

Jered Martin:

Welcome to Coffee With A Journalist, a podcast by OnePitch, featuring the tech industry's most well-known journalists. The goal of our show is to uncover the real person behind the real stories you love to read. We discuss their beat and news coverage, what their inbox looks like, and a whole lot more.

Jered Martin:

On today's show, we're joined by Katharine Schwab, the deputy editor of Fast Company's technology section. Katharine covers large tech companies, such as Microsoft and Facebook, and how technology affects everyday consumers.

Jered Martin:

On the show today, Katharine talks about her transition from writer to editor, the importance of having a good subject line to grab her attention, how the tech team at Fast Company decides what stories to write about, and more. Let's dive in and hear more from Katharine on today's episode.

Beck Bamberger:

Hey, everyone. Welcome to Coffee With A Journalist. Another great episode we have today with Fast Company's Katharine Schwab. I'm so glad you're here, Ms. Katherine. Are you drinking coffee?

Katharine Schwab:

I'm drinking water. It's too late in the day for me.

Beck Bamberger:

It's doing the day, too, for me. You know, it's about 90-something percent of people that we have on this are not drinking coffee.

Katharine Schwab:

Well, if I had decaf coffee, I would be all over that.

Beck Bamberger:

Possibly.

Katharine Schwab:

At home, you know?

Beck Bamberger:

We might have to change the name. Where are you right now? New York City?

Katharine Schwab:

I am. I'm currently in New York City in my apartment at my little home office.

Beck Bamberger:

Home office. Aren't we all?

Katharine Schwab:

My home office. I've got a desk. It's like my living room and my dining room all in one room.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, it's everything.

Katharine Schwab:

It feels very New York.

Beck Bamberger:

Sounds New York. I was just going to say it sounds like New York. Welcome. Well, thank you for being here. As people know, you are currently a staff editor at Fast Company, have been there about a year, and you were previously an associate editor. You've been at the Atlantic. You've been also at Stanford Arts Review. So lots of good experience. And SF Chronicle and Seattle Times. So you've been around.

Beck Bamberger:

I want to start by asking about your day to day with your job. What is it like being particularly an editor for Fast Company?

Katharine Schwab:

Yeah. So, I mean, I've had a kind of an interesting journey at Fast Company. I started as a kind of a freelance writer, and then kind of was a full time writer, and now I've transitioned to editing. So it's been definitely an interesting transition. This September will be my one year mark as an editor. But the main part of my job is really deciding what stories we cover.

Katharine Schwab:

So we have a very small team. So it's a lot of kind of assigning stories to our staffers, and then also working on freelance pitches, and then also we do a lot of kind of op-eds and contributed essays as well. So there's a lot of decision making, a lot of headline writing, and then, of course, the nitty gritty editing sentences.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. So we always talk about inboxes on this particular show, because people want to know what does your inbox look like? So do you get a lot of pitches directly, or how does your inbox look?

Katharine Schwab:

Yeah, I do get a lot of pitches, and I think it's been kind of frustrating recently because I've also transitioned the topic that I cover. So I used to be a design reporter for Fast Company, and now I've transitioned kind of full time to covering tech, but a lot of people in my inbox have not tracked that transition so I still get a lot of pitches around architecture or kind of niche design stuff that is just not relevant to me anymore.

Beck Bamberger:

Why are they still pitching you that then?

Katharine Schwab:  
It's really annoying.

Beck Bamberger:  
I don't understand.

Katharine Schwab:  
Yeah. I mean, a lot of people don't do their research. It's very clear.

Beck Bamberger:  
It says deputy tech editor right on your Twitter, folks.

Katharine Schwab:  
Mm-hmm (affirmative), it does. Yeah. It's very clear. It's in my handle. I have people asking, and then I try to kind of let people know, hey, I don't cover this anymore. Please reach out to our design reporters.

Beck Bamberger:  
Don't tell me their next question is, oh, well, what do you cover?

