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Jered Martin:

Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist brought to you by OnePitch. The guest on our show includes some of the most notable journalists from the top US-based publications who cover topics including technology, lifestyle and culture, health, science, and consumer products. We discuss their role, the types of stories they cover, what their inbox looks like and how they connect with sources.

Jered Martin:

Bryan Walsh, Axios's future correspondent joins us on the show today. Bryan joined Axios in February of 2020. He covers emerging technology and the trends shaping geopolitics, work, warfare, and more. Additionally, he writes the twice weekly Axios Future newsletter. Bryan has been a reporter and writer since 2001 when he started at Time magazine. He helped launch OneZero and Medium, and is the author of End Times: A Brief Guide to the End of the World available on Amazon.

Jered Martin:

Today, Bryan shares in detail about the types of stories he writes for Axios, his biweekly newsletter and how he leaves pitches and sources into them, his experience reporting at Time, which led him to write his book and more. Let's hear more from Bryan now.

Beck Bamberger:

Hey, everyone. Welcome to Coffee with a Journalist. We are in season two here today, and I'm super excited because today we have on Bryan Walsh from Axios, who also is an author, which we will talk about because we have that wonderful part about what are you reading right now? Bryan, welcome to Coffee with a Journalist. Thank you for being here.

Bryan Walsh:

Great to be here too.

Beck Bamberger:

Are you drinking coffee? What are you drinking right now?

Bryan Walsh:

I'm actually drinking coffee. I thought it would be best to stay in the spirit.

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Beck Bamberger:

Me too. Yes. It's very rare that myself and the other person are drinking coffee at all. So yay. Keeping up with the theme here. It's early in the morning, a little bit when we're doing this, so that's excellent. Okay. Bryan, we want to, of course, dive into your inbox. Now, you've been in Axios since February of 2020. So it's not like you've been on that beat for a long time, like you were at Time, but how crazy is your inbox with pitches?

Bryan Walsh:

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It's pretty crazy, I'd say. **I mean, what I do is look at emerging tech, big emerging trends, and that means a lot of startups.** I mean a lot of companies that are in this kind of space, whether it's AI, whether it's biotechnology, automation, what have, telehealth, a lot of companies are doing a lot of things, which means a lot of people reaching out to me with ideas, with CEOs who want to talk, announcements, things like that.

Bryan Walsh:

So every day is kind of an element of triage to try to figure out, okay, who can I respond to? Who would I want to respond to? What am I working on where this might piece into that later? So I do a newsletter twice a week and you add that up, that's like eight or nine pieces altogether between those two. So that's a lot of people I need to talk to. So I'm often open to speaking to people, even if I don't automatically have something in mind, because I know it could be something that could then be stored for later. You use it to add to a trend or so forth because you always need... Three makes a trend, so you always need to get that third person as well.

Beck Bamberger:

Exactly. Do you cleanse your inbox in any way, shape or form or do you let it ride? Do you save things in a folder of any sort, pitch wise?

Bryan Walsh:

I'm a pretty bad organizer when it comes to email. I depend on search. Maybe I'll star things, favorite things. I often move things into like an Evernote file. So I'll do that if it's something I can put them in and slot them in the subject areas. But I have to admit especially since I joined Axios, the size of that inbox has just been growing and growing. I'll spend a day writing a piece, writing the newsletter and that means things sort of pile up during that time.

Bryan Walsh:

So one of my new year's resolutions is to try to get a little bit more efficient, a little bit better at figuring out how I can put all this in my fingertips and not get so much anxiety when I look at the number on the Gmail app on my iPhone.

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Beck Bamberger:

Let us know if you figure that out. I mean every other journalist on here would want to know your secrets because no one's solved it yet. Oh, man. Now do you respond to pitches?

Bryan Walsh:

I do. I do not respond to every pitch.

Beck Bamberger:

That's impossible, I imagine.

