

EPISODE 120

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist brought to you by OnePitch. The guests on our show include some of the most notable journalists from the top US-based publications who cover topics including technology, lifestyle and culture, health, science, consumer products, business news, and beauty and wellness. 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 our new video series, featuring journalists from the show.

Our guest this week on Coffee with a Journalist is Marlice van Romburgh, the Editor in Chief for Crunchbase News. Marlice leads a team of journalists doing data-driven reporting on venture capital and private companies. During the episode, Marlice tells us about her start in business journalism, how the Crunchbase team sources data for their stories, the pitches that succeed with her and her team, and more. Let's hear from her now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:16] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger, the host of this little show. We've been having so much fun over this now many, God, weeks, in probably a couple years we've been doing it. This is our opportunity to chat with real journalists, real reporters, editors, chief **[inaudible 00:01:33]**, etc., so all of us publicists can learn better how to work with our friends in the media and also just to know like what should we not do, how should we not piss them off, and instead have better relationships.

So we quit bitching about pitching. That's our goal on this show. I'm, just for context for everybody, Founder of OnePitch, and why we created it is because I have an agency that runs and works with all types of reporters, journalists, etc. With us today, ooh, for the tech fanatic, let's just say, although there's a lot of other things Crunchbase does, but we will get into it. We have the Editor in Chief of Crunchbase News with us today. Marlice van Romburgh is here with us, and she's going to tell us all about Crunchbase and what else we got on the pitching front.

Marlize, welcome, and thanks for being here.

[00:02:22] MVR: Thanks so much, Beck. Great to be here.

[00:02:24] BB: Yes. So Marlize, you've just been in the role about a year as editor in chief. You're in some change. You were managing editor before for another year. Then you were also at Silicon Valley Business Journal. So you've been in this VC realm, Silicon Valley realm for quite some time. I don't usually start into the like how'd you get into the area you focus on. But, no, how did you get into Silicon Valley as the area you're going to focus on?

[00:02:51] MVR: Sure. I think it kind of goes back to I've really basically been in business journalism my entire career, partially sort of by accident, partially because I thought it was really interesting. The brief history, if we kind of go back, I, like many journalists, sort of graduated college right at the height of the financial crisis, which was a terrible time to get a job in journalism.

But I was pretty stubborn and wanted to do that anyway, and sort of the job I could find was at a small local business publication. It ended up being a really amazing experience where I worked closely with the editor and founder, who was sort of a mentor to a lot of young journalists and ended up covering banks, regional and local banks, and what was going on with them during the financial crisis, which was extremely educational. I really enjoyed being able to sort of make clear for local readers what was going on with the economy and how they were affected by these business changes. Suddenly, business journalism wasn't very abstract anymore. It was very real for a lot of people.

That's sort of how I started, and I ended up moving up to the Bay Area after a few years and joined the San Francisco Business Times and then moved down to the Silicon Valley Business Journal, which is a sister publication to SFBT. Obviously, being in Silicon Valley, really the big companies down there are the big companies you'd expect. So we really covered Google and Apple but from a very different way than most media publications do, in the sense that we really weren't writing about their products or anything like that, but about, again, the impact that these very large companies have on the local communities where they're actually based.

But that did sort of get me into covering tech more specifically and then –

[00:04:45] BB: You're deep in now, Marelize, that this is it.

[00:04:46] MVR: Yes. There was no going back. But at the same time, we also really covered the startups there because those were the small businesses that you write about when you're a business journal in Silicon Valley. I really, really just loved talking to startup founders, so many people with interesting ideas who were just launching really interesting companies. Beyond that, when this role opened up at Crunchbase, it was really a kind of a chance to both join and lead a pretty young newsroom and help to set the vision for that and just to go a little bit deeper on the venture and startup scene as well.

[00:05:26] BB: That leads us to Crunchbase. For those who maybe are not as familiar, and frankly I ask this now of every single reporter we have on here, even if it's from the New York Times, what does this publication all entail for our listeners, to be clear?

[00:05:40] MVR: Sure. So Crunchbase News is sort of an interesting publication in the sense that we're an editorially independent newsroom, but we're part of Crunchbase, which, for those who aren't familiar, is basically a software database product with information about companies. It started way back when it was actually part of TechCrunch originally.

[00:06:02] BB: It was, yup.

