

EPISODE 58

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, brought to you by OnePitch. The guests in our show include some of the most notable journalists from the top US-based publications, who cover topics including technology, lifestyle and culture, health, science, consumer products, and business news. We discuss their role, the types of stories they cover, what their inbox looks like, and how they connect with sources.

Our guest on the show today is Heather Somerville, a technology reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*. Heather joined the journal in 2019 and covers venture capital and finance. Heather started her career in 2007 as an editorial assistant, and has previously worked for publications, including Reuters and *San Jose Mercury News*.

Today, Heather shares more about her openness to Zoom coffee meetings, her passion for writing a particular type of story, her thoughts on embargoes, and more. Let's dive in now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:06] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger, the owner of BAM, an agency that represents all these technology startups, and then, also OnePitch, where we help people pitch better for — to the media. Hence, we have this show. Today, we've got another star, which I'm very excited about, Heather Somerville from the Wall Street Journal. Welcome, Heather.

[00:01:28] HS: Hey, great to be here.

[00:01:29] BB: We're excited to have you. Let's start, Heather, with — what we always like to start with, which is the inbox. How crazy is your inbox?

[00:01:39] HS: It's pretty full. It's pretty jammed yesterday, so I've got to go back a day to take care of email that I didn't respond to that's a day old, which is never a good place to start.

[00:01:48] BB: Never good.

[00:01:51] HS: It's pretty full of PR pitches, that I probably won't get to. A — lots of tech newsletters that I will hopefully have time to read, but unlikely to get to today. Probably a lot of industry and analysis and reports that I will also bookmark and hopefully, read sooner rather than later.

[00:02:11] BB: Got you. What's your inbox cleaning system, if there is a system, or you just let it roll? Are you one of those people that let it roll? Or you delete voraciously, like every pitch that comes in?

[00:02:21] HS: Probably somewhere in the middle. I try to make sure things are tidy before I go to bed at the end of the day.

[00:02:25] BB: Oh, that's good.

[00:02:26] HS: Some days are more successful than others.

[00:02:28] BB: Oh, got you. Okay. Then for pitches that get your attention, because you are inundated with them, what makes you open a pitch, if ever?

[00:02:40] HS: I do open most of them.

[00:02:42] BB: Really? You're in a rare bunch. You're in a rare bunch.

[00:02:46] HS: I respond to a miniscule percentage of them. I say, if there's some relationship with the individual who's making the pitch, I will certainly open it and respond to it, for no other reason than to maintain that relationship. Acknowledge that person's time and effort. That's

just simply not how we get our best stories. They don't tend to come through pitches, so I don't spend a whole lot of time engaging with them.

But often, a pitch, or a coffee with someone in the old days, or now it'd be a Zoom call these days, and to get to know someone else in the field, someone who may have something to say that's interesting about a topic that I'm reporting on. I'm very happy to make time for those sorts of things.

[00:03:31] BB: Okay. Is it, if someone wants to be in that elite group of the few that get the response, what would you say are a couple of those elements? Is it, “Hey, I've got a source?” What would you say, gets you that response? Because again, you can't have the coffee as you're saying.

[00:03:47] HS: I think emails that very clearly show that the person making the pitch has actually read my work and knows what I do is a good place to start. A suggestion for a person to connect with, who knows something about a story that I've written, or an area that I'm really interested in and can add value to that reporting. The people who are able to dial right into that very quickly and very succinctly with few words, those are the types of pitches that I'll engage with and often respond to. The ones that are just like, “I have to have a great story for you.” Well, that's, again, that's not how good journalism is generally done. Those would probably be passed over.

[00:04:28] BB: Yes. Got you. Okay, that gives us some good insight. Speaking of the stories you do, so you cover technology, financing, venture capital, startups, which is pretty broad. A lot of times, you've covered the big ones, like the Ubers and Lyfts and Airbnbs of the world and so forth. What is it that helps you come up with the story you want to do? Now, sometimes when we ask people, they're like, “Well, it's what my editor has to do.” Or it's a breaking news thing, which is totally that. Is it ever — you're on a walk, you're taking a shower, and you're like, “You know what I haven't done before?” Or do you ever see a pitch that you're like, “That reminds me of four other pitches I saw earlier in the week. Let me look at that.” What would you say?

