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Jered Martin:

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

Jered Martin:

Today, we're joined by John Biggs, the editor in chief of Gizmodo magazine. John's tenure in journalism has spanned across 17 years, including his past roles with New York Times, TechCrunch and CoinDesk. Not only is John a well-known journalist, but he's also an entrepreneur and author and most recently launched his newest book Get Funded, The Startup Entrepreneurs Guide to Seriously Successful Fundraising.

Jered Martin:

On today's episode, John shares about his early days at Gizmodo, his thoughts on what tech news consistence of how pitching has shifted over the past 10 plus years and more. Let's hear from John on today's episode.

Beck Bamberger:

Hey everyone. Welcome to Coffee With the Journalist. Today, we have another, God I'm having a roll here, celebrity practically in journalism, John Biggs is here today.

John Biggs:

Celebrity. That's a strong word.

Beck Bamberger:

Come on in this realm out with, what did you say? Fifth book, as of today? Fifth?

John Biggs:

Fifth book. Let me check. I don't actually remember.

Beck Bamberger:

My goodness fifth. Yes. Called Get Funded, The Startup Entrepreneurs Guide to Seriously Successful Fundraising. I think every founder could use that, if you're ever going to raise a dollar from VCs. Thank you for being on today, this is so great.

John Biggs:

No, thank you. So it's the eighth book. I'm sorry.

Beck Bamberger:

You lost count. My God.

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John Biggs:

It's been a rough couple of years, so yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Well you have raised in excess of 30 million bucks in the past, so you're a little aware of this topic. So hence, you've written this, you previously, as [inaudible 00:02:09] mentioned, you were at TechCrunch. You were at CoinDesk as the editor. You were a marketing specialist at Visible Magic, which we're not going to talk too much about, but you've been around, John and currently for folks who don't know your editor in chief at Gizmodo. For folks who aren't as maybe familiar with that particular outlet. I know it's super nerdy, I personally like it. I read it every day, but what would you say is Gizmodo's brief?

John Biggs:

I mean, it's a gadget blog, I started there in 2000, I forget now it was 2003 or 2004 or something like that. I was the third editor. It's part of the Gawker Media Group or was part of the Gawker Media Group or whatever you want to call it anymore. So it's changed over the years. When I came back, I came back about, gosh, two months ago, it feels like 15 years ago. Yeah. I can still see my fingerprints on the clay as it were, as we started it. But, I think that the focus is different because the gadget world is no longer so very gated. You really don't have 50 phones. You really don't have 50 laptops.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

John Biggs:

And because of, I think, hardware startups and things, it's really changed the way you can cover gadgets. So it's a whole new world right now.

Beck Bamberger:

And I think now, who doesn't have a gadget? I mean, you're not in a neck of the woods or a certain like, Oh, I'm a geek. So everyone has gadgets. If you're in America, it's like a thing. Yeah. We all have these tools. So, I feel like that's technology coverage though too is now everyone, you're consumed by, you can't get away from technology.

John Biggs:

All news is tech news now. Right? So even from Trump tweeting, the question is, can he tweet? Is it legal to use that medium as a direct communication with the voter? All the way up to, I don't know of ICE rounding up immigrants using using technical tools. It's all tech now. So, we're basically inundated.

Beck Bamberger:

You're submerged. And are you in Brooklyn right now?

John Biggs:

Yeah, I am Brooklyn.

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Beck Bamberger:

Hanging out in Brooklyn, even in the mid COVID way to go.

John Biggs:

No, it's, it's been, it's been fun.

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Beck Bamberger:

Well, let's talk about your inbox. Cause that's usually the most pertinent thing people want to hear about is, what does the reporters or the editors inbox look like? Do you get a bunch of pitches on the daily?

John Biggs:

We do. Oddly enough, Gizmodo doesn't get that many pitches. It's kind of funny. I'm kind of watching it right now. I just deleted about a thousand emails out of my box.

Beck Bamberger:

Today?

John Biggs:

Well, yeah, no, this was gathered over a week. So back at TechCrunch, I used to get like, used to be ridiculous. I used to have like 5,000, 6,000 emails a day and maybe it's the, maybe it's because there aren't that many daily announcements.

Beck Bamberger:

Did you say 5,000? 5,000?

John Biggs:

Yeah. Yeah. It was nuts.

Beck Bamberger:

What? In your inbox? Every day.