[00:06:02] MVR: It was really a way for startup investors to find companies to invest in, for startup founders to find investors. It's grown way beyond that, and it actually spun out and is an independent company now. But it's used by millions of people for all kinds of research.

On the news side, we still write mostly about startups and other private companies and venture capital. Our readers are mostly startup founders, entrepreneurs, and investors. So I think what's somewhat unique about our coverage is we're journalists. We spend a lot of time talking to people, but we sort of anchor and base most of our reporting around Crunchbase data. It's sort of our secret sauce, if you will.

[00:06:43] BB: Yes. It gives you all those magical details and data points that you can leverage for stories and stuff, which is such the brilliance, I have to say, of Crunchbase News because you're able to report on the data that's being collected of your own system, which is kind of fantastic.

[00:06:57] MVR: Exactly, yeah. It's really kind of fun. We tend to find story ideas in the data, which, obviously, is interesting. But also just to sort of validate what's going on in the market as well. So we'll talk to people and think, "Oh, that's kind of interesting." Like do we actually see that in the data? Is this a sector that's suddenly hot and getting a lot of funding? So we were sort of able to marry that traditional reporting with our own data analysis.

[00:07:23] BB: I love it. Now, Marelize, since you're editor in chief, are you getting tons of pitches?

[00:07:31] MVR: I do. I would say my inbox, just like everybody else in the business, is overflowing. Most of the time, I aspire to be an inbox zero person. I don't always get there. But I would say definitely the vast majority of pitches I get are not relevant. Like there's a pretty quick time between when I get it, and it's just immediately archived or deleted.

[00:07:57] BB: So that's how you get to your aspirational zero. You archive or delete.

[00:08:01] MVR: Exactly. I move pretty quickly through those. But I think I have a pretty good system at this point for spotting the real emails, the real pitches in there, and I do respond to those.

[00:08:11] BB: Okay. So what is that system? Is it via the subject line or via the person? What would you say?

[00:08:17] MVR: I would say mostly the subject line. Obviously, if I recognize somebody and I've talked to them before, I'm always going to open that. But the subject line really has to make it clear that this is not just a mass pitch. That it's actually about something that we would cover.

There's probably about a three to five seconds in there where I make a decision about if this email is going to be opened or not.

[00:08:42] BB: Excellent. So for your delete versus archive, how do you make that decision?

[00:08:47] MVR: I think I generally archive them just because I still have this strange paranoia that maybe I will delete something that actually I won't be looking for at some point. But every once in a while, if it's clearly just true spam, I will just delete it.

[00:09:01] BB: Gotcha. Then are you subscribed to a bunch of newsletters, like from your peers in the industry?

[00:09:07] MVR: I am and I do try to read through them, sort of my morning routine. I don't always get to them. But, yeah, I definitely read what other people are doing. There's so much good reporting and content out there. Then it really helps to spur our own internal story discussions as well.

[00:09:24] BB: This is a new segment that we just added in, Marlize, but curious to hear how you would approach this. We want to know the big three. Like what are the three things that you want to see in every single pitch that you're like, "Hell, yes. I'm going to respond to that pitch."?

[00:09:41] MVR: I think that the first, as I mentioned, is, obviously, it should actually be individualized as a pitch, something that speaks to the fact that the sender knows what we cover, knows who I am, and has spent some time doing research. So that's the first. The second is really all bring something unique, and that doesn't just mean an exclusive. We're actually not that big on exclusives, but it's –

[00:10:06] BB: We're going to talk about that in a second. Yes.

[00:10:08] MVR: Yeah, yeah. I'm happy to talk about that. But in general, just some kind of unique story idea. Maybe it's not just something about a particular company. But I think some of the more successful PR pitches that we've actually taken some of the up on are, "Hey, I noticed

you guys cover larger trends. This is something I've noticed that I think is kind of interesting. Yes, one of my clients happens to be in that space, and I'd be happy to connect you.”

But I think there's more to it beyond that because that's really how we're covering the startup sector. These days, it's really focused on those big picture trends, really helping readers sort of understand where the economy and the market overall is going, especially this year with a very strange startup and tech market. Continuing to understand sort of what the underlying trends are is really important. Those pitches tend to succeed.

Then the third is just being helpful, which kind of ties in with the second point. But often somebody will reach out, and I'll say, “Okay, we're not working on something on this in particular, but I do think it's interesting, and I'll keep this in mind.” Very often, I do end up following up with that person saying, “Hey, we actually are going to start working on something around this. Can I still speak to that person? Or do you still sort of have some ideas of a few clients who would be willing to speak for this story?”

