

EPISODE 77**[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 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 John Timmer, a senior science editor for Ars Technica. John has done over a decade's worth of research in genetics and developmental biology at places like Cornell Medical College and the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. When physically separated from his keyboard, he tends to seek out a bicycle or a scenic location for commuting with his hiking boots.

During the episode, John shares about his transition from academia into journalism, the science community's system for pitching stories, why it's not okay to follow up with him and more. Let's hear from John now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:17] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger, founder of OnePitch, also BAM, which represents all these venture-back technology companies. It's a lot of fun. It's never boring, I will tell you. Definitely today, it is not going to be boring because we have a PhD on the show today, with a molecular cellular biology PhD in biochemistry. I cannot wait to talk to you, John. John Timmer is here. He is the science editor at Ars Technica, very excited to have you, John. Hello and welcome.

[00:01:51] JT: Thank you for having me on. I hope I can live up to that introduction.

[00:01:55] BB: Right. Well, you've been at the outlet as we heard for 15 plus years. That's quite rare in media. How did you make the transition from the academia to media?

[00:02:05] JT: Very awkwardly really. Basically, I was at a point in academia where I got fed up of struggling for funding all the time. I took a year off to try a whole bunch of different things, freelance and journalism is just the thing that worked out for me in the end.

[00:02:23] BB: I love that.

[00:02:24] JT: Yeah. I was very lucky that Ars at the time was sort of a series of blogs that was gradually professionalizing. Even though I didn't really know what I was doing at the time, I had enough space to learn as the organization grew up around me. It really worked out very luckily for me.

[00:02:46] BB: Quite perfect. What is your inbox like on the daily?

[00:02:52] JT: My inbox the site of an ongoing war between my attention span and the public relations community really.

[00:03:00] BB: Yes. I love how you call it a community, yes. Perfect!

[00:03:05] JT: I've got a lot of responsibilities beyond writing. I edit, I manage freelancers, things like that. If I'm lucky, I write one story a day and I get somewhere on the order of 50 to 60 pitches most days.

[00:03:27] BB: That's a lot.

[00:03:27] JT: The math just doesn't work out.

[00:03:30] BB: With that, especially — okay, that's a 1 to 60 ration, let's say. How many of those pitches ever do convert? I mean, from the numerical sense, we can maybe tell but you're not writing a story necessarily from a pitch 100%. How often are the stories converting from a pitch?

[00:03:49] JT: It's even worst than it sounds. The science writing community, the structure around that is a little unusual in the journalism. And that a lot of what we write about are new studies that come out. There's a whole system in place for handling that. That includes what are called press information officers at universities and research places. But also, the journalist that publish the studies, Science Nature, Developmental Biology, all these journals will give you access to papers before they're published. They had press officers as well. That is sort of going on in parallel with the sort of traditional public relations emails that I'm getting. I sort of got a foot in both worlds, really.

[00:04:45] BB: I had never factor in or thought about the academia side of it and the PR that's on that side.

[00:04:52] JT: Yeah, the journalist has each week, noon on Wednesday, which just few hours ago, it means, Nature releases a bunch of papers. 2:00 PM on Thursday means it's Science's turn. These cycles are happening every week, and a lot of my story ideas come out of that. In terms of direct email pitches, the ratio is even lower than one story a day might indicate.

[00:05:24] BB: How do you organize those pitches? Are you a mass deleter? Inbox-zero person? Flag or color code system?

[00:05:31] JT: I am not a mass delete. I actually, but I'm not organizes. I'm somewhere in between the two. I will at least glance in everything that comes in, because I have gotten good information via pitches. I don't just want to blindly through everything out. There's a lot of places that will just email every single writer at Ars Technica. I get thing on areas that are part of the site, but I never have personally covered. Those, I've started to just mark it spam. I may eventually miss something good from them, but my inbox —

[00:06:13] BB: Yeah, it's not coming to you. Okay. Question about that. That is a frequent and very bad practice, that people have mentioned before. Are you guys on Slack? Do you talk about this? Do you all kind of joke about like, "Oh, yeah! Did you see so and so send us all the same pitch?"? Is that like discussed or do you guys just know that it's happening and secretly just ignore it?