Bryan Walsh:

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Yeah. **I mean I pick and choose based off what sounds interesting. What happens to dovetail with what I was thinking about writing that week?** Because I work in a fairly short turnaround. I'll sometimes have things working for longer periods of time, but in reality, when you're doing this twice a week, that's amounts to almost like 4,000 words. You need to just sort of like, "Okay, what am I doing?" Making sure there's something in the newsletter every two or three days. And so I sort of do focus on like, "Okay, I have a sense that there's something in the news or there's something that's been piquing my interest or I want to just know about the pandemic or I want to do something about AI.

Bryan Walsh:

Okay. Then I take a look and see who's... As part of among other things, **when it comes to pitches, like okay, who's been reaching out around different sectors and then sort of select the ones I think we'll use or work for that.** As well it's just sometimes things that sound interesting or I think could be useful down the line. **It's always great to have those introductory conversations because then that can lead both to maybe a story or even just someone that you can then sort of call on later on when you're looking for some support within a piece or a sort of a gut check or what have you.**

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Beck Bamberger:

Or you're like supporting that trend.

Bryan Walsh:

Yeah, exactly. Yeah, precisely.

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Beck Bamberger:

Got it. So given the array of the stories you do cover because it is about the future, which is all encompassing, you just did, for example, a piece on the end of hopefully mosquitoes, a biotech company, then you did a review of a book called The Ministry for the Future. So like wide range. And then of course the newsletter that you have. How do you come up with the story to do, given how vast your beat is?

Bryan Walsh:

Yeah. Sometimes I have sort of things in mind that I just need to hit, I need to update. So there might be something where bigger, broader, such as like where is synthetic biology right now. Just kind of a subset of a biotech that involves synthesizing DNA, coming up with cool new products. The thing you mentioned about the mosquito actually is a synthetic biology company. So they will actually figure out a way to create a new repellent that actually works with the bacteria in your skin and so forth.

Bryan Walsh:

So sometimes it's that. Sometimes I'm looking something off the news because the pandemic had really overtaken so much of what I and everyone else writes about. So if there's something happening in the news around the vaccine gets approved, okay, well that suddenly has generated interest in how these new kinds of vaccines are going to be made in the future.

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Bryan Walsh:

Have we reached a new threshold? A new turning point around how fast we can do this, then I will want to do almost a news driven story around that and look to see who can be talked to or who's working in that space. And then other times it's just things that strike my fancy or stuff that I have a particular interest in. **Like in part, because of the book I'm very interested in big, potentially dangerous technological catastrophes. Or those working in that space.**

Bryan Walsh:

So are you working in the space of one engineers germs and how that could go wrong or how to secure that. Or are you working in AI ethics and the question of how we better use those kinds of technologies. So things like that. So it's like half and half news driven. Me less so than a lot of my colleagues at Axios who were doing business, doing politics. That's a very news driven cycle. I had the luxury and also sometimes the burden because I have to generate myself of trying to just all right, pick a trend out of the general stream that is the future and decide, okay, **what do I want to write about this moment, knowing that there's going to be another one in two or three days?**

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. That's a lot to keep up with.

Bryan Walsh:

Yeah, it is.

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Beck Bamberger:

That's a lot. Now, do you at all leisurely read anything of any sorts related to the future or are you like, "Oh no, I just do like classical non-fiction because I can only handle like I have to go far away from my beat." What is kind of your collective of reading material look like?

Bryan Walsh:

For book-wise, it's kind of split between two. I like to sort of like half my time be spent on just things I like that I just want to read this off in fiction. And then the other half is kind of spent on trying to catch up and come up to speed in the various subjects that I'm working on. So I'm one of those people like I can only do one book at a time. I can't really do two books. So I'll sort of read between them, one novel and then one nonfiction book.

Bryan Walsh:

And then a lot of the time is spent for magazines, all the ones you'd expect, the New Yorker, but like the Atlantic then also closer to what I read about ones like MIT Tech Review are really great. But a lot of that, I'm consuming online. And honestly, a lot of it comes via newsletters. **I don't mean to be a newsletter newsletter, but that has become the most efficient way I've found to get links, to get story ideas, to get smart commentary. It just comes to you and you know when it comes to you.**

Bryan Walsh:

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I mean, that to me is part of the reason why newsletters have been successful in recent years is that it's actually a pretty good way to winnow down what would otherwise be the gigantic fire hose of content being shot at you all the time. So that's a lot of times just trying to catch up with that, but stuff in the pocket app, hopefully get around to it, slotted into the various folders I have for different subject matters. I wish I could read more for pleasure, but like everyone else, it's a little bit of a struggle.

