

**Title: James Poniewozik, Audience of One: Donald Trump, Television and the Fracturing of America**

**Podcast: Half Hour of Heterodoxy**

**Episode: 77**

### **Transcript**

[Welcome to *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, featuring conversations with scholars and authors and ideas from diverse perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

**Chris Martin:** James Poniewozik is my guest today. He's the Chief Television Critic for the New York Times. We will be talking about his new book *Audience of One: Donald Trump, Television and the Fracturing of America*, which was listed as one of the 10 best books of the year by Publishers Weekly, one of the *50 Notable Works Of Non-Fiction in 2019* by the Washington Post and a *Notable Book of the Year* by the New York Times Book Review.

One critic called it two books in one because half the book examines the history of television from the Reagan era to today and the other half illustrates how Donald Trump assiduously used television to create his persona.

As Poniewozik puts it, Trump is “a character that wrote itself, a brand mascot that jumped off a cereal box and entered the world, a simulacrum that replaced the thing it represented.” *Audience of One* combines both humor and serious analysis to explain how new forms of television programming, reality TV in particular, have changed the world that we live in.

Hi James. Thanks for joining us on the show.

**James Poniewozik:** Oh, thanks a lot Chris.

**Chris Martin:** I would like to start by talking about television in general. So if you were to give a talk to college students today, to prepare them for how television has been influencing culture and how it's going to continue influencing culture and politics, what would you say to them?

**James Poniewozik:** I think the first thing that I would do is sort of impress on them what is one of the underpinnings of my book which is that the form of television and of any medium often influences the content and the way that – the kind of content that it produces, the tone and tenor of that content.

So the first thing that I would probably talk to them about is about how – obviously television has mattered for instance in politics, in American politics for a long time. You know, going back to the Kennedy and Nixon debates and so on, if the students had studied that or not. The Reagan, Clinton, et cetera, et cetera.

But what does that really mean? One of the things that that means is that television tends to promote a different kind of argument and rhetoric than print media does, right? You're sending

image as well as text. So it is much more ripe for sort of appeals to emotion and the non-literal. I would probably talk to them a bit about Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, which was one of the sort of – you know, I wouldn't say necessarily inspirations but jumping off points for this book where he talked about sort of following in the footsteps of people like Marshall McLuhan, how television sends a different sort of communication than text.

One great quote from his was one can disagree with a television commercial. But one can't refute it, which is to say the logic that you tend to get or the kind of argument and rhetoric that you get in a visual medium tends to be as much about emotion and non-literal feelings than it is about logic.

So that's sort of a baseline and then part of the question is, OK, so when that television environment that we live in – right? Because part of the reason this is so important is that it immediated society, in a society where we're spending six or eight hours of our day or more in front of some screen or another, more and more of our experience of the world comes to us through a screen.

So what is it that we're getting from those screens and how has that changed over time? One thing that I would need to lay out for them – and I won't give it to you in all the details. We can go into more of it later. But a lot of young people don't really realize or they didn't grow up during the sort of mass media era of television when we had three networks, when everything was sort of directed toward and helped create a monoculture where people were watching the same things at the same time, hearing the same ideas at the same time and everyone from entertainers to politics presenters on TV had to assume the same sort of broad audience.

That changes the communication a lot when you move from that to our fragmented thousand-channel, million social media feed environment that we have now.

Describing it to you, I realized that I would probably have to tighten that talk a lot for the – but that's sort of the – you know, in other words, before you can talk about the – in what ways, what kinds of messages television is sending us, you kind of have to understand something about just how it sends the message and why that matters.

**Chris Martin:** So I would like to get into the fracturing of America that you just talked about or the fracturing of the television audiences. That's one of the subtitles in your book title. But you talk about both the history of TV and how Donald Trump has used television and the economy of celebrity in general.

Would you have written this book even if Donald Trump hadn't existed? Were you interested in writing a book about the history of TV or was it really the way in which Trump used TV that fascinated you?