[00:06:33] JT: It's discussed when the pitch is off target for every single writer on site.

[00:06:40] BB: Oh gosh!

[00:06:40] JT: Yeah! You get these random things for a new TV show or a new album or something that we don't really cover. We'll laugh at that. But aside from that, it's just a hazard of the business it seems.

[00:06:57] BB: Yeah, it does. Not a practice we want to embrace in any way. What would you say is — and we're going to have a little fill in the blank here time in just a minute, but what would you say is your top tip to publicists?

[00:07:12] JT: Know who you're pitching. If you look at the last, even just glance down the titles of less 20 articles I've written, you'll have some sense what interest me, what I write about, what areas I cover. If you're on target, you're more likely to get a response even if it's, "I'm too busy for this now." But the ones that look interesting, I don't throw away in case it's a subject I come back to. I can always search my email. My memory is really bad about a lot of things, but it's pretty good about things I've seen before. If I find something related of, and dig back and found out that I did have sources offered to me two years ago or something.

[00:07:58] BB: Okay. That is another practice I'm finding more and more as I talk with now dozens and dozens of people for this particular show. You use your inbox as almost your own personal Google. So you'll go in there and Google whatever it may be. Fog, loving, I don't know, bags, whatever and you'll find something, you'll go, "Oh, yeah! That person did send me something." Do you do the same? You search your inbox for that key phrase or something?

[00:08:22] JT: Yeah. I don't always find it and my memory sometimes plays tricks on me, but I'll give it a try if it's something that registers as being vaguely familiar.

[00:08:31] BB: There you go. Okay. Well, we do have an audience ask, John. I'm going to tee it up for you. This comes from Jeffrey Lerman, who's from Glencoe and he says — this may be a long topic. "What is your view on how to restore faith in journalism?" Oh! That's probably the

most philosophical question we've ever gotten and I don't know how much time you have, but what would you say?

[00:08:57] JT: Oh, man! That's a tough one.

[00:09:00] BB: Jeffrey, that is a tough one, but what would you say? Now, obviously it's a bias question to speak academically, because restore faith in journalism. Not assuming we need to, but go ahead.

[00:09:10] JT: Yeah. I would say we do need to. I'll acknowledge the problem. Really, the thing that's most essential there is for it to no longer be in the interest of people to denigrate journalism. If you couldn't get mileage out of saying fake news, be it political, economic or whatever, then there's no incentive to that. People will shape what they believe based on the societal groups they feel that they're a member of. So if you have a political party or a professional organization or something like that that's always saying the press is misrepresenting us. Then the people who identify as members of that group will adopt that.

There will always be a demand for something like that, so the question is, how do we stop this supply of people saying that the press is the problem here? That is the sort of generic way of putting it. How specifically to do that is way beyond my ability to offer suggestions.

[00:10:26] BB: Jeffrey, that's probably a topic to discuss at length over a long dinner, perhaps. But I love — we're getting some very interesting audience ask and I love it.

[00:10:35] JT: I think that's more for wine with a journalist than coffee.

[00:10:39] BB: Yes, exactly. Which by the way, do you drink coffee or you drink anything right now?

[00:10:43] JT: I am not drinking coffee right now. It's a little later in the day for me, but I am a coffee drinker. If you caught me a few hours earlier.

[00:10:50] BB: Me too. You're in New York right now, right?

[00:10:52] JT: Yeah.

[00:10:54] BB: Yeah, it's way too late over there. Late afternoon. Okay, John. I have a fill in the blank part now. One of my favorite parts and you let us know what the answer is to this fill in the blanks. First one is. My favorite sources always My favorite sources always —

[00:11:10] JT: This gets back to what I said earlier, know what I write about. It really comes down to, they know they have something I'm interested in and that starts a conversation right there because we've got shared interest at that point.

[00:11:25] BB: This could be completely the opposite, but the most annoying sources always —

[00:11:31] JT: Circle back.

[00:11:32] BB: How many times?