Katharine Schwab:  
Oh, it is. Oh, it is.

Beck Bamberger:  
No!

Katharine Schwab:  
It is. It literally says in my email signature, deputy tech editor. It's pretty obvious what I cover.

Beck Bamberger:  
That's awful.

Katharine Schwab:  
If they say that I just don't respond. I'm like you can do your own research on that. I'm really easy to find on the internet.

Beck Bamberger:  
Of course. Oh, God.

Katharine Schwab:  
Yeah. Pet peeve.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, yeah. There's a lot of pet peeves shared on this show here. Are you one of those inbox zero people? How do you fly through the pitches?

Katharine Schwab:

Oh, no. Oh gosh, no,

Beck Bamberger:

Tell us more.

Katharine Schwab:

I am not an inbox zero person. I try to have things read at least, but my inbox is quite a mess. I tend to have kind of everything that I'm working on or that is still active, whether it's pitches I'm considering, or if I'm reporting something, all of those messages, of course, things I need to get back to, edits that are waiting, all of that stuff kind of sits in a big jumble in my inbox. Then I have all the unread messages. I try to go through maybe once a day, but I try to keep it just once a day, because otherwise it gets really overwhelming.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh yeah. Yeah. I would imagine. This is what every person we chat with too, has, which is just how do you deal with the deluge of just so many?

Katharine Schwab:

Well, and if you get behind, it's-

Beck Bamberger:

Then you get behind and then you get depressed, like you can handle it. But then on the extreme side, we've had a handful of people who are ninja-like inbox zero people.

Katharine Schwab:

Really?

Beck Bamberger:

Within the hour. Oh, yeah. It's fascinating.

Katharine Schwab:

I am so impressed.

Beck Bamberger:

It's fascinating. I don't know how. I mean, it's your full time job.

Katharine Schwab:

Yeah. You could never get anything else done. At least I couldn't, that's for sure.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Gosh. So what makes you open an email? Or let's say, more specifically, a pitch? Is it all about the subject line? Is it you know the person? Is it, what?

Katharine Schwab:

So I have a confession to make that I'm so bad with remembering people who are pitching me. Sometimes I get emails saying we worked together on this story once. They're like, don't you remember me? I feel so terrible about it. But it's really the subject line. I mean, I think I do get a lot of just like spam, they've sent it to a thousand people, kind of pitches, and those are deleted pretty quick. I do try to respond and at least say this isn't a fit or whatever, but-

Beck Bamberger:

You do? To all of those?

Katharine Schwab:

No, no, no, no. Not to those. Not to the big scam ones.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay, okay.

Katharine Schwab:

But if someone has taken the time to craft something and has clearly put some thought into it, I try to at least be respectful of their time and say either no thank you or ask a couple of questions or whatever it is. But yeah, the subject line definitely means a lot.

Katharine Schwab:

I'm still figuring out my strategy on this, to be honest.

Beck Bamberger:

Protocol, yeah. Yeah.

Katharine Schwab:

But because I used to cover design and now cover tech, I think I feel like the pitches have not really caught up to that yet.

Beck Bamberger:

Got you.

Katharine Schwab:

So I'm trying to kind of encourage people who are pitching things that are more in my wheelhouse to reach out to me when they have interesting stuff.

Beck Bamberger:

Earlier, you said, Katharine, that you guys have a small team and you are funneling through, okay, what are we going to talk about? What are we going to publish? What stories are we going to do? How does

that happen? Is it a daily meeting that occurs? And then what happens from there with the actual story? Can you walk us through that?