**James Poniewozik:** You know what? I could have but I'm not sure I would have and here's the reason. It's funny. I'm not sure anybody has asked me about this. But it's something that I've thought about a lot.

All the principles that I'm talking about in this book would have existed regardless. The way that the fragmentation of media has fragmented in the culture in many ways, the way that that creates both a more sort of rich and diverse type of television art and often a more polarized, infractious TV news culture and so on and even if Donald Trump never existed or never ran for president, you could see the evidence for that in the political battles of the cable news era, et cetera, et cetera.

I don't know if I would have been able to sell that book very well, number one, and I don't know if it would have been as engaging to write for the reason that that would have been a very sort of – you know, a dry kind of idea-based book that – you know, you could have written it as a history of television. You could have written it as a book that's sort of organized with chapters around themes.

But what happens when Donald Trump, the guy from *The Apprentice* is suddenly elected president? It's two things. Number one, it is a dramatic manifestation that this stuff actually matters. There's to me – you know, and I still have a hard time persuading some people of this. But there's to me no better proof that television is still an extremely powerful influencer of politics and the larger culture than directly electing the host of a primetime reality show president without any intervening step. You know, the term spent is governor of estate or anything like that. So this is literal proof that this stuff can affect the political climate of the country and the world.

Number two, again all this stuff would have been true if Marco Rubio were president today or Hillary Clinton or whoever. But once you have this fact that everybody is grappling with of Donald Trump being president and this sort of tumultuous event happening in American politics and how did we get there, suddenly this dry kind of academic idea story becomes a story with a narrative and a through line and a protagonist. As a critic, that's something that you almost never have a chance to do. It's to write something that is basically a narrative work following a fascinating, surreal, maybe terrifying character over the arc of a period of generational and societal change.

So I had thought about writing books on and off for the couple of decades that I've been a TV critic and I had never been able to come up with a subject that I just thought engaged my attention enough to spend a couple of years that it takes doing that.

I think the fact that this gave me the chance to sort of really write a story rather than just an argument was appealing and to me at least more powerful.

**Chris Martin:** And the way you frame your book, you mentioned two appearances by Donald Trump on TV, one from 1981 where he argues that he's not the kind of person who would be elected president because you need to have a certain agreeableness and popularity and then in 2015, just before he does it, he appears on TV and says that you don't have to be generally liked anymore.

So you frame your book by saying he was right both times and we need to understand the changes that occurred. So you cover several changes, the rise of the anti-hero drama, professional wrestling, reality shows. If you were to pick one of those as the most important for understanding politics, I know that's a tough question, but if there's one that's the most crucial development, which one would you pick?

**James Poniewozik:** I mean actually it's probably not a super tough question because I've thought about this a lot and in reality, you can't separate any of these out from Donald Trump because he kind of required a perfect storm of confluence of events to actually end up in the White House.

But I certainly think when you're talking about presidential politics, cable news and the rise of Fox News in particular is the biggest sine qua non.

Without the ways that it modeled for an audience, this idea that the active politics, the active governance was this sort of theatrical culture war fighting because they had seen it on TV and in their political media for a couple of decades. There wouldn't be the opportunity for Donald Trump or anyone else to take that next step and go from simply being an outspoken controversial celebrity figure to someone with an actual political following and political authority.

So if I've got to pick one, it's that. But in reality, all of these changes, the fragmented media, are associated and it's a lot of one thing leading to this, leading to that.

**Chris Martin:** And you talk in the latter half of your book about a psychological study showing that we form parasocial bonds with our TV characters or with the TV characters we watch. So we feel like we're acquainted with them. We feel like we know them the way we know our friends.

But you also talk about how we've – well, that study suggests we even form parasocial bonds with people who are narcissistic or not entirely virtuous. With anti-heroes for example, a lot of people felt like they knew Walter White in *Breaking Bad*.

