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Jered Martin:

Welcome to Coffee with a Journalist, a podcast by OnePitch, featuring well-known journalists from top US-based publications, covering technology, lifestyle and culture, health, science, products and services, and more. The goal of our show is to uncover the real person behind the real stories you love to read. We discuss their beat and news coverage, what their inbox looks like, the types of pitches they receive, and lots more.

Jered Martin:

We're joined by Aaron Pressman on today's show. Aaron is the senior technology writer for Fortune magazine and the co-author of Data Sheet, a daily newsletter covering tech news. Aaron joined Fortune in March of 2016, and previously reported for Yahoo, Bloomberg and Reuters. On the show today, Aaron tells us more about his newsletter, the Data Sheet, his latest coverage surrounding 5G, the ways a perfect pitch can be crafted for his writing interests, and more. Let's dive into today's episode with Aaron and Beck.

Beck Bamberger:

Hey everyone. Welcome to Coffee with a Journalist. Today, we actually have coffee, because we're with Aaron Pressman, Boston-based writer. He's writing, a Fortune magazine senior writer now, focusing on all things tech. Aaron, thank you for being here.

Aaron Pressman:

Oh, my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Beck Bamberger:

And you're drinking iced coffee, you mentioned.

Aaron Pressman:

I am drinking iced coffee this afternoon.

Beck Bamberger:

Excellent, and I'm working on a hot latte. So we have ice, hot, everything here. By the way, for people who don't know, your quote unquote technical title is senior technology writer, and you also write the very noted Data Sheet newsletter. And that comes out weekly, I believe?

Aaron Pressman:

Every day.

Beck Bamberger:

It comes out every day. Yeah, because I get it, with term sheet. Okay. Yeah. Every day, every day you can get Aaron's newsletter. Why don't we talk about that actually for a quick second. Because I think most folks are familiar with Fortune in general, with the tech news and business news that it covers. But Data Sheet, tell us a little bit about that, first.

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Aaron Pressman:

The idea is that there is so much tech news going on and it's hard to keep up.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Aaron Pressman:

Some of it, you sort of need to really need to know, and some of it is more like, "Wow, wouldn't it be interesting to know?"

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Aaron Pressman:

Or it would be funny to know. So the Data Sheet, every day we try and bring you one, big, 500-word essay about a topic of the day, and then lots of little hits on more interesting, funny and unique items.

Beck Bamberger:

Highly recommend it if you need to know anything in tech and then also in VC, you can just return Term Sheet and Data Sheet and you're good. I like how they're both sheets, by the way.

Aaron Pressman:

Yeah. Well, and I think Term Sheet was first, and then Data Sheet was sort of like the little brother.

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Beck Bamberger:

I like it. Keeps it simple. Nice. Well, Aaron, we always like to start with your inbox. What's in it? Is it crazy? Are there lots of pitches? Describe.

Aaron Pressman:

Yeah, my inbox is crazy. There are lots and lots and lots of pitches. I think one thing that's really gotten better over the years, from my point of view as a reporter is, pitches are getting a little more sophisticated around other news events. Sometimes people have an expert who can comment. Today, there was big news about the electronic vehicle maker in China, NEO, hooking up with GM. I got some interesting pitches that were sort of like, "Here's our expert's take on this thing." So that's a thing that comes in my inbox that I kind of like, even when I don't always ... I won't necessarily, I'm not always going to quote those, but they're very informative for me, and it's giving me good vibes about from the sender and from the expert.

Beck Bamberger:

Because they're up to speed.

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Aaron Pressman:

Yeah, and they're offering something that helps me, that's useful, that's engaging me, as opposed to just the straight in-your-face pitch, which I get plenty of those, too, as well. I write a fair bit about 5G, the new next generation of wireless. Obviously there are a lot of people out there pitching 5G, whether it's just the phone companies themselves, or companies with products or services that are somehow a play on 5G or experts or statistics or research reports.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Aaron Pressman:

Oh man, do I have a lot of 5G stuff. Some things I delete, but I don't know how all reporters deal with their inbox. One thing I do is, I do on any topic that I'm covering regularly like that, I do stash a lot of those emails into a side folder on the subject. Then later when I'm working on a longer story, I may sift through there, do some words, some keyword searches through there. Because sometimes those pitches had something that didn't help me right now, but will help me on a future story.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, so you're one of the savers.