Beck Bamberger:

And it seems so luxurious, doesn't it? Of like, "Oh, let me..." At least for me now at this point. I'm not even a journalist, but like, "Oh, let me spend an hour reading a book, an actual..." I mean, it just seems like the most la-di-da thing that I could possibly do, but I want to do it more. I've never thought of equating it to a luxury. And in a way, it really is of like sitting down with a book in hand and just enjoying it.

Bryan Walsh:

Right. Because it requires sort of uninterrupted time and solitude, two things of which are hard to find these days.

Beck Bamberger:

It's quite true. Okay. Now, you were one of the rare journalists we've had on here who also has a book. So your book *End of Times: A Brief Guide to the End of the World*, which came out in 2019. So interesting timing by you. I want to hear a little bit about that because one people of course can get it. That's great. But what spurred you to do this book? Was it your experience at Time, for example, Time magazine?

Bryan Walsh:

Yeah. A lot of it was the experience at Time. So I worked at Time basically from when I left college for 15 years, started as a foreign correspondent. Well, started as an intern then became foreign correspondent in Hong Kong and Tokyo, and then wrote about the environment a lot back here in New York where I am now. What I was focused on was climate change for a long time. Here's a big global mega trend that has potentially catastrophic consequences. So that was on my mind. But then I'd also written a lot about disease. I'd covered the avian flu, if you remember that back in 2005, 2004.

Bryan Walsh:

I've covered SARS before that in 2003. So the forgotten flu pandemic 2009. So that was on my mind too, as a subject. Then I started looking around and seeing that there had been over the last decade or 15 years, this whole new academic discipline around this thing called **existential risks. These are dangerous threats that could go really, really badly for the human race like either extinction or essentially something that looks like Mad Max after the fall.**

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Or a...

Bryan Walsh:

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Yeah, I know. Yeah, exactly or COVID. So once I figured that out, I was leaving Time just because I wanted to switch to writing more and I thought this would be a fascinating book to write about. Let's look at the big ways, both natural and human made the world could end, what can be done about them. And that's what I spent essentially 2017, 2018 researching writing and then the book came out. Then of course the following year, there's pandemic. So the timing was good in the sense, I suppose, that it was before that. I'm not sure if it would have been a help if it had come out at the exact same time or that would just been two on the head, I suppose.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, wow. So I asked you before we started getting on the recording here, but was there a spike sales in COVID times?

Bryan Walsh:

Yeah, there was another new spike. I mean, if maybe if we put the disease and not asteroids on the cover, it would have done even better at that time. But there was like both in terms of people reading it, but also in terms of people reaching out to talk about this subject. Especially in those early days, I think when it was not fully clear.

Beck Bamberger:

If we were going to make it, yeah.

Bryan Walsh:

Exactly, yeah. It felt like the start of a movie, but definitely I think a lot of lessons are applicable there because this is... The big point I was trying to get out of the book is that it's very tough to prepare for these kinds of risks because they've never been experienced before. We haven't experienced a pandemic on this scale for a hundred years. And when you don't do that, it's kind of hard to put the money to prepare, even though what we've seen very clearly here, I mean, this is going to end up costing us beyond the terrible loss of human life, trillions upon trillions of dollars.

Bryan Walsh:

We could have averted it for far, far less, but it's just not something we do. Hopefully that we'll learn that lesson this time. We tend not to. We tend to sort of get shocked and then forget. But I am hoping, at least around this particular subject we'll be smart enough. And technology is helping us there too, to ensure that something like this won't happen or if it does happen again, won't be as bad as this one has been.

Beck Bamberger:

I was just talking with a friend on that of, "Man, how do you get your war chest going with disease?" I mean, this has to be a conversation multiple people are having, but how cool could it be if like, "Oh, yeah. Oh, new thing. Yeah. We got a vaccine in a month, whatever." Now, I don't know if that could be done, but maybe with AI.