It's not always immediate. But if the pitch is not necessarily looking for something from me right then but it's just sort of there as a helpful resource, I'm going to remember that person.

[00:11:41] BB: Okay. That's how maybe you can get a relationship starting with you. But, okay, so longer trends, data. You touched on exclusive just for a second. So exclusives versus embargoes, do you have preferences? Do tell us.

[00:11:55] MVR: Yes. We get a lot of embargoed news. We tend to not really write about, for example, individual funding rounds these days. That's mostly what we're offered under embargo as a publication that covers tech and VC. Again, we sort of note them might keep it in mind, but we very rarely write about those, just because we really are focused on those larger trends.

[00:12:19] BB: Plus, it's a very busy space, as you know. Like there's a lot of coverage that funding rounds all over the place.

[00:12:25] MVR: Exactly. We could never be comprehensive, even if we wanted to be. Also, something to keep in mind, sometimes I kind of point this out to people, we are a part of

Crunchbase, and Crunchbase definitely wants to be comprehensive. So it sort of doesn't make sense for us as a newsroom to write about every funding round because it will ultimately be captured in Crunchbase and sort of live there in the database.

But in terms of exclusives, we will always consider them. It definitely helps to raise the likelihood that we'll cover that story. But again, even then, the story really needs to be one that speaks to a larger trend or offers something bigger that we can sort of pull some analysis or context around, rather than just XYZ company raise this much money. That's really not what we focus on.

[00:13:18] BB: That's not a story anymore. Yeah.

[00:13:21] MVR: Yeah. It's just not.

[00:13:22] BB: Right. It's not. It's not at all. Yeah. It's kind of nice that it's not, in my opinion. So there's that.

[BREAK]

[00:13:29] ANNOUNCER: Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious to see the unique ways OnePitch helps PR professionals and marketers pitch journalists? Head to onepitch.co to learn about our new OnePitch score and see how easy it is to find the right journalists to pitch your news to. Sign up for your free account today. Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW RESUMED]

[00:13:53] BB: Okay. So, Marlize, you also touched on it saying, "Hey, if you're just there, it's being like helpful, just there. I can loop back to you at some point." How does one develop a relationship with you, especially in these times?

[00:14:09] MVR: Yeah. I think, and again a big part of it is understanding what we cover, I'm always happy to connect people to – As the editor in chief, I'm not necessarily the person that they should be chatting with. It might be the beat reporter, but I also like to have those

relationships, and often I'll kind of keep somebody in mind and maybe down the line say, "Hey, Chris," or Sophia, two of our reporters. "There's this person and I've kind of chatted with them about this. I can connect you when you're looking for a source for that story."

But I think, mostly, it's, again, being sort of genuine, not overly intrusive, but just letting me know that either they have a story idea. They have some clients who could speak to a particular area that we've been covering and just sort of offering that up as a resource. Then, obviously, being somebody who is responsive when the time comes, I definitely had some of those where they say, "Oh, I can definitely connect you with this person." Then when you actually are writing the story and you're on deadline, it's like, well, actually –

[00:15:14] BB: I don't feel like that's talked about as often from like the journalist side. So I'd love to get into that more of just like publicists. You got to be at the drop of the hat ready to go, right?

[00:15:25] MVR: Right, right. Then that's – I know that's unfortunate. Maybe you haven't heard from us for two months, and suddenly we need something like now.

[00:15:30] BB: Yeah. Suddenly. Yeah, exactly.

[00:15:33] MVR: That's just the nature of the news business, where deadline-oriented people and sometimes we just need something now.

[00:15:41] BB: I think everyone needs to know. Yes. They're under deadline, more than you. Sorry, publicists. Therefore, speed is of the essence. Again, we don't talk too much about that.

Okay, Marlize, I have a fill in the blank section here. So I will give you the phrase, and you could just fill it right in. Are you ready?

[00:15:58] MVR: All right.

[00:16:00] BB: My favorite sources always –

[00:16:02] MVR: My favorite sources always come through.

[00:16:05] BB: As we were mentioning.

[00:16:06] MVR: Exactly. On delivering on promises.

[00:16:08] BB: The best subject line I've ever received was –

[00:16:13] MVR: Boy, I can't think of a particular one, but I'm sure it was short and sweet.

