

EPISODE 141

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist brought to you by OnePitch. The guests on our show include some of the most notable journalists who write about topics ranging from technology to lifestyle and culture, health, and science. We discuss the types of stories they cover, their thoughts on exclusives and embargoes, their favorite pitches, and how they connect with sources. Head to onepitch.co and look for the video page to learn more about our new video series, featuring journalists from the show.

Today on the podcast, we're joined by Kenrick Cai. Kenrick is a senior reporter for technology at Forbes, covering venture capital and startups. During the episode, Kenrick talks about reviewing pitch subject lines, the importance of having clarity in your pitches, the types of stories that pique his interest, and more. Let's hear from Kenrick now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:10] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist, and I actually have coffee today, so it's a damn good day. I'm Beck Bamberger, and I'm here to interview Kendra Cai today, senior reporter over at Forbes. Kenrick, welcome from San Francisco.

[00:01:26] KC: Thank you for having me. It's really nice that – I don't have a coffee with me, and also somehow I've gotten the whole day without drinking coffee yet.

[00:01:33] BB: Kenrick, it's almost noon.

[00:01:35] KC: I know. It's wild.

[00:01:36] BB: Dude.

[00:01:37] KC: I, usually, like need two cups by this time. So I'm not sure why I –

[00:01:41] BB: What happened?

[00:01:43] KC: Yeah.

[00:01:44] BB: That would not happen for me. Just to be clear, like there would not be like, “Oh, shoot. I forgot to get –” No, no, no, no, no. Oh, my gosh. I'm admiring you, the stamina.

[00:01:53] KC: Most of the time in much worse condition when I don't have coffee, so there's a rare outlier, for sure.

[00:02:00] BB: Yeah. You're blazing bright here. So okay, good. Well, I'm glad we have you. Kenrick, I ask everyone this, just in case people aren't as familiar, but how would you categorize the coverage of Forbes?

[00:02:12] KC: That's a really good question. There are a lot of different categories with Forbes. We have our magazine, which I should note is five or six times a year, we have the content on our website. But even then, that kind of differs. So we have a portion of it comes from people like me that are on staff at Forbes. But then there's also a lot of stuff that is written by our contributors, the sort of freelancers, Forbes brand voice that is a whole another apparatus. So I think the number one like misconception that people have with Forbes is just they conflate the first thing they see on forbes.com with just like what Forbes as a whole has become.

[00:02:57] BB: Oh, I see. Okay.

[00:02:58] KC: Yeah. There's a lot of different segments to Forbes, I would say. But the segment that I'm on is on the editorial side, doing journalism on staff for Forbes. The type of work we do there, I guess to go back to question, generally, more Forbes has a real, I think, mission of highlighting the most interesting stories of entrepreneurial folks, stories like that that have a bit more of a human angle also.

[00:03:29] BB: Yeah. The people, the actual people. By the way, speaking to your first point, just under the innovation tab alone are like 16 different categories, all the way to transportation,

sustainability, social media. I mean, it's a vast deep media platform, for sure. Just in case other folks aren't familiar.

[00:03:51] KC: A lot of different staff writers and also contributors writing about different types of things, for sure.

[00:03:58] BB: Quite a lot. Then, yeah, a robust contributor network. Kenrick, how is your inbox with all the pitches you probably receive?

[00:04:07] KC: My inbox is, just I would actually say, like doing a lot better these days, and I think part of that is –

[00:04:12] BB: What? How?

[00:04:15] KC: I think I have like recently in the last, say, two or three months starting to take a more proactive approach with my inbox. Now, I'm actually like kind of making use of like the different features of like our email client. We're on like Microsoft Outlook. **[inaudible 00:04:35]** different things. I think the number one like unlock for me is like I have important main inbox that like most emails default to as I'm like starting to see like the same like spam emails from like the same irrelevant email addresses of people that are constantly sending me irrelevant pitches. I move them over to my other tab.

So the quality of things that may get into my main inbox folder has become, I think, a lot higher than before, and I'm spending a lot less time like sifting through pitches that just are things that I would never cover because they're automatically defaulting to that other inbox now **[inaudible 00:05:21]** because sometimes something good will end up in there but –

[00:05:24] BB: Do you check it, though, if it just doubled to make sure?

