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Jered Martin:

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

Jered Martin:

Joining us today is veteran journalist, Michael Liedtke from The Associated Press. Michael has been a business and tech writer for AP since April of 2000. He covers a wide range of tech businesses from Google and Yahoo to Netflix and Twitter. Additionally, Michael covers the issues affecting technology and society, including stories on privacy and innovation. During today's episode, Michael talks about why he's more likely to read email he receives, his feelings on local journalism, and much more. Let's hear more from Michael and Beck now.

Beck Bamberger:

Hey everyone, welcome to Coffee with a Journalist. We're in season two, full swing here. I don't even know how many episodes we've done at this point. But today, with coffee, actually, I just learned, is Michael Liedtke from The AP. 20 years at The AP, Michael.

Michael Liedtke:

Hi.

Beck Bamberger:

Thank you for being here.

Michael Liedtke:

Thanks for having me.

Beck Bamberger:

I was telling you, I haven't seen, I don't think, anybody on this show with the double digit on the front there, of any news outlet that they've been part of.

Michael Liedtke:

Yeah. Longevity's on my side, at least. Which is a good thing in a pandemic, right?

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Beck Bamberger:

It is. We'll talk about that, definitely, when we talk on the future of journalism. But first let's start with your inbox. How does it look in there? And how many pitches are you getting?

Michael Liedtke:

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A lot. Still a lot, yeah. It kind of slowed down in the early stages of the pandemic. I guess people were still feeling their way around. But yeah, it's gotten pretty much a steady flow. I don't keep track. It's a steady stream, a steady stream.

Beck Bamberger:

A week. How many would you say a week?

Michael Liedtke:

So a week, so I'm just going to guess about, all my email, this is internal, like maybe 1,000 emails a week.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh yeah. That's a lot. That's a lot. Do you have some type of organizational system to keep the pitches and so forth organized?

Michael Liedtke:

I'll flag the ones that are interesting to me. **After a while you get to, there's stuff that you can tell is more, I don't want to say spammy, but more mass blast stuff that seems like I'll get to that later, and sometimes, just because of the flow of things, I might not. You can tell from the subjects, like some people are just, they don't understand what you're covering or just sending like, "It's tech so you must be interested," which is not necessarily the case, right?**

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Beck Bamberger:

That is true. Mm-hmm (affirmative). How do you suss that out from an email in the subject line where you're like, "Clearly that's spam"?

Michael Liedtke:

Well, a lot of it's, I could say reporter instincts. **But also, to tell you the truth, a lot of it's like anything else in relationships, of course I'm more likely, if I know someone and I've dealt with them in the past and they've given me good ideas, or I've met them, or it's a company that I cover, obviously I'm going to open those, for sure.** But general ones, I'm more likely to, you're going to get my attention more if it seems like it knows, this definitely knows what I cover and why, and it also knows what The AP's interested in. You can kind of tell from that line where, "Oh, it's peaked my interest." Or again, if it's someone I know, I'm always going to open it, right?

Beck Bamberger:

Got it. Okay. Are you one of the inbox zero people or you let it ride to thousands and thousands?

Michael Liedtke:

I let it ride.

Beck Bamberger:

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Oh, my God.

Michael Liedtke:

You know what? Here's the secret. The AP for some reason, until a couple of years ago, we had a fairly limited amount of, believe it or not, even way beyond the times of Gmail, I could never understand it, I used to gripe about it, we had like some ridiculous, like 750 megabytes of storage. You had to do a constant, you actually were forced to do... You had to separate the wheat from the chaff pretty quickly.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Michael Liedtke:

A couple of years ago, we went, now we have like that 100 gigabytes. So you get lazy and you go, "I don't care. I don't need to get to it right away." Yeah, it will stack up. So I don't have that discipline anymore, where I had to actually weed through the things.

Beck Bamberger:

You said you flag your pitches. Do you sometimes get back to a pitch months later? A year later? We've heard people say, "Yeah, 12 months later, something hits."

Michael Liedtke:

I will get back to the person, "Hey, this is interesting, but that's right... I'm looking at this thing. I may come back to you about it." Or, often I'll get a pitch about a story that I've already written and they're trying to amplify and I go, "That could be, but right now, I'm not going to write about that." But yeah, definitely. So yeah, you'll hear back from me usually if it's something like, "That's interesting." Because I want to let you know I may be coming back to you, or it's something I want to look at further. So, yeah. Rarely do I flag something without letting the person know that, "Hey, you've got my interest."

