

**EPISODE 111**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER:** Welcome to this weeks' episode of Coffee with a Journalist, brought to you by OnePitch. The guests in our show include some of the most notable journalists from the top US-based publications, who cover topics including technology, life sound 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. Head to onepitch.co and look for the video page to learn more about new series featuring journalists from the show.

Our guest this week on Coffee with a Journalist is Adrienne LaFrance, an executive editor at The Atlantic. She's held numerous roles in the publication since 2014, and prior to that, was an investigative reporter for several local news organizations. During the episode, Adrienne starts off by telling us about her role as executive editor, her thoughts on cold pitches, her advice for sources approaching journalists, and more. Let's hear from Adrienne now.

[INTERVIEW]

**[00:01:20] BB:** Welcome everyone, this is coffee with a journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger. I'm the founder of OnePitch. We did this thing so that people could understand publicists, how better to work with journalists, and we all need a friend in journalism and as publicists, and PR people, knowing what journalists actually want is very good for us. Hence, we made OnePitch which is producing this lovely show you here today. I also run BAM, an agency that works with all venture backed technology company. So, I am in the stuff, every day, working with all the journalists, living and breathing this great stuff in this wonderful work that we get to do via storytelling.

With us today, coming from springtime. It sounds like in DC with the birds chirping in the background is Adrienne LaFrance. She's the executive editor at The Atlantic. I'm very excited to chat with you today. Welcome, Adrienne.

**[00:02:12] AL:** Thanks so much for having me.

**[00:02:13] BB:** Yes, Adrienne. So, do you have a window open? What's happening over there?

**[00:02:17] AL:** I do have a window open. It's very springy here. We have like actual daffodils are happening, because spring is coming. It's good. It's very good.

**[00:02:24] BB:** Are there tulips as well?

**[00:02:26] AL:** I haven't seen any tulips yet, but it's only a matter of time.

**[00:02:30] BB:** Love springtime. It doesn't happen in California at all. The cactus is still a cactus anyway. Okay. Adrienne, actually, let's start with the role, because you're not a reporter necessarily. Those are more senior reporters, reporters, journalists that sometimes we get to hear. So as executive editor, what does that entail?

**[00:02:50] AL:** Well, I am a reporter. I think of myself as a reporter first. That's been what I've done. But now as executive editor, I oversee our editorial departments. So, the website, the print magazine and audio. So, really just helping direct coverage and editing stories and talking to our brilliant journalists about what they're working on and all of that good stuff.

**[00:03:14] BB:** That sounds like a lot. How many people are under you?

**[00:03:17] AL:** I think it's about 130.

**[00:03:19] BB:** Oh, my gash. Adrienne, that's a lot. That's a lot. Well, then, do you get a lot of pitches?

**[00:03:26] AL:** Yes, definitely.

**[00:03:28] BB:** Okay. Let's talk about the pitches.

**[00:03:30] AL:** My inbox is chaos, honestly. I think yeah, I mean, I get like most journalists, just all kinds of things, things that are of interest, things that the Atlantic probably would never do, things that are just random. So yeah, all kinds of things.

**[00:03:44] BB:** So, you mentioned it's chaos. That is the typical journalist experience that's has been on the show for 130 episodes, or whatever we're on here now. How do you organize it at all? Everyone has a technique of some sort.

**[00:04:01] AL:** I really don't keep up very well with email. I have to confess. I think I organize it in the sense that I'm really scanning for people I know. So, it's hard to break through, if it's not someone I know already. I really don't organize. I'm not a good inbox zero person at all. Nothing like that. It's just sort of –

**[00:04:21] BB:** Are you a let it ride person?

**[00:04:24] AL:** Hundred percent. I can tell you, I'll look at my –

**[00:04:26] BB:** Yeah, let's look at it live. Tell us. Tell us

**[00:04:31] AL:** My unread right now are 362,000 –

**[00:04:33] BB:** What? What? Wait, this might be a record. Wait, did you say 367,000?

**[00:04:43] AL:** 362,546.

**[00:04:46] BB:** Wow. You know what, though? There's like a dividing line in the world of journalism. There's the level of extreme, the inbox has to be zero and you delete stuff all day long, all the time. And then there's this side, which is on the other extreme, you're just the let it ride and you just have no anxiety about it whatsoever. It just is what it is.

**[00:05:08] AL:** Yup. That's how I feel. I just got to go with the flow.

**[00:05:11] BB:** Wow. Okay. So, as editor, you're clearly not writing all the pieces. Are you then – if you receive a pitch that you believe has some legs to it, are you forwarding along? Assigning it to someone? How do you process that?