So why do you think – I know you're not a psychologist. But psychologically, why do you think people form these bonds with people who are not virtuous?

**James Poniewozik:** Yeah, I mean – look, yeah, it is important to stress that I am entirely a psychological dilatant here. So I don't want to claim otherwise. But first there's the – I don't know if you would call it the evolutionary fact or the psychological fact that we create these bonds with figures that we encounter through mediated channels because our brains haven't evolved to distinguish between context we make in reality in the flesh and context that we get from somebody simply being in our living room once a week and becoming a familiar face that we see as often as we see many other people in real life.

Then further to that, I think that a viewer makes an identification. For instance with an anti-hero or villain, like Walter White, in part because those are sort of the imperatives of story. To

continue watching, you need to be invested in his challenges and the way he gets around them and the conflicts.

You need to be engaged by how well the story is told and therefore you want the story to continue on some level. You want him to win out and of course you're a good person. I'm a good person. We all want to think of ourselves as good people.

So you need to get yourself to a place where you realize that that identification is not a bad thing and for some people, that is accepting that OK, well, one can be engaged with a story but not approve of the character's behavior. You know, not think that that's a national model for behavior in real life.

But for other people, you definitely saw this with Walter White. It becomes, well, that behavior must be good or must be defensible. Walter White is really just a strong man who's providing for his family and he's taking care of his own in the tough world and there's nothing wrong with that.

You know, I don't want to say that like *Breaking Bad* simply brainwashed people into believing this. There's always a push-pull with it, right? If you are inclined to believe that sort of message, you're probably at least bringing some of that, if not all of it, with you to begin with.

But it certainly gives you a lot of material to buttress that point of view if it's one that you're inclined to.

**Chris Martin:** Right.

**James Poniewozik:** That say it's a tough world and maybe conventional morality doesn't apply anymore or that what matters is that you take care of the people who are close to you and screw everybody else.

**Chris Martin:** Right. I mean I do think it's interesting that after *Breaking Bad*, the first major TV role – if I've got this right, the first major TV role that Bryan Cranston had was playing Lyndon B. Johnson, a US president in *All the Way*.

**James Poniewozik:** Yeah. He has done a few others but that may have been his next big role after that immediately. But yeah, I mean it's – there is I think quite a connection between anti-hero charisma and political charisma. They draw on a lot of the same types of performance.

I mean anti – you know, obviously there are a lot of different kinds of anti-heroes in drama generally and on TV. But particularly with these male anti-heroes that you could see in some ways as paving the way for the political personal that Donald Trump ran on, there are these common elements of sort of dominance behavior which certainly was – it's a thing with politicians generally and Lyndon Johnson in particular.

It is sort of interesting to see how the same figure conveys those two things in different environments.

**Chris Martin:** Right.

**James Poniewozik:** I mean Lyndon Johnson was very famously someone who would ...

**Chris Martin:** Like loom over people.

**James Poniewozik:** Yeah. Like he physically loomed the way that Tony Soprano – a very big guy who liked to use that and make just sort of his prominence and his masculinity felt. He had his own ways of saying I'm the one who knocks. So that's definitely not an unrelated thing.

**Chris Martin:** Right. So I'm curious about whether you think this economy of celebrity is influencing young people. The reason I ask this is I did part of my dissertation on why young people appear to be more anxious, college students in particular.

One counseling center administrator, college counseling center administrator whom I interviewed said this is a quote from her and this interview was done in November 2016. She said, "My observation just of social culture over the past number of years is that we have created this economy of celebrity that I think is problematic for young people, people that don't have a degree and are not espousing a particular occupation, become famous. They become successful and famous and in many cases wealthy simply by being and being seen and I think that's what many of our students are competing against and I think one of the disadvantages of this most recent political outcome is that we have in fact reinforced the idea that you don't actually have to be skilled and have any particular expertise in order to be highly successful."

So do you feel like that sort of economy of celebrity is stressing out young people because it suggests that expertise is overrated?