Aaron Pressman:

Oh, yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

You do the same thing.

Aaron Pressman:

Storage is free, right? No, one's charging me.

Beck Bamberger:

Absolutely. But no, some people are mass to leaders. They don't read anything unless they know you. Some people just let it ride. I've listened to people who were like, "Yeah, there's 97,000 emails." They're just like, "It's good." And they just let it go. Some people do the folder thing. It sounds like you have a folder system. In other words, you might not get a response from a pitch, but you might eventually, given if it's a topic that then comes into your spotlight of what you're covering?

Aaron Pressman:

Definitely. And there are those topics, you can look at what I write about, I write about 5G a lot, I'm writing a little about electronic vehicles now, chips and semiconductors and stuff like that, those pitches, even when they're small companies or people I've never heard of, in general 5G, I'm saving those. Because I know I'll be writing more stories and feature stories later.

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Beck Bamberger:

Gotcha. Are there any pitches you're getting that are just total trash that have nothing to do ... Are people like pitching you for Yahoo, where you used to write?

Aaron Pressman:

I can't even break it down so coherently. I get so many pitches that, some of them are fantastic, some of them are terrible and some of them are somewhere in between.

Beck Bamberger:

What's a fantastic pitch?

Aaron Pressman:

Well, there's two ways a pitch can be fantastic. One is by luck, which is, "Oh, I just got assigned or decided to write about something," and in comes a pitch. "We just did a research report estimating how big that market will get." And you just think, "Oh, that's perfect."

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Aaron Pressman:

But I think to me, a perfect pitch is less in my face and more ... I'm a curious person. You can read Data Sheet, you can see I'm interested in off-the-beaten-path stuff, things that appeal to my nature as a lifelong learner or a curious tech person, those get my attention.

Beck Bamberger:

Makes sense. And then, is the subject line critical for you? Does that grab you to open an actual email?

Aaron Pressman:

Well, I might be unusual, but the subject line is almost irrelevant to me. I'm like-

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, you open every one.

Aaron Pressman:

Yeah, I'm using my down arrow key there and just-

Beck Bamberger:

Yes, yes, yes. Down, down, down, down, down. Yeah.

Aaron Pressman:

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Subject line is just not good enough for me. I need to see what's in there. Sometimes even the formatting, I probably shouldn't say this, even the formatting of an email when there's like a block quote, a nice juicy block quote, then I'll stop and say like, "Oh, what does that quote say?"

Beck Bamberger:

Ah, interesting.

Aaron Pressman:

I'm doing it visually, in some ways.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Oh, okay. I haven't heard that before. Visual, okay, and curiosity, appeal to your curiosity.

Aaron Pressman:

Yeah.

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Beck Bamberger:

I like it. Now, what about actually creating a story? We like to chat with folks about, well, where do you get the idea for a story? Does it get handed down to you and you go, "Oh, okay. Now I got to go write about this," or are you standing in the shower? You're on a walk with your dog and you go, "Oh, this sounds interesting." Or are you scrolling through Twitter and you're like, "Wait, something's happening." Or, do you ever get it from pitches? How does a story come to light?

Aaron Pressman:

Look, it is all of the above. It's 2020, it's the web. I'm writing some stories that take me an hour to write, and I'm writing some stories that take me six months to write. I have stories that haven't been written, that are aren't out yet, that I've been like sort of noodling and working on and reporting on for months and months and months.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Aaron Pressman:

I think one way that I am definitely trying to orient myself a little better and that some of my younger colleagues at Fortune are great at, Jeff John Roberts had a great story over the weekend about the Holocaust weirdness on TikTok.