**[00:05:27] AL:** Yeah, I do. I mean, if I see something that grabs my attention, either just because I find it interesting, or because maybe it's something that is in the realm of something I know, someone on my team is working on, I might forward and just say, I do definitely forward things and just say like, “In case of interest”, or, “This looks like the story you're working on”, or whatever it may be.

**[00:05:46] BB:** Gosh, okay. Does that take up a lot of your time? Or are you just letting that inbox just ride because that really doesn't – do pitches result into actual coverage, is the better question.

**[00:05:58] AL:** Very rarely. I would say very, very rarely. Occasionally, I'm trying to think of an example. I mean, sometimes –

**[00:06:04] BB:** Yes, one example of late?

**[00:06:06] AL:** I guess, it's more likely, I think it comes down to relationships, I would say, because people who know the kinds of things that you work on will pitch you more effectively, because they understand what you're interested in. So, as a writer, that's certainly true for me. But yeah, it's very rare. A cold pitch, it's really hard to have that result in coverage.

**[00:06:29] BB:** Okay, this is good to know.

**[00:06:32] AL:** It's disheartening. I know.

**[00:06:35] BB:** And that's okay. This is why we have this show, so people know what's up and how to finesse anything. Related to that, if there's even a glimmer of hope here, is there a subject line you've recently seen or one that you remember where you're like, “Damn! That was an email I had to open from the pitch.”

**[00:06:53] AL:** I mean, I guess one tactic that sometimes works is someone asking, if someone – I can't think of a specific subject line. There are definitely creative subject lines. I feel like you find this with like political campaigns too, where you're like, "I see what you're doing there. You're trying to get my attention." But I think, the thing that has been more effective has been, if someone reaches out and rather than just saying, "I have this client, what do you think?" More like, "I've noticed you cover X, Y and Z. I think there may be areas where I could be helpful to you. Could we find time to talk at some point?" Or like, "Could I tell you more about what we're focused on?" Or something where it's like, trying to understand what the journalist is focused on, rather than sort of throwing spaghetti at the wall and hoping it sticks approach, which is, I think, a lot harder.

Obviously, it's more time consuming, and some people don't want to talk on the phone. So, it's hard to break through in any case, but I think demonstrating that you understand what the person is trying to do in their work is a helpful starting point. And so even like, like someone saying, "Oh, I read your story on whatever the last story was", might be a better entry point than just pitching something out of the blue.

**[00:08:10] BB:** Although, I feel that that line has to be very careful. Because also on the show, we've heard people who are like, you just throw out a line that said, "Yeah, I read your story on baseball", and they're like, "How about we talk about shampoo?" And you're like, "What does that have to do?" It's like, you didn't read the story.

**[00:08:30] AL:** I think, it's also like, you have to demonstrate that you actually have read it too, because people we'll get pitches where it's like you obviously just links to my last two most recent stories. You know what I mean? You have to be careful with that one too.

**[00:08:42] BB:** Yes. Okay. I want to back up a moment here for everybody. We've had tons and tons of outlets on here now. It's been a wonderful, and you Adrienne, have been a handful of different outlets a lot at the Atlantic, of course, which is great. But all the way from Honolulu, and being a freelancer, and back to the Atlantic and all this great stuff. And Atlantic, I personally love and read. But for those maybe listening who aren't as familiar, how would you describe the outlet overall?

**[00:09:12] AL:** Sure. We are a magazine of ideas. It's a general interest magazine. We've been around since 1857. So, 165 years. We're very focused on sort of understanding the American idea and we don't define that what that, is sort of core part of our mission is that over the course of many generations of our magazine's existence, we're always interpreting and reinterpreting what that could mean and what it means to different writers. We're very much writer's collective. So, we're a place where we like a lot of different varying viewpoints. We're interested in debate, even argument, and we just think that having many voices coming together and trying to understand this country and this experiment we're all part of, is very important. So that's The Atlantic

**[00:10:00] BB:** Oh, great way to describe that. I hadn't heard it like that. Wonderful. Do you ever get exclusive pitches?

**[00:10:06] AL:** I think so. Yeah. For sure. I'm trying to think of a recent one. But yeah, occasionally.

**[00:10:15] BB:** Okay. And this is always a topic because people have varying viewpoints of exclusive versus what the true exclusive or an embargo or anything like that? So, would you ever take an exclusive? Let's ask that.

**[00:10:28] AL:** I think it depends what it means. I mean, we certainly, if someone's offering exclusive access to someone to be interviewed, sure. If it's someone who would want an interview anyway, great. But just by nature of something being exclusive doesn't necessarily mean we'd be more interested in it.

**[00:10:46] BB:** Mm-hmm. Then is there ever a time, and I think I would know the answer, but just to make sure we handle this question. Is there ever a time that an embargo would be appropriate for The Atlantic or that someone would that would fall across your inbox?