[00:05:27] KC: Yeah. So basically, like how I think about it now is with the stuff that is going in my main inbox, I'll open all of them, read all of them, and then decide whether I might cover it or not. With the stuff in the other tab, I'm not opening all of those. I am just looking at the subject line to like see if it's relevant or not. Then every once in a while, if there's something that seems

like it's in that folder, but it could actually be something for me, I'll click on it. I think this is just like helped me in terms of email management, which I have been really, really, really bad at for like the first couple months.

[00:06:04] BB: Well, you know what? You're one of the very rare gems I've heard that actually has figured it out and gotten better.

[00:06:11] KC: I wouldn't say I've like totally figured it out. But I –

[00:06:13] BB: I didn't say that, but yes.

[00:06:15] KC: It's a lot better than it was a few months ago.

[00:06:18] BB: Good for you. What's a great subject line to you?

[00:06:22] KC: I think a great subject line is just something that is like clear from the get go, like what is the story here. It could be like super boring. Like I'm looking at my inbox right now, and I have one that's like, "Meeting with – To see," company name. But like I think that's good because that just like tells me straight up like what is the purpose of this email. Like I said, with the stuff that goes with my main like important inbox, I will still click on it and just like read through the text. But I think if it's not like quickly clear from the subject line and like the body text like what is this pitch, then I don't know. It just makes everything a lot more cumbersome. So I think clarity is the number one thing I would say there.

[00:07:12] BB: Number one. Number one. Do you have a subject line, by the way, that you recently have loved that you can share? It's okay, if not.

[00:07:19] KC: Nothing like super in particular stands out. For my train of thought when I look at these emails is like – I think maybe this is like different but like from some – I just – The subject line is like not really the main thing for me. It doesn't matter too much, as long as it's not like obnoxious, every word in caps, like irrelevant from like might be – I don't know. Something that's just has nothing to do with venture capital. Then I'll take notice of that, in the sense of like delete

it. But besides that, I think it's all the same to me. The key thing is like is it clear what you're pitching to me, if it's a pitch.

[00:08:08] BB: Okay, clarity. Do you have a preference on how long, by the way, the pitch should be? You like like three lines max or bullet points or anything like that?

[00:08:18] KC: Yeah. As long as it's not like a giant essay or the length of an article or something like that. I think it's all relatively the same for me, as long as like it's clear like what the pitch is when I'm reading through those first couple lines, those first couple bullets. I guess the other thing that kind of stands out is if you are putting like a lot of stuff into the email. Is this stuff relevant for me? It could potentially be like really helpful for me, in terms of, say, I'm covering a funding round. If you're putting like the basic details in there, that goes a long way in terms of like me not having to like spend time during like the live interview, asking those basic questions.

[00:09:07] BB: Yes. You can just be clarifying.

[00:09:09] KC: Yeah. So if the supplemental stuff in the email is like relevant to like the type of stuff that I cover, that's great. But if it's like just like five paragraphs that go into like super, super technical stuff about like some startups, like latest product, it's just like a lot deeper than like the type of stuff that I actually cover, then that's probably not as ideal.

[00:09:39] BB: Okay. I hope everyone's listening. Kenrick, for you, you mentioned and talked about like the human aspect and elevating that. You've done quite a variety of stories, as we look through like The Accidental Billionaires. I love that piece. That's featured on your homepage right now or your author page.

[BREAK]

[00:09:59] ANNOUNCER: 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 to learn about our new OnePitch score, and

see how easy it is to find the right journalists to pitch your news to. Sign up for your free account today. Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW RESUMED]

[00:10:23] BB: What, for you, is like the most fun story you get to do, that you're dying to do?

[00:10:31] KC: Yeah. That's a great question. I think that's a great example that when you called out, like I said, with the different segments of Forbes, we still have our magazine. I think doing stories for the magazine is like a kind of rare opportunity, but like the type of opportunity that lets us go a level deeper in telling not just like something someone is announcing but like how this company got here through like all their trials and tribulations. I think like being able to go that level deeper is like what excites me and is kind of like what sparks my reporting juices.