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, okay. Oh, that's good. So you'll be notified if you get the flag, okay.

Michael Liedtke:

Yeah. Sometimes they misdirect to me, where I see something that's more, that they just don't... The AP can be confusing. We have people all over the world. We're all kinds of different things. So I would say, "Because we are separate, I can't speak for them," I said. "But this is an area that's covered by so-and-so, and you may want to, you want to maybe run it by them," and I give them their email address and let them take it from there. I try to be helpful in that way. And it helps us, too. Sometimes they are good, it's just out of my realm, and I'm not going to cover it, so I can't really tell them yay or nay.

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Beck Bamberger:

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Tell us a little bit about how you craft one of your great stories. For instance, does it come from a pitch? Does it come from, you're having a brainstorm in the shower? Does it come from some lead that you call? Where do those come from?

Michael Liedtke:

I do get some great inspirations in the shower, but sometimes story ideas, but it can come from anywhere. It's just, part of the job is keeping on track on what is of interest. As you get to know your beat better, you know, you understand what is more likely to affect the general populace. For one thing, The AP is maybe different. We're not a tech blog. We're not going to go deep into the weeds type of stuff, which is fine. A lot of tech blogs go into that, and will get kind of wonky and nerdy. We are definitely more like the main street journal. So we are looking at, we have to understand the nerdy stuff, but we explain it. We're mostly interested in stuff that's going to have a bubble to the mainstream and really reshape the culture or the society or affect people personally more. We're not as likely to get into the stuff that the nerdy guys find fascinating. It is kind of interesting to me, it's just not something we're going to write about.

Beck Bamberger:

You want to have more of a holistic view.

Michael Liedtke:

Yes, yes. That's a good way of putting it.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. Gotcha. And by the way, for people, because we were talking about this before we hit the record button, your beat has changed and of course it's changed over 20 years. But you used to do some more startup-y stuff, but now you're really doing like the Apples, the Googles, the big, Big Kahunas, the fangs, as we call them.

Michael Liedtke:

Yes, definitely the fangs. I also cover Netflix a lot. This is a true story. On Netflix, I did my first story. I'll never forget it because of what happened. I had this great feature. This was back when it was the DVD by mail and it was just taking off. It was 2001. Of course, I had this big feature lined up. I had talked to Reed and all these people like, "This is kind of interesting. Some people think it could kill Blockbuster." At that time, like, "Nah, it can't." The reason I remember it is, it was slated, it was moving on September 11th, 2001. To say the least, it got lost in the shuffle that day.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes.

Michael Liedtke:

Yeah, it went out early that morning. I think it went out after midnight that day. Reed used to joke about that. I mean, not about the event.

Beck Bamberger:

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No, of course.

Michael Liedtke:

But how the first story that I did-

Beck Bamberger:

So, wait, it was like a story that was kind of... Was it a-

Michael Liedtke:

It was a feature about Netflix. Because then people, not a lot of... I think it had like two million. It was kind of the new concept. Like, "What? DVD by mail?" And you could hold onto the thing as long as you wanted. So it was a feature and it was like, I thought, a cool feature. But of course, a major event overshadowed everything that went out that day, understandably.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michael Liedtke:

Anyway, that's just a backstory, how long I've been around, but how long I've been covering Netflix, too.

Beck Bamberger:

No, it makes sense.

Michael Liedtke:

We're coming up on 20 years next year, on that.-

Beck Bamberger:

Wow, that's true.

Jered Martin:

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Beck Bamberger:

Well, let's play a quick word association game. These are always fun, Mike. So let's see here. I will say a word. You tell us your first word back. Food?

Michael Liedtke:

Mexican.

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Beck Bamberger:

Drink?

Michael Liedtke:

Beer.

Beck Bamberger:

Hobby?

Michael Liedtke:

Running.

Beck Bamberger:

Google?

Michael Liedtke:

Changed dramatically. That's too words.

Beck Bamberger:

San Francisco?

Michael Liedtke:

Eclectic.

Beck Bamberger:

Netflix?

Michael Liedtke:

I think of Reed.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Smartphones?

Michael Liedtke:

Pitchers.

Beck Bamberger:

Consumers?