[00:11:34] JT: Even once.

[00:11:35] BB: Even once.

[00:11:39] JT: Yeah. I told you about the number of pitches versus stories and the math means that if you get people on top of that circling back every time, then it just gets completely unmanageable. The other thing is that, I know whether I'm interested. If I don't have time to respond, it really means I don't have time to respond even though I'm interested. I don't — I will sometimes respond to the follow up, but in every case, I've still got the original email sitting in my inbox, because it was something I was considering responding to anyway.

[00:12:21] BB: Well, we know the answer to the next one then. You can follow up with me if — never, never done.

[00:12:27] JT: Yes. I am a minimalist in that sense.

[00:12:31] BB: Oh! I love it.

[BREAK]

[00:12:34] 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 journalist to pitch your news to. Sign up for your free account today. Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW RESUMED]

[00:12:58] BB: I love it. It would be a huge help if you —

[00:13:00] JT: That's a good one. Really, a quick summary in a paragraph up top is the most helpful for me, in terms of the body of the pitch. I need to make judgements very quickly because of the volume of things that I get through. So if I could just get a sense of what the pitch is about. That will help me to decide whether to read further or not.

[00:13:28] BB: Yep. There you go. The best compliment I received about my work was —

[00:13:33] JT: Really that it was accurate. I deal with a lot of highly technical subjects. Although I'm a biologist by training, I've written about astronomy, particle physics, geology. I'm way out of my depth there and suffer from severe impostor syndrome.

[00:13:54] BB: Really?

[00:13:55] JT: Oh God, yes.

[00:13:56] BB: Really? Why?

[00:13:58] JT: I am not a particle physicist. They do a great job of doing their best to explain it to me, but I'm never going to have the in-depth knowledge that they do. So having one of them, an

expert in the field tell me, “You did a good job of summarizing that” is really the best thing I can hope for.

[00:14:20] BB: That’s nice. Yes. My favorite stories to write are —

[00:14:26] JT: Ones that there’s a long history. Science is a process and often, there’s progress decades earlier that comes to fruition later and it’s a human activity, so often there’s a buildup of people getting committed to a certain problem and things like that. When I find the stories that personally satisfy me most are the ones where the new results are like an afterthought and it’s mostly about how we got there and why it’s important for the time to go out there. To give you a specific example. The whole detection of gravitational waves, which won a Nobel Prize recently. The National Science Foundation, a government organization that’s pretty conservative with how it gives out its money, basically told these people, “We’re going to fund you to build something we know won’t work, so that you’ll know how to build something that will.” They committed to this for like a decade of millions of dollars of money to sort of build iteration, learn from it and then build the second one. That worked and got the Nobel Prize. That’s sort of history that really makes for a compelling story to me.

[00:15:50] BB: The problem with that though, with history, it moves so dang slow. You got to wait many, many years.

[00:15:53] JT: Well, that’s the advantage of being in the same job for 10, 15 years.

[00:15:58] BB: That’s also true. There you are. That’s true. You could really see things come around in 15 years you could do in development or something. That is cool.

[00:16:06] JT: It’s funny sometimes. You go Googling for your own past coverage to link in and you think, “Oh! That was a couple of years ago and it’s eight.”

[00:16:16] BB: I know. The one piece of advice I have for aspiring journalist is —

[00:16:20] JT: Talk with other journalist, really. There’s no single experience and no single one piece of advice that’s going to work for everybody. The more people you talk to, the wider range

of experience you get, and the more diverse perspective on things you get, the better off you'll be equipped to a landscape that's now constantly changing.

[00:16:44] BB: Yeah. The last best thing I ate or cooked was —

[00:16:48] JT: Oh! The last best thing I ate or cooked.

[00:16:50] BB: Best, emphasized. Emphasized best.

[00:16:55] JT: Every now and again, there's a special on lobster. It's been a while since I've done that, but I love it.