Beck Bamberger:

What? What's on TikTok now. God, it's so crazy, that world. I can't even keep up. Go ahead, go ahead.

Aaron Pressman:

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I am trying to keep up more on social media, on Twitter. I have three teenage-ish, two of them aren't teenagers anymore, but three kids who also help me really kind of ... I listen in on what their, what tech topics they're listening in on. It is a wide spectrum wide, a wide funnel. Is that the right analogy?

Beck Bamberger:

Yes, it is.

Aaron Pressman:

That I'm trying to get story ideas from, so it's not just the same old pathways that I've been using for years and years and years.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, you got to evolve. You did say, "Oh yeah, it comes from everything." But are there ever pitches that you go, "Oh, wait, that's the nugget of a really good story," or is that so rare, it's not even funny?

Aaron Pressman:

I don't know that necessarily the nugget, but I definitely get pitches where someone has done some research about something that I was thinking of vaguely for a long time. That can help crystallize. I'm trying to think of a great example recently. It's not jumping to mind. But for many years, cord cutting was a thing, but it was hard to get your finger on it. Then I started getting reports that were more focused on the average cable bill price, looking, including everything, all inclusive. This is a few years ago now, but and how much of it, how it gotten so high when you included all the extra charges. It was a nugget that sort of crystallized to me like, "Oh right, okay. Everybody's cord cutting because it's a rip-off."

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Yeah.

Aaron Pressman:

And here's the guy who did the statistic that really proves that and shows, over the last 10 years, here's how much cable bills have gone up. I think sometimes when people have something really original that they've uncovered or analysis they've done, it can help focus something that I've generally been thinking about.

Beck Bamberger:

So from all over the place.

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Jered Martin:

Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious to see the unique ways OnePitch helps PR professionals and marketers pitch journalists? Head to [onepitch.co](http://onepitch.co) to learn about our new One Pitch Score, and see how easy it is to find the right journalist to pitch your news to. Sign up for your free account today. Now, back to today's episode.

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Beck Bamberger:

Well, let's play a fun little area that usually has to do with stories, and it's just simple word association. So I'll give you a word, Aaron, and then you give me the first thing you think of.

Aaron Pressman:

Okay.

Beck Bamberger:

Does that sound good?

Aaron Pressman:

Yep.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Usually they're illuminating. Let's go. First one is food.

Aaron Pressman:

Donut.

Beck Bamberger:

Drink.

Aaron Pressman:

Coffee.

Beck Bamberger:

Hobby.

Aaron Pressman:

Cycling.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh yeah. Google.

Aaron Pressman:

Search.

Beck Bamberger:

SpaceX.

Aaron Pressman:

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Going to the Mars.

Beck Bamberger:

Zoom.

Aaron Pressman:

Too much Zooming.

Beck Bamberger:

I have to double click on that. Silicon Valley.

Aaron Pressman:

IPO's.

Beck Bamberger:

Wearables.

Aaron Pressman:

Apple Watch.

Beck Bamberger:

Antitrust.

Aaron Pressman:

Overblown.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Election.

Aaron Pressman:

Scared out of my wits.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Journalism.

Aaron Pressman:

Been a long time. Well, a lot, a lot of journalism.

Beck Bamberger:

Pitch.

Aaron Pressman:

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Email.

Beck Bamberger:

And then inbox.

Aaron Pressman:

Overflowing.

Beck Bamberger:

Overflowing. Back to the inbox real quick. What do you get, 1,000 emails a day?

Aaron Pressman:

No, but it's in the hundreds. When I went on vacation recently, I came back and I had 11,000 unread emails.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh no. How many days were you gone?

Aaron Pressman:

Yeah, like 14 days.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay, so of solitude. Damn though. Did you dig out of that?

Aaron Pressman:

I honestly did not. It's not possible.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Aaron Pressman:

That would take two weeks to dig through.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Oh, wow.