Katharine Schwab:

Yeah. So it's not really daily, because we're a magazine, we're sensitive to the news cycle, but we're not tied to it, which is a really lovely freedom to have.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Katharine Schwab:

We don't have a daily meeting, but I think we are talking every day and kind of going through, oh, this looks interesting, oh, should we follow up on this? What could be a unique kind of more Fast Company angle on this bigger story? From there, often it's kind of managing the capacity of my writers to make sure they're not overwhelmed, because they all have so much going on all the time and often there's things that would be great to cover and we just don't have the capacity because we're so tiny.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Katharine Schwab:

We're really going kind of up against staffs that entirely cover tech, or big publications have dedicated reporters for each big tech company. I mean, we're so far away from that. So we really have to be smart and try to choose in a savvy way what it makes sense to spend our time on. So we just can't keep up with all the tech news that's happening every day. It's a constant struggle to figure out what stories make the most sense for us to be telling.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). You recently did a story on Pinterest, and I know you wanted to chat about that. So how did that story come to be? Tell us a bit more about it.

Katharine Schwab:

Yeah. So in mid-June, two women who used to work at Pinterest, Ifeoma Ozoma and Aericia Banks, both went public with allegations of discrimination and kind of talked a lot about their experiences working at Pinterest as black women. Kind of in response to Pinterest's Black Lives Matter statement, they really wanted to call it out for how hypocritical it was based on how poorly they were treated at the company.

Katharine Schwab:

So, I mean, everyone picked up this story. Every news outlet, every tech section of every news outlet covered this in some way, shape, or form. I originally reached out to them kind of with the idea of actually them publishing a first person essay about their experiences. I try to do that often, because I think hearing directly from people whose lives have been impacted by technology, whether that's through their work or kind of on a more personal level, that can be a really powerful way to tell a story that we don't see as much. So that's something that I personally feel invested in, in helping those stories be told.

Katharine Schwab:

So I originally reached out to them about that, and then it quickly became clear that that wasn't really the right format for the story. So after a long interview with them, I kind of decided that I really wanted to focus on this practice of leveling, which is something that happens in tech. It's kind of the fundamental way employees are structured at a tech company. They're divided into levels.

Beck Bamberger:

I've never actually heard of it before until I was looking at your piece, to tell you the truth.

Katharine Schwab:

Yeah. I mean, it's definitely a tech specific thing. So I thought that because the story had already been told so much based on their tweets, their viral tweets, about this, I thought I could really kind of bring something new to the story by looking at the history of leveling and looking at how leveling has been used in tech generally in a discriminatory way.

Katharine Schwab:

There is an ongoing Google lawsuit where essentially the main plaintiff was mis-leveled. She was brought in at a lower level. So I spoke to the employment lawyer for that case and he was able to provide some really crucial background to these women's stories at Pinterest. In some ways it felt like a rare story because they gone public, they had both kind of done everything right, they filed discrimination complaints with the state of California. They had tried everything internally to get their levels corrected and were denied and were denied. So they were so brave in speaking about their experiences and really being the face of this. It was great to be able to bring some of that extra context that this is systemic, this is a systemic problem.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh yeah. Interesting with this piece, too, because the story was out there and yet you were then able to take it, use it in a different way, make it into something totally different, and then thinking it was going to be a first person narrative, but then finding that that was not the best format. I mean, that just shows the evolution of the story that can happen.

Katharine Schwab:

Yeah, it was kind of a wild ride. It was funny, after the story was published, one of the women reached out to me and said, do you remember when this was going to be a first person essay? I'm so glad that wasn't the form it ultimately took, because this was the right way to tell this story.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Speaking of stories, what type of reading do you do? What are you reading?

Katharine Schwab:

Oh, there's so much to read. I mean, it's one of the pleasures of my job is that reading is an important part of my job and there's so much incredible tech journalism that's happening constantly. So I'm a really big fan of Motherboard. Vice does really amazing hope.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, Vice is so good.

Katharine Schwab:

Kind of scrappy accountable tech journalism that I'm just such a fan. The Times' tech reporters are some of the best on the planet, and so I read their work pretty religiously.

Katharine Schwab:

You know, it's interesting, it's been great to watch Medium's tech publication, OneZero, which is relatively new, just explode, and they've done such fascinating work. So I'm always kind of keeping an eye on what they're doing and what they're thinking about too.