John Biggs:

Yeah. And I would have to go through and I would delete.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, wow. That's the biggest number I've ever heard.

John Biggs:

I mean, it was a wider swathe of the internet. Right? So we were talking about web dev, web apps, startups, all this other stuff. So I don't know anybody from like, Hello Fresh to some kind of new

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developer system would try to pitch us. So I was dealing with that. So that was a daily slog. So, me deleting a thousand emails today because I was out for about a week is like a vacation.

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Beck Bamberger:

Wow. Well, you were the editor in chief or the editor at large at TechCrunch for three years.

John Biggs:

I was there for 15 years.

-

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, you were, Oh, I'll excuse me. 2005. I misread that 2005 to 18. Holy cow. That's why I told you you're a celebrity. Hey, I totally misread that because I think subconsciously, I thought, "Well, who's at an outlet for 13 years?" Wow. I'm so excited you're on, John, you're going to sprinkle us with your knowledge of the industry and such. But let's go back to the inbox. So now Gizmodo, it's different. I think there's a big difference between reporter versus editor, because sometimes you're playing signal guard and you're pitching things over to someone on your team who might report it. So do you still, like you yourself, do people write pitches to you? Like "John, I know you're the editor, but like, I really want you to review this new watch.?"

John Biggs:

Well, so I mean, I think people have. That was one of the things though that actually got kind of depressing. Because I really didn't have any friends. I just had people who pitched me. So yeah, I mean, it's literally my entire relationship with humanity was basically, "What does this person want from me?" Which is-

Beck Bamberger:

God. Yeah.

John Biggs:

I guess, I don't know. I mean, that's not healthy. So, that's kind of gone away, which also is kind of depressing as well because it's like, "Oh, well now I don't know." The, the friends I didn't want, I don't have, and now I don't have even though those friends quote unquote.

Beck Bamberger:

Well, you're busy writing books, so hopefully that's another outlet for you.

John Biggs:

Yeah. So, I'm trying to try to stay busy. So, the thing there is that you're in a position of, I guess, power. Blogs for the most part have kind of lost their juice over the past decade, let's say. In TechCrunch, when first started, that was 10,000 easy signups in a minute as soon as you got posted on TechCrunch. And now it's, I don't know, a couple of hundred because just people are so inundated with stuff and it's an

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entirely different world. I mean, there used to be a situation where VCs would basically say, "If you aren't mentioned in TechCrunch, we won't invest in you." So, that was a lot of power to wield.

Beck Bamberger:

That's a lot.

John Biggs:

The flip side of that is that you basically were just pitched constantly, just hassled constantly about what you want to do.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow. I mean, to TechCrunch's name, and you were one of the founders, we have clients. Now this is on the BAM side of things, but who are like, "Oh, absolutely. I have to get my article. I need to get the piece of news in TechCrunch. That's my top focus." That's it? I mean, it still carries a lot of weight in the tech world.

John Biggs:

Yeah. And that's, that's fine. It's kind of silly that they give it that much power, but God bless him for wanting it. And again, it's maintained its power. I think what TechCrunch has done well is they've really done events well, so they've really done-

Beck Bamberger:

Yes.

John Biggs:

Defines the startup event and it's one of the best. So.

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Beck Bamberger:

And people love it or have loved it in the past. They're going to do a digital version of it. We'll see how that goes. Making of the story, so, John, we like to just ask folks whether you get an article idea from a pitch or you're walking your dog or you're scanning Tik Tok, whatever you're doing, where do you come up with the nugget of a story?

John Biggs:

I think it varied and vast one thing that I did was set up a thing called Tech for Reporters, [techforreporters.com](http://techforreporters.com). And it's basically just kind of like my reverse spam system. Unfortunately, a lot of reporters just don't try it I guess. I don't know what's going on, but it's an interesting, it's an interesting system because you can basically ask a question and you can say, "Hey, what do you think about," I don't know, "VPNs" and I can get immediate answers. And that's one it's kind of like help a reporter out, but just for tech ideas.

Beck Bamberger:

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Gotcha.

John Biggs:

Yeah. That's what I built out for that. I don't really get pitches. I don't get stories from pitches anymore. It's just because, unless it's like some kind of new gadget, right? Unless it's just something small, but, if I'm writing something, I want to write something with some teeth. So I'm trying to figure out who I can talk to.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And where are you getting that though? Are you scanning Twitter? Are you talking to various folks?