I think there's a real merit to covering funding rounds and new funds and new partners and announcements like that, and I understand that. But I think the most rewarding stories are the ones that go one or two or three or many levels deeper than that and kind of get on the ground of what's actually happening, rather than being a specific like packaged up announcement for a specific milestone.

[00:11:43] BB: So getting deeper.

[00:11:44] KC: Getting deeper. Yeah. I will say, though, that there's two ways to do that, and I've like seen that in terms of like what I'm pitched. I think like when we're doing a deeper story like that, the vast majority, the majority of the time, it doesn't come from like a specific email pitch about like from a PR person that's like, "Do you want to do like a feature story about this?" I think it generally comes more, in my experience, from me actually reporting on the ground and getting a sense of what might be an interesting story through pattern recognition and just like talking to – Grabbing coffee with a CEO and hearing what like their – What's top of mind for them on a day-to-day basis. Or meeting up with a VC and formulating those ideas over time.

I think, even with The Accidental Billionaire story that you were taught, that one is very much kind of speaks to that I think. It wasn't going to be like a story in the magazine for an eight-page

feature from the get go. But I did an interview with Ali Ghodsi, CEO of Databricks, and it was initially just going to be some short like 600-word story, I think. I had a great conversation with him. He really kind of took me under the hood on a lot of things with the company and the whole journey, and he just stood out to me as like a very vibrant character. I realized there's a whole untold story with this company that has like reached the \$28 billion valuation. Well, it deserves to be unpacked. So, yeah, it kind of snowballed and evolved from there into this full-fledged story.

But I think that's what I'm looking for is like when I'm meeting with someone, like getting a sense of like who are you and like what are you willing to like talk to the press about.

[00:13:49] BB: Yes. That's the other component to it, I'm sure, because some people don't want to tell you the whole story.

[00:13:53] KC: Yeah. They have like really remarkable stories, but they just probably would not want to talk to us –

[00:13:59] BB: Right. Do you ever think about that, like how many stories are truly out there but will never see the light of day because the person who holds the story doesn't want it out?

[00:14:12] KC: Yeah.

[00:14:13] BB: I have never thought about that.

[00:14:15] KC: All the time. **[inaudible 00:14:16]** is for me trying to like unpack some of these stories that maybe want to reveal firsthand, if it's just really important to what's going on in Silicon Valley, right?

[00:14:37] BB: Yeah. Wow. Kenrick, what stories are you watching, listening to? Anything, any which way you absorb stories. We'll take Netflix. We'll take podcasts. What you got?

[00:14:52] KC: Like the – And are you talking about stories to do with my beat or just –

[00:14:55] **BB**: No, anything. Just for fun. Just as a story consumer.

[00:14:59] **KC**: Just for fun. Just a story consumer. That's a great question. I think what I've been doing a lot more lately is like actually not – Maybe this is kind of a bad look on my part, but I have not been consuming so much like news content as much as I'm like trying to like just read more like longer for books, trying to –

[00:15:21] **BB**: Have anyone in particular?

[00:15:23] **KC**: I'm always reading like five books at a time, which is like really bad.

[00:15:25] **BB**: That's me too. Yeah.

[00:15:28] **KC**: It's bad because then it just like slows down like my ability to [inaudible 00:15:31]. But I'm reading *Cult of We*, which is fantastic.

[00:15:35] **BB**: Oh, yes. Classic at this point.

[00:15:38] **KC**: Classic, for sure, at this point. Then I like to do like both like nonfiction and fiction. So I'm reading like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* right now.

[00:15:49] **BB**: How is that? I haven't done that one.

[00:15:52] **KC**: Really good. It kind of like reads like sort of – It's like kind of mythical in a sense or like a fable in a way.

[00:16:00] **BB**: Yeah. I've heard that.

[00:16:02] **KC**: How it's told, I don't know. It's very remarkable. I'm really into like magical realism and like surrealism and stuff like that. But, yeah, I don't know. I feel like reading stuff like this. I guess the fiction stuff too. But then like a nonfiction book like *Cult of We* has been like the reason I'm doing that more and more now, I think, is like just seeing like what all the different

angles that a story might come from and kind of like trying to figure out like, what are the right questions to be asking people when I'm doing interviews with them.