Katharine Schwab:

But I mean, there's so much, and I think that's what's really exciting about working in this field right now, and really why I've pushed in my career to get to tech, because it's such a fascinating nexus of different topics. You know, you have kind of the technical piece of it, but really the story is a culture story and it's a business story and it's a political story, and it's all of these things mixed together in a way that other beats, I feel, don't have that in the same way.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, yeah. So are you saying you always wanted to be in tech and you've now finally have arrived?

Katharine Schwab:

Well, no. I mean, initially, I wouldn't say I have arrived, but it's certainly been something that I've been wanting to do for a while now. Actually, when I started my career, I was an editorial fellow at the Atlantic.

Beck Bamberger:

I see that. Yeah.

Katharine Schwab:

I was placed on the culture team. So my background when I was in college, I did a lot of kind of feature writing and arts. That was really my passion. I got to the Atlantic and I realized very quickly that covering culture in a mass media format really means writing about TV shows, movies, and music. A lot of people do that so well, but I realized that wasn't really what I was kind of most interested in.

Katharine Schwab:

I went to Stanford, and so I had been kind of soaking in the kind of Silicon Valley ethos for awhile. So I realized tech is really the biggest culture story of our time. I mean, it's shaping the way we think at such a fundamental level that it's hard to kind of grasp really. In kind of realizing that, I kind of slowly started trying to make my way over from culture over to tech more and more specifically.

Katharine Schwab:

So yeah, I mean, this current job has in some ways certainly been kind of a culmination of a lot of years of work of trying to position myself more on this beat that I care about a lot.

Beck Bamberger:

Well, and you can't escape it, tech, at this point, because it is culture and it is daily life and it is politics and it's everything. Yeah. Which I think is the really cool part.

Katharine Schwab:

Yeah.

Jered Martin:

Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch.

Jered Martin:

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Jered Martin:

Now back to today's episode.

Beck Bamberger:

Well, let's play a little word association game, Katharine. I'm going to just give you a word and you just tell me what the first thing is that you think of.

Katharine Schwab:

Oh boy. Okay.

Beck Bamberger:

There's no wrong answers, and sometimes it's really fun.

Katharine Schwab:

Okay.

Beck Bamberger:

So, okay. First one, food?

Katharine Schwab:

Curry.

Beck Bamberger:

Drink?

Katharine Schwab:

Water.

Beck Bamberger:

Hobby?

Katharine Schwab:

Plants.

Beck Bamberger:

Plants? Like house plants.

Katharine Schwab:

Yes.

Beck Bamberger:

I love it. Are you a successful house plant owner?

Katharine Schwab:

I am. I'm moving in a couple of weeks, and so I had to count how many plants I have.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh my gosh. How many do you have?

Katharine Schwab:

I have about 40 plants.

Beck Bamberger:

In your New York apartment? Oh my God. It's like probably a jungle in there.

Katharine Schwab:

Yeah. It's pretty awesome. I'm originally-

Beck Bamberger:

That is rad.

Katharine Schwab:

Yeah. I'm originally from California, and when I first moved to the East Coast, the winters were really rough, and I really felt the seasonal depression. In preparation for the winter a couple of years ago, I said, you know what? I need to buy some plants, and it's helped me so much. I love them. They're my children.

Beck Bamberger:

I love it.

Katharine Schwab:

I try to propagate them. I'm still very much a novice, but it's been a really fun hobby.

Beck Bamberger:

That's the best one I've heard so far.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Social media?

Katharine Schwab:

Facebook.

Beck Bamberger:

Mobile app?

Katharine Schwab:

Twitter.

Beck Bamberger:

New York City?

Katharine Schwab:

Subway.

Beck Bamberger:

Democracy?

Katharine Schwab:

Trump.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh.

Katharine Schwab:

Not in a positive way. I'll just add that. The antithesis, perhaps.

Beck Bamberger:

I'm sure. How about Apple?

Katharine Schwab:

iPhone.