John Biggs:

I'll work with my editors here. Just trying to figure out what is top of mind for them. We do a lot of science and ecology stories. That's something that I've never really focused on, but it's something that the site focuses on. And if I see something on Twitter or whatever that passes through the transom of my mind, then I'll give it to them.

Beck Bamberger:

You get this, for example, Tom cruise thing, where he's wearing this horrendous mask.

John Biggs:

Oh gosh, I found it. Yeah. And I showed it to our IO9 editor and she basically pointed out that everything about it was wrong, because he was wearing the awful mask. Somehow these kind of like teenage girls identified him in a van without even seeing his face, which is kind of cheesy. Like you can kind of tell that he was maybe making it up.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Yeah. It's very awkward. Interesting. Okay. So you, so you happened to just like come across this?

John Biggs:

Ah, yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

And you were like, "Oh, okay." And chat with, okay. Oh, interesting. Wow. And even putting his own screenshot of himself on his own Twitter page. Okay. Interesting. Wow. The internet it's vast and wide itself. That's the scary part.

Jered Martin:

Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by one page. Are you curious to learn more about the unique ways One Pitch helps connect journalists with brands and sources? Head to [onepitch.co](http://onepitch.co) for more information about how we're helping each side save time and connect more effectively. Sign up for your free account today. Now back to today's episode.

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Beck Bamberger:

Well, one thing we like to do, John is a word association game. So I'm going to just tee up a word and you gave me the first word you think of, if that sounds good.

John Biggs:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Beck Bamberger:

Here we go. Okay, food.

John Biggs:

Oh gosh. Hungry, I guess, because I haven't had lunch.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Hungry. Oh. And it's late over there in Brooklyn. Drink.

John Biggs:

I got to slow down during COVID.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Hey. Hobby.

John Biggs:

Hobby, watches.

Beck Bamberger:

Gadgets.

John Biggs:

Everything.

Beck Bamberger:

AI.

John Biggs:

Kind of the future. Not really.

Beck Bamberger:

Brooklyn.

John Biggs:

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Home.

Beck Bamberger:  
Startups.

John Biggs:  
Too many.

Beck Bamberger:  
Cryptocurrency.

John Biggs:  
Garbage.

Beck Bamberger:  
Time.

John Biggs:  
Not enough.

Beck Bamberger:  
Pitch.

John Biggs:  
Too many.

Beck Bamberger:  
Inbox.

John Biggs:  
It's fine. Recently.

Beck Bamberger:  
By the way, so you mentioned earlier, you just deleted a thousand there just off the cuff. So are you one of the absolute zero unread people and delete everything or do you do a sophisticated filing system?

John Biggs:  
No, no, no. So I've gotten to the point where I can just go through all this crap and just, and just delete it. It's not impossible by any stretch of imagination. So, I'll just delete it really.

Beck Bamberger:

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And it's gone. There you go. And do you get to zero? Is that a reoccurring theme for you? Or are you kind of lax about that?

John Biggs:

I definitely want to cut it to zero. I'm looking at it now, I only got one unread.

Beck Bamberger:

One?

John Biggs:

Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow.

John Biggs:

And then I've got another two in Gizmodo, so I mean, I have multiple email addresses as well.

Beck Bamberger:

Dang. Wow. Hats off to you. And this is after we're coming back from Labor Day when I would imagine people are like, okay, it's officially not summer, let's go. Good for you. Okay. I'm envious of that. And by the way, since I am, do you have like a cadence in which you go through and batch them out? Or is there a structure to that?

John Biggs:

I don't think there's a structure. Just if I see it, I'll go through it. So the, the benefit is if I get it down to one or two, I can do it a lot faster than if I have five I haven't left built up. So I really don't let it sit for like, I don't know, an hour or two, just doesn't make any sense for me.

Beck Bamberger:

Got you. Okay. What are you reading right now, John? Besides your own written material?

John Biggs:

Well, I just read the Institute by Stephen King. I don't know why I read that.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, was it good?

John Biggs:

It was all right. I mean, like I haven't read Stephen King since I was like a kid.

Beck Bamberger:

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I was going to say, it's an old school throwback.

John Biggs:

So, I said to myself, let me see what he's been doing.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

John Biggs:

And I really enjoyed it. I also read a book called Pachinko. I was just on vacation last week, so I did a lot of physical books. I carried a lot of physical books with me and there was a book that was basically the history of a South Korean family. That was really, really rich. I mean, it was really dense and I enjoyed it. And oddly enough, I was able to read these massive books that I remember taking ages to read.