**[00:11:00] AL:** Yeah. Certainly, I mean, where that comes into play for us is perhaps like academic studies or scientific findings. That's something that we definitely accept in terms of embargoes, when it's – again, it's like something's coming out in a scientific journal, and we agree that we'll keep it embargoed until the next day and have early access so we can start

working on it. That's critical for us. Other embargoes, maybe not as much, but that's a common one.

**[00:11:35] BB:** Got you.

[MESSAGE]

**[00:11:37] 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](https://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 CONTINUED]

**[00:12:01] BB:** We have a little fill in the blank section here, Adrienne. So, I'm going to have a phrase for you and then you can fill it in. Does that sound good?

**[00:12:10] AL:** Sure.

**[00:12:09] BB:** Okay, first one, my favorite sources always –

**[00:12:14] AL:** Answer my calls.

**[00:12:14] BB:** There you go. You'll never get a response from me if –

**[00:12:19] AL:** You email me, probably. I'm so bad at email.

**[00:12:23] BB:** Well, you just heard everybody. You're going to be one of those 367,000. Okay, well, then, this question. You can follow up with me if –

**[00:12:33] AL:** I don't mind people being persistent. I totally get it. I feel bad if I ignore people just because there's too many messages. But I'll try to be straight with people and just say like, "Oh, sorry, this isn't of interest." I totally understand. People are just trying to do their jobs and our work is the same way. We hound people all the time.

**[00:12:58] BB:** I haven't heard, I don't believe on this show of like, "Oh, yeah, we do the same thing. It's just in a different way." That's good distinction there. The appropriate amount of lead time for a story is –

**[00:13:08] AL:** It totally depends on the story. I mean, some could be an hour a day. Others need weeks or months, even.

**[00:13:19] BB:** Have you, and now being editor that you know, what's the range? Like the shortest amount to the longest amount that you've recently seen? Like two hours to 12 months?

**[00:13:31] AL:** We definitely have pieces that people work on for more than a year. We're a magazine. Yeah. So, that's not uncommon for us. And then the other things that people turn around an hour. It's the nature of media in this era, we run the gamut.

**[00:13:47] BB:** Maybe that's good for people to know just how long that range can be, for sure. Okay. My favorite stories to write are –

**[00:13:56] AL:** Good one. Complicated, I would guess? I guess, I would say.

**[00:14:01] BB:** Yes. Your last one was in early January, America's Running Out of Time, for instance. So, that's a heavy piece and you have some Facebook stuff. Okay. By the way, is there a story you wish you were writing right now?

**[00:14:14] AL:** I mean, I'm always sort of working on something in the background, but I don't know specifically. Nothing that I would share at this moment. But yes, always working on something.



[00:14:25] **BB:** Okay. Keep it under the hat. I like that. The best compliment I received about my work was –

[00:14:33] **AL:** Probably that it made a difference somehow. It helped make the world better in some way.

[00:14:38] **BB:** Do people write you, by the way, about all the stuff that they landed? How often is your comment box full?

[00:14:45] **AL:** Yeah. People write a lot. It's great. For better and worse, but I think that's a good thing. We want to hear what people really think.

[00:14:51] **BB:** Yeah, okay. I like it. Now, the next section, Adrienne is one of my favorites because I get to get all the juicy insights and figure out what's happening? What are you reading or listening to or consuming in any form of storytelling? We'll take it all.

[00:15:10] **AL:** Well, I try to read basically everything on the Internet.

[00:15:13] **BB:** Yes, time consuming, just a bit.

[00:15:16] **AL:** I read all of the big mainstream, national papers and other magazines, of course, but also other little websites. I'm on Twitter a lot like every journalist. And then other than that, what other things am I consuming? I don't know. I occasionally will check in on TikTok. I'm really interested in the Internet and new platforms. So, I like to kind of see what's going on on different ones. But nothing wild, and then I read paper books. I read a lot of books, just like actual books.

[00:15:47] **BB:** I love it. Okay, now tell us, tell us what books are you reading right now?

[00:15:53] **AL:** Right now, I am reading a book about Waco. The I don't know if you remember in the early '90s, the there was a big – it's a really depressing story, actually. But this compound where the FBI tried to intercept this religious sect that was – yeah, like '93.

[00:16:17] **BB:** Yes. Okay. Is it like a memoir? What is it? Is it just a historical?

[00:16:22] **AL:** It's a book. It's about cults in the battle for religious freedom in America. So, in my work, I've written a lot about conspiracy theories. It's an area that I'm interested in and continuing to report on. So, it's related to my work.