[00:16:18] BB: Okay, short and sweet, and that's why. So you want something short and sweet, subject-wise, subject line-wise. Okay. You'll never get a response from me if –

[00:16:26] MVR: There's quite a few. Ones that come to mind is if you write me a long email about how much you've enjoyed XYZ coverage and it's actually not me or my publication.

[00:16:41] BB: That's bad. That's bad. You can follow up with me if –

[00:16:45] MVR: You can follow up with me if I have indicated some interest or response and maybe have just gone a little bit quiet. That just means I'm busy. However, if it's the 10th time you've emailed me, I'm probably not interested.

[00:17:00] BB: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. The best follow up time period is –

[00:17:04] MVR: Probably mornings. I tend to kind of clean my inbox out and then try to not look at it too much throughout the day. So if you can catch me kind of in the morning, as I'm drinking my coffee, sorting through things, they'll probably your best.

[00:17:17] BB: Morning. The appropriate amount of lead time for a story is –

[00:17:23] MVR: So we probably have a longer lead time than most here. I would love a week, at least.

[00:17:30] BB: Oh, a week. We don't hear that often. Okay, a week. My favorite stories to write are –

[00:17:36] MVR: My favorite stories to write or to edit are really, really those that speak to a larger trend that's really meaningful to people but hasn't been covered very well. Some specific examples we've sort of written about, some of these areas of tech that just don't seem to get a lot of funding, although they do tackle real problems. Some of those have been the most fascinating, just to meet some of the people who are really kind of working towards those issues or really passionate about finding a particular area, specifically some of the technology in the women's health sector, for example.

[00:18:15] BB: That completes, by the way, our fill in the blank, Marlize. But I'm already going to the next thing, which is how you get the inspiration to do the stories you do. Yes, it can come from the data. Yes, it can come from the pitches. But, for example, you recently wrote a piece. It says from the editor's deck, so we definitely noticed from you. What we learned from a year close to covering diversity in the startup ecosystem. How do you get the inspiration for these more longer depth pieces you do? Or does the data or the pitches direct you?

[00:18:47] MVR: In that particular case, it was some combination of the data, which Crunchbase actually sort of uniquely has really strong data about the percentage of funding going to underrepresented startup founders, which we think is something that's really important to cover. Because we have that data, we felt it was important to really kind of invest in a longer term newsroom project, looking at the issue.

Not just the issue, I think what we tried to do in that case was to look at some of the things that are working because it can become very bleak in some ways. I think year after year, you will sort of see those headlines only 2% or only 3% of venture funding is going to women or to black founders. So we wanted to go beyond that. In that case, we had done a particular newsroom project called Something Ventured for whole year where we really looked at those issues. We sort of had this cohort of startup founders who we followed along for the whole year as they were building their businesses, and that was really interesting.

I think in that case, that really came about through a newsroom conversation where we talked about what else we could be doing to cover that issue and to kind of come at it from a different angle to, again, being aware that there's a lot of I think fatigue in the industry when it's just the headlines repeating the same bad news again. So that was one that we really liked.

A lot of our ideas do come from newsroom conversations. We're sort of all out there talking to people on social media on Twitter, just sort of seeing what's going on. We spend time in the data too. I think sometimes editors or reporters will just sort of have an idea. Kind of quickly go into Crunchbase and see if it really is a thing, and that might lead to a story idea.

[00:20:36] BB: Isn't that cool? You can be like, "I have a feeling about something. Let me check the data real quick," and you've got it right there. That's amazing. That is great. Thanks for filling us in. So newsroom discussion collaboration kind of drive some of those stories that come to light. That's neat.

We talked a little bit about newsletters, Marlize. What are you reading, watching, viewing? We'll take any form of stories. We'd like to understand what feeds your mind.

[00:21:03] MVR: Sure. On kind of the newsletter tech business news front, it's really a bit of everything. I think it's a really interesting time to be part of this media landscape. I think there are a lot of publications doing it right. So I personally read everything from the Wall Street Journal and Reuters and the New York Times to some of the more niche publications like The Information, for example.

[00:21:28] BB: Also great publication.

[00:21:30] MVR: Yeah. So that's the protocol. I think it's been doing a lot of really good work as well, kind of covering very particular sectors too within the tech and startup world. Beyond that, on a personal basis, I'm actually not much of a TV viewer. So I never have – A good suggestion for somebody is to watch. I'm about 10 years behind, typically.