Michael Liedtke:

Mainstream.

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Beck Bamberger:

5G?

Michael Liedtke:

Nascent.

Beck Bamberger:

Journalism?

Michael Liedtke:

Identity?

Beck Bamberger:

Pitch?

Michael Liedtke:

Hit.

Beck Bamberger:

Inbox?

Michael Liedtke:

Oh, clutter.

Beck Bamberger:

Clutter. There you go. Okay. Tell us, we like to ask this, and this is where I get all my book recommendations, frankly, is there anything you're reading or listening to or watching that you want to share?

Michael Liedtke:

Well, I just started reading... well, I haven't started reading it. I just got it. I'm excited to read it. What I'm reading right now is, I'm finishing up, I'm a big Bruce Springsteen fan, so I'm reading a biography written by him by someone else. Because I read his own autobiography. But I'm about, I'm excited to read, Matthew McConaughey's new book, his biography, Greenlights, right? I love that guy.

Beck Bamberger:

It's on my list. People have been raving about it.

Michael Liedtke:

I just got it in the mail and I'm looking forward to it. He's a really wise guy. I latched on to him early on in Dazed and Confused, and I really admire him for the way he transformed his career. I saw a good interview about the book on Bill Maher a couple of weeks ago. It was interesting to me how he

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purposely stayed away from rom-coms and gave up the big money. Rust Cohle, from the first season of True Detective, is one of my all-time favorite characters.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). The portrait on that, the cover, by the way, is so profound and gorgeous, in my opinion. Okay, so just for people to know, you might be like "Matthew McConaughey?" No, this book, I'm on Audible right now, has a 4.9 rating of 16,000 reviews and counting. I'm like, "Holy crap." I mean, that's huge.

Michael Liedtke:

Yeah. Sounds really good. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Obama's book right now. I mean, okay, it came out two days ago, but right now, has about 500 reviews. Of course, everyone else loves that too. But the point is, wow. Yeah, that is on my list. Oh, it's on The Wall Street Journal's best sellers, too, right now. I can't wait. I can't wait. Okay. What else you got?

Michael Liedtke:

Oh, what else I'm going to read? I'm also a big Jimi Hendrix fan. I've been reading a lot of music biographies. Well, one great book I read during the pandemic, it happens to be written by another music artist, but really nothing about music is, the Bicycle Diaries by David Byrne.

Beck Bamberger:

The Bicycle Diaries?

Michael Liedtke:

Yeah, he bicycled all around all these cities around. He's a big bicyclist. In typical David Byrne fashion, it's about bicycles, but so much more about society. I don't know if you saw on HBR, I know... Well, he had the show, America Utopia, which is also brilliant. That book is, I recommend it to a lot of people, it's about cities and how they've been reshaped in the last decade, and what the future of them are going to be, and a lot of quirky observations, as you would expect from a guy who wrote the visionary song for the pandemic back in what, 1980, Life During War Time, which always reminds me of what we've been going through. This ain't no party, this ain't no disco.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Wow. Okay. Those are good ones. Do you have anything else?

Michael Liedtke:

I've been watching a lot of video, but in a different way. This is kind of interesting. Because I am, I mentioned Netflix earlier, I'm still one of the three million people that get DVDs by mail, besides getting the streaming service. I thought it'd be funny, everyone else is streaming, and I decided to binge watch by DVD, and I get the two DVD plan and it worked perfectly. I watched the whole Americans series, which was awesome, six seasons. I had never watched it, but I had heard good things and it was incredible.

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Beck Bamberger:

Good recommendation. How is the DVD service? Do they come nicely packaged and everything?

Michael Liedtke:

Yeah. Yeah. It's just like, because you know a disc, there's four episodes. That worked well. I'd watch. By the time I was done with one disc, the next one was in the mail. I don't binge watch 10 shows at a time, so it's like two or three episodes, and it worked perfectly, yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Good to hear you could still do that. I don't even have a DVD thing on my laptop right now. Mac just totally ditched that.

Michael Liedtke:

The funny thing is, I also... So I would drive the disc back and drop it in the mailbox in my stick shift car, which, I drive a stick shift, which is funny, too.

Beck Bamberger:

Well, I have a 20 year old Corvette, so I can relate to that.

Michael Liedtke:

Oh, you got a stick probably, too, then.

Beck Bamberger:

Actually, it's an automatic.

