

< TMZ trades Hollywood gossip for Capitol Hill scoops with new D.C. bureau

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Transcript

STEVE INSKEEP, HOST:

The news and gossip site TMZ has made a name for itself with big scoops on celebrity culture. Now it's covering Capitol Hill, and NPR congressional correspondent Claudia Grisales is covering them.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

CHARLIE COTTON: You don't look like Pee-wee Herman, by the way.

CLAUDIA GRISALES, BYLINE: That's TMZ's Charlie Cotton outside Reagan National Airport. He's chatting with Senator Jon Ossoff, touching on President Trump's jab calling the Georgia Democrat Pinky Herman. Cotton, a native Australian, also wanted to hear more about Ossoff's ties to Australia through his mother.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

JON OSSOFF: You know, there is a laidback culture, I think.

GRISALES: Cotton is one half of TMZ's new D.C. bureau. The other is Jacob Wasserman, who's reported for TMZ from LA and New York.

JACOB WASSERMAN: What me and Charlie are trying to do is we need to take a step back. And while it's great to get into the importance of social and political issues, we want to understand who these people are.

GRISALES: This year, TMZ sparked interest after posting photos of vacationing lawmakers during a partial government shutdown. By April, TMZ D.C. was born. Now

Wasserman and Cotton work a grueling schedule to cover Congress through a different lens.

COTTON: This place is kind of like a reality show, so we just want to capture some of the natural entertainment.

GRISALES: No topic is off-limits, and some is a dramatic departure from traditional Capitol Hill reporting. In one recent viral segment, the duo argued that stuffy straight guys were ruining the D.C. dating scene. Cotton said they got an enormous response from Hill staffers and some lawmakers, too.

COTTON: Of all the clips we've shot - and we've shot, like, some important people - we've never received a response like we did for that.

GRISALES: But not everyone is keen to talk. That includes Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer. He declined to answer Wasserman's question about a mysterious sound heard during a recent speech.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

WASSERMAN: Senator, Jacob with TMZ. Did you fart yesterday on the Senate floor?

GRISALES: Ultimately, TMZ conceded the sound might have been something else. But Wasserman and Cotton say such lowbrow questions can give lawmakers a big payoff - reaching disengaged voters. They argue TMZ could help Schumer and other members connect with people they may not normally reach.

WASSERMAN: What a great opportunity it is to maybe play it off and show your personality.

COTTON: He would be, like, celebrated.

GRISALES: At the other end of the Capitol, TMZ found a more receptive audience in House Republican Lauren Boebert. The Colorado Congresswoman opened up on everything from Botox to behind-the-scenes talks on a critical defense policy bill.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

LAUREN BOEBERT: It's a big issue on the left and the right, and many of my constituents have reached out. They don't want this provision in the bill.

GRISALES: Robert Thompson, a Syracuse University professor of television and pop culture, says the duo is especially notable in a moment when American media is under fire.

ROBERT THOMPSON: It is extraordinary, the disproportionate amount of attention these two guys are getting.

GRISALES: But Thompson notes that while TMZ has operated under different rules in the past, such as paying for exclusive photos, their new D.C. operation should be taken seriously. It's a point Wasserman emphasizes. He says they're after the big scoops - TMZ's bread and butter.

WASSERMAN: We want to be players, and we want to compete and break news that is going to move the needle.

GRISALES: If they're successful, they could do for politics what they've already done for celebrity culture - turn gossip into news and news into gossip.

Claudia Grisales, NPR News, the Capitol.

(SOUNDBITE OF THES ONE'S "BE STRONG")

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