalls, because of – not even just AI generated imagery and videos, which are incredibly convincing and – unless you're a professional – hard to tell the difference.

We need journalism and journalists more than ever. The problem is that journalism as an industry, I think, has lost a lot of trust from the American people. Journalism as a whole, as an industry, needs to rebuild their trust with everyday people. That's really important because we need them to help.

Not help tell us what to think, but they need to help give us [combat misinformation] and to say, hey, by the way, this is an AI image. This is fake. You as the general population, as the masses have a discussion, tell us what we need to think of this, give the power of discussion to the community and filter all the garbage out because there's so much of it now and it's only getting worse.

Andrew Pestano

I may be biased in saying this, but I appreciate any effort to support journalism.

John Matze

I might be supporting it now. Four years ago, I was probably crapping on whatever you were working on, but don't take offense to that. I've seen the light, if you will.

Andrew Pestano

That's the most important aspect. No matter what your position was in the past, you can change it and improve it, which is what we need. That's the trajectory we need for public discourse.

Andrew Pestano

Imagine yourself, you're in your mid-20s. You're about to launch your first social media platform. It's Parler. What would you say to that younger John Matze?

John Matze

I'm a pretty stubborn person, and I was pretty dang stubborn back then. I don't know if there's anything I could have told myself that I would have actually listened to, to be honest, because I was so confident.

I would have probably cautioned myself to explore the Dunning-Kruger effect a little bit more, – the less you know, the more confident you are until you get to the peak of Mount Stupid.

My heart was in the right place. But I also think there were some key things that I didn't do, which were to really question the people around you. When you start surrounding yourself with people who might be a bad influence, to figure that out sooner rather than later.

And if you catch somebody telling you lies and you catch somebody who's misleading you to try to do something about that quicker and sooner.

That would have been the advice I would have given to myself if I could.

Andrew Pestano

Putting yourself in your position now. You've been a tech entrepreneur for a long time and I know you know how to code so I'm curious.

Say you needed to create an AI version of yourself. Say you needed to create a JohnGPT. What characteristics do you give yourself? What's in your code?

John Matze

I don't think I would be able to make myself into an AI. I don't think of myself really as a digital person. I'm kind of more of a hands-on person.

Even the day-to-day work that I do now, I want to be on the phone. I have to move around. I have to be talking to people. I'm a pretty active person, so I don't think AI would be the way to do it. Until we can get robots that can go out and garden and have chickens and like to pick up random hobbies all the time and pursue them, it's not really going to reflect accurately.

I would, however, if I was designing an AI, make it do math properly. That's kind of a bash on ChatGPT, who we've seen kind of deteriorating on the math front over the last few years.

Andrew Pestano

It's somehow deteriorating on that front, but it's becoming more and more used by millions of people.

John Matze

And you can tell when somebody writes something with it. It sounds more and more corporate and it sounds more and more like a word salad coming out of the computer, if you're reading something that AI touched.

Andrew Pestano

You are a high profile person and you're in the political conversation, especially in how politics overlaps with tech. After everything that's happened, what do you wish people knew about you?

John Matze

I don't think of myself as being high profile and I don't really like to think of myself as wanting to be either.

As the face of a company, I just want to represent its best interests and I want to try my best to get our message out – what we're trying to do.

If that means I have to go out in front of the public and do that, then I'm excited to do so to help the team and to help the company and to help drive this thing to be successful and to help our mission, which is to build a large online community where people can have discussion, debate, and discourse in a world right now that's really hostile to talking to one another.