[00:16:39] BB: Yeah. Yes. Interesting.

[00:16:42] KC: I don't do a lot of –

[00:16:43] BB: Interesting to read and consume stories in a way of, then how you perfect your interview style. Also haven't thought about that. Lots of deep thoughts on here today, Kenrick. I like it. Okay, last question for you, Kenrick, and perhaps this is another deep one. What do you think the future of journalism looks like?

[00:17:02] KC: Oh, my gosh. That's a great question.

[00:17:05] BB: It's a meaty one. Yes.

[00:17:07] KC: It's a meaty one. I would say I'm optimistic on journalism, in general. I don't know. I think like it's really unfortunate to see how much it's been squeezed, compared to like the heyday of 20 or 30 years ago, right? But I feel like maybe I'm in a privileged position in my current role. I think that we've gotten to a point where like things have kind of stabilized after that like period of chaos from after the initial onset of the Internet age up to like the mid like 2010s, where it seemed like people just hadn't really figured out business models.

Whereas now it seems like there's like kind of like a couple of different types of business models that are starting to work for different journalists, and like we're seeing all these new, like substack but then also these like new specific news publications popping up that are like, newsletter first, right? So I don't know. I'm optimistic from like an industry sense that it's here to stay in a, hopefully, increasingly stabilized form.

I feel like I've been like paying a lot of attention to like AI and like generative AI lately and like all the tech that is popping up in the last couple of months, as far as that goes, like the DALL·E GPT-3 stuff. It's like super interesting from like a coverage standpoint. I think I'm trying to do more and more of these AI stories, but it's also like there's like AI for like copywriting and AI for

writing like marketing copy and AI for like just writing like screenplays even and the creative stuff too. I don't know if that's a – I think there's a lot TBD there but kind of –

[00:19:09] BB: Quite a bit. Quite a bit.

[00:19:11] KC: Yeah. It's like somewhat exhilarating and it's like somewhat scary to think of like what writing just in general like looks like in the future.

[00:19:21] BB: Is it it, and is it writing? I don't know. Like can you imagine like a metaverse where it's a character reading to you from some, I don't even know, like in a music. I don't know. We're having an expensive conversation, Kenrick. I guess we'll see.

[00:19:40] KC: Yeah. I guess we'll – Did you see Sequoia Capital? Like two of their investors wrote like a blog post about generative AI, but it was like written – The byline was like Pat Grady and Sonya Huang and GPT-3 because, I guess, they used the AI to like help them write that blog post. So it's really interesting to think about just what that means from like a journalism and writing standpoint. But that being said, I do feel like there is always a place for this like deeper level reporting that kind of goes to that human level or kind of going under the hood of a company, whether that's like from an investigative standpoint or just talking to startup founders and talking to VCs and figuring out the trends that are happening that people would want to read about besides just the one off announcements.

[00:20:34] BB: Yeah, yeah. They're very par for the course. I like the deeper dive stuff. Keep it up, Kenrick, basically, in short.

[00:20:42] KC: I hope so. I feel like I'm like just like starting to crack the surface or crack the – What is it? Just at the tip of the iceberg.

[00:20:49] BB: The tip of the iceberg.

[00:20:51] KC: Yeah. Can be frustrating. But yeah.

[00:20:54] BB: Well, that's the fun. I think that's the pursuit of journalism.

[00:20:57] **KC:** I guess so. Yeah.

[00:20:58] **BB:** To find the bottom of the ice.

[00:21:00] **KC:** Finding the bottom of the ice.

[00:21:01] **BB:** Find the bottom of the ice. Well, we're going to end there, Kenrick. Kenrick Cai, thank you so much for being here, senior reporter at Forbes. I hope you get to the bottom of the ice in your time.

[00:21:13] **KC:** Thanks for having me, Beck.

[00:21:15] **BB:** Thanks, Kenrick.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:21:16] **ANNOUNCER:** Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring Kenrick Cai from Forbes. To learn more about the latest tools on OnePitch and to subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter, head to our website at onepitch.co. We'll see you all next week with even more insights about the journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.

[END]