Michael Liedtke:

Oh really.

Beck Bamberger:

It is an automatic. It's one of the rare ones. Mm-hmm (affirmative). But I get compliments. I painted it.

Michael Liedtke:

Yeah. Well, you know what they call it, because so few people know it, it's like it's a built-in anti-theft device. No one wants to steal a stick shift now.

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Beck Bamberger:

There you go. Okay. Now, this is a pertinent question for you, Michael. Given your long history in journalism, what do you think the future of journalism looks like?

Michael Liedtke:

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Well, thank God we had it, right? I mean, I'm not just talking about... The last four years, I think the value of it, it's never been in dispute, but it really came, I think crystallized for a lot of people, how important a free press and the job that so many great journalists did in a difficult time in our... and when it's been under assault, especially by people in power. So I think it's got a place.

Michael Liedtke:

I worry about the business model, like a lot of people, because of the way we've traded dollars for dimes, or even pennies, maybe, the transition from print to digital. New York Times has got a great model. It seems to work, with subscriptions. Certainly some of these big publications are going to be around. But I worry mostly about local journalism. Because like a lot, I used to work in community newspapers, were great, was where I started my career. And they're gone, the ones that I used to work for. All those things that are slipping through the cracks, the weird stuff that goes on, people in power on the local level that affects people lives, are probably not getting caught or exposed to the scale of some of the things that happened on the national level the last few years.

Michael Liedtke:

But usually, because there's a demand for it, there's usually... A model is usually figured out for it. I just don't know about the written word as much. Because even video is so huge, and video does play a huge, important role, right? But I don't know, text seems to be getting diminished, the importance of text. I worry about that.

Michael Liedtke:

I'm honest with, I encourage, I get a lot of questions from, young people about journalism. **It's fairly clear to me that, I was just a word guy. That's why I went into journalism. I've learned a little bit about photography. Don't do video very much. We have to multitask more. I think a lot of the young people are just digital natives that are natural at that anyway. But you need to do everything now, I think, the future's going to be. You're not just going to be a word guy or a picture guy. We have great photographers that do nothing but take pictures at The AP. But I think you're going to be more of a hybrid. We're already seeing that, doing podcasts like here, too. You have to be a jack-of-all-trades more than ever, I think, is going to be the future. So I always advise people to do that. Yeah.**

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Do you ever speak to colleges or universities?

Michael Liedtke:

I have a couple of times. It's been a few years. I talk to some high school classes. I still enjoy that. Yeah. I want to encourage people to do it, but I also feel like you got to be frank about what's... I started in the business when there was still the, before there was even a computer at every station that you were still... It was at the stage where you had electric typewriters. They ran what you wrote on the paper and ran it through these machines that transformed it in a way to put it on the printing press.

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Beck Bamberger:

Wow.

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Michael Liedtke:

So I've seen a lot of transition. I also saw the old characters in the newsroom, which you don't see as much. But it's changed a lot. And, let's see, it's been 37 years in the business.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. It's crazy. What do you mean by characters?

Michael Liedtke:

Oh, the classic characters. When you had the old guys, just like you would, might have seen the trusty old guys, and they would have a little something hidden in their drawer to put a little special sweetener in their coffee, which wasn't sugar.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, wow. Real old school stuff. Okay.

Michael Liedtke:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh wow.

Michael Liedtke:

But there were great editors, right?

Beck Bamberger:

Hey, hey.

Michael Liedtke:

Even though they may have been sipping a little something on the job, they always got the job done. But they'd smoke, there was smoking in the newsroom.

Beck Bamberger:

Were you in any of those newsrooms?

Michael Liedtke:

Yes, early on. I was the young, yeah, I was the kid, right? The kid doing the... yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow. What a time. Man, there's something so nostalgic to that, I think for those who have never seen that. But being from California, anytime I'd go somewhere, especially like in France where smoking is way more embraced, and in part of the Middle East, you're like, "Oh my God, someone's smoking inside." It almost like-

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Michael Liedtke:

Right.

Beck Bamberger:

... throws you off. Like, "What's happening? What's happening?" Anyway, I just think that's a very California thing, though.