[00:05:11] HS: Yeah, I don't know that they come to me in the shower, or out for a walk necessarily. I would say, it's really a combination of things that I feel passionate about, as well as things that are the topic of conversation at the moment. They are something that on my beat, entrepreneurs are talking about, investors are talking about. Regulators interested in regulating tech are talking about —

[00:05:39] BB: — Which is a big topic right now, for sure.

[00:05:41] HS: Yeah. It's an area where there's overlap between something I feel strongly is a public service to unpack and explain and deliver to readers. As well as is the buzzy topic of the day, in circles where people are looking very closely at technology and its implications to the world.

[00:06:03] BB: Yes. Well, that must be a never-ending area for you to unpack, I'm sure. Never lost for words. By the way, I read *The Wall Street Journal* every single dang day. I've seen your stuff and I read it voraciously. Yay for that. I'm a ruthless, what would you say? Subscriber, I guess, you can say.

[00:06:20] HS: Well, I thank you for that.

[00:06:21] BB: Comes to me in paper format. Yes. I do like it.

[00:06:22] HS: We are nothing without our readers and we don't have paychecks without our subscribers, so I appreciate that.

[00:06:26] BB: There you go. There you go. And of course, my team reads and all that stuff. I actually get the paper version and I love it. This is good. What about what you are reading, Heather? We always like to ask people. We'll take by the way, watching, listening to podcasts, Netflix, whatever, whatever you got, we'd like to know.

[00:06:43] HS: I am reading, well, I will say in terms of journalism, in terms of the news, I read — a lot of it is the news on my beat. I tend to not have a whole lot of time to wander off my beat. It's a lot of tech news from a lot of the obvious players and sometimes, the less obvious players. I try to read a little bit of *New Yorker*, a little bit of *New York Times Magazine*, and I enjoy the long reads.

I recently read a *New York Times Magazine* long read on call centers and the journalists went to India and met with people who worked at the call centers and pulled the curtain back on that life and that job a little bit.

[00:07:21] BB: Oh, that's cool. Yeah.

[00:07:23] HS: I am normally a pretty voracious reader of novels. I love fiction. I would say, I have a one-year-old, so that has been shelved for some time.

[00:07:33] BB: Yes, I could imagine. I would imagine.

[00:07:34] HS: The piled books on my nightstand is more about pretty much exclusively parenting books.

[00:07:38] BB: Oh, got you.

[00:07:39] HS: Which I will not bore you, or your listeners with. And my husband is a journalist with *The Chronicle*, the *San Francisco Chronicle* is my hometown paper. I do read *The Chronicle* everyday as well.

[00:07:51] BB: Nice. What's the last fiction book you read that you loved?

[00:07:54] HS: Ooh. I think, the last one was actually a re-read of *The Night Circus*, which is one of my all-time favorites.

[00:08:02] BB: *The Night Circus*. Oh, let's look it up. Let's look it up. I get all my recommendations from the show. Okay. *The Night Circus*

[00:08:08] HS: Erin Morgenstern, I believe is the author.

[00:08:11] BB: Oh, my God. It has 23,000 reviews. Wow.

[00:08:16] HS: If you are the type of person who loves to escape into a world, where there's a little bit of magic and mystery, then this is a book for that.

[00:08:25] BB: Wonderful.

[00:08:25] HS: I read it a while ago and adored it and reread it. That was probably one of the more recent fiction books.

[00:08:30] BB: It says, the opening line just grips me already. "The circus arrives without warning." Adding right now. That's excellent. That's excellent. Then what's your one-year-old into? I mean, you're barely reading probably. Do you have any recommendations you like, just from the parents out there?

[00:08:50] HS: Well, I think now it's more a question of what books is he not going to destroy?