**James Poniewozik:** I kind of don't want to speak for young people in that way, from the standpoint of whether it is stressing them out. I will – I'm glad to take somebody else's word for that. But I do think it is – it's undeniably a much bigger presence and reality in their lives if you are a young person today as opposed to when I was in college or certainly when Donald Trump was just leaving college and getting into business.

There was a celebrity culture but you couldn't look to say – you know, teenagers getting incredibly famous simply as YouTubers. You know, or that sort of thing. In other words, people sort of self-generating fame and careers simply from accessibility on the media.

I would think that like a lot of technological revolutions, it probably creates both a sense of opportunity and anxiety, right? Because there are people for whom doors are opened and many other people for whom there's just a sense of their doors out there that they don't know how to get through and that's a stressful experience.

But it is certainly just a – in connection with the experience of Donald Trump as a celebrity that I'm laying out here. It's certainly multiplying at many levels of scale and many, many times over the thing that was his initial insight when he goes into his dad's real estate business and he says, "I'm going to bring show business into real estate," which is that appearance can create reality and that it is more important to seem like the best XYZ than it is actually to be the best XYZ because you can leverage that appearance into a brand and into other efforts.

Then the brand sort of becomes the business in itself. So the very – the 1.0 version of that is you become a tabloid star and then a presence on talk shows and you write a book and you become sort of famous for being famous in that way.

But now that has – that has trickled down to everybody from reality stars to people who become social media stars and Instagram influencers without even the intermediating authority of a reality TV producer.

So yeah, I think it definitely resonates. To what extent it's a positive or negative for the young people of today, I would be interested to hear from them.

**Chris Martin:** Right. I mean I don't know if anyone has done a systematic study of young people on this issue. It does seem like it's – it's weird that we aren't tired of narcissists because eventually – I mean in the real world, we eventually get tired of narcissists that we have to deal with. But when they're on Instagram or YouTube, somehow we don't get as tired of – we don't get tired so easily.

But I wanted to talk about your recent coverage of other political things. So you've written quite a few columns about the impeachment hearings which were on TV and had a huge TV audience and also the debates. So among people in congress and people running for president in 2020, do you feel like any candidates or any politicians understand how to use TV the way Donald Trump did?

**James Poniewozik:** Well, not necessarily the way Donald Trump did. But I'm not sure that using TV the way that Donald Trump did would work in the Democratic Party. I think that at best what you want to do is to offer a competing theory or a competing narrative and an answer to the question of how to get your message into media that's dominated by this outrageous president that dovetails with the particular realities of your party.

What I mean by that is that just like with a lot of political things, there are differences between republicans and democrats and their audiences. You know, the Republican Party is – in America tends to be more racially and culturally homogenous. The Democratic Party tends to be more of a confederation.

So it tends to be different kinds of messages that get across as well and different kind of communication. I mean that's why I think you had for instance the boom lit in speculation a while ago about whether somebody like Oprah Winfrey might run for the democratic nomination, right?

**Chris Martin:** Right.

**James Poniewozik:** She is a celebrity. She's a media celebrity, somebody who uses media very well. She doesn't use it precisely in the way that Donald Trump does although there are some parallels. But she is – has a persona that is sort of – that is more in keeping with kind of – not just the ideology but like the aesthetic of the democratic party.

So you could see somebody using it in that way. I don't think that there's necessarily a democrat this time out who I think just has like – you know, a magic media touch the way that say Barack Obama seemed to for his moment in 2008.

What I do see is kind of a lot of competing theories of the case. Somebody like Mayor Pete Buttigieg is someone who – I believe even wrote academically on political messaging in television and the media and talks a lot sort of explicitly about how we have to find ways of changing the channel from this show that Donald Trump produces.

Conversely, somebody like Joe Biden is sort of making the argument that you can appeal to people's sense of exhaustion and offer them an opportunity to turn the channel off.