Michael Liedtke:

Yeah. Well it's not good for you, right? I'm not encouraging anyone to smoke. I'm just saying like, yeah. I'm glad there's no more smoke. I do miss the... Newsrooms look so much different. If you didn't know better, sometimes you wouldn't know the difference of whether you were walking into an insurance office or a newsroom. One of the best movies I saw that captured the spirit of the newsroom was Spotlight, a few years ago, right? That was-

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. The Boston one that they uncovered the huge scandal.

Michael Liedtke:

Another great show that people often binge watch is The Wire, the fifth season of The Wire.

Beck Bamberger:

Let's put it on the list.

Michael Liedtke:

But the fifth season in particular, because it was written by, The Wire was done by a former newspaper guy, and it captured the essence of a... It was supposed to be, I think, the Baltimore... It was set in Baltimore, so it was the Baltimore Sun, or maybe they didn't call it the Baltimore Sun.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Well, let's now finish up with my favorite part, which is the Mad Lib part. I'm going to give you the phrase or the thing we need, and then I'm going to read it back to you once we get everything dialed in.

Michael Liedtke:

I haven't played Mad Libs in a long time.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, I know, right? This is a blast from the past. Okay. What is a catchphrase, any catch phrase?

Michael Liedtke:

I don't know. See you on the other side.

Beck Bamberger:

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See you on the other side. What is a scare phrase that you hear in journalism?

Michael Liedtke:

How much longer for that story? Almost done?

Beck Bamberger:

And then what about an empowering phrase you might hear as a journalist, or a buzzword?

Michael Liedtke:

Well, everyone likes to hear, great job, right?

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). All right, an adjective?

Michael Liedtke:

Sublime.

Beck Bamberger:

Good one. A part of a pitch?

Michael Liedtke:

I saw your story on...

Beck Bamberger:

I saw your story. Okay. Another adjective?

Michael Liedtke:

Hopeful.

Beck Bamberger:

Another part of a pitch?

Michael Liedtke:

X startup is about to raise a Series B.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Yes. Okay, what's an amount of time?

Michael Liedtke:

An amount of time. A millisecond.

Beck Bamberger:

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And then another adjective?

Michael Liedtke:

Arduous.

Beck Bamberger:

Good one. What about a singular noun?

Michael Liedtke:

Singer.

Beck Bamberger:

And then what about a topic?

Michael Liedtke:

Pandemic.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Favorite word of the year. And then a verb ending in I-N-G?

Michael Liedtke:

Running.

Beck Bamberger:

And then just any verb?

Michael Liedtke:

Color.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Here we go. To me, tech journalism is seeing you on the other side. It consists of, well, how much longer is that story going to take, to great jobs on the daily. If a pitch is as a sublime, I saw your story intro, I will absolutely respond to it. However, if a pitch has a hopeful, this startup is about to raise a series B part, you can expect no reply from me. If a millisecond goes by and you don't see an email back from me, you can just assume I'm not arduous about it. And the best stories always have singers and are usually about the pandemic. The best way to reach me is by running it over to me, but you can also color it for me. There you go.

Michael Liedtke:

That's what I want to see, color for me.

Beck Bamberger:

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Yeah.

Michael Liedtke:

That's another thing I've been doing, I've been coloring.

Beck Bamberger:

You've been coloring, like with coloring books?

Michael Liedtke:

Rock stars. I have a coloring book of rock stars.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, my gosh. Oh, that's fun.

Michael Liedtke:

Well, it's kind of like a meditation. It's like everything and nothing, and yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. It's very soothing, adult coloring books.

Michael Liedtke:

Yes.

Beck Bamberger:

Is it a child one or is it an adult one?

Michael Liedtke:

No, it's an adult one of, featuring rock legends. I've done everyone. Bob Dylan, Mick Jagger. I just finished one of The Police just the other day.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh man. Well, that's fun.

Michael Liedtke:

Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

I want you to enjoy your coloring.

Michael Liedtke:

Thank you.

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Beck Bamberger:

We're taping this around Thanksgiving, so hopefully you get to do some coloring during that time.

Michael Liedtke:

I will. I'm working on Led Zeppelin right now, in case you're wondering.

Beck Bamberger:

Perfect. Thank you for the recommendations for reading. I definitely got a book on the download here. And otherwise, thank you so much for being on today. This was so fun.

Michael Liedtke:

Thanks for having me.

Jered Martin:

Thanks for tuning into this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring Michael Liedtke from The Associated Press. 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 episode. To learn more about the latest tools on OnePitch, 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.