[00:16:35] **BB:** What's it called?

[00:16:39] **AL:** It's really random. It's called *Why Waco* by James Tabor and Eugue Gallagher. It was published early '90s. It's kind of a throwback.

[00:16:47] **BB:** It's not audible, for example.

[00:16:50] **AL:** Probably not. But I'm reading it.

[00:16:52] **BB:** Okay. *Why Waco*. It's on Amazon. Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America. Oh, fascinating. I'm going to get this now. It's expensive. It's a paperback, 32 bucks. Look at that. Good to know. Anything else?

[00:17:07] **AL:** Recently, the last fiction that I read was the new Jonathan Franzen book, *Crossroads*, which I love. It's so good. I highly recommend that one. I'm trying to think of what I read before that. I don't know. A lot of different random things.

[00:17:23] **BB:** Okay, great. I'm adding *Crossroads*. I like the cover of it too. Great. Gift for wedding depth and vividness of character with breadth of social vision has never been more dazzling evident than – dang, I love when people write up the blurbs, sometimes for these and you're just like, “Dang, you should be writing the book.”

[00:17:44] **AL:** I love the blurb. It's really, really good.

[00:17:46] **BB:** Buying now, buying now. Okay, great. Adrienne, thank you for that. Real quick, I want to go back to this cult thing, and related to just the experiment we are living in called America. How do you all – your 130 employees, discuss and assess what is in the Zeitgeist?

And what is bubbling up in America? Do you all have a daily standing meeting? Are there thousand Slacks going on? Do you watch Jeopardy? How do you know what's happening?

**[00:18:19] AL:** I mean, we do have various daily stand ups in different configurations and different teams. We definitely have a million Slacks. I think each person who's writing has their own sort of collection of preoccupations, or beats, or many beats. You can know reliably that like some category of things, this writer is thinking about, at any given time. And the, of course, you have editors who are paying attention to sort of what's happening in the world and anticipating what might happen, and anticipating what our readers might be wondering about or thinking, and trying to – in terms of daily coverage, we certainly want to meet the moment and help people navigate whatever the big stories of the day are. But because we're a magazine, and again, this goes to the long lead time thing, like we're also, we want to just tell great stories.

So, a lot of times, we're hoping to define what's in the Zeitgeist and maybe people aren't talking about this topic, but we think they should be or whatever the case. As a general interest magazine, we have the great joy and luxury of not having to cover everything, but rather deciding elective some degree of discipline, like what we should be asking people to pay attention to. So, yeah, that's how it works.

**[00:19:35] BB:** I like that. And then is there ever, and usually, I don't ask this because it's not usually too relevant. But I think in this case, it is. Is there ever discussion of the responses, the feedback that you get from the readership that then informs, “Oh, okay, we got to do a second story on this” or, “Oh, there's more”, or, “Oh, there's interest in this. Let's have a second cult piece.” Something like that.

**[00:19:58] AL:** Yeah, I think, we of course pay attention to the impact that our pieces have, like if there's a huge number of people that read a certain piece, we'll take note of that. But it's more, we're really driven by what we're experiencing in our own lives and conversations with our friends and family and sources and other experts we rely on. So, I think that during pandemic, especially, so much of our coverage was driven by the questions that we, not just as journalists, but just as people trying to navigate this incredibly complicated moment, had for ourselves. And so, journalists tend to be very curious. We're really driven by the questions that we find ourselves asking about, whatever the thing is.

**[00:20:46] BB:** Yeah. Well, rather speaking like that, what do you think the future of journalism looks like?

**[00:20:55] AL:** I think it's bright, but I wouldn't say that, because I'm a journalist. I mean, this informational environment that we're all in is so new, and I think there is a lot of confusion that can come from that, but a ton of opportunity. So, I don't minimize the extent to which the shifting informational environment can be disruptive, especially to our industry. But I think, I've always said it, it's as good a time as it's ever been to be a journalist. It's certainly important work, and I can't imagine anything more fun. So, there's that. I don't know, I think the future is bright and chaotic and necessary, is how I put it.

**[00:21:39] BB:** Chaotic necessary. Oh, best answer I think I've heard on that. Adrienne, thank you so much for hopping on here today with our coffee, and our birds, and everything great.

**[00:21:51] AL:** Thank you for having me.

**[00:21:53] BBL** And the large experiment called America. I really appreciate you being here.

**[00:21:55] AL:** Thank you so much for having me. It's great chatting.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[00:22:00] ANNOUNCER:** Thanks for listening in to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring Adrienne LaFrance from The Atlantic.. If you enjoy listening to our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts and anywhere else you listen to podcasts. If you have a moment, please leave us a review to share your thoughts about the show and today's guest.

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[END]