[00:17:00] BB: Lobster, wow! That's the first time I heard lobster on here. That's great. Quarantine has taught me —

[00:17:09] JT: Oh! The importance of leaving the apartment. It's really — I love the outdoors and I love the city. It's always tough to balance those things, but sort of where being outdoors around other people makes you nervous really threw off my balance and everything. So sort of understanding how to manage that, and change circumstances and getting back to it now that I'm fully vaccinated. Really, it's been a challenge for me.

[00:17:45] BB: Yeah, it's been very challenging across the board. But thank goodness, the vaccinations, science, yay!

[00:17:53] JT: Yeah. We've been very lucky with that.

[00:17:55] BB: We have been in this country, yes. My perfect Sunday is —

[00:18:02] JT: Part of a three-day weekend where I had Monday off.

[00:18:06] BB: Oh! That's a good answer. No one's come up with that yet. I agree. Let's double click on that. Love it. That's great. Okay. John, I always like to ask what are you reading, listening to, watching? We'll take any consumption of any stories. Do you have anything?

[00:18:26] JT: I'm gearing up to read something. One of the things that went by the way side with the pandemic, because I was so focused on that coverage. I like doing a few books reviews every year. I don't read as much as I'd like.

[00:18:41] BB: Wait, wait, wait! Let's pause real quick. Book reviews?

[00:18:44] JT: Yes.

[00:18:44] BB: What does this mean? Like your eight-grade book reviews where you turn it in somewhere or you publish them?

[00:18:53] JT: No. It's more — you have like the New York Review of books type of review.

[00:18:59] BB: Oh! I see. Okay. So you're giving your opinion. I just thought that was funny because I haven't heard book review like that. I immediately thought, "Oh God! Like back to eight grade."

[00:19:06] JT: It had never occurred to me the terminology is the same.

[00:19:10] BB: You know what? Now I'm like, wait a second, wait a second. Yeah. You know what? Okay. So of course, I had to Google this. If you put in book review, the first that comes out is examples. Seventeen book review examples to help you write the perfect book review.

[00:19:26] JT: But we call them **[inaudible 00:19:27]** reviews without thinking about it.

[00:19:29] BB: Yeah, exactly, because when did you ever turn that in for school.

[00:19:30] JT: So I've always used that terminology.

[00:19:33] BB: Yeah, interesting. Okay. What ones are you gearing up for?

[00:19:36] JT: I just got pitched on about *How to Talk to a Science Denier*, which covering things like the pandemic, vaccinations, climate change. To a certain extent, you feel like you're talking to the audience that's already convinced and you're never going to convince the people who are dead set about believing you. This is a book that purportedly at least offers solutions for how to work around that.

[00:20:07] BB: It reminds me of *Think Again*, which is one of Adam Grants newest ones. He pops up books all the time, but it is about rethinking what you think you know. How to combat — I wouldn't say maybe combat, but for those — any staunch anti whatever you want to insert. How do you talk to people? What do you do? Same type of concept. Very needed right now.

[00:20:28] JT: It's an ongoing struggle. Yes, it's a sort of thing you might need to do to reestablish faith in journalism as we're discussing earlier ago.

[00:20:37] BB: There you go. Back to that, yes. Okay. Anything else?

[00:20:42] JT: Not really. I started watch on Netflix and old series that I missed when it came out called *Halt and Catch Fire*, which is sort of a fictionalization of the very early days of the computer industry.

[00:20:59] BB: *Halt and Catch Fire*, right?

[00:21:01] JT: Yes. I am old enough that my very first computer was a Commodore 64. I sort of vaguely remember this sort of era. It's interesting to see it dramatized.

[00:21:18] BB: Oh! On Netflix?

[00:21:20] JT: Yes.

[00:21:21] BB: Fantastic. Okay. I'm always looking for a good series. Is it a shot in a way where it looks like it's shot from that time or is it crystal clear and beautiful and all that good stuff? Is it kind of like grainy and like from that time?

[00:21:34] JT: It is not grainy, but they definitely have a lot of period card, they have a lot of period hardware and things like that. It's believable.

[00:21:46] BB: That's good. I always wonder and I—f you look at the Oscars, you get awards for like costumes and set designs and stuff. Because, can you imagine trying to design that. Like someone is like, "Hey! Okay! We need a 1981 set it Cincinnati, '81. Go find the cars."