Beck Bamberger:

Privacy?

Katharine Schwab:  
iPhone.

Beck Bamberger:  
Journalism?

Katharine Schwab:  
Internet.

Beck Bamberger:  
Pitch.

Katharine Schwab:  
Annoying.

Beck Bamberger:  
And then inbox?

Katharine Schwab:  
Overwhelming.

Beck Bamberger:  
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Katharine Schwab:  
Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:  
That's how it is. Okay, what do you think about the future of journalism? Speaking of democracy. Or speaking of all the things we're talking about tech.

Katharine Schwab:  
Yeah. I mean, I feel really grateful to have had such a good run in journalism so far, but it certainly is a scary industry, and with the pandemic it feels very uncertain. I feel really lucky to be at a small media company. We haven't had mass layoffs. I do feel very nervous, particularly for the future of local news. I think that's something that is the piece about the future of journalism that feels the most worrisome to me.

Katharine Schwab:  
But, you know, I see places like ProPublica, which is a nonprofit newsroom, and I find that really exciting and inspirational. The incredible tech reporter, Julia Angwin, kind of spun out of ProPublica and launched her own nonprofit newsroom, and I feel like that model, particularly for accountability journalism, is a

really exciting one. I'm hopeful that we'll see more of that. I mean, it'll be interesting to see if it's successful. I mean, it still does feel like a bit of an experiment.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes, yes.

Katharine Schwab:

But I'm excited to see that in particular for investigative journalism, because it's so hard to do. I mean, at a place like Fast Company, even, we just don't have the resources to do that kind of work often, which is also why I feel really proud of this Pinterest story, because I was able to do a little bit more of that. But given kind of how fast the internet moves, we don't always have the resources for that kind of work. So I'm excited about that piece.

Katharine Schwab:

Even though the pandemic has ruined our events business to some degree, as it has for every media company, we have done some virtual events and that has been really exciting. We actually had one last week and it was great. I mean, it was a bit of an experiment for us, but it turned out we had really, really great conversations, and that gives me some hope that the events piece of journalism will kind of continue even through the pandemic.

Beck Bamberger:

I hope so.

Katharine Schwab:

Yeah. But the ad model, just, oomph.

Beck Bamberger:

No, that's-

Katharine Schwab:

It's got to be diversified, really.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Yeah. Being as young as you are in journalism, so it's not like you've been in it for 25 years or something, would you still go back to your college self and say, yeah, go down this path?

Katharine Schwab:

I mean, I would. I feel really lucky to be able to do this work, and I think I've been able to get a job and I've been able to hold a job. So I feel like for young journalists, I think you've got to take your shot and you've got to try.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Katharine Schwab:

I remember one of my kind of early mentors, she was my editor at my very first internship at LA Magazine. I remember my family had kind of scared me a little bit about going into journalism and I was thinking about, oh, maybe I should think about PR. I remember I had a coffee with her or something, and she was so mad at me.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, she was? Don't go to the dark side.

Katharine Schwab:

Yeah. I mean, she said don't go to the dark side, but also she said you've got to try. Don't quit before you've even started if this is what you really want to do.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Katharine Schwab:

I mean, it's a rough business and it's a rough industry, but I feel like you have to take your shot, and that would still be my advice. You know, if that doesn't work out and that doesn't make sense, then you can reevaluate.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Katharine Schwab:

But you know, I wouldn't necessarily go to journalism school. I mean, I did not go to journalism school, I would not advise people to go to journalism school. It's just too expensive.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes.

Katharine Schwab:

If you can and you're in the position to take your shot, do it.

Beck Bamberger:

Do it. That's a great one, Katharine. I haven't had too many people say, you have to take a shot.

Katharine Schwab:

Maybe it's because I'm still young and naive. I don't know.

Beck Bamberger:

Hey, that's okay. I'll take it.

Katharine Schwab:

Let's talk in five years. We'll see where I'm at.