[00:08:55] BB: There you go. Yup.

[00:08:59] HS: The books that he can bang around and grab out of my hands are other books that qualify. We've read a lot of Shel Silverstein poems to him growing up.

[00:09:08] BB: Wow. My favorites. Yeah.

[00:09:09] HS: Really love those. *Where the Sidewalk Ends, A Light in the Attic*.

[00:09:11] BB: Yes. *The Missing Piece*.

[00:09:13] HS: Yes. Yes. Of course, Dr. Seuss has its requisite bookshelf and let me see the classics, *Blueberries for Sal* and *Make Way for Ducklings*. The books that I remember fondly from my childhood have certainly been duplicated for him.

[00:09:28] BB: I love it.

[MESSAGE]

[00:09:31] ANNOUNCER: Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch.

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Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:09:55] BB: I have a Shel Silverstein book on my coffee table. It is *The Missing Piece*. I have *The Missing Piece* and *The Missing Piece Meets the Big O*. I think I'm going to reread that tonight. Obviously, you can read it in about seven minutes. That'll be a quick one for me. Thank you. I think we should cover that more on this, actually, this show, particularly for the parents of like, "Hey, what are you reading? What have you got out there?" Because we got a lot of parents here. Well Heather, we're going to play a word, not association, but more like a fill in the blank, if you will. I'll give you the phrase and then you fill it in, if that sounds good.

[00:10:26] HS: Sure.

[00:10:27] **BB:** Okay. My favorite publicist always —

[00:10:31] **HS:** Respects my time.

[00:10:32] **BB:** Yes. The most annoying publicists always —

[00:10:36] **HS:** Follow-up 25 times, not taking silence for an answer.

[00:10:40] **BB:** No. What, 25? Are you joking?

[00:10:43] **HS:** That's probably hyperbole. I would say, I've gotten as many as five or six.

[00:10:49] **BB:** Okay. Wow, that absolutely scares me. Wow. Okay. You'll get a response from me if —

[00:10:58] **HS:** You take a moment to read the last couple stories that I've written.

[00:11:02] **BB:** There you go. You will never get a response from me if —

[00:11:05] **HS:** You call me by the wrong name.

[00:11:08] **BB:** No. Heather. Really?

[00:11:11] **HS:** Yes.

[00:11:12] **BB:** Oh, God. This is bad stuff.

[00:11:14] **HS:** Sometimes people don't change the name from the last person that they emailed.

[00:11:18] **BB:** They're just copy-pasting, copy-pasting. Oh, that's a —

[00:11:21] HS: Or better yet, they will have the brackets and fill in name here, or XXX and forget.

[00:11:26] BB: Oh, no, no, no.

[00:11:29] HS: Oh, yeah. Just, I mean, complete apathy.

[00:11:32] BB: Wow. Yeah, no, no. Okay. It would be a huge help if you ... publicists.

[00:11:40] HS: Delivered your pitch succinctly in as few words as possible and don't use silly texting shorthands, like TY, or whatever. Write properly.

[00:11:52] BB: BTW. TY.

[00:11:54] HS: Exactly.

[00:11:55] BB: Yeah. Okay. My perfect Sunday is —

[00:11:59] HS: Some time outside, if the weather allows, that going for a hike, or going to the beach and probably stopping at a brewery with my family.

[00:12:08] BB: Oh, that's so nice. The nicest thing I ever heard about my articles or work was? Oh, wait. Does this stump you?

[00:12:17] HS: Yeah, it does. It does.

[00:12:19] BB: Oh, really? Did you ever get a reader comments say, "Oh, my God. This is the best article ever," anything like that?

[00:12:24] HS: Generally speaking, the people who — I won't speak for other reporters, although I think that I am not an exception here. People who reach out after a story to say something negative, to say something critical and often offensive. That's definitely not —

[00:12:38] BB: Of course. Yes.

[00:12:39] HS: That's definitely not how you get a feel good response from readers. I will say, people who have, in the past, told me that the work did some public service. A wrong was corrected].