[00:22:03] JT: Right. Sporadically in New York, you'll wonder through a neighborhood that's made up to be the 1930s or something and you wonder where all these things come from.

[00:22:13] BB: Yes. Wow! I always had like just appreciation for people who are doing, not the set designs. I'm like, modern time, but having to like — I don't know, resurrect that from who the heck. I don't even know how you start with that. Where do you even get things.

[00:22:31] JT: Yeah, the whole organization processes, they're like, do these movie production companies just sort of know who to call up to turn a neighborhood into a different era.

[00:22:41] BB: Really? Yeah. Man! Interesting application perhaps for a historian. You work in movies to get a historical fact. I don't know. I just thought of that idea. Okay. Well, that was a good list, John. I do like it. I'm going to look at that *Halt and Catch Fire*. Cool.

[00:22:57] JT: Yeah. I'm only on the first season, but it's been an interesting ride so far.

[00:23:00] BB: Okay. There are four seasons it says. Excellent. Tell us — now, this does loop back to kind of to the audience ask. But to get more, maybe perhaps from a positive view, what do you believe the future of journalism looks like?

[00:23:13] JT: I've mostly thought about that in terms of science journalism, because I'm more plugged in to that than the political journalism operates on level I don't understand.

[00:23:26] BB: Yeah, that's a different —

[00:23:28] JT: Just a casual observer there. But it's been positive and that a lot of recent outlets have come out that feel the need to have a science section.

[00:23:40] BB: Very true.

[00:23:40] JT: I view that as positive. Like everybody else, there's a struggle for finding financial model that is sustainable, but there seems to be, even as some models fail, enough new outlets coming in through things like foundation, funding and so on that provide people a place to write. I'm pessimistic that it will be turbulent, but I'm optimistic that options will be available to us. And certainly, the pandemic has really driven home how important it is to have people to do quality science coverage. Because the places without them just cause societal level problems.

[00:24:27] BB: Agreed. Agreed. It is interesting from the lens that you're having of like, "Okay. Clearly, you are someone who is advanced in your academic career of knowing what the heck you are reporting on. Or sometimes, I feel a lot, there's often a journalist who's like thrown into dealing with some topic and you're like, "Wow! You have no background at that." Like you're a journalist, you got that down, but oh, complicated topic. It's wonderful to see someone who has the background academically in order to know what the heck they're really talking about, which is just great and rare. I hate to say, but rare,

[00:25:02] JT: Well, in science, it's not incredibly rare. There's a fair number of us out there. But those sorts of situation should just describe an editorial failure. The editor decided you have to do this news story even though we have nobody qualified to do it. You're just throwing the reporter into something they're completely unprepared for. That does nobody any good.

[00:25:26] BB: That's true. It's like VC, venture capitalist, investing in stuff they have no idea about. Not good. Not good. They're check writers, but that's about it. There you go. Okay. John, we have come to our mad libs portion. So fun. Sometimes they're accurate —

[00:25:44] JT: Vaguely prepare for this.

[00:25:45] BB: That is totally fine. Sometimes they're just silly, sometimes they're shocking. It kind of runs the gamut, so let's see what we get here. The first word, an emotion.

[00:25:57] **JT:** Frustration.

[00:25:58] **BB:** Frustration. An adjective?

[00:26:02] **JT:** Obtuse.

[00:26:04] **BB:** Did you write this down, John? Are you prepared?

[00:26:06] **JT:** I did not. No, I did not even have — like I said, I have listened to some previous ones, so I was sort of mentality prepared, but emotion was not on my list of things I might get asked for.

[00:26:19] **BB:** All right. Okay. Another adjective?

[00:26:22] **JT:** Fraudulent.

[00:26:24] **BB:** Fraudulent. This is going to be a rich one.

[00:26:27] **JT:** That's what they're calling the election these days, I hear it.

[00:26:30] **BB:** That's right. Greeting? Any type of a greeting?

[00:26:35] **JT:** Good morning.

[00:26:37] **BB:** Good morning. A verb?