Bryan Walsh:

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Yeah. Well, what's really fascinating is that we actually had this vaccine like the Moderna and the Pfizer ones, the new ones, the first ones. Essentially in finished form very quickly after the virus was discovered in sequence. The rest was a matter of the clinical trials, what had to happen, safety, efficacy, and so forth. But this new technology, one of the most exciting new technologies we have out there, this ability to use mRNA to quickly sequence a virus and then actually figure out what is it about it you can actually attack, can you use for a vaccine. That could potentially create a situation down the line where we can do this way faster.

Beck Bamberger:

Way faster, right?

Bryan Walsh:

Or you can get ahead of it and begin to sort of design, ready-made. Almost like keeping a sort of artillery in reserve, vaccines that can sort of adjust to any number of potential virus families out there. And there's going to be more. So hopefully this will be a turning point that we can do this. This is the one thing we did really well in this pandemic, in the US. Pretty much everything else, not so great. But in this case, I think we could really point the way towards a much safer future, which is one of the nice sides of the stuff I read about.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, fascinating.

Jered Martin:

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Beck Bamberger:

Okay. All right. We got a little word association. So I'm going to give you a word and you tell me first thing that comes to mind and we'll see what we get. Are you ready?

Bryan Walsh:

I'm ready.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Food?

Bryan Walsh:

Tacos.

Beck Bamberger:

I plus one that. Drink?

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Bryan Walsh:

Beer.

Beck Bamberger:

Hobby?

Bryan Walsh:

Reading. That's so boring.

Beck Bamberger:

No, it's great. The luxury, the luxury of that. I'm down with that. Biotech?

Bryan Walsh:

Moderna.

Beck Bamberger:

AI?

Bryan Walsh:

Apocalypse.

Beck Bamberger:

Climate change?

Bryan Walsh:

AI Gore.

Beck Bamberger:

Robots?

Bryan Walsh:

Revolution.

Beck Bamberger:

VR?

Bryan Walsh:

Over-hyped.

Beck Bamberger:

Extinction?

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Bryan Walsh:

Agenda.

Beck Bamberger:

Agenda? Did you say agenda?

Bryan Walsh:

Yeah. I don't know why, I swear.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Journalism?

Bryan Walsh:

Reporters.

Beck Bamberger:

Pitch?

Bryan Walsh:

Inbox.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, the next one is inbox. Okay. Inbox? I guess pitch.

Bryan Walsh:

Anxiety, I was going to say.

Beck Bamberger:

Anxiety. Hey, that's good. A lot of people have a feeling on that last one there. So, yeah. Okay. Speaking of journalism, how do you feel the future of journalism is?

Bryan Walsh:

It's challenging I would say. I'm coming up this summer 20 years as a professional in this business which is mind-blowing to me. **I've been fortunate enough just to be doing this work for so long and to do it both in a big sort of older mainstream place like Time magazine where I started my career and now more recently at a really vibrant, viable startup in Axios. That's rethinking so much of how we approach and write the news, which I think is really great.** I mean, so much of how we used to write, had to do with technology that was put in place decades ago like how long should a story be? That was because of certain page length in column like the newspapers.

Bryan Walsh:

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So we're challenging that saying we don't have to do that. So that's exciting. And **I think the energy around that space is exciting. But there's no getting around the fact that the financial side and the business side is really, really challenging.** And the reality is you are competing anytime you're doing anything in media, more broadly against every other possible place. The eyeballs of the reader you're trying to reach, could be looking at whether that's Netflix or whether that's a different media brand or whether that's a TikTok or whether that's a video game or whatever.