[00:12:53] BB: That's nice. Yeah.

[00:12:55] HS: Or some sort of injustice was made a little bit more tolerable, or a little bit less awful. That's vague, but that's the best I can hope for.

[00:13:04] BB: Yeah, I get that. That's nice. How about the last best thing I ate was?

[00:13:10] HS: I made chili for Super Bowl Sunday. It was great.

[00:13:13] BB: Oh, good one. Quarantine taught me —

[00:13:17] HS: Quarantine taught me that being a good reporter, you still need to show up places physically. You've got to go places. You've got to see people. You've got to watch their body language. You've got to show them who you are through your body language and your physical presence. As many apps and devices that we have, it's no replacement for making the connections that I still think are the foundation of some of the best reporter source relationships.

Really understanding that a story, so much of the time you've got to be there in some way, whatever that story is. There needs to be some showing up. Trying to do without that, I think has made this job harder, that way so many other people's jobs are more difficult.

[00:14:08] BB: I would imagine. My favorite stories to write are —

[00:14:12] HS: I love getting to write stories, where there's some humor, some quirkiness, or some off-beat characters.

[00:14:18] BB: Yes. Like that circus story, perhaps. I think that would be fun. One thing I think people should know about me is —

[00:14:27] HS: There's nothing people need to know about me. Read my work. I am not —

[00:14:33] BB: Read your work.

[00:14:33] HS: I am not the story. My work are the stories. There's a lot of journalists, who enjoy being more public figures, being very active on social media and having their own personality and hats off to them. I am not that. You don't need to know that much about me. I just hope you read my work and I hope you read the journal, because I really believe in it.

[00:14:55] BB: Yeah. What a great response to that. That's the first time I've heard that. Okay, one piece of advice for aspiring journalists is —

[00:15:02] HS: Be kind.

[00:15:03] BB: Be kind.

[00:15:04] HS: That's a big part of the job.

[00:15:06] BB: I love that.

[00:15:07] HS: You've got to be ruthless. At the same time, you've got to have compassion. It's a hard-juggling act and when to turn up which of those, but they're both necessary.

[00:15:20] BB: Love that too. We have an audience ask here. This is coming from Michelle Kafka from the Kafka Media Group. She is asking, “How do you feel about embargoes on announcements and what's your ideal timeline for receiving an embargo pitch?”

[00:15:37] HS: I'm not crazy about them, just because in general, I don't like to be on someone else's timeline. That being said, they're part for the course these days. They're very common. I would just say in terms of preferred timing, just giving the reporter enough time to do their work properly, so that would depend, of course, on the meat of the announcement. I would say, there's announcements in less than an hour that's probably not great.

[00:16:02] BB: Not good. Yeah, not good.

[00:16:03] HS: I don't think there's any hard and fast rule on that.

[00:16:06] BB: Okay. That's a good answer. Is there any, and this can be an embargo pitch or anything else, but is there any pitch to you that stands out where you're like, “Wow, that is the perfect pitch. It was short. It was concise. It got me to write the story in two days.” Is there any element of that, that we can highlight, perhaps?

[00:16:24] HS: No. I want to be clear. I don't want to bash pitches and bash people who have important jobs.

[00:16:30] BB: Of course.

[00:16:31] HS: I really can't tell you what a perfect pitch is, and that's really my — my intention is not to demean or bash people who have the job of pitching the press. They have an important role. I think the important thing to understand is that that is generally not how stories are made. They're not generally handed to reporters in that way. I will say though, in order to not get people in PR too depressed, there's a lot of good work that's done in building rapport with a journalist and developing that relationship. So that when I get that pitch, it can lead

somewhere. It may not be that precise story that that person, or that company had in mind, but it can often lead somewhere else that's interesting.

I guess, I can say that you're recently an individual I know who is actually not a PR person, but a person with a pitch nonetheless, kind of really dialed into a couple of themes that I am really interested in. He knew that from my prior work, and that is issues of national security and technology and China-US tech relations. I've done a lot of reporting on that and he really dialed into that as something that would be a framing for the story he had in mind.