[00:26:41] **JT:** To look.

[00:26:43] **BB:** Okay. A noun?

[00:26:46] **JT:** A tree.

[00:26:50] **BB:** Got you. An adjective?

[00:26:52] **JT:** Green.

[00:26:55] **BB:** Great!

[00:26:57] **JT:** Sticking with the tree theme, since there's one sitting on my desk.

[00:27:00] **BB:** Sitting on your desk? Is it a bonsai?

[00:27:02] **JT:** It's a small one. No, no. It's grown from seeds. It's a long-term project.

[00:27:08] **BB:** Oh God! What type of tree?

[00:27:09] **JT:** A giant sequoia, of all things.

[00:27:12] **BB:** Oh my gosh, and it's sitting right there on your desk?

[00:27:14] **JT:** Yes.

[00:27:15] **BB:** That's fabulous. Who else has a tree on their desk? Wow! Okay. Where were we? Oh, yes. Cringe-worthy PR term?

[00:27:25] **JT:** Cringe-worthy one?

[00:27:28] **BB:** Like, "Just following up." That definitely is yours. That definitely is yours.

[00:27:33] **JT:** Yeah. That one sets off PTSD now, so go with it.

[00:27:38] **BB:** Okay. Just following up. Okay. A part of a pitch?

[00:27:44] **JT:** I'm not sure what the PR firm terminology would be, but do you use hook?

[00:27:51] **BB:** Yeah.

[00:27:52] **JT:** Sure, hook then.

[00:27:54] **BB:** Sure. We'll do that. And length of time?

[00:27:57] **JT:** An epoch.

[00:28:02] **BB:** Name of a real person ideally alive?

[00:28:04] **JT:** Ideally alive. Donald Rumsfeld is out as of this morning.

[00:28:09] **BB:** I know.

[00:28:11] **JT:** Barack Obama.

[00:28:12] **BB:** Was he high on your list?

[00:28:13] **JT:** No.

[00:28:17] **BB:** Okay. Then last, an emotion.

[00:28:20] **JT:** Sadness.

[00:28:22] **BB:** Sadness. Okay. Here we go, John. When I think of the future of journalism, I feel frustrated. The pitches I receive have gone from obtuse to fraudulent. If I receive a pitch that starts with, "Good morning!" I take a look. When I write stories on trees, I get green. My favorite pitches include, "Just following up" and very specific hooks. I normally take around an epoch to respond to my emails, but if it's Obama, I will respond immediately. If you do get a response back from me, you should know I'm very sad for that. There you go.

[00:28:58] **JT:** Those last few sentences were impressively accurate.

[00:29:02] BB: See, it magically works out. It really does. That's why we have a fun time doing it. Well, John. Thank you for being on today. This is so fun.

[00:29:10] JT: It was fun talking with you.

[00:29:12] BB: I hope you enjoyed that mad libs. Thank you for all your tips and insights, so always helpful. always helpful to all the publicist who are listening right now.

[00:29:20] JT: Well, great. I had a good time talking with you, and it's been interesting finding out about this podcast.

[00:29:26] BB: Oh! How did you hear about us?

[00:29:27] JT: By your invitation. It caused me to go back and listen to a few and get a sense of what you're up to.

[00:29:35] BB: Oh! Wait a second. So you listened to a few before you responded?

[00:29:39] JT: Well, yeah. I mean, there is the risk —

[00:29:42] BB: Oh! You checked us out. Yes.

[00:29:43] JT: I like to know what I'm getting into and there is the risk that sometimes, people with crazy ideas invite sane people on. I would just assume not spend my time doing that.

[00:29:57] BB: You did your diligence.

[00:29:58] JT: Exactly.

[00:29:59] BB: I love it. Very good. Well, we've had fabulous all stars and incredible people on this show. I'm glad we made the cut. That's very good.

[00:30:07] JT: Well, I'm glad I did as well.

[00:30:09] BB: There you go.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:30:15] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for tuning in to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring John Timmer from Ars Technica. 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. 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 a brand-new guest and even more insights about the journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.

[END]