Beck Bamberger:

I'll take it. All right. Well, to wrap up, Katharine, we're going to play our Mad Lib.

Katharine Schwab:

Okay.

Beck Bamberger:

Which is shockingly highly accurate.

Katharine Schwab:

Ooh, okay.

Beck Bamberger:

So let's see how it goes for you. Okay, first off. What is a catch phrase? Any catch phrase?

Katharine Schwab:

Democracy dies in darkness.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, that's a good one. Okay, what about a journalist scare phrase?

Katharine Schwab:

Algorithms.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh. Ooh. That's a scary one.

Katharine Schwab:

I feel like my life is so dictated by like the algorithms on social media and like what it serves people to read, you know?

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Okay, what about an empowering journalism buzzword?

Katharine Schwab:

Accountability.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Adjective.

Katharine Schwab:

Leafy.

Beck Bamberger:

Leafy. I love it.

Katharine Schwab:

I'm staring at my plants right now.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Perfect. Part of the pitch?

Katharine Schwab:

Context.

Beck Bamberger:

Then what about another adjective?

Katharine Schwab:

Broken.

Beck Bamberger:

Broken. Then another part of a pitch?

Katharine Schwab:

Embargo. Time.

Beck Bamberger:

What about an amount of time?

Katharine Schwab:

A week.

Beck Bamberger:

Another adjective? Almost done.

Katharine Schwab:

Tall.

Beck Bamberger:

Tall. Singular noun?

Katharine Schwab:

Chair.

Beck Bamberger:

Chair. Okay, what about a topic?

Katharine Schwab:

Misinformation.

Beck Bamberger:

Then a verb ending in I-N-G?

Katharine Schwab:

Running.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Then just a regular verb?

Katharine Schwab:

Send.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Are you ready, Katharine?

Katharine Schwab:

I'm ready.

Beck Bamberger:

Here we go.

Beck Bamberger:

To me, tech journalism is how democracy dies in the dark. It consists of algorithms and accountability on the daily. If a pitch has a leafy context, I will absolutely respond to it. However, if a pitch has a broken embargo, you can expect no reply from me.

Beck Bamberger:

That's totally, that's the first like fully factual one I've heard so far.

Katharine Schwab:

Nice.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. If a week goes by and you still don't hear back from me, you can just assume I'm not really tall about it. The best stories always have chairs and are usually about misinformation. The best to reach me is by running to me, but you could also just send it to me.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. There's some accuracies in there.

Katharine Schwab:

Okay. Yeah, there's some pieces of that that work.

Beck Bamberger:

I love it.

Katharine Schwab:

Great.

Beck Bamberger:

Katharine, thank you so much for your time and your grace and all your plant love. I can feel the leafy-ness from here. Please send us a photo. We need to see this.

Katharine Schwab:

Oh, okay.

Beck Bamberger:

Do you put them all together? Like do they all hang out as like a choir or something?

Katharine Schwab:

They kind of do. It's true. I actually turned two or three shower caddies into little like plants.

Beck Bamberger:

No!

Katharine Schwab:

Yes. I'll send a picture. It's very cute.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, that sounds like a perfect like Etsy thing.

Katharine Schwab:

Yeah, it hangs on my window.

Beck Bamberger:

Turn your caddy into a plant thing.

Katharine Schwab:

Except there was no DIY whatsoever. I'm not a DIY person.

Beck Bamberger:

Hey, that's okay. That's okay.

Katharine Schwab:

Great. Well, thank you so much. This has been really fun.

Beck Bamberger:

Thank you, Katharine. This was great.

Jered Martin:

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee With A Journalist, featuring Katharine Schwab from Fast Company. If you like our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts, and anywhere else you listen to podcasts.

Jered Martin:

If you'd like to learn more about OnePitch, head to our website at [onepitch.co](http://onepitch.co) to see the unique ways we're helping journalists and public relations professionals start great stories.

Jered Martin:

We'll be back next week with an all new guest and even more insights about the tech journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.