I thought that was a good way to get my attention. For whatever that's worth, but I just — I have to reiterate organic stories that the reporter seeks out, uncovers are really often the better type of journalism, where I think PR people have a role is they have a role in helping to build and nurture that relationship between the reporter and the source of information. Oftentimes, the report and the PR person are, of course, their interests do not align line, they're at war with each other.

[00:18:29] BB: Exactly.

[00:18:30] HS: There's a way to do that dance. There's a way to do that dance very eloquently.

[00:18:34] BB: I agree. The whole essence of this is the stance, and how do you get your good story, but how do I get my client happy at the same time. All these things. Speaking of and this can relate to publicists, or how you want to think about it this way, but what do you think the future of journalism looks like?

[00:18:53] HS: That's a meaty question.

[00:18:56] BB: Yeah. Big sigh. Big sigh.

[00:18:58] HS: I'm worried. I've been worried for the last 14 years I've been a journalist, and I'm still here.

[00:19:05] BB: That's right. You are.

[00:19:06] HS: We haven't been on a sinking ship yet. Or at least one that's sunk all the way to the bottom. I will say, I think we've learned a lot in the industry over the past several years. This is not a business that can or should live on clicks, on digital ad revenue that does not work and it didn't turn out well for a lot of people who tried that. I think that there's a lot more focus now on membership models, on subscription, paywalls, on even non-profit models. I think those all have potential. I'm not sure how successful they'll be in all cases.

I think there's still going to be a lot of good news organizations that don't survive. That makes me sad. I think there's a lot more direct publishing going on and there's good things about that. There's journalists who are really talented, like Eric Newcomer from Bloomberg, who have gone on to start their own newsletters.

[00:20:06] BB: That's right.

[00:20:07] HS: Those serve a purpose. I think that there's also some worrisome parts of this trend, where there's an attitude that through direct publishing means, anybody can be a "journalist," and it misunderstands the role of editors, of ethics editors, of standards, of skills that are honed over years and years. And of the public service mission that underlines real journalism. I am fully aware of the widespread and growing dislike of and distrust of mainstream media. Not to say it's not unfounded at times. There have been plenty of mistakes. But just to simply think one can cut out institutional journalism like that is done at *The Wall Street Journal* is a problem for democracy. It's a problem for society.

I think about a lot of conversations happening in tech right now, venture capital firm, Andreessen Horowitz, building its own media business to accelerate its direct publishing efforts. Which is very much a nod to how much it dislikes the criticism of the tech industry in the press. That's fine, if they want to do that, and others want to do that. I hope that people, the consumers don't mistake that sort of publishing for journalism. I'm just worried, the more

polarized society is, the more people get their news on Facebook and don't clear the sources and retreat to echo chambers. I worry a lot. But all I can do is keep doing what I'm doing and hope that some of the other talent people who are also doing the work, keep doing it, and that enough media organizations are creative enough to navigate financial challenges ahead, because there will be many more.

[00:22:09] BB: Oh, yeah. There will be. I like what you said about — and I haven't heard this too often on the show, just about the role of the structure of newsrooms, like with the editor and what the role of the editor does and maintains, and a managing editor, for example. That is imperative. I think people just think, like, “Oh, you find some story, you write it up and you post it up.” No, there's quite a bit more that, of course, goes into creating a whole piece and making sure it's balanced and not biased and all these various things. Appreciate you saying that. Nod for editors.

[00:22:43] HS: Yeah. I think it's our responsibility as members of the media as journalists to do a better job of being transparent about how newsrooms work and communicating to people about how decisions are made in newsrooms and how stories come together. Why things are included, or why things are excluded. The fact that a lot of people don't understand, for instance, how many editors my stories go through and how many people I need to reach out to for comment, even if they're not even mentioned in the story, all that stuff. That's not other people's fault. That's our fault as an industry for not being more transparent about how these decisions are made and how a final product comes to be. I hope that we do a better job of that.