Bernie Sanders on the other hand is somebody who sort of has a – he runs on a deep sense of having a brand of personal authenticity and kind of a pugilistic communication style and probably sort of – just rhetorically is probably the closest to Trump. I don't think like he would necessarily take that as a compliment. But I mean just simply in the sense of kind of having a punchy debate style and so on. That sort of thing.

All of these are kind of things that are suited to that particular person and I don't necessarily know what works better. But I do think that like when you look at the democratic debates, I at least look at it in part as a meta argument of here is how I would use the media. Here is how I would use my media presence against this sort of media typhoon that we're up against.

**Chris Martin:** Right. Well, with Bernie Sanders, I think what's similar is there's a sense that has – his speeches aren't crafted by a PR team or by a group of several people trying to craft a least objectionable message in this overly polished way. So there's that similarity.

I think that reminds me of – there's a chapter in your book about the least objectionable – the concept of the least objectionable program. Can you talk a bit about that and whether that is still around to some degree?

**James Poniewozik:** So the least objectionable program was a TV programming term that emerged in I guess early '70s, late '60s that described the notion of – in a three-network TV environment, when all the networks had to draw audiences of tens of millions in order to survive. You needed to put things on the air that were inoffensive. In other words, the goal of your typical TV program was not to give people a reason to change the channel, right?

This was a time when you didn't have a lot of different media options. TVs generally didn't even have remotes. You actually had to physically get up from your couch and walk across the room to change that channel. So you didn't want people crossing that defensive mode.

So you put things on that were sort of – you know, big tent and appealed to everybody and kind of – you know, tried to offend nobody and the incentives become different once media becomes more multiplicitous.

Once you have more choices and more of those choices are targeted at particular types of audiences, particular demographics, particular interests, you are creating programming that is explicitly not for everybody, that – you know, and then in many cases is – I mean a lot of the – from the early days of MTV. You know, a lot of the imperative of that like a lot of youth programming is this is totally not for your parents. This would annoy your parents, right? And that's replicated in all sorts of fields throughout the media. You move from trying to create the least objectionable program to in many ways trying to create the most objectionable program, things that are really not for a lot of people but are intensely for the group that they're aimed at.

That kind of gets to that evolution that I am trying to sketch out in the journey of Donald Trump as essentially a TV persona that you were alluding to, that when he said in 1981 that a controversial figure can't get elected president today because of television and when he said in 2015 that oh, I don't think this is going to be election really about likability, he's right both times.

What has changed is the environment. That changed in ways that were very fortuitous and lucky for him. So the LOP, the least objectionable program, is something that is it more and more missing in the – you know, popular media and entertainment culture today.

You know, sort of the close examples that you will see to it is say something like the Super Bowl, one of the – you know, the few remaining mass events where you are trying to offer a halftime show for people who don't like football and this kind of – this angle to pull in this group and because you're literally aiming at all of America.

One thing that is sort of interesting that I try to dig into a bit in the book is that one place where you still sort of have that dynamic is in a presidential general election, right?

Where you sort of have a kind of two-network system constitutionally built into the system. In other words, you have to obtain an electoral college majority and for all practical purposes, only two political parties have a shot at it.

So theoretically, you are trying to appeal to – well, you don't necessarily need 50 percent of the electorate but you need 50 percent of the electoral votes. So that's where you have lately been getting this dissonance between a media culture and a political media culture that's often very tailored to intense political basis and then this atmosphere of national politics where politicians at least until recently had to sort of adopt at least the pretense of speaking to everyone and wanting to govern everyone.

**Chris Martin:** Right. Yeah, there's a former speech writer named Barton Swaim who has a book about his work speech-writing for Mark Sanford in North Carolina. But I heard him at a book festival and he talked about how the one unique thing about Donald Trump's strategy and around 2016 was being very clear that there are certain segments of the public he was not trying to appeal to, which up to then was less common.