Beck Bamberger:

You were just flying by?

John Biggs:

Yeah. In two days. So it was kind of fun.

Beck Bamberger:

Were they relaxing?

John Biggs:

We went up to Maine to the Deer Isle. So, I wasn't really distracted. I mean, I have three kids, so I was obviously distracted, but I also think because of the Kindle, because of just not even expecting, not even thinking about density of books anymore. Yeah. I would sit there and just fly through it. And then now that I'm past that stage, I can just pick up that Stephen King novel and read it in a day and a half.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow. By the way, on Audible, it's over 18 hours, 59 minutes. So it's a thick one. Wow.

John Biggs:

Yeah. It's really odd. I don't know. Maybe, I'm not even saying that I got something special. I just think it might be something because of the Kindle.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. You don't see the pages.

John Biggs:

Yeah. Maybe.

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Beck Bamberger:

It changes your mind a little bit, perhaps. Ah, and then what are you reading? Let's say on the daily, do you read some newsletters? Do you look at certain websites?

John Biggs:

Not really. I have a list of favorites that I go to every day just to like look through like Boing Boing, End Gadget and TechCrunch, but that's about it.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. So you don't have a lengthy repertoire of the 12, 13 things you got to go through. Some people do and I'm like, "God!"

John Biggs:

Yeah, no, this is a big list. So, if I look at it now it's probably about 30 sites that I just hit, but I don't read every single thing, but.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. But it's up, it's pulled up ready to go.

John Biggs:

Yep.

Beck Bamberger:

Back to the pitches. And I know that's now been cut to the bone pretty much for you, but for those folks who are still pitching, was there ever a pitch where you were like, "Wow!" Was there ever a time when you were at TechCrunch and maybe in particular where you're like, "That's a damn good pitch." Or like a style of a pitch that had you open and go like, "You know what hats off?"

John Biggs:

Well, I mean, I don't want to encourage people to do goofy stuff. Like there were a lot of pitches like that were kind of crass or somebody once sent me a Jerry can, a gasoline can full of coffee beans.

Beck Bamberger:

What?

John Biggs:

And it's because their product would super, super boost some kind of website or something like that. I thought that was just kind of goofy, wasteful. And then there was a guy, there was one startup I remember literally, it was like, he was just cursing people out in the subject line and like, "Hey jerk, why don't you take a look at this stuff? We know that you're not paying attention. We think you're an asshole," or something like that. And it's like, "Come on. It's really ridiculous." I don't know if you guys are explicit or not.

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Beck Bamberger:

Wow. Oof.

John Biggs:

But that was really frustrating and every time I talk to people, I tell startups how to do this thing. They're kind of like, "Eh, we don't believe you," but I tell them that's an absolute truth. The best pitches are basically a CEO saying, "Hey, I have something cool. Would you like to take a look at it?" I mean, some of my favorite pitches are just like people that I kind of recognize, maybe I do, maybe I don't, who say like, "Hey, this is an interesting thing. Would you like to take a look?" And as soon as I see that, then I can say, "Yeah, sure. What is it?" Or even if it's just like, I don't know if I just respond with just my address, if they want to send me a sample or whatever, just real nice and quick.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow. I'm surprised by people thinking that there's an effective way of using cursing in your headline or in your subject line to get a response. What? Like what?

John Biggs:

Yeah, but a little bit, we're also remember you have to remember the mentality of an entrepreneur. The entrepreneur is under immense pressure. If they've raised, for example, \$4 million and they can't get any attraction. And this happens almost every day. If they can't get any traction, if they can't get anybody to pay attention to them, basically, it's a personal failure and it's to the extent that you feel like you feel like it's your, I mean, it is your fault, but whatever. You feel exhausted to a degree.

Beck Bamberger:

What are your thoughts on the future of journalism, particularly as you've been in it for a while?

John Biggs:

Oh gosh, I don't know. I'm not overly excited for its future. I think we're in a world where nobody really appreciates it. Nobody appreciates the work people do. And it's really frustrating to me to see that. And also, we started giving our stuff away. So we basically just wasted the brains of an entire generation of journalists I'm a whatchamacallit, I'm a gen X-er and we basically built out this whole idea that you just have to produce constantly. So, there's all the cohort that I came up with are now doing garbage for all intents and purposes. They're doing Best Buy kind of stuff. And just fancy, just like roundups and everything. And it just doesn't make any sense.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Oh. So if you had to rewind the clock, would you still do it?