[00:23:28] BB: I do too. Well, our last part, Heather, for today is our little mad libs. I'm going to give you the word and you're going to give me whatever your word and then I'm going to read you back the whole little paragraph. Sometimes they're very funny and sometimes they're very accurate. We'll see what we get, if that sounds good.

[00:23:45] HS: I'll just give you back whatever word comes to mind?

[00:23:47] **BB:** Yes, exactly. That's it. That's it. It's going to be random and fun and probably interesting. Okay. The first thing is emotion. What's an emotion?

[00:23:57] **HS:** Laughter.

[00:23:57] **BB:** Laughter. What's an adjective?

[00:24:01] **HS:** Sparkly

[00:24:02] **BB:** Sparkly, yes. Okay, another adjective.

[00:24:06] **HS:** It's almost like it's too big a question.

[00:24:09] **BB:** You can put anything you wish.

[00:24:12] **HS:** Capricious.

[00:24:12] **BB:** Capricious. I love it. Okay. A greeting, any greeting.

[00:24:19] **HS:** What's up?

[00:24:20] **BB:** What's up? You've read my mind. Okay, a verb.

[00:24:23] **HS:** Catapult.

[00:24:24] **BB:** Catapult. You are coming in hot with these today. A noun.

[00:24:29] **HS:** Anteater.

[00:24:30] **BB:** Anteater. How about another adjective?

[00:24:35] HS: Squishy.

[00:24:36] BB: Squishy. These are great. Cringe-worthy PR term, or a thing that they do, like misspelling your name, since you mentioned that earlier.

[00:24:49] HS: It doesn't have to be one word?

[00:24:50] BB: No, no. It could be a phrase.

[00:24:52] HS: Forwarding the same email without a new greeting.

[00:24:57] BB: You get stuff that's just forwarding the same email? That's the whole email to you?

[00:25:02] HS: Yeah, yeah.

[00:25:03] BB: Oh, God. Okay, part of a pitch.

[00:25:05] HS: I hope you are doing well!

[00:25:08] BB: Hope you're doing well! Length of time.

[00:25:13] HS: You want a number, or?

[00:25:14] BB: Yeah, yeah. A second. A decade.

[00:25:18] HS: Century.

[00:25:19] BB: Century. Let's go with that. Name of a real person.

[00:25:23] HS: Steph Curry.

[00:25:24] BB: Steph Curry. Good choice. Then an emotion. Any emotion.

[00:25:30] HS: Giddy.

[00:25:31] BB: Giddy. This is going to be a good one. Okay. Heather, here we go. When I think of the future of journalism, I feel laughter. The pitches I receive have gone from sparkling to capricious. If I receive a pitch that starts with "What's up," I catapult. When I read stories on anteaters, I get squishy. My favorite pitches include forwarding the same email and a very specific, "I hope you're doing well." I normally take around a century to respond to emails, but if it's Steph Curry, I will definitely respond. If you don't get a response back for me, you should know that I get very giddy for you. I like it.

[00:26:09] HS: Well, if Steph Curry ever reached out, I would get back to them right away.

[00:26:13] BB: See? Exactly. I would just say that somewhat accurate, this one. I like it. I like it.

[00:26:20] HS: Somewhat accurate. Yeah.

[00:26:21] BB: Somewhat accurate. Well, Heather, thank you for being on today. This has been so delightful. I hope people will not spell your name wrong and I hope people will read your work.

[00:26:30] HS: I so appreciate that. Thank you for having me. This was a lot of fun. Thanks for letting me talk a little bit about the business that I am in and do a little bit now living with you.

[00:26:41] BB: Exactly. Thanks, Heather.

[00:26:43] HS: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:26:45] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for tuning in to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring Heather Somerville from *The Wall Street Journal*. If you enjoy listening to our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts and anywhere else you listen to podcasts. If you have a moment, please leave us a review to share your thoughts about the show and today's guest.

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[END]