[00:21:50] BB: That's okay. That's okay.

[00:21:54] **MVR:** Then obviously, alongside reading a lot of business and tech news for work, for pleasure I tend to mostly read fiction just to really kind of have that escapism as well.

[00:22:03] **BB:** You got anything good fiction-wise right now? This is where I get all my stories, Marlize. So I need to know. I'm pulling up my Audible right now, right now.

[00:22:12] **MVR:** Oh, Audible. Okay. Yeah.

[00:22:13] **BB:** Well, I look on Audible first. Then sometimes, I'm like, "Oh, let me actually buy the real book." Yeah, yeah. It depends.

[00:22:19] **MVR:** Yeah, exactly. I'm trying to think of what I just finished. I think on Audible, part of the pressure too is it might be a great book, but how's the narration?

[00:22:27] **BB:** It is so important. It is so important. Yes.

[00:22:31] **MVR:** I'm trying to think. I'm reading a few history books right now, so that's not quite as interesting. On the fiction side, just recently read *Lonesome Dove*, which is kind of a modern classic. It's a Western but sort of a literary Western. It was quite fun and interesting to read.

[00:22:47] **BB:** Oh, my God. That's 5,000 reviews, five-star. Wow. 36 hours, though, and it's book one. There's multiple.

[00:22:57] **MVR:** Yes. Although I will say I started to read some of the others, and you can definitely just stick with that if you want the experience.

[00:23:01] **BB:** Okay. It says, "*Lonesome Dove* will make listeners laugh, weep, dream, and remember." Okay, *Lonesome Dove*.

[00:23:11] **MVR:** Everything you're looking for in one book.

[00:23:14] **BB:** Wow. Amazing. Okay. See, I knew there was a pearl like that hidden in there. That is fantastic. Thanks, Marlize. Okay, just on our last note here, the future of journalism.

You've been in the journalism realm a bit. You've been in, specifically, Silicon Valley realm a bit. Another interesting arena to be focused in, doubling down on two areas. What do you think the future looks like?

[00:23:40] MVR: I think I'm generally optimistic. I think we've, obviously, gone through a very tumultuous time for journalism, especially the local news. I'm still probably less optimistic about local news because I think there's still a lot to be figured out there with the business model. But by and large, I think we've sort of entered a new era where there's a lot more focus, again, on serving readers versus advertisers or sort of just chasing traffic.

For example, we have a lot more of these high quality subscription news sites. There are a lot of kind of startup publications that are focusing on niche communities, which I think is really cool. So in general, it seems like there's been a bit of a pivot with publications really kind of focusing in on what people actually want and, in some cases, what readers will pay for.

I also think that sort of the rise of the creator economy that we saw during the pandemic has been a good thing for journalism as well. I think it got a lot of people sort of recognizing that creating content, whether it be YouTube videos or reporting original journalism, so forth, that it's something you can pay for, and you can actually support the kind of content that you want to see. So I'm very optimistic about that trend as well.

[00:24:55] BB: I have to say, having done so many of these way back to three years ago the future journalism, it was bleak. That conversation has shifted into more of this optimistic view, and you fit right into that, Marlize. It's lovely to hear because there is a huge demand for great journalism, and I really hope it is not going to be jeopardized, as we move along here in this interesting planet and world of ours.

[00:25:22] MVR: Yeah, I completely agree. I wouldn't still be doing this if I wasn't optimistic about where we're going. So I think we have good times ahead, and we're just sort of navigating ourselves along.

[00:25:32] BB: That's all we can do. I think that's it. Well, Marlize, thank you so much for being here today. Marlize van Romburgh, she's the Editor in Chief, Crunchbase News. Check out that

data that's so live and rich. It really is one of the most incredible data sets and now news sources that there is in the Silicon Valley world. So I look at it every day, to tell you the truth, Marlize. So appreciate you and thank you for being here.

[00:25:57] MVR: Thanks so much for having me.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:25:59] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist featuring Marlize van Romburgh from Crunchbase News. If you enjoy listening to our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts, and anywhere else you listen to podcasts. And if you have a moment, please leave us a review to share your thoughts about the show and today's guest. To learn more about the latest tools on OnePitch and to subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter, head to our website at onepitch.co. We'll see you all next week with a brand new guest and even more insights about the journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.

[END]