Bryan Walsh:

So that's a lot of competition. And the nature of social media is it's kind of... **The internet, I think is it's a very winner take all platform, which means that's actually good for consumers in the sense of what they're getting with the access you're able to get that just wasn't possible 30 years ago, but that's going to be tough for the viability of a lot of people within this business.**

Bryan Walsh:

And **I do worry about certain areas like local news,** which is just very tough. I mean there's a reason why so much of the media we're doing now is focused on national or even international issues because you can maximize the reach, but maybe only people in Pittsburgh are really interested in Pittsburgh news and that's not a huge market, but on the plus side, **Axios is actually experimenting and launching a whole bunch of local newsletters who really think in sort of medium-size cities and really hope that that could be something that could roll out further and really make a difference around that dearth of local news we're seeing.**

Bryan Walsh:

So like a lot of things I read about when it comes to the future, **I can see a lot of optimism, a lot of hope around technology, a lot of potential for a better experience, but also a lot of headwinds in terms of who's really going to win and what that will look like especially for those of us who were actually doing it.**

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. I always am interested speaking with people who've been now in the decade plus of the industry versus folks I have on here who maybe have three or four years because they were like just they're in school with it and maybe have some internships and stuff, but it's different when it's the 20 plus year people considering the macro environment. By the way, is that what spurred you to go to Axios leaving such a honored, traditional big behemoth, like Time.

Bryan Walsh:

Yeah, that was a big part of it. I mean, seeing their success at such a young age, seeing like the creativity and the track record of those who were making it, that really did motivate me. I want to work at a place that I thought could be successful that had been successful, and it's been completely what I expected since I've joined.

Beck Bamberger:

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Excellent. That's good to hear. And exciting, it sounds like. Wonderful. Well, Bryan, now we have the mad lib. We'll see how on point it is, how accurate or if it's just plain silly, totally fine, either way, but let's see what happens if you're down for it.

Bryan Walsh:

Sure.

Beck Bamberger:

Are you ready? Here we go. So first thing is just to catch phrase, any catch phrase.

Bryan Walsh:

Eat my shorts. I guess it's a Simpsons.

Beck Bamberger:

Eat my shorts. Love it. That's the first time I heard that one. Okay. What's a scare phrase you would hear in journalism?

Bryan Walsh:

I have a few notes on the story.

Beck Bamberger:

I have a few notes. Yes. Okay. What about an empowering thing you might hear or a positive thing you might hear?

Bryan Walsh:

You can get twice as much space.

Beck Bamberger:

You can get twice as much space. Okay. An adjective?

Bryan Walsh:

Excellent.

Beck Bamberger:

Part of a pitch?

Bryan Walsh:

Innovative.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. What about another adjective?

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Bryan Walsh:

Concise.

Beck Bamberger:

And then another part of a pitch?

Bryan Walsh:

Groundbreaking.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Amount of time?

Bryan Walsh:

30 minutes.

Beck Bamberger:

An adjective?

Bryan Walsh:

Delayed.

Beck Bamberger:

A noun, singular noun?

Bryan Walsh:

Paragraph.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. And then what about a topic, any topic?

Bryan Walsh:

Artificial intelligence.

Beck Bamberger:

A verb ending in I-N-G?

Bryan Walsh:

Ringing.

Beck Bamberger:

And then what about just a verb, any verb?

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Bryan Walsh:

Male.

Beck Bamberger:

Male. Okay. Okay. That was pretty fast. Let's read it back, Ryan. Here we go. To me, tech journalism is eat my shorts. It consists of, I have a few notes on that story and you can get twice as much space on The Daily. If a pitch has an excellent part of an innovation, I will absolutely respond to it. However, if a pitch has a concise mention of something groundbreaking, you can expect no reply from me. If 30 minutes goes by and you don't see an email back from me, you can just assume I am delayed about it. The best stories have a paragraph and are usually about AI. And the best way to reach me is to ring me, but you can also just mail it to me. Wow, Ryan. That actually somewhat makes sense.

Bryan Walsh:

It actually made sense.

Beck Bamberger:

It made sense. Some of these do not at all in any way, shape or form. So this was a refreshing. Thank you for playing and thank you for being on today. This was a lot of fun.

Bryan Walsh:

Me too. Thank you so much.

Beck Bamberger:

You're welcome. By the way, happy holidays. I know this is debuting later in 2021, but it's in December right now. Bryan, we appreciate it and way to survive this year.

Bryan Walsh:

All right. Thank you very much.

Beck Bamberger:

Thank you.

Jered Martin:

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