Aaron Pressman:

I tried to do what I tried to do. I scanned through it. My email program also separates, I forget what it calls it, focused emails. I looked at all the ones that the email program highlighted as more important.

Beck Bamberger:

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God that's giving me heart palpitations. Well Aaron, given the background that you've come from, you've been at Yahoo, you started out in like the ... you were at The Bond Buyer, you were at the Industry Standard, you were at Bloomberg. You've been around the circuit when it comes to business technology news. What do you actually read for fun? Books? Articles? Newsletters? Whatever.

Aaron Pressman:

That's a great question. One thing is, there are still some websites out there, which I think are more like probably running on 20 years old or more, but which still have a sort of ... Well, Jason Kottke is the one I'm thinking of.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh yes, yes.

Aaron Pressman:

kottke.org, where they still have this ethos that I really ... was really in bloom when I was getting into technology reporting of sort of finding all these weird, wild, interesting things all over the web, whether it's videos of SpaceX rockets landing from-

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Aaron Pressman:

... coming down from space, or some new art exhibit or some funny thing on TikTok or whatever, those kinds of websites that bring together a lot of stuff. But I also omnivorous. I'm reading books. My friend, Eric Weiner, just wrote a great book, The Socrates Express, which I, my wife and I both read and-

Beck Bamberger:

Let me put that down. I always get all my book recommendations from the show. Socrates Express.

Aaron Pressman:

Yeah. That's a good one.

Beck Bamberger:

All right, yes. In search of life lessons from dead philosophers. Love it. Available on Amazon and Audible, everywhere. Okay. What else? What else are you reading?

Aaron Pressman:

You won't be surprised to learn. I read a lot of newsletters.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes.

Aaron Pressman:

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I'm reading letters both to stay informed, but also I just find it's a great medium to learn about things, get information. I'm really interested in podcasting, so I'm reading Hot Pod.

Beck Bamberger:

Hot Pod, yes.

Aaron Pressman:

I read a lot of, I read probably too many tech news letters, like Protocol and Bloomberg and ZDNet and TechBrew and Release Notes, which is, I'm forgetting his name, the guy from the Houston Chronicle who's so great. And then other kinds of newsletters. Matt Levine's Bloomberg newsletter about finance is so great. He's really maybe a model for my newsletter writing.

Beck Bamberger:

Way to shout out. Yes. Is there anything you read that's just kind of totally like fiction, fantasy, like fun, like totally non-related?

Aaron Pressman:

Oh, I have a huge science fiction, fantasy collection downstairs in the study. I do read a lot of that. I'm delving back to when steam punk was a big science fiction theme. So I'm reading a book called Perdido Street Station, which is really, really weird. It gets your mind out of the whole work thing.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah, it does. Tell us a little bit more about that book.

Aaron Pressman:

That's China Miéville's book. It is about a world where there are a lot of genetically modified people, I guess I would say. People have been integrated with machines into their bodies and stuff. I'm only about halfway through. It's sort of a noir science fiction. Very dark, very dark.

Beck Bamberger:

That's great. Wonderful. I'm almost done with, here's a classic for you, Dune, Frank Herbert's.

Aaron Pressman:

Well, we all have to read it before the next movie comes out, right?

Beck Bamberger:

That's right. That's right. You got to get on that. Then FYI, today, so today, even though this podcast doesn't come out on the daily, today is September 8th, just for folks listening, and today, if you're a food fan, David Chang's book, Eat a Peach, it's a memoir, and he's the guy who was on Netflix as Ugly Delicious and Momofuku and all that good stuff. Oh, and I'm already like three chapters in on the Audible, and it's so, it's just so real. He narrates it too. I think that's the best part.

Aaron Pressman:

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Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Where you can get the books, but it's narrated by the author.

Aaron Pressman:

Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

It's like a different experience, in my opinion.

Aaron Pressman:

Well, the restaurant business is so hard, and so the people who succeed have real-

Beck Bamberger:

You almost want to call it survive. You got to get over the survival node, and then maybe you can get into this. But, oh my God.