The reason I brought up whether the least objectionable program is coming back, it just seems like everyone is talking about Baby Yoda and it does seem like – I mean who doesn't like a baby? So Baby Yoda is sort of this way of appealing to everyone.

**James Poniewozik:** You tend to see it more. I mean that's actually not a bad point. The thing is *The Mandalorian* itself, I don't know if that is necessarily the same sort of like broad big tent programming that – you know, you saw back in the '50s and '60s although it kind of is. But more and more often when you see that kind of – you know, mass phenomena still exists. But A, they're more the exception than the rule in our culture.

It tends to be more in sort of memes and things that people are consuming kind of atmospherically or secondhand through – you might think Baby Yoda is really cute and see Baby Yoda GIFs online and that sort of thing and yet never have watched an episode of *The Mandalorian*. There's this kind of like separate viral life that phenomenon has.

You see it in something like Old Town Road this past summer. It's kind of an old-fashioned example of several quadrants, music all-hit, that it's hip-hop and it's country and it's for young people and it has got stuff that appeals to old people and yet it emerges basically from TikTok, like this extremely micro media outlet. It wasn't – it wasn't produced for consumption on the Ed Sullivan Show or something like that.

It was out of this sort of atmosphere of multiplicity and millions of voices. One thing came up that this vast sort of mass social media audience found that it could connect to in one way or another.

So those mass phenomena do still exist but the mechanics of them are a lot different now. Again, yeah, I just think that they tend to be the exception in the same way that an interesting niche TV program was the exception in the 1960s.

**Chris Martin:** Oh, which of the TV shows that are running right now do you really enjoy?

**James Poniewozik:** I really – I'm going to cheat a little bit because with streaming and so on, nothing really dies and we're in the holidays. So we're sort of between seasons. But one show that I just finished that I really loved is HBO's re-conception of *Watchmen*, which I would recommend to anybody. I've written about it a fair amount as a critic because I find it fascinating. It is in an era of a lot of sort of cheap, boring cultural nostalgia and reboots and remakes. It was something I was very anxious about because it is a reboot of a comic series,

graphic novel that was already made into a movie and it was another thing based on existing intellectual property and I'm kind of tired of that.

But Damon Lindelof and his writing staff did this fascinating thing where they took this sort of subservice comic story that was about the Cold War and brought it to the present and re-contextualized it and made it rather than about the Cold War, about America's racial history and the history of lynching in America and using race to question the idea of who is it in America that really needs to wear masks and be protective of their identities.

Maybe it's not Clark Kent. Maybe it is a black man who is not going to be received as a hero if people know who it is behind the mask. So in addition to being incredibly entertaining which is the only way that something like this can work, they have fantastic ideas and it's nine episodes. I kind of appreciate a short, discreet that – you know, work of TV these days.

So if you haven't watched it, I totally recommend that. It works on every level.

**Chris Martin:** I do appreciate short, discreet series. I don't like it when – around season three, it starts to become a soap opera that just seems to go on forever.

**James Poniewozik:** In the era of streaming, there's just so many bloated TV shows and this felt just right. It could have even been a couple of episodes longer and it's kind of rare for something to leave you wanting more these days.

**Chris Martin:** Well James, thanks for joining us on the show. It was great having you.

**James Poniewozik:** Oh, thanks Chris. That was a really good talk.

[Music]

**Chris Martin:** You can follow James on Twitter at @Poniewozik. He's speaking at a few universities in 2020. So he may also be at your university in the near future. The show notes include a link to an episode of *The Bulwark Podcast*, where Charlie Sykes talked to James Poniewozik about the book and to a couple of video recordings of some longer book talks.

If you enjoyed listening to the show, please leave us a review on iTunes because it helps spread the word about the show. As always, you can reach me at [podcast@heterodoxacademy.org](mailto:podcast@heterodoxacademy.org) and follow me on Twitter at @Chrismartin76. Thanks for listening.

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