John Biggs:

Oh yeah, definitely. I mean, I have no problem with, with doing journalism, quote unquote. I think the thing that I have issues with is that we're in a world where nobody appreciates that they are doing that journalism and everybody thinks it's fake news when it's basically we're giving you stuff for free all day long.

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Beck Bamberger:

Yes.

John Biggs:

You're taking it and you're really enjoying it, but you're still complaining about it. So.

Beck Bamberger:

It's a problem. When do you go to, well, not now, I mean COVID but do you go to journalism schools and at all talk about this?

John Biggs:

Yeah. I used to, I guess over the past couple of years, it's been less and less, I guess. I don't know what happened there. Yeah. It's like, I'll try to help as much as I can. If I hear something or I hear from somebody that they need help or whatever, I'm happy to offer a hand.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. What's interesting on what you said is, and this is a consistent answer, is if the outlook is still negative, the person usually says, well, has it's been a hundred percent so far, that they'd still do it. They'd still rewind the clock and say, "Oh yeah, no, I'd still do it. This is my calling or this is what I love, or this is what I have to do or whatever it is." So there's always this interesting duality between those.

John Biggs:

I would never change. I mean, I try to change, for example, I tried to become an entrepreneur startup. I did that for a number of years. And what came out of it is I basically built two businesses that are specifically designed just to scratch the itches that I had as an entrepreneur. And one of them was specifically about content.

Beck Bamberger:

And then now, and here you are back at Gizmodo.

John Biggs:

Yep.

Beck Bamberger:

So you got sucked back in. Well, John, let's play this last part of our podcast for today, which is our Mad Libs section. Are you familiar with that?

John Biggs:

Yeah, I know all about Mad Libs. Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Okay. Well, we're going to play one and then we'll read it back. We'll see what happens here. So first thing is a catch phrase. Any catchphrase.

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John Biggs:

I'm loving it.

Beck Bamberger:

I'm loving it. Okay. A journalist scare phrase or word that you never want to hear as a journalist.

John Biggs:

Deadline.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. What about a buzzword used in journalism that's positive?

John Biggs:

Blockchain.

Beck Bamberger:

How about an adjective?

John Biggs:

Adjective? Happy.

Beck Bamberger:

Happy. And then part of the pitch.

John Biggs:

The throat clearing.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay, another adjective.

John Biggs:

Green.

Beck Bamberger:

And then another part of a pitch.

John Biggs:

The conclusion.

Beck Bamberger:

Great. Amount of time.

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John Biggs:

Year.

Beck Bamberger:

Year, and another adjective.

John Biggs:

Loud.

Beck Bamberger:

Right? A singular noun.

John Biggs:

Corn.

Beck Bamberger:

Corn. I haven't heard that one. A topic.

John Biggs:

Cell phones

Beck Bamberger:

Cell phones. And then almost done here. A verb ending in ing.

John Biggs:

Running.

Beck Bamberger:

And then how about just a verb?

John Biggs:

Move.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Here we go. John, from the top. To me, journalism is I'm loving it. It consists of deadlines and blockchain on the daily. If a pitch has a happy clearing of your throat, I will absolutely respond to it. However, if a pitch has a green conclusion, you can expect no reply from me. If a year goes by and you don't see an email back from me, you can just assume I am not loud about it. The best stories always have corn and are usually about cell phones. And the best way to reach me is by running it over to me. But you can also move it over to me. There you go, John.

John Biggs:

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We did it.

Beck Bamberger:

Put that in your next book.

John Biggs:

I'll put it up front so people can read it.

Beck Bamberger:

In the little jacket and the little, a little margin jacket thing, "Here's my Mad Libs on all things journalism." Perfect. Oh John, thank you for being on for today. Such a legend. I know you're being discreet, but give yourself kudos here. Eighth book out. Everyone needs to get it. By the way, you can follow John on Twitter @johnbiggs, you already have almost 40,000 followers. So again, celebrity status here and your website, your personal website is on there too. So people can click over and see all your books. Get all of it on Kindle. Perfect. Thanks, John. Appreciate you.

John Biggs:

Thanks.

Jered Martin:

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