Aaron Pressman:

You're making me hungry for restaurants. I haven't been to a restaurant in so long.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Yeah. I hear you. Well, we'll get back to that one day. At least we can all read the news and journalism and be entrenched in that, for better or for worse. For better, though, on your side. Speaking of, you've been in journalism for a while. You got your degree, finished that out in the '90s. So it's been, you're now 20-plus years into journalism. What do you think the future of journalism is?

Aaron Pressman:

Well, in some ways I'm pretty worried about the future of journalism. I think as we were talking about earlier, I actually started with a friend of mine, a podcast about local news in our town. Our town is only 30,000 people.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah, you were saying.

Aaron Pressman:

Because really, the newspaper that covered, that the weekly newspaper that covered the town is a shell of its former self. The Boston Globe does not cover much beyond the city right now, and a few of the really big cities in the state. So you have huge amounts of government activity and business activity and good things and bad things, and nobody really knows about them. Just kind of people wondering about them. There's Facebook rumors. At the local level, I'm pretty unhappy and sad about that no one's really cracked and found a business model, and you have these private equity companies scooping up hundreds of local newspapers, and not caring that much about the quality of the journalism.

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Aaron Pressman:

I think at the larger level though, there's a lot of things to feel good about. It seems like some of the big, great journalism institutions, like The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, are doing very well, even in these tough times. I think smaller creators are finding ways to make, whether it's newsletters with subscriptions or podcasts with advertising. So I'm feeling a little better about the big picture, and a little more worried about my local picture.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, that's a common thread we keep hearing on the show. By the way, I misspoke. You've been in journalism for 30-plus years, because your first job, according to my little sheet here, started in, well, 1989. Do you remember Investment Dealers' Digest?

Aaron Pressman:

I worked in 2 World Trade Center in 1989.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow.

Aaron Pressman:

It was a really fun time. That was a time where the business news world was smaller, and so there were a lot of these trade publications, like Investment Dealers' Digest. Then ultimately the people I worked with there went on to places like The New York times and Fortune and Business Week and all over the place.

Beck Bamberger:

It must have been suits for days. Did you wear a suit? Did you wear a suit or did you wear a white shirt and sit next to a typewriter?

Aaron Pressman:

No, I had a little Mac, one of those little Macs with the little screen.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. This is a little bit before my time, but it seems fun.

Aaron Pressman:

We had a teletype machine.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Aaron Pressman:

I have a very strong memory of the day that Kuwait was invaded. I guess Iraq invaded Kuwait, and the teletype machine went crazy.

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Beck Bamberger:

Okay, so let's back up for a second. What is that, for folks who don't know, including myself? What is that?

Aaron Pressman:

It's sort of like an automated typewriter.

Beck Bamberger:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Aaron Pressman:

That's getting the Dow Jones feed of news, because you didn't have a computer.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Aaron Pressman:

You didn't have a network.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Aaron Pressman:

So it's typing out, on a long roll of paper, like a roll of toilet paper or a roll of paper towels, it's typing up every story that the Dow Jones news wire is publishing. So it's constantly typing out, here's a story about this company and that company, and here's what the stock market's doing. Here's what the energy markets are doing.

Beck Bamberger:

It's a live feed.

Aaron Pressman:

Yeah, it's a live feed. It had bells inside it. If something really big happened, a bell would ring, so someone would go and look at it. And if a really, really big thing happened, the bell would just keep ringing and ringing.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow. Oh, that's like, wow. I wonder who determined if it was worthy of a ding or not?

Aaron Pressman:

I'm sure there was an editor.

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Beck Bamberger:

That was someone's job.

Aaron Pressman:

That was an editor's job.

Beck Bamberger:

That's a ding. And if it was big enough, maybe it's a double ding. I don't know. Wow. Man. That's probably on YouTube somewhere. I'm going to look that up. I'm going to look it up and hear that sound.

