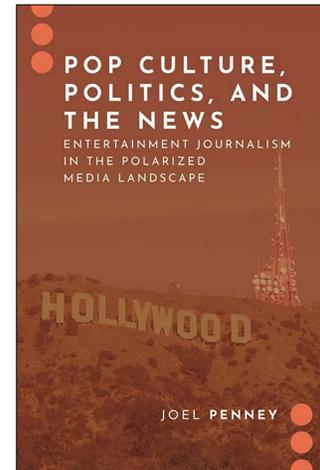


Joel Penney, **Pop Culture, Politics, and the News: Entertainment Journalism in the Polarized Media Landscape**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022, 264 pp., \$29.95 (paperback).

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Throughout the last decade, the landscape of political discussions has been greatly influenced by the rise of entertainment journalism. High-profile cases such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and the exposure of racial discrimination and power abuses within the Hollywood industry have garnered widespread attention, primarily due to political information and commentaries provided by pop culture news. However, despite its undeniable impact, the work of entertainment journalists has often been dismissed and not been given serious attention in political journalism and political communication circles, often categorized as trivial and lacking substance. Furthermore, the prevalence of *clickbait* tactics employed by certain media outlets has perpetuated the perception of this genre as low-quality journalism with little to no public value.



In ***Pop Culture, Politics, and the News: Entertainment Journalism in the Polarized Media Landscape***, Joel Penney presents a paradigm shift by delving into the crucial role of entertainment journalism in shaping contemporary political discourse. Through insightful interviews with journalists covering pop culture news and engaging with political issues, as well as with audiences who actively share this content on social media, the author proposes a reevaluation of our understanding of impactful journalism and persuasive political communication by integrating pop culture topics. Moreover, while he argues that pop culture reporting and comments offer significant value to the public, Penney critically examines how hypercommercialism and hyperpartisanship challenge this value. Through the different chapters of the book, he investigates the production and consumption of entertainment, its potential influence on political interest, and the level of knowledge its audiences possess.

Penney's arguments in this book revolve around the theoretical framework of the pop culture-politics nexus, where the realms of entertainment and the arts frequently address political subjects in their content, often serving as the basis for political and ideological forms of analysis and critique. Furthermore, he highlights the blurred boundaries between politics and entertainment in today's media landscape, where audiences consume both through the same media screens. While this framework has attracted scholarly attention, Penney emphasizes that contemporary entertainment journalism provides a platform for ideological discussions and pop culture analysis. To illustrate this point, the author draws on examples from the Hollywood industry, such as the racial-reckoning discussion in the Hollywood Foreign Press Association (HFPA) after George Floyd's murder and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter. Even though it focuses mainly on Global North experiences, through these examples, *Pop Culture, Politics, and the News* provides insight into the political role of entertainment journalism.

Additionally, Penney's analysis encompasses the traditional perception of quality journalism, viewed through the lenses of objectivity and neutrality, which often marginalize opinion-based formats (e.g., critics) and dismiss the so-called soft news—the antithesis of “hard news” political reporting—focusing on entertainment, arts, and culture. However, as the author points out, specific characteristics associated with soft news and opinion formats, such as informality, emotional appeal, and sensationalism, have permeated “hard news” reporting, mainly when media outlets prioritize profit generation. His analysis raises important questions regarding the public value of entertainment journalism and its role in creating interpretative communities and highlights the relevance of cultural issues within political communication. Cases such as the extensive coverage of the #MeToo movement exposing abuses within the Hollywood industry demonstrate how topics from the cultural sphere can effectively intersect with and contribute to the broader political discourse. Moreover, by briefly recollecting the history of entertainment journalism, Penney shows how it has played an essential role in U.S. political discourse.

To provide insight into the inner workings of this journalistic realm, Joel Penney's book examines how reporters and critics from diverse news outlets, representing both left- and right-wing perspectives, perceive and interpret pop culture's political impact and ideological significance. The author illuminates the explicit advocacy role adopted by left-leaning journalists who critically scrutinize the entertainment industry, exploring its messages, representations, and off-screen actions to advance progressive values about race, gender, and sexuality. The tangible impact of this journalism is evident in the industry's response, with Hollywood taking steps toward greater diversity and inclusion, such as including LGBTQAI+ characters in blockbuster sagas. Although some people may question the motives behind these actions from the industry, perceiving them as mere marketing strategies or tokenism, they have undeniably provided space for marginalized voices to be heard.

In contrast, journalists with a right-wing perspective perceive pop culture reporting as a tool in the broader “culture war” aimed to backlash progressive values and the perceived exclusion of conservatives within Hollywood. Penney acknowledges the influence of the conservative journalist Andrew Breitbart, who championed the notion that culture shapes politics and advocated for reclaiming the battleground of pop culture to secure long-term political success. Arguments by right-wing journalists often revolve around concepts such as freedom of expression, cultural grievances, and the belief that pop culture should remain a depoliticized space. However, it is essential to note that within the conservative camp exists a nuanced approach that is less combative and more focused on economic strategies, targeting new audiences that hyperpartisan media outlets may not serve.

Regardless of the ideological orientations of news outlets, entertainment journalism struggles with economic pressures that incentivize the coverage of sensationalized content related to trending pop culture and celebrity topics. Penney illustrates how journalists are compelled to employ specific formulas prioritizing quantity over quality and professional expertise, often resorting to *clickbait* tactics and publishing “hot takes.” The latter leaves entertainment journalism in a precarious position, as the industry often fails to recognize its broader public service and the value it can provide. *Pop Culture, Politics, and the News* goes even further by exploring the influence of social media on the practices of entertainment journalists. As Penney highlights, audience feedback and interactions play a significant role in shaping editorial decisions and determining what topics to cover. However, this dependence on social media also presents challenges for journalists, as they may face hostility and threats, mainly if they belong to marginalized communities.

In addition to the inner work of journalists, Penney gives attention to the perspectives of audiences who engage online with pop culture news. Although his insights in this arena come from a nonrepresentative sample of the entire spectrum of users, his analysis provides valuable access to the thoughts of actively engaged audiences who circulate this type of news. For instance, while some users resist the idea of including entertainment journalism in their political news diet, it clearly serves as a basis for citizen-level political expression, conversation, and online activism. Moreover, for some groups of users, the consumption of pop culture news is a tool for keeping up with public issues in a more accessible way. Based on these analyses, Penney remarks how the pop culture–political nexus allows apolitical audiences to use entertainment journalism as a “bridge to politics” (p. 168). While it might not replace the consumption of political news, it creates an engagement in the political sphere.

In his final chapter, Penney concludes that entertainment journalism still faces significant barriers to fully providing meaningful public service to audiences, particularly in the current context where cultural and political spheres are even more intertwined. This form of journalism remains constantly threatened by both commercial pressures and hyperpartisanship. However, allocating institutional resources to professional roles within the industry and forging a closer relationship with academia could strengthen its public value and quality. Penney’s analysis makes a compelling argument for the vital role of pop culture news in today’s political landscape, making it a valuable read for scholars and students in the fields of journalism and media studies.