Aaron Pressman:

Oh, the sound. Yeah, probably.

Beck Bamberger:

Like when you had to dial up your AOL.

Aaron Pressman:

You could set that to be your text message arrival sound.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. That's a good weekend project for me. Okay. I'm excited. Thanks Aaron. Okay. Well the future of journalism being what it is, would you do it again?

Aaron Pressman:

Boy, that's a great question. It's certainly been as fun a job as any person I know, growing up or anywhere who has a job, journalism is certainly just as fun. Because, I've gotten to travel all over the world, meet incredibly talented and interesting and weird people, and express my own thoughts and views about them. I think if you're a curious person and you're a person who likes to tell a story, still a great thing to try and do.

Beck Bamberger:

So you'd still do it? Yeah.

Aaron Pressman:

Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

But no, I can tell you love it, and I don't think you could do anything else.

Aaron Pressman:

I'm like every other journalist. I think I've thought about going to law school or teaching or doing a lot of other things. But this has just kept me, kept my heart beating all these years.

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Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). I love that. Last part for today, Aaron is a fun little Mad Libs, little part that we play. So I'm going to tee you up with the word I'm looking for, and then I'll read back the whole entire Mad Lib.

Aaron Pressman:

Okay.

Beck Bamberger:

If that sounds good. Sometimes they're shockingly accurate, so we'll see what we get today.

Aaron Pressman:

Okay.

Beck Bamberger:

All right, so first what's a catch phrase, any catch phrase?

Aaron Pressman:

Just do it.

Beck Bamberger:

Just do it. Okay. What about a journalist scare phrase, like you never want to hear this word or phrase mentioned to you?

Aaron Pressman:

Stop the presses.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. What about an empowering journalism buzzword?

Aaron Pressman:

They put it on the cover, maybe.

Beck Bamberger:

Put it on the cover. Let's do that. Yes. An adjective.

Aaron Pressman:

Sweet.

Beck Bamberger:

Then what about part of a pitch?

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Aaron Pressman:

The world will never be the same.

Beck Bamberger:

And another adjective?

Aaron Pressman:

Infuriating.

Beck Bamberger:

All right, we'll go with it. This is getting good. Good. How about another part of a pitch?

Aaron Pressman:

Exclusively for you.

Beck Bamberger:

An amount of time.

Aaron Pressman:

Two-and-a-half-hours.

Beck Bamberger:

2.5 hours, great. Another adjective, and then we're almost done.

Aaron Pressman:

Friendly.

Beck Bamberger:

A singular noun.

Aaron Pressman:

Smartphone.

Beck Bamberger:

And then how about a topic, any topic?

Aaron Pressman:

Ancient philosophy.

Beck Bamberger:

First time that someone's said that. That's good. A verb ending in I-N-G.

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Aaron Pressman:

Swimming.

Beck Bamberger:

And then another verb.

Aaron Pressman:

Concentrating.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay, are you ready for the mad-lib? Here we go. Okay.

Beck Bamberger:

To me, tech journalism is just do it. It consists of stop the presses and put it on the cover on the daily. If a pitch has a sweet, the world will never be the same phrase. I will absolutely respond to it. However, if a pitch has an infuriating exclusively for you remark, you can expect no reply for me. If two-and-a-half-hours goes by and you don't see an email back from me, you can just assume I am not friendly about it. The best stories always have smartphones and are usually about ancient philosophy. The best way to reach me is to swim it over to me, but you can also concentrate on me.

Aaron Pressman:

That is hilarious.

Beck Bamberger:

That's pretty fun. That's a good one.

Aaron Pressman:

Kind of true.

Beck Bamberger:

Kind of true. Aaron, thank you so much for being on today. It was a lot of fun. I'm going to look on YouTube for that sound.

Aaron Pressman:

All right. Set it up. Thank you.

Beck Bamberger:

Aaron, thank you, again.

Aaron Pressman:

It was great talking to you.

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Jered Martin:

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